DIALOGUES @ RU

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RUTGERS

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FOREWORD

Welcome to the 20th Volume of the Dialogues@RU academic journal. This journal is meant to give undergraduate students the opportunity to publish their papers from the course *Research in the Disciplines*. Through these essays, readers will be able to see the product of the student's academic research, creativity, and analysis. All authors present in this journal have worked hard to perfect their essays, both in writing and in editing. And all authors have been given a chance to join the discourse and share their chosen topics. The journal has editors and authors working together to be sure that what is presented is the best that we can offer, with subjects ranging from commentary on healthcare and remedies, analysis of social media, and much more.

As student editors participating in the *Editing Internship*, we are proud of this opportunity to work under the guidance of Tracy Budd and master the ins and outs of the editing process. This semester served as a tremendous learning experience for all of us and set a valued example of what proper communication, patience, and collaboration looks like. Our accomplishments are a true reflection of teamwork. With hundreds of submissions to sort through, our team eagerly dedicated long hours reading through each student essay thoroughly and fairly. Rutgers is home to many strong writers and it was our honor to highlight the students whose work shows much promise. The student authors were a pleasure to work with. Not only were they excited to improve their writing alongside us, but they went above and beyond to treat our strict deadlines with professionalism. Their willingness to accept our feedback and their appreciation for our hard work is mirrored in our gratitude for their research, which served as the foundation of such a rich academic journey. The editing process is taxing. Each and every one of us felt the pressure of meticulously taking a work, and refining it with purpose and care. We will carry this knowledge with us throughout the rest of our academic careers and into our future endeavors.

Our editorial process unfolded in several clear phases, each giving us a different role in shaping the essays that appear in this volume. The first stage, sub-editing, asked us to focus on the main ideas and structure of each paper. We read to understand the author's claim, how the argument developed, and whether the paper moved in a logical way from point to point. During this stage, we looked for gaps in reasoning, unclear transitions, or sections that needed more support. We also checked the use of sources by confirming that authors interpreted their research correctly and applied it in ways that strengthened their claims. Sub-editing required us to step back and think about each essay as a whole, and our goal was to help writers present clearer arguments and more purposeful organization. Once this stage was complete, we moved on to tech-editing. This phase involved slower and closer reading. Instead of focusing on the overall argument, we worked at the sentence level. We corrected grammar, punctuation, and phrasing. We reduced repetition, improved word choice when it interfered with clarity, and made sure the writing remained consistent. Tech-editing also required careful attention to citations. We checked each quotation against the source and confirmed that citation formats followed the rules of the assigned style. This stage was long and careful, but it ensured that the authors' work was presented in its strongest written form.

As a whole, our experiences as editors for Dialogues@RU has been invaluable, as we are sure the same can be said for the authors whose work has been presented. In working on this project, we have learned firsthand what it takes to publish a piece. We have learned when to push an author to give their best and when to back down. The result is a collection of twenty-two insightful and thought-provoking essays, each a unique display of niche understanding. We'd like to take a moment to thank Tracy Budd, for pushing us in the right direction as we embarked on our editing journeys. Without her guidance and support, this publication would not be what it is. We'd also like to thank Mark DiGiacomo, the Executive Director of the Writing Program at Rutgers–New Brunswick, for his unwavering support for Dialogues@RU.

Editorial Board
Dialogues@RU
Volume 20
Fall 2025

EDITORIAL BOARD

CONTENTS

Nashwa Faruk

Betting on the Future: The Ethical Implications of Gambling in Esports

ABSTRACT

Esports, video games played in an organized and competitive environment, is a relatively new and growing industry. However, similar to traditional sports, gambling and sports betting have become intertwined with both the viewing and playing experience. This paper examines the extent to which gambling and sports betting have become integrated into the esports ecosystem, considering the potential ethical implications that arise from the heavy integration of gambling and esports. Using Foucault's Normalization Theory as a framework, case studies such as Counter-Strike weapons, Twitch predictions, and historical advertisements and sponsorships are examined to understand how gambling mechanisms are normalized within esports. Additionally, previous research regarding the impacts of exposure to gambling at a young age helps identify the ethical implications of heavy integration. Based on case studies and previous research, the analysis concludes that there is a significant integration between gambling and esports. This is highly concerning because of its young audience, as the study shows that exposure to gambling and betting through these various means leads to lasting adverse effects. However, the context of esports is also examined, as the paper investigates how the need for financial viability has led to the increased integration of gambling in esports. Overall, the paper concludes that the current and rising level of normalization presents significant ethical risks. To rectify this, intervention is necessary, although it is likely improbable without large-scale community advocacy.

INTRODUCTION

Esports is an overarching term that refers to the various systems of organized video gaming competition. A relatively new phenomenon, the first recognized esports tournament occurred in 1972 (Good). However, the industry has both rapidly developed and grown in popularity globally. A large percentage of viewership and industry growth comes from Europe, the Middle East, Africa (EMEA), China, and the Asia-Pacific regions.

Additionally, to recognize the nuances of esports, it is necessary to understand the community's demographics. As of 2024, 32% of esports viewers were between the ages of 16 and 24, and in total, Millennials and Generation Z make up 76% of all viewership (Connolly; "Get to Know"). For context, the average age of a traditional sports fan is 50 years old, compared to the average age of an esports fan, which is 29 (Orme-Claye). These younger viewers are also the most passionate and active in the community, as 31% of 18 to 29-year-old esports consumers said that esports was one of their top interests, compared to only 17% of all esports consumers. Younger viewership is also the sector of viewership that is growing the fastest, as interest climbed over 4% from 2021 to 2024 (Webb). Males also dominate the fan communities, as 72% of all viewers were male; however, female viewership has increased heavily over the past few years (Connolly).

While most video games have a competitive scene, this paper's analysis focuses on the games League of Legends, Valorant, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO), and Dota 2, as these are the most-watched esports worldwide (Luongo). To further elaborate, League of Legends and Valorant share the same developer and esports organizer, Riot Games. League of Legends is the most popular esports worldwide, as the grand finals of its World Championship Series in 2024 garnered a peak viewership of approximately 50 million viewers (LoL Esports). Valorant is a relatively new, yet rapidly growing, esports game, having been released in 2020. As Riot Games runs esports, both League of Legends esports and Valorant esports are run similarly. Both games have four different leagues in various geographical regions worldwide and a select number of franchised organizations in the leagues, which receive financial and managerial support.

Conversely, Counter-Strike and DOTA 2 are games published by Valve Corporation, another game development company. Throughout this paper, Counter-Strike will be referred to under multiple names, including "Counter-Strike", "CS2", and "CS:GO", as the name changes when the game's firmware is updated. However, they refer to the same game system and the same esports. Both DOTA 2 and Counter-Strike are run similarly, with Valve taking a significantly smaller role in managing esports compared to Riot. Valve hosts the most important tournaments, including the three Majors and the International, in Counter-Strike and Dota 2, respectively. Independent organizations run all other tournaments and qualifiers. However, Valve actively oversees esports and maintains its position as the final governing body.

The industry has matured rapidly in comparison to traditional sports. Due to its international reach and digital presence (for example, several broadcasts happening on online streaming platforms, such as Twitch), the community has primarily grown in a decentralized manner, outside the scope of country regulations. Thus, mechanisms like gambling and sports betting were able to intertwine themselves with esports and the video gaming community. However, with the increased integration of gambling into esports, there have been community-wide discussions about the ethical conundrums of allowing gambling and advertising gambling in esports, mainly due to the industry's young demographic. Discussion has ranged on most sides of the spectrum, as some parts of the community continue to argue that gambling is as integrated into esports as it is in traditional sports. In contrast, other sides of the community advocate for removing gambling-related advertisements from the broadcast experience. Thus, due to the disagreements surrounding the position of gambling and sports betting in esports, the question arises: To what extent are gambling and sports betting integrated into esports? If there is significant integration, are there ethical implications to consider in the integration of gambling and esports?

To answer these questions, it is essential to examine the relationship between esports and gambling. To address this, this paper examines the following aspects: the prevalence of gambling and sports betting in video games, which contributes to the further normalization of gambling within the community; the presence of gambling in the viewership experience; and the integration of gambling and sports betting into the financial models of leagues and organizations. Based on these case studies, if gambling and sports betting are heavily integrated into esports, the next step is to examine the implications of this integration, particularly from an ethical perspective. To explore these implications, this paper looks at the demographics of esports and the adverse effects of introducing gambling at a young age. Based on case studies and research, the overwhelming consensus is that gambling and sports betting are heavily integrated into esports, raising overarching ethical concerns when considering the esports' young audience.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NORMALIZATION THEORY

This paper employs the sociological theoretical framework of Normalization Theory to examine how gambling practices may become embedded in esports. According to Thomas et al., Normalization Theory, rooted in the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, seeks to understand how social mechanisms become rationalized by society through five different determinants: access and availability, trial rates, regular use rates, social accommodation, and cultural accommodation. Access and availability is a measure of how easy it is for someone to partake in the behavior; trying rates is the measure of amount of people who have ever tried the behavior; recent and regular use documents the amount of people who continually engage in this behavior; social accommodation refers to how much peers accept the behavior; and cultural accommodation is how ingrained the behavior is in societal values and institutions. Based on the number of determinants, it is possible to understand how normalized the practice has become in society (Thomas et al.).

While this theory has been applied to gambling as a whole to figure out how normalized gambling has become in regular society, it has not been used to esports and gambling. When applying this to esports, gambling, and sports betting, cultural and social accommodations will change due to the niche status of these behaviors. Overall, the level of normalization of gambling and sports betting in esports (based on the number of determinants) will convey the level of integration of different gambling mechanisms in esports, which helps answer the first research question.

EXAMPLES OF GAMBLING INTEGRATION

Gambling and sports betting are deeply and heavily intertwined with esports through the games, broadcasts, and advertisements, creating an environment where betting behaviors are normalized, encouraged, and often indistinguishable from the core esports experience. As gambling becomes more integrated into video games, the inclusion of gambling in esports becomes more normalized. With the rise of free-to-play games, many companies have begun to rely on mechanisms such as loot boxes or Gacha (similar to a blind box). In 2021, 91% of China's top 100 highest-grossing iPhone games incorporated a type of loot box mechanic (Xiao et al.). In games, loot boxes and Gacha are mechanisms where players can spend a certain amount of virtual currency to get a surprise gift in return. For instance, a player could spend 50 coins for the chance to obtain a higher-ranked item; however, most of the time, the odds embedded in the game result in the player receiving a less desirable item instead (Leon). These types of mechanics have been likened to slot machines, due to their reward structure (Rogers).

Randomized reward systems in video games create a gambling-like environment that can lead to addictive behaviors and increased participation in real-money esports betting. These randomized reward systems accustom players to a gamble-adjacent reward structure, where they risk a certain amount of money or credit in exchange for the chance to obtain a corresponding benefit. These systems addict players, as gambling works by releasing dopamine to the brain, no matter if the player gains or loses (Champion). Increased exposure to these dopamine surges in-game can lead to the player base becoming addicted to the sensation, which may lead them to seek greater highs through external betting and gambling (Zack et al.). Thus, games that have some aspect of betting already embedded in them and that have a thriving esports scene will have a larger amount of their viewer base engaging in esports betting, as they are more likely to transition from in-game gambling to real-money bets on competitive matches, because the psychological instruments of gambling encourage this habitual behavior.

Specifically, two of the most impactful psychological mechanisms in gambling are operant conditioning and escalation of commitment. Operant conditioning is the learning process in which people are more likely to repeat an action in the future if they have previously done it and received a reward. Because players who bet in video games have already received a reward in the form of a dopamine rush, they are more likely to continue to do so in the future (Shead). Escalation of commitment occurs when a person increases their investment in a decision, despite having seen evidence of its failure (Ungvarsky). In gambling and sports betting, this is where gamblers will continue to gamble, maybe even on higher levels, after losing, because they believe continual gambling will help them recoup their losses (Quaglieri et al.). Regarding esports betting, this means that players who have already engaged in small-scale betting within games, most of which have no real-life monetary impact, may feel compelled to escalate their involvement to real-money betting. This is especially likely to happen after experiencing wins that reinforce the behavior, as they believe their luck may carry over to real-life monetary betting. Even if they face losses, the sunk cost of previous wagers and the emotional investment in the game can drive them to double down, believing that continued betting will eventually pay off, creating a cycle of reward, loss, and increased investment.

Counter-Strike's Weapons Cases serve as clear examples of how in-game gambling mechanics, such as loot boxes and skin betting, can lead to player betting on esports. In 2013, Valve, the developer of Counter-Strike, introduced Weapon Cases, where users could obtain keys directly through the game or the secondary market, and then use these keys to open specific loot boxes, colloquially referred to as "cases" (Esgate). Each case had a hierarchy of possible weapons that the user could receive, with probabilities ranging from an 80% chance of obtaining a military grade weapon to a 0.26% chance of receiving an exceedingly rare weapon (knives and gloves) ("CS2 Case Odds"). The way these cases are opened is also visually reminiscent of a slot machine, where possible weapons spin rapidly in a roulette-like mechanism. Cases act as legal forms of gambling for young people, as there is no age verification, and anyone can start participating in the roulette system as long as they have the monetary means to buy the keys. Then, users can choose to either use the skins when they play Counter-Strike or keep them as investment pieces, as the value they can resell the skin for changes based on market conditions. Opening skin cases is heavily integrated into the viewing experience of watching Counter-Strike esports. For example, many tournaments will broadcast different streamers opening cases during downtime. Thus, streamers and viewers go through the roulette process together, and both experience the dopamine rush of opening cases. Additionally, streamers will ultimately showcase the rare or exceedingly rare prizes they can win through the roulette system, enticing viewers to open cases themselves to see if they can also win big. Ultimately, cases function as a gambling-lite system that is tightly integrated into the Counter-Strike experience, shaping how players engage with the game and the broader esports culture.

Another example of CS cases' integration into Counter-Strike Esports is the ability to use the skins as replacements for cash when "Skin Betting." In skin betting, users place bets using their skins instead of betting on esports matches using cash or national currency. This adds another layer of gambling to esports betting – a participant plays a game of chance to obtain an object of monetary value, then uses that object to play other games of chance. It is akin to winning a car through a roulette game, then using that car to bet on an NBA game. This creates a continuous cycle where users are exposed to sustained dopamine rushes, leading to addiction on a greater level. The normalization of gambling through the video games themselves and the further pipeline into esports serves as evidence of gambling's heavy integration into esports.

The determinants of Foucault's Normalization Theory can be applied to Counter-Strike case openings as a whole. The easy process of obtaining a Counter-Strike case to open demonstrates its ease of access and availability. There are many websites where players can purchase keys for any case they desire (different types have unique skins that can be obtained). The try rates of case openings are also exceptionally high, as, according to mathematically obtained estimates, around 76.4 million cases were opened in a single month (October-November 2025) ("Cases Unboxed the Last Month"). As for public perceptions and social/cultural accommodations surrounding skin case openings, skin case openings are a behavior widely accepted by the Counter-Strike community and are even lauded as a pinnacle part of the game. The practice is heavily ingrained in the community, with Counter-Strike fans opening cases while in person at a tournament to celebrate their potential win with the community (ESI Editorial Team). Thus, based on Normalization Theory, it can be said that opening loot boxes in Counter-Strike, in the form of cases, is extremely normalized and just another aspect of the game.

Another example of the extensive integration of gambling and sports betting into esports is the increasing prevalence of gambling-adjacent mechanisms within the viewer experience. Mechanisms such as Twitch predictions and fantasy leagues have become routine parts of the fan community. As mentioned, most esports spectating occurs through streaming platforms such as Twitch, as well as platforms like SOOP and Huya in non-English-speaking regions worldwide. A notable feature integrated into the esports viewing experience on Twitch is Twitch Predictions, which allows viewers to bet virtual points on game outcomes or in-game events. The bets integrated into the broadcast are similar to prop bets or straight bets available in independent sportsbooks, such as predicting which team will win a map or whether a particular player will reach a specific number of kills (in the context of first-person shooter games). Also, there is a monetary aspect to Twitch Predictions, as viewers can spend money to expedite the amount of virtual points they accumulate (which are usually gained through watching the broadcast).

The mannerisms of esports viewers regarding predictions begin to resemble those of independent bettors, for example, becoming angry if the ability to bet is not available and constantly asking if predictions will be run (Kindbridge). When asked about bettor behaviors, different moderators of esports broadcasts shared specific instances, with the overall sentiment being that certain viewers go above and beyond when they are unable to bet (9flshdrive). Some moderators talked about being accosted and harassed in direct messages after a bet was paid out incorrectly, while others recounted instances where they dealt with viewers begging to be allowed to bet again after they were banned from doing so (Mayumiz; Beyond3005).

Twitch Predictions exemplify how esports broadcasts integrate gambling-like features. Most, if not all, broadcasted esports events will feature Twitch Predictions, including official broadcasts, and the predictions are constantly advertised. For example, all users will have a different symbol next to their name based on the outcome they chose, the prediction stays visible on screen at all times by way of a pop-up on top of the chat, and users who chose the correct side of a bet are greeted with a celebratory screen with confetti pop-ups ("Channel Points Predictions"). The broadcast platform acknowledges the resemblance of Twitch Predictions to actual gambling, as the feature is restricted in various countries that enforce stricter gambling regulations, including Denmark, South Korea, Singapore, and Sweden, among others ("Predictions Terms and Conditions"). While users are not betting actual money, the system introduces young audiences to esports gambling-like behavior and mechanisms in a low-risk, gamified environment. Overall, the constant exhibition and advertisement of a gambling simulation to the young audiences of esports normalizes this behavior and blurs the distinction between entertainment and betting.

The determinants of Normalization Theory can also be applied to Twitch Predictions. The access and availability of Twitch Predictions is exceptionally high, as they are available on most esports broadcasts on the website. However, in the Asia-Pacific and China, Twitch is not the primary broadcast site. Instead, other platforms that do not have this gambling mechanism, such as Billibilli and SOOP, are the primary methods of viewership. Thus, there is no complete access and availability. Also, while it is not possible to determine whether the determinants of trying rates and recent and regular use rates are met because the data is unpublished, based on the demand for predictions and their availability and ease of access, it can be assumed that much of the community has tried or takes part in the mechanism.

Additionally, social and cultural accommodations are a part of esports broadcasts that many in the community look forward to and participate in. When asked about Twitch predictions, various esports broadcast moderators mentioned that viewers would get angry if predictions were not run on time. Thus, this tells us that the mechanism is deeply ingrained in the community's routine (Lady Auro). Therefore, based on Normalization Theory, the gambling mechanism of Twitch Predictions is heavily normalized and ingrained in the American and EMEA viewer regions.

Furthermore, gambling and sports betting are heavily integrated into esports through advertisements and sponsorships. The biggest problem for esports has been the financial viability of the scene, with most clubs and leagues operating at an economic loss, even after operating for 20 years or more. Even the most viewed leagues struggle, such as League Champions Korea (LCK), the primary circuit of League of Legends, which has incurred cumulative losses of around $29.6 million from 2022 to 2024 (Fisher). Game developers and esports organizations have yet to ascertain a consistent revenue model. However, they face increasing pressure to maintain financial viability. As economic pressures mount on esports organizations and developers, sponsorships have become a crucial revenue stream to sustain operations and meet investor expectations. For organizations, venture capital firms that invested in the teams in 2021-2022 "want their dime back," according to Sean Gares, General Manager of Shopify Rebellion (The Score Esports). Conversely, game developers like Riot Games face increasing pressure from upper management. In Riot's case, it is from the parent company Tencent Games, as the Chinese company has reportedly instructed Riot "not only to remain financially successful, but also to justify its investments by obtaining concrete returns in the medium term," according to investigative reporter Dymey. To ease pressures, organizations and developers have turned to sponsorship and advertising as the linchpin in the esports financial model, as sales decline and broadcasting rights deals become increasingly rare. Sponsorships have become the primary source of income for many esports organizations; for instance, sponsorships comprised 45% of Team Liquid's revenue in 2021 (Ciocchetti).

Following the repeal of the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act, sportsbooks and gambling companies have been able to generate substantial revenue due to high profit margins, and they use these significant financial resources for advertising (Ramsey). Thus, they end up being the ideal sponsor for an esports organization that requires substantial funding to operate its business or host large-scale events. Conversely, gambling companies want to advertise in the esports industry because they aim to market to the esports audience, which is predominantly young men, as research has shown to be more likely to participate in sports betting (Nyemcsok et al.).

Due to the mutually beneficial relationship between gambling companies and esports organizations, Riot Games has recently announced that it will be relaxing its sponsorship guidelines regarding gambling companies (Needham). For 14 years, until 2025, partnered esports teams were prohibited from accepting betting sponsorships, and gambling companies were not permitted to be advertised on Riot's broadcasts. Thus, clubs that fielded teams in Riot Esports and Valve Esports had different sponsorships for each roster. For example, in 2021, the German esports club UOL was sponsored by Betway, a British online gambling company, and had fielded rosters in both CS:GO and League of Legends. However, the Betway sponsor was only present on the uniforms of the CS:GO roster (Biggar et al.).

Nevertheless, in December 2024, reports began to leak that Riot had met with their partnered esports clubs in Valorant and League of Legends to discuss their new, more relaxed sponsorship guidelines. From the 2025 season onwards (as of now), organizations in the Americas and EMEA (Europe, Middle East, and Africa) will be allowed to partner with betting companies; however, these organizations are not allowed to advertise such companies on broadcast, as no betting brands may appear on Riot broadcasts, Riot socials, or player jerseys (Needham). Additionally, Riot Games must vet all potential sponsors of partnered organizations to ensure these companies meet Riot's standards. The COO of Riot Games emphasized that the "decision was not made lightly" and that the primary reason for the change was to help teams unlock new revenue opportunities, emphasizing how significant gambling companies have become to Riot's current financial model of prioritizing financial profitability (Šimić).

An example of gambling companies acting as major sponsors and bankrolling esports tournaments and events was in 2021, when the sports betting company PrizePicks sponsored a collegiate Counter-Strike tournament run by CSL Esports, the "PrizePicks AWPTOBER Classic." This partnership is another example of the interconnectedness between gambling and esports, particularly on the financial level, with PrizePicks

CEO Adam Wexler describing esports as “a true line of business for us” (Hyrliková). However, there are moral implications to be considered when looking at the tournament itself–the AWPTOBER Classic was a tournament for college students, and a gambling company chose to advertise its addictive products to young students whose brains have not yet fully developed.

Advertisements are present throughout various esports broadcasts and on independent esports-related platforms. Similar to platforms like ESPN, websites such as VLR.GG and HLTV.org are primary reporters of game results, relevant events, and player statistics for Valorant and Counter-Strike, respectively. Moreover, like ESPN, betting advertisements are intertwined within both websites and their respective user experiences. The only ad on VLR is for Thunderpick, an esports-focused crypto betting platform, which is present on every single game results page. Additionally, the betting spreads for both Thunderpick and Rainbet, another online crypto casino and sportsbook, are the first things visible under the team logos. In conclusion, the multifaceted integration of gambling into the esports ecosystem, through in-game mechanisms, broadcast integrations, and widespread sponsorship and advertising, has normalized betting behaviors among its predominantly young audience, creating an inherent pipeline that eases the journey from casual viewer to active gambler.

In summary, betting mechanisms and gambling companies are embedded at various levels of the esports ecosystem. Normalization Theory determined that Counter-Strike cases and Twitch predictions were forms of gambling that were extremely normalized within the community, and this normalization is further supported by the increasing integration of gambling companies into esports. Together, these factors demonstrate that gambling in esports is not merely a fringe behavior but a deeply integrated practice sustained by commercial interests and embedded within the daily experiences of organizations and spectators alike.

THE ETHICALITY OF TARGETING YOUNG PEOPLE

When examining the significant integration of gambling and sports betting into esports, the primary ethical concerns arise from the intersection of this integration and the young demographics of esports. As previously mentioned, 32% of esports viewers were between the ages of 16 and 24 (Connolly). Young adults and children are already more likely to start gambling because, at that age, their brains have not yet fully developed, leaving them with “cognitive immaturities” that can lead to “illusions of control over outcomes” and a “poor understanding of statistical probability” (Hollén et al.). Combined with the normalization and perceived exposure to gambling and betting mechanisms within the esports ecosystem, this has led to gambling demographics in esports skewing younger as well– a study done in Australia in 2017 indicated that 30% of all esports bettors were between the ages of 18-29, compared to only 14% of all traditional sports bettors (Gainsbury et al.).

This skew is concerning, as there has been extensive research done about the psychological and physical consequences of gambling at a young age. Lynch et al. conducted a study across the U.S. that reported that adolescent and young adult gamblers were more likely to experience depression and alcohol and drug use, abuse, or dependence than their non-gambling counterparts, and that the correlations between gambling and these conditions were strongly positive. Comparatively, the study found no relationship between alcohol abuse and adult gambling, nor between lifetime depression and adult gambling (Lynch et al.). This highlights the concerning nature of gambling’s heavy integration into esports, as exposure at a young age has a much more severe effect than exposure later on in life; however, esports as a medium works to expose as many young children and adults as possible.

The normalization of case opening and skin betting, and their integration into esports, highlights ethical quandaries because both forms of gambling are intensely addictive and can lead to more severe gambling problems. Greer et al., professors from Australia, conducted a research study comparing esports cash betting, roulette-based skins gambling, and esports skin betting, and found that different forms of gambling had distinct effects on each consumer group. Roulette-based skin gambling was uniquely associated with higher problem gambling severity and greater gambling-related harm, and participating in this gambling was associated with a greater frequency of esports skin betting. In contrast, esports cash betting was not uniquely predictive of gambling-related harm; instead, it was strongly associated with involvement in traditional gambling activities. Additionally, several reasons have been proposed to explain the different effects. Skin gambling’s unique harm was understood to be possibly due to its sheer accessibility to the general public and the roulette system’s “structural characteristics similar to casino table games and EGMs, which are known to facilitate persistence, loss chasing and impaired control" (Greer et al.). Thus, by relying on known methods to create gambling addictions, roulette-based skin gambling can encourage repetitive play and diminished self-control. When coupled with skin gambling's correlation with esports skin betting, this creates a compounding effect. Repeated exposure to fast-paced, chance-based gambling normalizes betting behaviors and encourages continued participation across related platforms, whether that be through regular skin gambling, esports skin betting, or forays into esports cash betting. This interconnected activity within the same ecosystem reinforces harmful gambling patterns and increases individuals' susceptibility to gambling-related problems.

Twitch Predictions epitomize the heavy integration of gambling-like mechanics into the core esports viewing experience, illustrating how these features normalize and introduce gambling behavior among young audiences, thereby reinforcing the pipeline from casual esports viewers to participants in monetized esports betting. According to Hing et al., a study of adolescents in Australia showed that teens aged 12-17 who participated in simulated gambling were more likely to engage in monetary gambling later on. Externally, simulated gambling can normalize gambling and thus lead it to be "perceived as a safe and socially acceptable activity." In contrast, internally, simulated gambling allows for increased practice with gambling, leading to "an inflated sense of skill" that can "[nurture] overconfidence in the probability of winning in monetary gambling" (Hing et al.).

The integration of gambling companies into the esports financial model raises various ethical concerns, one of which is the potential for young viewers to fall prey to predatory companies that prioritize profit margins and sustained financial gains over time. The deep integration of betting and gambling companies into the esports scene is part of a continuous cycle, where sportsbooks and betting companies target young people by investing heavily in embedding betting within esports. This widespread integration encourages more young adults to participate in betting, incentivizing sportsbooks to further advertise and invest in the industry, reinforcing the cycle. Thus, the root of the problem lies with the sportsbook companies that target young adults as the primary market for esports gambling. The gambling companies target esports for a reason–it is their primary demographic. Young people comprise the most significant proportion of individuals who have never gambled previously, while those in their 20s and 30s make up the majority of habitual gamblers (Welte et al.). Therefore, sportsbooks must capture the attention of non-gamblers as young as possible, so they can mold a habitual gambler who can be exploited in their 20s and 30s. Hence, esports' younger audience base, coupled with the incentives for sportsbooks to target younger audiences, creates an ideal environment for sportsbooks to expand their market cap and profit ceilings. As organizations and leagues become increasingly reliant on revenue from gambling companies, they lose control over what they can do to protect their audience, and, inherently, allow these companies to exploit their fan communities.

Additionally, as mentioned, there are ethical considerations to take into account regarding AWPTOBER being a tournament for college students. By sponsoring such a tournament, PrizePicks is directly marketing its product to 18 to 22-year-olds, whose research has shown them to be more susceptible to gambling addiction in comparison to other adults. Furthermore, research conducted in Australia found that exposure to advertisements from gambling companies and sportsbooks was associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in sports betting and increased spending when doing so (Browne et al.). Given the constant presence of gambling advertisements on major esports platforms, such as VLR, this association is likely to persist.GG and HLTV.org suggest that the young esports audience, already immersed in an environment that incentivizes them to start gambling through primarily ease of access, peer pressure, social normalization, and marketing, is especially vulnerable to developing riskier gambling habits, both in frequency and monetary commitment. Also, by potentially developing such habits at a young age, these viewers may be more likely to carry gambling behaviors into adulthood, increasing their long-term exposure to financial harm and addiction risks (Botella-Guijarro et al.).

Ultimately, the integration of gambling into the esports ecosystem presents deeply troubling ethical consequences due to the pipeline it creates. Young viewers become exposed to and familiar with gambling and betting mechanisms as esports fans, whether through an introduction to a roulette system using skin betting, advertisements on broadcasts for various sportsbooks they can use, or small dopamine rushes from winning bets in Twitch predictions. This repeated exposure normalizes gambling and lowers the psychological and physical barrier of entry to participate in monetary gambling or sports betting, leading young adults to possible addiction and physiological consequences. As the current integration of gambling into esports is maintained and financially motivated bodies push for increased involvement of gambling companies, the league, organizations, and esports community are faced with an ethical conundrum: deciding which of the two is most indispensable - the financial profitability of the scene or the safety of the community.

GAMBLING SPONSORS: NECESSARY FOR FINANCIAL VIABILITY?

While it is often argued that esports leagues need gambling companies as partners to maintain financial viability, Riot Games serves as a decisive counterexample. The League of Legends esports system was financially sustainable for 14 years, from its inception to 2025, while prohibiting gambling companies from being advertised on broadcasts or from collaborating with teams that competed in their league. Instead, the company used revenue from merchandise sales, mainly revenue generated by the League of Legends game itself. The esports sector accounts for only a small part of Riot's overall revenue, but its focus on financial profitability has led it to seek a net positive profit in this sector of its studio as well. In fact, most of Riot's revenue comes from the games they publish: In 2023, the company generated sales of €1.55 billion and a profit of around €385 million, mainly through in-game purchases (ex., for skins and in-game currency) (Dymey). In comparison to the company's financial structure, "esports promotion activities as a whole remain inexpensive," and Riot's co-founder Marc Merill maintains that the investment is for "delivering exceptional value to our audience over the long term" (Dymey; Gould). Merrill also emphasized that "we [Riot] sell [merchandise] … to make it better to be a player" (Gould). However, instead of prioritizing the health and well-being of their viewer base, Riot chooses to mirror a broader industry trend of focusing on financial growth, even when those partnerships raise concerns among their customers.

According to Dymey, a reporter who uncovered financial documents from Riot Games, it was not until recent years, driven by a mandate from Tencent, that Riot prioritized financial profitability over its established model. He commented that Riot's decision to open doors to ethically questionable sponsorships was "first and foremost strategic choices aimed at refocusing on high value-added assets to maximize dividends to TENCENT Holding" (Dymey). The shift to try to become financially profitable, rather than economically viable, was not due to a lack of financial sustainability, but rather a strategic move to increase profitability in the esports sector.

Moreover, the decision to work with ethically ambiguous companies has prompted mixed reactions from viewers, broadcast staff, and partner organizations, with some expressing concern or withdrawing their involvement. In their announcement where they confirm their partnership with the Esports World Cup, a multi-title multimillion dollar tournament funded heavily by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, Riot cites the tournament's ability to provide financial stability to esports organizations as one of their reasons for participation, while also acknowledging how most of the community will "not feel great about [Riot's] decision to partner with EWC" (Baxter; Riot Games). However, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund is controversial because the money itself comes directly from the Saudi Arabian royal family, who have been implicated in various human rights abuses as individuals, such as the murder and torture of journalist Jamal Khasshogi, and as a regime, such as their treatment of activists and critics of the state (Wilkinson). The primary purpose of this investment in esports is to use it as a mechanism for sportswashing, which involves leveraging major sports events to mitigate negative press surrounding the government and ultimately launder their reputation (Francavilla). Because of this, various Riot-contracted broadcast staff have come out about boycotting the tournament itself, labeling the decision as one driven by greed from both Riot and esports clubs, and "a fat L for people who care about sports washing" (Klimentov). As for Riot's decision to allow gambling sponsors, even the CEOs of esports organizations have come out to denounce the decision, with Adam Adamou, the CEO of Moviestar Koi, a Spanish esports organization, openly addressing the public and tweeting that "we will not pursue betting partnerships at @MovistarKOI" (Adamou). The community's reactions convey the disconnect between Riot's new pursuit of profitability and the values held by most within the esports community. By aligning with organizations widely criticized for unethical practices, Riot undermines its credibility and erodes the trust and goodwill it has spent over 19 years building. Riot's recent choices underscore the ethical implications of such decisions, particularly when they compromise the community's overall safety. The normalization of gambling through league partnerships and broadcast exposure thus becomes not just a business tactic, but a moral failing with long-term consequences for the health of the community.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the current symbiotic relationship between esports organizations and leagues was only possible because of the constant normalization of gambling in esports that laid the basis for gambling companies to market and advertise upon. This process can be understood through the lens of Normalization Theory, which allows us to conclude that gambling has truly become normalized in the community – based on the ease of access to gambling mechanics or sportsbooks, high trial rate on platforms such as 1xBet and Prize Picks, Counter-Strike case opening numbers in the millions per month, the acceptance of gambling advertisements and sponsorship by various parts of the community, and backtracking of game developers, who go from being formerly against gambling to now okay with the company advertisements.

Without the heavy integration and normalization of gambling and betting mechanisms in video games, there would be less of a concern about the emergence of a cyclical process where viewers, especially young viewers, are introduced to gambling through esports, then choose to pursue it more actively, as the barrier to entry lowers with every sponsorship and marketing campaign. The emergence of this cyclical process is not accidental; rather, it is a direct consequence of most esports league's decision to focus on profitability over viability. This mirrors what happens to most companies under Capitalism: there is no space for companies to do what is best for their consumers; the best thing will always be to do what is best for the bottom line. However, for these companies and leagues, prioritizing their bottom line has become a requirement for their continued existence, even at the expense of their loyal audiences and communities.

While it may not be entirely feasible to completely boycott esports organizations and league directors who choose to incorporate gambling elements into their games, it is essential to acknowledge the significant consequences that such integration has had on the esports industry. It will continue to impact on vulnerable audiences. By raising awareness, the public can generate meaningful pressure and backlash that discourages the continued integration of these features and mechanisms. Ultimately, recognizing the ethical implications of integrating gambling and gambling mechanisms into esports is the first step in challenging their continued normalization within the community.

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Reconstructing the American Monomyth: Age of Ultron and the MCU

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how Avengers: Age of Ultron both reinforces and adapts the narrative structure of the American monomyth, as defined by Robert Jewett and John Shelton, and Lawrence. This study draws upon the broader trends of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, where superheroes function as modern myths reflecting cultural values and stereotypes surrounding morality, heroism, and justified violence. Through analysis of the film's portrayal of interventionist heroism, collective action, and moral accountability, the paper outlines how Age of Ultron introduces elements that appear to challenge the monomyth, including the heroes' responsibility for the central conflict, the resulting unintended destruction, and the shift from lone hero to a team-based structure of heroism. Furthermore, the film's engagement with post-apocalyptic anxieties, particularly its portrayal of fractured restoration rather than full redemption, is examined in relation to monomythic expectations. Despite these complexities, the analysis demonstrates that the film ultimately preserves the core ideological and structural features of the American monomyth, adapting rather than abandoning its traditional framework.

INTRODUCTION

Superhero films have long functioned as modern myths, reinforcing cultural ideals about heroism, sacrifice, morality, and power. This is especially true for science fiction films found in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). This collection of movies has played a crucial role in shaping contemporary perceptions of what it means to be a hero. This aspect of films came to light, especially after the events of 9/11, which induced a change in superhero films. Superhero films began to provide a sense of escapism from the trauma of the event. Films like *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), and *Black Panther* (2018) emphasized themes of patriotism and heroism. These movies often portrayed superheroes as symbols of hope and resilience, resonating with audiences seeking reassurance and inspiration. The American monomyth, as defined by Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, serves as a dominant narrative structure within this genre, portraying heroes as selfless redeemers who emerge to restore order when institutions fail. As Jewett and Lawrence describe it, the monomyth follows a formula in which "a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task" (Jewett and Lawrence 20). *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), one of the films in the MCU, however, presents a morally complex vision of heroism, raising questions about whether the film reinforces or challenges this traditional structure.

Superheroes function as both wish-fulfillment figures for audiences and cultural agents that reflect contemporary values and anxieties. As McSweeney asserts in his chapter "*Turning to the Dark Side: Challenging American Mythology in the Superhero Genre*," superheroes operate as mirrors of national ideology as they serve to "endorse prevailing social values and behaviors in texts that both reflect and influence the cultures in which they are produced" (McSweeney 112). However, these figures also serve as embodiments of national fantasies, consolidating and legitimizing American worldviews. These national fantasies included American exceptionalism, imperialism, and foreign militarized intervention. By showcasing heroes who triumph over evil through strength and valor, these stories can obscure the nuances of international relations and the diverse perspectives of those involved. This can lead to a form of storytelling where moral absolutism prevails, suggesting that good and evil are easily identifiable and that violence is a justified response to threats. Additionally, the portrayal of superheroes can reinforce stereotypes and exacerbate cultural tensions. For example, the depiction of villainous characters, such as Red Skull and Ultron, often mirrors societal fears and prejudices, which can perpetuate harmful narratives about certain groups. This aspect of superhero storytelling raises critical questions about representation and the responsibility of creators in shaping public perceptions. Given this broader cultural context, examining how individual films utilize or reinforce these ideological patterns becomes crucial.

Avengers: Age of Ultron provides a clear example of how these ideological tensions are portrayed within superhero narratives. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* initially appears to challenge the American monomyth by presenting a morally complex narrative in which heroes bear responsibility for their actions, and the film ultimately reinforces the monomyth's core ideals. The justification of violence by *The Avengers* in their effort to eradicate evil perpetuates the notion that violence, when executed by morally upright individuals, is "good violence". Stark's transformation from a self-centered billionaire to a hero willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good exemplifies the selfless redeemer archetype prevalent in the American monomyth. By absolving Stark through Vision and ensuring that *The Avengers* remain the world's only legitimate protectors, the film upholds the necessity of the moral authority of heroes, a key component of the monomythic structure. By shifting from lone heroism to collective heroism, however, *Age of Ultron* also marks an evolution in the monomyth, suggesting that modern heroism is no longer a singular burden but a shared responsibility, albeit one still defined by American ideological frameworks. This shift brings to attention a deeper consideration of how heroism itself is conceptualized within interventionist narratives.

Such a shift also raises broader questions about moral accountability, the justification of violence, and the consequences of interventionist heroism. As Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo explain, "heroism represents the ideal of citizens transforming civic virtue into the highest form of civic action, accepting either physical peril or social sacrifice" (Franco et al. 99). Building on this framework, interventionist heroism can be understood as a form of heroic action that extends this sense of moral authority outward into the affairs of others where such interventions are justified because they serve a supposedly higher moral purpose (Franco et al. 99). Some scholars like Ross Griffin and Terence McSweeney have examined how the MCU perpetuates U.S. interventionist narratives, framing American-led violence as necessary for maintaining global stability. Griffin argues that the MCU positions superheroes as benevolent enforcers of justice, stating that the film industry "repackages American aggression as a uniquely benevolent brand of violence that was only ever used to protect the principles of democracy and freedom" (Griffin 168). McSweeney extends this discussion by critiquing how the genre simplifies the consequences of violence, ensuring that heroes remain morally justified. As McSweeney states, *Age of Ultron* "legitimizes and endorses Stark's impulsive actions, and in Vision's integrity, even his decision to make Ultron, even though the robot was evil, is also retroactively endorsed" (McSweeney 199). This movie introduces a more ambiguous depiction of heroism, where power leads to unintended heroism. This paper builds upon these existing discussions but moves beyond them by analyzing how the shift from lone heroism to team-based heroism modifies the traditional American monomyth. This research examines the following question:

How does *Avengers: Age of Ultron* adhere to or challenge the structure of the American monomyth? Subsidiary questions include: Does the film reinforce the selfless redeemer archetype, or does it complicate it by portraying heroes who create as much destruction as they prevent? Does the shift from lone heroism to team-based heroism challenge the traditional American monomyth, or does it merely modify it while maintaining its core structure? Using the previously defined American monomyth as a theoretical framework, this paper will analyze key moments in the *Age of Ultron* to determine whether the film ultimately upholds, critiques, or reconfigures the traditional hero's journey.

JUSTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE AND THE SELFLESS REDEEMER IN THE AGE OF ULTRON

One of the central tenets of the American monomyth is the notion of justified violence, where a selfless hero steps in to restore order when traditional institutions fail. Superhero films often depict violence as a necessary force for maintaining order, reinforcing the selfless redeemer archetype. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* complicates this framework by portraying *The Avengers* as both saviors and the creators of destruction, yet their actions remain justified within the narrative. The main conflict of the film arises due to Tony Stark's reckless decision to create Ultron, an AI initially designed to protect the world, but that turns into a genocidal entity. Despite Stark's involvement in creating the crisis, the film redeems him through the creation of Vision, a character that embodies wisdom and virtue. In "*The Mythologies of the Contemporary Superhero Film*", McSweeney argues that even when heroism leads to catastrophic consequences, the narrative absolves the hero by reaffirming their noble intentions rather than holding them fully accountable (McSweeney 43). The creation of this new cultural other, Ultron, leads to a series of battles where both the hero and the villain inflict significant damage on the city. This echoes Griffin's argument that "the violence enacted by *The Avengers* is justifiable in that it is undertaken to save the society rather than subjugate it" (Griffin 174). This narrative justification of violence reflects broader patterns in American cultural mythology, where interventionism is framed as morally necessary despite unintended consequences. The theory of Zero Factor, where on-screen casualties are minimized or omitted, further supports this sanitization of violence. The Battle of Sokovia serves as the climactic confrontation in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, in which

Ultron attempts to annihilate humanity by lifting the city of Sokovia into the air and dropping it to trigger an extinction upon impact. As the city begins to be torn apart and buildings begin to collapse, large-scale destruction becomes inevitable. This very battle, for instance, results in mass civilian casualties, yet the film prioritizes *The Avengers*' efforts to evacuate civilians via the Helicarrier rather than dwelling on the destruction itself. By emphasizing their rescue efforts over the eradication of the enemy, the film reinforces their role as benevolent protectors. The devastation of Sokovia, much like real-world military interventions, is reframed as collateral damage in a necessary battle for peace. As McSweeney states in *War on Terror*, "While the film warns that the United States can be both manipulative and destructive, ultimately it rehabilitates its global role as a necessary one, as without these very Americanized superheroes, the world would be lost" (McSweeney 131). *Age of Ultron* follows this pattern, briefly acknowledging *The Avengers*' destructive impact but ultimately portraying their intervention as essential for humanity's survival.

Despite introducing moral ambiguity, the film ultimately reaffirms the necessity of interventionist heroism rather than fully critiquing it. The final battle scene, in which *The Avengers* lift an entire city into the sky to prevent global annihilation, exemplifies this contradiction. The scale of destruction is massive, but the film ensures that the heroes remain morally justified by presenting Ultron as an absolute evil that must be defeated at all costs. This aligns with McSweeney's observation that superhero films often depict violence as "the clear cut war of good against evil, and therefore, in a sense, "the good war" in which everything works out and the good wins in an anemic happy ending" rather than engaging with its complex consequences (McSweeney 199). By maintaining the binary of good versus evil, *Age of Ultron* prevents a full deconstruction of the monomyth, instead modifying it to acknowledge flawed heroism while still upholding its core ideals. This echoes McSweeney's broader argument that the superhero genre remains inherently conservative as it offers solutions that are "exclusively undemocratic and violent, a 'mythic massage' that soothes and satisfies" (McSweeney 43). Rather than fully breaking away from the selfless redeemer archetype, the film slightly shifts its focus, recognizing the unintended consequences of heroism while still portraying *The Avengers* as the only viable force to protect the world. By briefly acknowledging the damage the heroes cause, the film appears to invite moral reflection, yet it ultimately reinforces their legitimacy by framing their mistakes as the unavoidable costs of saving humanity. This reassures the audience that even flawed heroes remain morally necessary, preserving the belief in their indispensability. Even though the team's actions directly lead to global instability, they are still framed as humanity's last line of defense, reinforcing the fundamental ideological structures of the American monomyth.

INTUITIVE ETHICS AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE MONOMYTH

The moral authority of the American monomyth is sustained not merely through the hero's actions but through the moral frameworks that those actions reflect. In Age of Ultron, *The Avengers* exemplify what Gehman et al. identify as a preference for "individualizing foundations of care and fairness," which prioritize compassion, protection, and justice for individuals over loyalty to systems or authority (Gehman et al. 1). This is especially apparent in *The Avengers*' decision to rescue civilians in Sokovia, even as the city crumbles around them. Rather than viewing the evacuation as a strategic failure, the film frames it as an act of redemption—reaffirming *The Avengers*' moral authority by focusing on the lives saved rather than the destruction caused. These moments align with Eden et al.'s findings that "heroes may remain heroes even when violating moral norms, as long as those norms are in the domains of authority and purity" (Eden et al. 12). In other words, the film allows its heroes to transgress institutional or societal rules—as Tony Stark does when he secretly creates Ultron—so long as their intentions are framed as noble and ultimately restorative. This dynamic reinforces a core component of the American monomyth: the hero must operate outside or above conventional systems in order to do what is "right." Rather than submitting to institutional controls, *The Avengers* create moral certainty by separating issues, thereby justifying their exceptionalism in terms of an appeal to a superior moral law. The disobedience of figures like Stark or Rogers is not portrayed as villainous, but as necessary, a sacrifice of conformity for the sake of justice. The film thus constructs moral legitimacy not through institutional validation but through an appeal to intuitive moral principles that audiences associate with heroism.

In addition to moral action, the emotional portrayal of *The Avengers* further strengthens their alignment with the American monomyth. Writers of superhero narratives note that emotional qualities, such as compassion, sincerity, and concern for others, are vital and function as markers for heroic virtue. Gehman et al. further emphasizes this dynamic by explaining that "movies depict values of compassion and fairness as virtuous by imbuing heroes (but not villains) with these qualities, and by portraying heroes as fighting for the rights and well-being of others, even when doing so entails physical or social risks" (Gehman et al. 13). This is visible in characters like Wanda Maximoff, who joins *The Avengers* only after realizing the human cost of Ultron's plan, or in Steve Rogers, who consistently prioritizes individual lives over military objectives. These portrayals showcase a key idea: moral heroism is not merely about what the hero does, but about the emotional and ethical stance they take toward others. Eden et al. supports this idea, noting that "the care domain may be particularly important for defining heroes; this influence may be due to the care domain's effect on perceptions of warmth and duplicity" (Eden et al. 203). This finding deepens the understanding of why audiences continue to perceive *The Avengers* as morally legitimate figures despite their rule-breaking or destructive actions. Because violations of the care domain decrease a hero's perceived warmth, an important trait for the audience's approval, small displays of empathy, concern, or loyalty help restore a hero's moral image. In other words, when heroes exhibit compassion, audiences intuitively read them as sincere and trustworthy, which compensates for their moral transgressions. In Age of Ultron, Tony Stark's arrogance and reckless action of creating Ultron would, normally, make him morally compromised, yet his emotional vulnerability and desire to save humanity maintain his heroic status in the eyes of viewers. The film relies on this emotional shorthand, allowing audiences to interpret their intentions rather than their consequences as the true measure of their morality and ensuring that heroes remain "good" even when their actions complicate or endanger the world they aim to save. This dynamic illustrates how the American monomyth remains resilient in contemporary media: rather than demanding moral perfection, it frames the hero's value through emotional authenticity and personal sacrifice. The Moral Foundations Theory's concept of "moral intuitions", those quick, affective responses to moral stimuli, helps explain why audiences continue to accept *The Avengers* as morally upright figures, even though they do break moral rules. Because viewers respond first to emotional signals such as compassion, regret, or vulnerability, they are inclined to interpret *The Avengers*' actions through their perceived intentions rather than through the actual consequences of their behavior. As heroes appear sincere and emotionally grounded, audiences read them as fundamentally good, even when their choices cause harm. In this way, the film sets viewers to excuse ethical transgressions and reinforces the idea that heroes remain trustworthy because of how they feel, not necessarily because of what they do. Ultimately, *Age of Ultron* does not present a fundamental rethinking of heroism but rather reaffirms the traditional mythic structure by grounding heroism in care, emotional sincerity, and the perceived moral duty to act.

EMBRACING GROUP HERO AND POST-APOCALYPTIC ANXIETIES

While *Avengers: Age of Ultron* appears to reinforce the American monomyth, an alternative reading suggests that the film deconstructs it by blending elements of the Group Hero archetype (Hall) and post-apocalyptic narratives (Lacroix and Westerfelhaus). One way the film challenges the American monomyth is through its shift from a lone hero to a collective, team-based heroism. Hall states, "In group hero stories, the emphasis is on the overall contributions of the group to the story, instead of a focus on specific actions. In other words, as long as the goal is achieved, those who participate are considered equal heroes." (Hall 217). Unlike traditional monomythic heroes, who act alone to restore order, *Age of Ultron* presents a team of flawed individuals, each contributing to both the crisis and its resolution. The film's climax, where *The Avengers* must unite to prevent the destruction of Sokovia, exemplifies this shift. While characters like Iron Man and Captain America maintain leadership roles, their decisions are collectively debated and executed. This diverges from the monomythic criteria, where the hero is an unquestioned savior who single-handedly rectifies societal corruption. By dispersing authority across a group of people rather than solely on a single figure, the film undermines the monomyth's core assumption that salvation depends on one morally superior individual. Team-based heroism introduces negotiation, disagreement, and shared liability, elements that the monomyth typically suppresses to maintain the illusion of a flawless redeemer. As a result, the narrative suggests that no single hero is capable of restoring order alone. This signals a move away from the monomyth's emphasis on singular, unquestioned authority. As Hall further argues, "In group hero stories, every person has something vital that they bring to the group which allows the story to be told" (Hall 220). This idea is evident in Age of Ultron, where each Avenger's unique skills and perspectives are necessary for their success - Scarlet Witch's psychic abilities expose Ultron's vulnerabilities, Thor's vision leads to the creation of Vision, and Hawkeye, often portrayed as the weakest Avenger, serves as an emotional anchor for the team. This emphasis on interdependence rather than individual heroism challenges the traditional American monomyth, presenting heroism as an unstable, ongoing process that requires constant negotiation, compromise, and shared responsibility rather than a singular act of redemption.

Additionally, the film's exploration of unintended destruction aligns with post-apocalyptic narratives, which Lacroix and Westerfelhaus argue "lack the characteristic optimism of the conventional American monomyth with its hope in the redemptive possibility of bringing about a community's restoration via the agency of some savior" (Lacroix and Westerfelhaus 92). This immediately sets up a critical stance against the traditional heroic narrative. Unlike traditional monomythic stories, which end optimistically with the hero purging corruption and restoring balance, *Age of Ultron* leaves the world in a state of uncertainty. The destruction of Sokovia is not simply collateral damage; it is a direct consequence of *The Avengers*' well-intentioned but ultimately flawed intervention, particularly Stark's creation of Ultron. Instead of affirming that a heroic intervention will ultimately redeem or restore a community, the film introduces an unsettling notion: even acts of heroism, driven by the desire to protect, can unleash vast and unforeseen destruction. It positions heroism as a double-edged sword. "Monomythic narratives typically end on a positive note with communal pollution purged and purity restored" (Lacroix and Westerfelhaus 92), but *Age of Ultron* complicates this structure by presenting a world that is not fully restored; rather, it is fractured, with the increasing political and ideological division leading to the Sokovia Accords in *Captain America: Civil War*. The Accords demonstrate that Sokovia never returns to the mythical state of purity that the monomythic heroes traditionally restore; instead, the aftermath is public distrust, fragmentation, and international oversight. This shift indicates that the heroic intervention does not cleanse the world but complicates it. Rather than restoring faith in the infallible hero, the film sows doubt about whether heroism is even sustainable in the modern world; a distinctly post-apocalyptic concern rather than a reaffirmation of fundamental monomythic optimism.

UPHOLDING THE AMERICAN MONOMYTH

Although *Age of Ultron* introduces elements of collective heroism and post-apocalyptic anxieties, it does not fully abandon the American monomyth. While *The Avengers* operate as a team, they remain a self-appointed force, reinforcing the monomyth's exceptionalist worldview. As Hall states, "Many lone hero stories are defined by the individual resisting larger causes that they perceive as unjust … group hero stories revolve around the group coming together to participate in a larger cause, for reasons that may or may not involve a higher personal morality" (Hall 218). While the film appears to embrace group heroism, it does not dismantle the hierarchical structure of heroism; leaders like Tony Stark and Captain America continue to drive decision-making, while other Avengers play supporting roles. Rather than fully committing to a collectivist model, the film maintains the monomythic idea that a select group of exceptional individuals must intervene to protect the world, reinforcing the necessity of elite heroism over democratic or systemic solutions. At the same time, while *Age of Ultron* introduces themes of uncertainty and unintended consequences, it does not embrace the irreversible destruction central to post-apocalyptic fiction. Lacroix and Westerfelhaus state, "The redemptive action required to purge paradise of pollution and restore its purity very often takes the form of a rough retributive justice in which the archetypal mythic hero ritually reestablishes the superiority of socially sanctioned good over socially proscribed evil and thus restores the status quo's moral order" (Lacroix and Westerfelhaus 91). This reflects how, despite Age of Ultron's moments of doubt, the film ultimately ensures that order is maintained: *The Avengers* remain the world's necessary protectors, and their role as redeemers is reaffirmed. Unlike post-apocalyptic narratives, which often depict societal collapse as irreversible and heroic action as futile, *Age of Ultron* maintains the monomyth's core optimism, presenting crises as challenges to be overcome rather than the beginning of inevitable decline.

McSweeney argues, "The very American superheroes of the MCU are strictly defined and contained by the ideology and beliefs of the culture which created them" (McSweeney 202). This suggests that rather than embracing the nihilism of post-apocalyptic storytelling, the film adheres to traditional heroic structures, emphasizing redemption, restoration, and continuity rather than despair. Even though the destruction of Sokovia creates political tensions in later MCU films, it does not signal the end of civilization or the erasure of heroic ideals. Instead, it leads to the formation of a new Avengers team, reinforcing the idea that heroism must persist even in the face of catastrophe, aligning the film with monomythic traditions rather than post-apocalyptic fatalism. As McSweeney further states, "Not a single film across the MCU explicitly challenges the idea that righteous violence is the path to redemption" (McSweeney 26), reinforcing that while the film acknowledges destruction, it still presents heroic intervention as necessary and justified rather than futile or self-destructive. Even though *Age of Ultron* introduces moments of ethical uncertainty, particularly in relation to Tony Stark's unchecked power, it does not abandon the notion that violence, when committed by the 'right' heroes, leads to restoration rather than collapse. This directly contrasts with post-apocalyptic narratives, which often reject the possibility of redemption and depict violence as leading to irreversible societal downfall. Instead, *Age of Ultron* maintains the monomyth's belief in the hero's ability to restore order, reinforcing the optimism of traditional heroic storytelling rather than the fatalism of post-apocalyptic fiction.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored how *Avengers: Age of Ultron* both adheres to and complicates the structure of the American monomyth, specifically in terms of its portrayal of heroism, the justification of violence, and moral authority. Through detailed analysis, it has been shown that while the film introduces a more complex depiction of heroism, one that involves moral ambiguity and collective heroism, the core ideals of the monomyth remain firmly intact. *The Avengers*' actions, despite the unintended consequences and ethical dilemmas they face, still adhere to the fundamental principles of selfless heroism and justified violence that the American monomyth entails. The shift from lone heroism to a collective, team-based approach does not dismantle the traditional narrative but rather updates it for a modern context, reaffirming its relevance in today's media landscape.

The theoretical framework of the American monomyth, as outlined by scholars like Jewett and Lawrence, was the theory used to analyze these findings. The notion of the hero as a redeemer who restores order through intervention, often involving violence, has remained central to the narrative structure of the MCU. Theories of collective heroism, as explored by Hall, offered a nuanced view that allowed for the exploration of group dynamics in Age of Ultron, while the concept of intuitive ethics helped explain the moral authority granted to *The Avengers*, despite their ethical transgressions. These theories proved to be valuable in understanding how *Age of Ultron* maintains the ideological foundations of the monomyth, even as it adapts to a more complex, team-oriented form of heroism.

Ultimately, this paper highlighted the enduring power of the American monomyth in shaping superhero narratives, demonstrating how these films continue to reflect and reinforce American values. The implications of this analysis extend beyond the MCU, suggesting that contemporary hero narratives in science fiction, across various media, continue to uphold the ideological frameworks of redemption, exceptionalism, and interventionism. As the genre evolves, the monomyth remains a potent tool for understanding the cultural and political forces of the time, illustrating the persistence of certain ideals in storytelling and their ongoing relevance in shaping public perceptions of heroism.

At the same time, the continued use of this narrative structure raises important questions for further research. How should the American Monomyth be presented in contemporary films in order to avoid reinforcing unexamined assumptions about justified violence or interventionist power? What responsibilities do filmmakers have towards this monomyth, given its impact on audience attitudes towards authority, morality, and global politics? And finally, how do the current cultural changes, such as increased public wariness towards political institutions and the rising global crises, affect the way audiences view monomythic heroism today? These questions offer a deeper insight into how the American monomyth can be adapted, transformed, and utilized in future media and what these changes mean for the definition of heroism itself.

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Sarah Nichols

Speech and Safety: Early Interventions for Children with Autism

ABSTRACT

This research explores how speech and language pathologists use various early intervention models to support children with autism in developing language and social skills. Because children with autism struggle with social communication and relationship skills, it is important that they receive specialized care so they can experience the best quality of life. This paper will compare the effectiveness of two early intervention models, Discrete Trial Training (DTT) and JASPER, and analyze them through the lens of Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA). Both methods are effective; however, JASPER presents fewer harmful long-term implications. This paper will ultimately address the short-term versus long-term effects of each method, the specific method's impact on society, and what speech pathologists can do to educate themselves on autism.

INTRODUCTION

According to Rachel Tee-Melegrito, a licensed occupational therapist, autism spectrum disorder is a developmental disorder that affects people's language, communication, and social skills (Tee-Melegrito sec. 1). Children with autism often struggle to communicate effectively with their peers; therefore, it is common for children with autism to receive speech therapy at a young age to help them develop functional language and communication skills to improve their quality of life. This paper will examine how speech and language pathologists can effectively support children with autism by comparing different early intervention models. This essay aims to raise awareness of the importance of autism research, the field of speech-language pathology, and the implementation of effective early intervention methods for children with autism.

The intervention models analyzed in this essay are grounded in ABA, a field within behaviorism that is based on operant conditioning. Through the use of research on traditional ABA models, including Discrete Trial Training (DTT) and Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Intervention (NDBI) models, such as JASPER, this essay will compare their effectiveness. A key term this paper will explore is the role and educational background of speech-language pathologists in treating children with autism. Autism spectrum disorder comes in many forms, and individuals with autism experience many challenges of living in a world that does not accommodate neurodiversity. Speech and language pathologists must deliver early intervention to children with autism through a model that is effective, safe, and affirming for them. The existing literature and research on early intervention models indicate that the JASPER model is the best fit for this description.

FOUNDATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

According to Lauren E. Miller, a PhD and assistant professor in neurology at the Medical College of Wisconsin, autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is "a neurodevelopmental disorder with complex and heterogeneous symptom presentations, characterized by social communication deficits and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior and interests" (Miller et al. 1). Autism is a spectrum disorder, which means that symptoms are presented in various ways across individuals. Some children have high-functioning autism, meaning they "exhibit relatively mild symptoms" of autism (Kids on the Move par. 3). Others have low-functioning autism and "have significant impairments in multiple areas of development and functioning" (Kids on the Move par. 13). This demonstrates that the experiences of individuals with autism are different across the spectrum and that the severity of diagnoses will vary. Jon Baio, a prominent author and researcher in autism spectrum disorder, shares that as of 2014, 1 in 59 U.S. children had been diagnosed with autism, and the rate continues to grow (qtd. in Beverly et al. 2). Therefore, it is important to understand the symptoms that constitute an autism diagnosis.

Symptoms of autism in children can include delayed speech development, limited emotional response, social relationship issues, and developmental delays in play. Children experience these symptoms to different degrees, though they are common among all diagnoses. However, being on the autism spectrum makes social interaction difficult, so children who experience these symptoms must be provided with support, regardless of how severe their diagnosis is. According to Stephen J. Gentles, a postdoctoral fellow and researcher in child disabilities and autism, it is common for community involvement, health, and overall quality of life to be negatively impacted for individuals with autism as a result of the social challenges they face (qtd. in Binns et al. 2). Social and communication challenges make it difficult for autistic children to connect with peers, communicate their needs, advocate for themselves, and build healthy relationships. The absence of healthy relationships harms the overall quality of life. Many aspects of daily life present challenges for individuals on the autism spectrum. A common characteristic of autism is "resistance to change or insistence on sameness" (Miller et al. 3). Many children with autism get easily anxious over change and are overwhelmed by new environments. They may shut down easily, refuse to enter a room, or hide from what is overwhelming them. Experiencing frequent changes in environment and social settings is an integral part of daily life. Thus, children with autism must receive therapy that will help them develop the language, communication, and social skills that will help them combat the inherent challenges they face in these areas.

Minimally verbal autistic children have difficulty communicating their needs and connecting with others socially. This could be because they do not possess the social language or vocabulary at all, or because they have the language but don't know how to produce it. It is common for individuals with autism to be minimally verbal or fail to develop functional language entirely. This is the case for about 25-30% of people on the autism spectrum (Tee-Melegrito sec. 1). Speech pathologists can help children with their functional language skills by working on articulation, voice, and fluency through different speech exercises. Speech and language pathologists (SLPs) are professionals trained in diagnosing, treating, and preventing speech, communication, and swallowing disorders (ASHA Speech-Language Pathologists par. 1). They can work in schools, hospitals, rehabilitation facilities, and private clinical practices. In addition to helping autistic children with their speech production, speech-language pathologists also assist children in developing their social communication skills. "Social communication encompasses social interaction, social cognition, pragmatics, and language processing" (ASHA Social Communication par. 1). Examples of social communication include, but are not limited to, emotional understanding and regulation, perspective taking, nonverbal gestures, and problem solving. Children with autism need to develop these skills so that they can communicate effectively with their peers and adapt to different social situations. Speech pathologists help children with these target skills by incorporating play-based therapy techniques, role-playing activities, and learning games.

Speech pathologists are experts in delivering therapy to children with autism in one-on-one settings as well as in small group settings; they can work independently or as a member of an interdisciplinary team. Speech pathologists often work closely with other professionals, such as special education teachers, child psychologists, and behaviorists. Megan Fedewa, a special education teacher with a focus on autism, is experienced in delivering naturalistic interventions to children on the spectrum. She expresses that "collaboration between educators and SLPs when supporting children with autism is especially important because of the different background and unique training each professional brings" (Fedewa et al. 1030). Speech pathology encompasses both individualized and interdisciplinary approaches, which makes it effective for treating children with autism. According to Brenda L. Beverly, an ASHA-certified Speech and Language Pathologist, speech and language pathology is the highest frequency service for children with autism. This means that out of all the specialized services sought out by autistic children and their families, speech pathology is the most common (Beverly et al. 21). Amanda Binns, a PhD and licensed Speech and Language Pathologist, states, "The breadth of SLPs' scope of practice enhances their ability to tailor the selection of treatment goals and strategies to each individual child, which is imperative given the heterogeneity of autism" (Binns et al. 2). Due to the heterogeneous nature of autism, children experience symptoms in different ways. While autism presents a similar set of symptoms for every child, cases of autism differ in their severity. One reason why speech and language pathology is the most popular mode of early intervention is that speech pathologists are adept at catering to each child's specific needs. Speech pathologists understand that autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning that not every child needs the same kind of intervention. Every child's needs are different and require different variations of speech therapy techniques. Thus, some of what makes speech-language pathologists' interventions so valuable are the variety of treatments available and the use of different early intervention models.

Interventions are often delivered by speech pathologists when children are very young. "Early intervention for autism is a proactive approach that emphasizes identifying and addressing developmental challenges in children as early as possible—ideally between the ages of 1 and 3 years" (Advanced Autism Services par. 7). Early intervention is beneficial for children with autism because there is high neuroplasticity in the brain during this period. This means that the younger a child is, the more they can learn, and at a faster rate. The support that children receive through early intervention benefits them throughout their childhood and into adulthood. Research has shown that early intervention has resulted in "significant improvements in IQ, language abilities, and social interactions" (Advanced Autism Services par. 7). Many families of children with autism use early intervention, particularly in speech and language pathology. By receiving early intervention in speech, children gain functional language and social communication skills. Early intervention is an effective and popular form of therapy for children with autism. It is essential to acknowledge that there are various types of early intervention models. It is common for families to choose an early intervention model without conducting thorough research on the model and how it works, resulting in children being placed in ill-fitting programs. As Pediatric Psychologist Madeline Racine states, "it is important that practitioners working with families of children with ASD be mindful of the breadth of treatments that families consider, and the potential risks and benefits of each, to help families obtain evidence-based interventions appropriate for their child" (Racine et al. 194). Because children are susceptible and vulnerable to change at such a young age, early intervention models must be thoroughly researched and understood by both parents and professionals. By understanding the scope of different early intervention models, families and professionals can determine the best treatment plan for the child.

APPLIED BEHAVIORAL ANALYSIS

ABA is the foundation of many early intervention models. Speech pathologists, special education teachers, and other professionals frequently use therapy methods and techniques rooted in ABA when working with autistic children. ABA methods are used to increase desired behaviors and decrease unwanted behaviors. "Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is the practice of applying the psychological principles of learning theory in a systematic way to modify behavior" ("What is Applied Behavior Analysis?" par. 1). Speech pathologists may use ABA methods to modify different social communication behaviors, like body language or gestures. ABA interventions are delivered methodically with an emphasis on adult-led instruction. John O. Cooper, a published author in the field of psychology, provides insight into a systematic approach used by therapists that is modeled after operant conditioning. He explains that operant conditioning is a psychological theory of learning that incorporates reinforcement and punishment. According to research by B.F. Skinner, operant behaviors are "influenced by stimulus changes that have followed the behavior in the past" (Cooper et al. 2). This means that behaviors are learned and performed according to their effect or result, rather than by stimuli or cause. In other words, punishments and reinforcements have a greater influence on behavior than the stimulus itself. Skinner expressed that operant behaviors are uniquely related to the environment, in that strategic manipulation of one's environment influences one's behavior (Cooper et al. ch. 1). For example, Skinner conducted an experiment in which rats were given a treat of food after they pressed a lever. The rats received a reward for completing the desired behavior, which increased the rate at which they pressed the lever. Eventually, the rats learned the lever-pressing behavior and were adept and comfortable with it (Cooper et al. ch. 1). The principle of operant conditioning is the basis of ABA methods.

DTT is an effective early intervention model that helps children with autism learn language and communication skills through reactions to stimuli. Connie Kasari, a distinguished professor and researcher at UCLA, states, "DTT emphasizes didactic, adult-led instruction and relies on teaching discriminations between stimuli, responses to stimuli, and providing systematic reinforcement for correct responses. The goals of DTT are to teach specific skills, to accelerate overall development, and increase school readiness" (Kasari 1240). In this method, therapists present children with different flashcards or other stimuli, conditioning them to give desired responses and developing their language and behavioral skills. At its core, "Discrete trial training (DTT) involves teaching single responses through trials of antecedent-behavior-consequence chains" (Racine et al. 195). ABA methods encompass the antecedent-behavior-consequence (ABC) framework and emphasize reinforcement, or a reward system. There are different target social skills that therapists teach by using this framework. For example, if a therapist is working on eye contact with a child, they might prompt the child to engage in eye contact by saying, "Look at me!" The vocal queue provided by the therapist serves as the antecedent, or stimulus, that prompts the child to demonstrate the desired behavior. In this example, if the child looks at the therapist, the therapist will then demonstrate positive reinforcement and reward them. There is no reward if the desired behavior is not displayed. Instead, the therapist would move on to the next discrete trial. DTT is typically delivered in a highly structured one-on-one setting, though therapists may integrate more natural settings as the child progresses. Brian Reichow, an accomplished researcher in autism studies, explains that children receiving DTT services should attend therapy frequently. It is recommended that children receiving DTT instruction receive treatment for 25-40 hours per week and remain in the program for several years (Reichow qtd. in Racine et al. 195).

Research has shown that DTT is a highly effective method of early intervention for children with autism. In a study conducted by Connie Kasari, 80 children between the ages of 33 and 54 months received the DTT intervention. The goal was for therapists to use discrete trials to help children with autism develop functional language and phrase speech. At baseline, 27 children had no words, 42 children were speaking in single words, 13 children spoke in word combinations, and none of the children were speaking in phrase speech. By the end of treatment, eight children had no words, 30 spoke in single words, 16 spoke in word combinations, and 22 spoke in phrases. This means that 38 children were speaking in word combinations and phrase speech at follow-up (Kasari et al. 1243). This shows that discrete trials were highly effective in helping kids develop functional language. By receiving DTT, children learned how to speak in phrases and not just single words. This is important data because it demonstrates how positive reinforcement impacts the modification of language and social behaviors.

What sets DTT and other traditional ABA models apart is the antecedent-behavior-consequence framework. This framework promotes a highly structured and intensive therapy model. These types of interventions are designed to run for many hours a week over extended periods and are delivered in highly clinical settings. In contrast, naturalistic early intervention models are offered in a child's natural environment, making the experience more comfortable for the child. Such methods will be discussed further in the following sections of this paper. It is essential to note that, despite the positive results displayed in the data, ABA remains highly controversial. Its rigorous behavior modification format contributes to the stigmatization of autism spectrum disorder. "ABA uses rewards and punishments to train autistic people to act non-autistic" (ASAN par 3). The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network has shared its position on the controversy, expressing that ABA is harmful because it focuses on making autistic people appear normal or neurotypical. Individuals from the autism community have also shared their positions on this issue. Owen McGill, Doctor of Philosophy, and Anna Robinson, a senior lecturer in education, record personal accounts of autistic individuals who have received ABA therapy. One autistic adult who provides a personal account in their article shared that ABA had a lasting negative impact on their life. "ABA made it much harder to make friends, because I was spending so much time trying to pretend to be someone I'm not that I could never really connect to people" (McGill & Robinson 9). This personal account is similar to others, as many people have shared that ABA has forced self-loathing and has caused people to feel dehumanized (McGill & Robinson 6-7). Evidently, ABA has influenced autistic individuals in a manner that is the complete opposite of what was intended. Instead of giving children the tools they need to be successful in adulthood, ABA was treated as a "cure" for autism (ASAN par. 1). Learned social and communication behaviors are difficult for children to generalize in real-life situations because they have been trained to focus their attention on masking their autism. This suggests that ABA is not the best early intervention model for speech pathologists to use. Autistic people have expressed the need for more accommodating methods that celebrate and respect autistic identity.

NATURALISTIC DEVELOPMENTAL BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS

Another prominent method of early intervention for children with autism is Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Intervention (NDBI). NDBIs are influenced by ABA, though not as heavily as DTT. Instead, NDBIs incorporate a more naturalistic and developmental focus. "NDBIs target developmentally appropriate goals integrated across multiple skill areas within functional daily routines and naturalistic contexts" (Fedewa et al. 1027). NDBIs are carefully designed to be easily implemented throughout a child's daily activities and environment, which helps children engage in active learning and social interaction. Examples of functional language and social skills targeted by NDBIs include self-advocacy, turn-taking, compromise, sharing, and problem-solving. By implementing NDBI techniques, therapists create a supportive and natural environment that fosters social development in children alongside their peers. "Compared to highly structured teaching approaches used in traditional ABA-based interventions, NDBIs emphasize child-initiated teaching rather than repeated responding to adult-led prompts, natural rewards and reinforcers, and application of newly learned skills to diverse materials and a variety of people" (Racine et al. 196). Children on the autism spectrum often struggle with communicating their needs, self-advocacy, and initiating and maintaining social interaction. NDBI models are beneficial because they encourage child-initiated teaching, allowing children to make decisions based on their own motivation. This also means that children are supported and encouraged to communicate on their own terms, rather than relying on prompting from adults. Children need to learn to communicate on their own terms, as this is a life skill that will benefit them throughout childhood and into adulthood. NDBIs are also beneficial because they reflect social settings, such as schools, playgrounds, or birthday parties, where children can directly apply what they learn while socializing with their peers. In contrast, the highly structured ABA setting is not as reflective of the situations that children would encounter in real life, making it harder for them to learn and apply skills in the future.

A common and highly effective example of an NDBI is the JASPER model. According to researcher Connie Kasari:

> JASPER is a developmentally anchored behavioral intervention that uses the child's current play level to choose appropriate toys and materials to create a context for learning… establishing play routines, responding to and expanding children's nonverbal and spoken social communication… and supporting children's regulation and engagement (1240).

The JASPER model design is rooted in behaviorism, like DTT, but differs significantly in its approach, as it is centered around a play environment rather than a clinical setting. Play is an essential avenue for children's growth and development in terms of language and social communication. This is because children naturally interact with their peers while playing. JASPER "targets social communication development on joint attention, symbolic play, engagement, and regulation" (Racine et al. 201). By targeting these areas through different pay setups, children can earn target behaviors in settings that are familiar to them. This benefits children because it is easy for them to apply the skills they learn in one setting, such as a classroom, to other situations.

Initial studies on the effectiveness of JASPER found that language skills in young children with autism increased when the intervention targeted deficits in joint attention and play. "Thus, JASPER uses modeling and direct teaching during naturalistic play routines to promote joint attention skills, expand and diversify play skills, and promote nonverbal and verbal communication, while utilizing several strategies to promote a child's engagement and emotion and behavior regulation" (Racine et al. 201). Because NDBIs are implemented in the child's daily environment, they are commonly used by speech pathologists who work in school settings. Speech pathologists work closely with special education teachers to incorporate JASPER into their classrooms and employ different strategies to encourage language and social development. "Strategies include selecting developmentally appropriate toys, placing them within the child's view, and setting up the environment for children to have face-to-face contact with each other" (Fedewa et al. 1027). Strategic toy selection benefits children on the autism spectrum because they can learn through play. Children learn how to communicate through play if the toys encourage turn-taking, pretend play, or teamwork. In many ways, the therapist starts delivering the intervention the moment they begin preparing the classroom for the child's arrival. Classroom and environmental design are fundamental components of the JASPER intervention model. Speech pathologists must understand how to create a classroom environment that optimally supports play interactions. Creating an optimal learning environment for children with autism spectrum disorders will help increase the effectiveness of the intervention they receive. The better the classroom is suited to delivering early intervention, the more comfortable the child will feel. Having an inclusive classroom set up that is supportive of the child will allow the therapist to naturally integrate therapy into play and make delivering interventions more enjoyable for the child.

Research has shown that the JASPER intervention model is very effective. In the same study that measured the effectiveness of DTT conducted by Connie Kasari, children were evaluated at baseline and at follow-up after receiving JASPER early intervention. The data from this study are of particular interest, considering that Kasari is the creator of the JASPER model, and because it directly compares JASPER TO DTT. In this study, 77 children aged between 33 and 54 months received early intervention through JASPER. At baseline, 24 children had no words, 45 children spoke in single words, 10 spoke in word combinations, and none spoke in phrase speech. At follow-up, 14 children had no words, 26 were speaking in single words, 13 were speaking in word combinations, and 23 were speaking with phrase speech. This means that 36 children were speaking in word combinations and phrase speech at follow-up (Kasari et al. 1243). Kasari's study shows that, objectively, both DTT and JASPER are effective models. Each model presented an increase in functional language use and demonstrated that most children receiving therapy through these made vast improvements.

All children who participated in this study met the criteria for autism, demonstrated limited language use, received at least 12 hours of intervention per week, and had a minimum 12-month age-equivalent score on at least one pre-screening assessment. Each child received a randomly assigned intervention model in community preschool settings with which the children were familiar. Although research has shown that both traditional ABA methods, such as DTT, are effective, stronger evidence has been provided for the efficacy and benefits of NDBIs, like JASPER. "Early studies investigating NDBIs for young children with ASD found significant improvements in generalization of learned skills and reduced dependence on prompts" (Racine et al. 196). Additionally, later studies have found that children learn more effectively when rewarded through natural reinforcement. An example of this would be handing a child a car to play with when they say the word "car," versus giving them an edible reward when they do so (Racine et al. 196). This example demonstrates natural reinforcement as one of the advantages of NDBI models, as it helps children learn at a faster rate, and illustrates how the opportunity to play with the toy serves as natural reinforcement for the child (Fedewa et al. 1030). Laura Schreibman, a distinguished professor of psychology and respected professional in autism research, speaks on the importance of natural reinforcement. Schreibman states:

Natural reinforcement is reinforcement that is intrinsic to the child's goal rather than unrelated to the child's goal … This is in contrast to more traditional behavioral strategies that involve having a child complete a task (e.g., push the car) and then receive an unrelated reward such as a token, break, different toy or food. (Schreibman et al. 2419).

Natural reinforcement refers to things directly related to a child's activity that keep the child engaged and give them a sense of satisfaction. Natural reinforcement is important because it helps children learn the positive consequences of their actions during play and social interactions.

PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

To determine which model of early intervention is the best one for therapists to use, it is important to consider personal accounts from autistic individuals who have experienced them. ABA is the foundation of most early intervention models, and most individuals with autism experienced it as a child. According to individuals with autism, ABA in the traditional sense, through models like DTT, is not the best method of early intervention. While the data proves that DTT is effective, people with autism have spoken about the long-term trauma they've experienced because of ABA. One autistic adult states, "(ABA) changed the way I act, react, or interact with the world…The aim was to force a square peg into a round hole, instead of being ok with being who I am. …Better to stay safe and isolated, than rejected" (McGill & Robinson 7). ABA caused feelings of anxiety and self-hatred. This is because the approach emphasizes a complete change in behavior rather than the acquisition of tools and skills that can help autistic individuals in their real lives. Teaching new behaviors through ABA methods is harmful because it makes people feel that their autism is bad, and they need to be trained to hide it. There are numerous other accounts from McGill & Robinson's survey of autistic adults. Some individuals have remarked that they now have clinical depression or PTSD because of ABA. The mental health implications of ABA suggest that this intervention model does more harm than good. Instead of improving one's quality of life, people are punished for their autism and trained to behave like their neurotypical peers.

Individuals with autism have also shared that there is a need for a "strengths based philosophy" to be implemented in early intervention (McGill & Robinson 11). Two people from this study shared that "focus on affirming what's good about autism along with helping to develop skills to navigate our society" is the autistic community's preferred method, and that "The best approach would be to see what goals the autistic kid has, let them direct the skill they want to learn, and to understand that the way autistic people think isn't bad" (McGill & Robinson 11). These reflections from autistic adults strongly support the fact that naturalistic models are equipped to serve the autistic community in the best way possible. The best early intervention models are those that encourage child-initiated teaching, celebrate and respect individuals with autism spectrum disorder, and meet the children where they are. It is imperative that the therapist, namely a speech pathologist, factor in the child's best interest when implementing early intervention. JASPER and other NDBI models are specifically designed to do exactly this and can be considered the best methods for implementation. "The most important thing is that any therapy should help autistic people get what we want and need, not what other people think we need. Good therapies focus on helping us figure out our goals, and work with us to achieve them" (ASAN par. 4). Research has shown that autistic people do not want to be helped through intense behavior modification methods because it causes harmful long-term effects. These interventions often place too much emphasis on prompting and not enough attention on the child. This highly supports the idea that JASPER is better for the autism community than DTT and other traditional ABA models.

SLP EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

Despite the prominent impact of SLP on children with ASDs, it has been documented that many SLPs are underprepared by their education on how to treat children of this population. "Sixty-nine percent of SLPS reported that undergraduate and graduate programs provided little training in ASDs, but 82% of participants reported participating in continuing education on ASDs" (Beverly et al. 3). This indicates that the majority of speech pathologists took the initiative to learn more about autism and explore ways to effectively treat it. This is important considering the target needs that children with ASDs have. A program called Project INTERACT was developed to combat the lack of autism education in SLP graduate programs. Johanna Price, a distinguished professional in the field of education and autism research, states that the program was designed "to prepare graduate students in psychology, special education, and speech-language pathology to work with autistic children with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities" (Price 419). SLPS must receive the training they need to be successful with this population because of the "important role that early intervention plays in autistic children's long-term outcomes" (Binns et al. 3).

CONCLUSION

Naturalistic early intervention models, such as the JASPER early intervention model, are the best ways for speech pathologists to treat children with autism spectrum disorders. The data have shown that both the DTT and JASPER methods are effective; however, stronger evidence suggests the effectiveness of naturalistic models. ABA is a controversial approach, as it often does more harm than good. Many individuals with autism have attested to this and have shared that they would prefer to receive more naturalistic interventions. The JASPER intervention model excels in helping children with autism develop functional language skills, as the therapy is conducted in their everyday environment and uses natural reinforcement methods. Understanding early intervention as it applies to autism and speech pathology is important because speech pathology is the most common therapy service delivered to children with autism. Speech pathologists have a variety of skills that are essential in providing effective treatment to children with autism and setting them up for optimal success in the future. Since children receiving the interventions are too young to think critically about which kind of intervention they want to receive, it is important to consider the experiences of autistic adults and see the effectiveness of the interventions in the long term. Autism is not a disease, but a different way of experiencing the world. Everyone's experiences must be valued, supported, and respected by all.

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Examining the Implementation of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Healthcare Policies

ABSTRACT

Governmental officials created Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies in healthcare to address disparities in treatment, access, and health outcomes. This paper delves into the question of whether these policies function as intended. Although there are major federal laws regarding healthcare accessibility, including The Affordable Care Act (ACA), their implementation in real patient experiences falls short. Within the United States' healthcare system, hospitals and clinics continue to struggle with cultural misunderstandings and institutional biases that affect the equitable distribution of healthcare to all individuals. The question is examined using several theoretical and structural lenses. Naomi Mezey's cultural theory on law demonstrates how policies are shaped into dominant social narratives, revealing the rough translation of policy into practice. Paul Farmer argues that legal and institutional frameworks cannot guarantee equitable healthcare or address the systemic forces that create and sustain barriers to do so, referring to this issue as "structural violence." Todic and others argue that while legal and regulatory DEI policies are essential, they cannot create lasting changes unless the culture and structure of everyday practices within healthcare institutions are also changed. Through these perspectives, this paper examines how DEI healthcare policies appear to reflect equity but often fail when faced with cultural barriers, institutional norms, and power hierarchies. Ultimately, this paper argues that without culturally informed implementation, DEI healthcare policies will not achieve the equitable healthcare system they initially aim to provide.

INTRODUCTION

In 2022, my grandmother spent her final months in a nursing home in Jersey City. The facility was in a neglected neighborhood, tangled within narrow streets lit by cars and pockmarked by potholes. My grandmother's room was a shoebox, suffocatingly confined by walls and sweltering with July summer heat, with no air conditioning. There was no electrocardiogram present, so we were forced to listen to my grandmother's dissonant breaths, fueled by the single oxygen tank that stood in the corner of the room. This intensely personal experience revealed a troubling reality within the United States' healthcare system—a reality not unique to my family.

Everyone is entitled to the highest quality care. However, many face a series of obstacles in having their basic needs addressed, like language barriers, culturally incompetent care, and staff indifference. Despite legal mandates aimed at providing equitable care, the cultural and institutional barriers embedded within our society remain unaddressed. My grandmother's story reflects the ongoing challenges in our healthcare system, where well-intentioned laws often fail to translate from policy into patients' lived experiences.

The need for policy evolution is urgent and undeniable. However, despite the intended motives of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies to promote equality in healthcare, many of these policies fail to translate into practical action due to cultural and institutional barriers that shape patient care. DEI healthcare policies must evolve beyond their legal frameworks to account for cultural norms and institutional structures that perpetuate disparities. This paper asks: How should legal DEI healthcare policies evolve to address the cultural and institutional barriers that prevent patients from achieving equitable healthcare outcomes in practice?

The *Compilation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act anchors* the federal government's efforts to promote equity in healthcare. *The Affordable Care Act* (ACA), with its initiatives of expanding Medicaid, preventing coverage denial due to pre-existing conditions, and extending dependent coverage, is a testament to the values of DEI by aiming to break down systemic gaps in healthcare access ("Affordable Care Act"). Despite the ACA being enacted by former President Obama in 2010, we are still confronting persistent disparities more than a decade later. These persistent challenges prompt questions about the influence of cultural norms, institutional practices, and systemic biases on the pursuit of healthcare equity, as well as why patients continue to experience disparities.

DEI healthcare policies must integrate cultural sensitivity and address institutional biases to achieve equitable healthcare outcomes. This paper will begin by exploring the limitations of existing legal mandates, analyzing how cultural studies frameworks can enhance the effectiveness of DEI policies, and discussing the importance of centering marginalized voices in policy implementation. This integration is crucial, as it ensures that policies are well-intentioned and effective. After applying a cultural studies framework to the analysis of DEI laws, this paper will propose integrating these policies into a broader cultural context that considers the lived experiences of marginalized communities to achieve their intended outcomes. The evolution of DEI policies must go beyond legal mandates and address the deeper cultural and institutional forces that shape healthcare access and equity.

THE LEGAL FOUNDATION: THE ACA & THE PROMISE OF DEI

The *Compilation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act* was introduced to address the long-standing disparities in the American healthcare system. Although the ACA does not explicitly mention "diversity, equity, and inclusion," many of its provisions reflect these values. However, the law's attempt to promote equitable care often clashes with the realities of cultural barriers and institutional implementations. This section will explore how the ACA's language and objectives align with DEI principles and examine the structural challenges that limit its effectiveness.

The ACA reflects a commitment to DEI by working to expand access and reduce disparities, yet achieving these goals requires more than just legislative language. DEI refers to the efforts that aim to recognize and respect differences (diversity), ensure fairness and justice in access and treatment (equity), and intentionally create environments where all individuals feel welcome and valued (inclusion). Regarding healthcare, "DEI efforts help to address these inequities in healthcare and patient outcomes. In fact, DEI leads to improved patient care" (The Significance of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Healthcare). While research shows that DEI efforts improve patient outcomes, their success depends on systemic structures and cultural norms that shape the delivery of healthcare. This means that laws like the ACA cannot fully guarantee equitable outcomes, and enforcing a DEI-focused approach involves changing the structures and cultures that impact how care is delivered and experienced.

Building on the ACA's commitment to DEI, the law attempts to operationalize DEI through specific protections. One of the ACA's advancements is the prohibition against insurance denials based on pre-existing conditions, a legislative effort to promote equitable access to healthcare. As stated in Title II, Section 2705, "A group health plan and a health insurance issuer offering group or individual health insurance coverage may not establish rules for eligibility (including continued eligibility) of any individual to enroll under the terms of the plan or coverage based on any of the following health status-related factors in relation to the individual or a dependent of the individual…" ("Affordable Care Act" 47) This section is important because it prohibits insurers from using a person's health status to determine whether they can enroll in or remain in a health plan. It also aims to prevent discriminatory behavior and ensure equitable access to healthcare. The phrase "including continued eligibility," as stated in parentheses, ensures that the law will not terminate individuals' coverage due to changes in their health or initial access to coverage. It also extends protection beyond pre-existing conditions by acknowledging various health-related discriminants. While this represents progress, it also highlights the limitations of legislation, demonstrating that legal protections alone do not fully address the more profound structural inequities in healthcare.

Another ACA provision intended to advance DEI goals is found in Title I, Section 1557, which expands civil rights protections by ensuring that individuals "shall not… be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under, any health program or activity, any part of which is receiving Federal financial assistance, including credits, subsidies, or contracts of insurance, or under any program or activity that is administered by an Executive Agency or any entity established under this title (or amendments)" (Office of Legislative Counsel 166). This provision adopts a civil rights-based approach to discrimination, focusing on protection against overt exclusion. However, it falls short of addressing the more subtle, systemic forms of inequity that marginalized communities routinely face. The language of the ACA implies specific programs that receive federal financial support, which raises questions for the private or less-regulated healthcare sectors.

In "Mapping a Cultural Studies of Law," Naomi Mezey writes, "Law and narrative cannot be understood apart from each other because law only exists within discourse (as do we all) and narratives create the rules of behavior by which we live in the world" (Mezey 44). This quote highlights the connection between narrative and law by suggesting that laws are not separate but rather deeply ingrained in society's broader discourse. As such, laws carry the assumptions and biases of the cultures that create them, impacting both who benefits and who is excluded. For instance, Title IV, Section 4004 states, “The Secretary of Health and Human Services (referred to in this section as the ‘Secretary’) shall provide for the planning and implementation of a national public-private partnership for a prevention and health promotion outreach and education campaign to raise public awareness of health improvement across the lifespan” (Office of Legislative Counsel). Examining these implications reveals how broad and untargeted strategies can risk reinforcing existing disparities when they fail to account for the diverse cultural and linguistic needs of marginalized groups. In the article “Health Literacy as a Contributor to Immigrant Health Disparities,” Jennifer B. Kimbrough explains, “low health literacy—among older adults, people with poor reading skills, people with limited mastery of the English language, members of ethnic or cultural minorities, and immigrants—is likely a major contributor to health disparities in this country” (Kimbrough 93). Her findings reveal that limited English proficiency and inharmonious communication methods contribute to poor health outcomes among immigrants. These details reinforce Mezey’s claim that law is not neutral or objective but a product of narrative. In this case, failing to account for immigrant experiences can lead to unequal health outcomes. This illustrates why vague legislative language and broad outreach campaigns are insufficient.

Assuming that expanded insurance coverage alone leads to equity overlooks more profound structural inequities in care delivery. Even under the ACA provision, many patients report worse outcomes due to institutional motives and a lack of cultural competency. As the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports, “Racism, economic and health system inequities, limitations on immigrants’ eligibility for Medicaid and other public health coverage, and numerous other factors have resulted in longstanding, harmful racial disparities in coverage, access to care, and health outcomes” (Cross-Call 2). Having legal coverage alone does not eliminate unequal treatment or health outcomes. While the ACA theoretically broadens access, it fails to address the barriers preventing it. Without cultural and structural reforms, the gap between having insurance and receiving equitable treatment remains unbridged. The ACA’s language often employs broad terms like “all Americans,” overlooking the distinct needs of various communities. By treating inclusion through a one-size-fits-all model, the ACA may improve access in some areas, but continues to fall short in addressing systemic barriers.

Recognizing that healthcare equity is not just a matter of policy, but rather a shift in the cultural narratives that dictate how healthcare is perceived and delivered, is crucial. The following section will examine how the structural limitations of various healthcare sectors affect patient experiences. This exploration aims to highlight the importance of culturally informed policy implementation in achieving genuine equity.

DEI IN PRACTICE: GAPS AND DISPARITIES

The Frontline PBS documentary "The *Healthcare Divide*" provides a lens that examines the real-world impact of healthcare disparities in the United States. This source highlights how systemic fragmentation, cultural insensitivity, and political instability persistently hinder the achievement of DEI goals in healthcare. Although DEI is often embedded in mission statements and hospital guidelines, its application is inconsistent across healthcare sectors, especially when comparing for-profit and nonprofit institutions. This section will examine how organizational structures, healthcare institutions' practices, and shifting political agendas exacerbate the disparity between DEI policy and the lived experiences of patients.

SYSTEMIC FRAGMENTATION

One of the most prominent themes in the Frontline PBS documentary is the growing fragmentation between nonprofit and for-profit healthcare systems. For example, Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx, once a safety-net hospital that prioritized low-income or uninsured populations (What Defines a Safety-Net Hospital?), soon began adopting corporate practices focused on billing efficiency and patient turnover. Healthcare workers interviewed in the documentary expressed concerns that these business-centered strategies compromised the quality of care for vulnerable patients. Similarly, Mass General Brigham, a well-funded hospital system in Boston, Massachusetts, was shown expanding into wealthier suburbs where patients were more likely to have private insurance (*Healthcare Divide*). This business expansion was not driven by community needs but by profit margins. These examples reflect what DEI critics claim is a structural flaw — institutions prioritize market logic over social justice goals, leaving DEI policies underfunded or strategically ignored. This reveals how for-profit motives redirect resources away from communities that already experience poverty and a lack of resources. In

"Critical Theory, Culture Change, and Achieving Health Equity in Health Care Settings," the authors argue, "Critical theory directs us to understand social problems like health inequities by analyzing the systems of power that produce and reproduce them, forcing us to transcend individualist and historical perspectives that hinder accurately diagnosing the root causes of health disparities" (Todic et al. 978-979). Rather than focusing on individuals, this quote highlights that health inequities are deeply rooted in recurring power structures, and these systems often remain unaddressed in policy documents, like in the *Compilation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act*. This limits the effectiveness of DEI efforts in producing meaningful changes. These examples illustrate how profit-oriented systems perpetuate and exacerbate health disparities, contradicting the goal of equitable care.

CULTURAL INCOMPETENCY IN MEDICAL PRACTICE

Alongside financial disparity, the documentary reveals cultural incompetence in clinical environments. In many underfunded hospitals, workers face burnout, short staffing, and language barriers. Patients often lack access to translators or culturally appropriate services, which can worsen their outcomes and erode trust in medical institutions. In contrast, well-funded hospitals typically have better staffing and more resources, which helps fulfill their patients' medical needs and improve their overall experience in patient care (*Healthcare Divide*). These conditions align with Mezey's claim that laws are not separate but rather deeply ingrained in society's broader discourse. DEI healthcare laws are legal documents and part of a broader social narrative about inclusion and fairness. These narratives often dictate how laws are interpreted and enforced, potentially leading to discrepancies between the intent of the policies and the real-world outcomes for marginalized communities. Healthcare providers, even unconsciously, may rely on dominant narratives that treat all patients the same, ignoring the cultural and linguistic differences that shape how individuals experience illness and healing. Without culturally responsive care, DEI becomes a symbolic gesture rather than a structural reality. Opponents of DEI argue that requiring staff to meet cultural competency metrics risks prioritizing political correctness over clinical expertise. However, as the documentary demonstrates, these competencies have a direct impact on patient safety and satisfaction, underscoring their practical value.

POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND DEI ROLLBACKS

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the fragility of DEI efforts in healthcare. The documentary highlights that patients from low-income ZIP codes are more vulnerable to higher rates of infection and mortality. Their hospitals were overwhelmed, while well-funded facilities had excess capacity. In this context, public health policy appeared disconnected from the realities of patient experiences. The pandemic catalyzed a renewed emphasis on essential workers — defined as "All paid and unpaid persons serving in healthcare settings who have the potential for direct or indirect exposure to patients or infectious materials" ("Categories of Essential Workers") — without offering them equitable protection or healthcare (*Healthcare Divide*). This dissonance aligns with Paul Farmer's argument in "Pathologies of Power : Health, Human Rights, and the New War On the Poor," which focuses on the structural violence that healthcare inflicts on marginalized communities. His research is guided by ethnographic evidence he obtained worldwide. Farmer states, "Rights violations are, rather, symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm" (Farmer 13). Farmer's argument demonstrates that rights violations, including those in healthcare, are not isolated events but rather manifestations of deeper, systemic power imbalances. His research shifts the analysis away from individual institutions and toward the structural forces shaping these pandemic disparities. The phrase "deeper pathologies of power" highlights that these violations are rooted in broader social, political, and economic forces that shape who does and does not have access. Opponents of DEI policies often claim that they politicize healthcare and distract from the core medical mission. However, as Farmer reveals, political and economic contexts are inextricably linked to health outcomes. Ignoring power structures is not neutral — it actively sustains inequality. Farmer's point illustrates that DEI healthcare policies cannot focus solely on surface-level violations of rights but must also acknowledge the underlying structural inequalities that shape who suffers and who is protected.

The documentary "The *Healthcare Divide*" reveals the gap between what DEI policies claim and what patients experience by showcasing the stark differences in healthcare institutions across various cities in the United States. When they are present, DEI policies operate within systems already shaped by economic inequality, racial stratification, and uneven distribution of resources. These patterns show that social systems embed laws and healthcare initiatives within the same existing hierarchies they aim to dismantle. As a result, policy language alone cannot overcome the structural forces that continue to determine which communities have access to high-quality care and which communities are left with underfunded institutions. Without more profound structural changes, including a cultural shift in defining healthcare as a right rather than a commodity, DEI will remain an unrealized ideal, and equity cannot emerge from policies that leave underlying power structures intact. In the next section, I will argue that achieving genuine equity in healthcare necessitates reforming laws, reshaping institutional culture, amplifying patient voices, and redefining who we believe deserves care.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE: TOWARD REAL EQUITY

While laws similar to the ACA aim to expand healthcare access, it is crucial to understand that legal frameworks alone cannot guarantee equitable care. The United States' healthcare system is at a critical juncture where it must evolve beyond performative compliance and reshape who provides care and how it is delivered. Cultural barriers and institutional systems within the healthcare workforce currently limit the inclusivity and effectiveness of healthcare. To achieve meaningful equity, DEI must be embedded in the institutions, narratives, and training that shape the healthcare experience. This shift requires urgent investment in cultural competency, the diversification of the workforce, and mechanisms that center patient experience in policy decisions. It also requires confronting cultural assumptions and determining whose suffering is acknowledged and whose experiences are ignored.

The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), a nonprofit organization with a mission to transform health through education ("About Us"), argues that the pursuit of health equity depends on a healthcare workforce equipped to serve diverse populations. In their article, "Importance of Diversity in Health Care," the AAMC emphasizes, "'We aim for excellence in patient care which cannot exist until we have a physician workforce capable of caring for all patients and their needs holistically, and until the profession of medicine is accessible to all qualified individuals'" ("Importance of Diversity in Health Care"). This framing shows that DEI must be foundational to how medical institutions train professionals and provide care. The idea that excellence is unattainable without DEI challenges the concept that fairness means identical treatment. Instead, the AAMC defines equity as care tailored to the patient's background, needs, and experiences. When all patients are treated "the same," healthcare professionals have a higher risk of reproducing existing generalizations, especially when cultural misunderstandings go unaddressed.

However, the implementation of diversity programs falls short of structural transformation. As stated in "Critical Theory, Culture Change, and Achieving Health Equity in Health Care Settings," the authors argue that "Building a culture of equity within an organization is only one component of successful equity initiatives" (Todic et al. 978). This distinction highlights how many healthcare organizations confuse cultural programming with systemic change. DEI policies in healthcare must integrate cultural sensitivity in efforts to address institutional biases and promote equity. Without corresponding changes in policy and infrastructure, these initiatives may remain symbolic. For example, interpreter services are often underfunded or rarely provided, despite interpreters being essential for patients who do not speak English (Juckett and Unger). This failure illustrates how institutions claim inclusivity while maintaining practices that exclude the very populations DEI efforts are meant to serve. Patients and their experiences are shaped by immigration status, racial marginalization, and disabilities, which limit the ability of healthcare systems to respond meaningfully to their needs. In these cases, DEI becomes a rhetorical tool rather than a practice of justice, ultimately failing to deliver equitable healthcare outcomes.

To deepen his critique, Paul Farmer's definition of "structural violence" explains why equity requires more than good intentions. He writes, "Today, the world's poor are the chief victims of structural violence—a violence that has thus far defied the analysis of many who seek to understand the nature and distribution of extreme suffering. Why might this be so? One answer is that the poor are not only more likely to suffer; they are also less likely to have their suffering noticed" (Farmer 50). Farmer's argument defines the concept of structural violence and how those experiencing poverty suffer due to their increased vulnerability. The phrase "less likely to have their suffering noticed" emphasizes how systemic structures are designed to silence the pain of marginalized populations, making it less likely for meaningful change to occur. DEI policies that do not account for structural harm overlook the suffering that results, let alone alleviate it. By focusing on behavior over structures, many DEI efforts can emphasize the appearance of inclusion without redistributing power or resources. Cultural competency training can teach healthcare workers to respect differences; however, it cannot compensate for the fact that many of the same patients lack access to transportation, insurance coverage, or services in the first place.

Naomi Mezey extends this argument by highlighting that law is never neutral but is shaped by and contributes to dominant cultural narratives. She writes that laws often "highlight the ways in which law is often beholden to accepted stereotypes, custom, and settled expectation (culture) and also participates in constructing and enforcing certain identities at the same time that those legal identities are negotiated and contested by the very people who claim them" (Mezey 51). This quote clarifies how societal norms and cultural stereotypes impact legal frameworks. Mezey argues that law actively reproduces cultural expectations, determining which identities are recognized, legitimized, or ignored. In addition to being influenced by these cultural norms, Mezey argues that the law actively contributes to creating legal identities that both support and contradict those expectations. Cultural presumptions about identification, including race, gender, and socioeconomic class, frequently influence who benefits and suffers from DEI regulations in the healthcare industry. This dynamic is evident in how "underserved" populations are often framed as passive care recipients, rather than active participants who are fully included in the healthcare system. The absence of diverse patient voices in policy discussions leads to laws and institutional reforms that reflect the priorities of the dominant group, often categorized as white, English-speaking, and insured, while excluding the needs of others.

Finally, DEI reform cannot succeed without addressing who is seen as "deserving" of care and how equitable treatment should be defined. As Brenda Battle notes in her article, "DEI in the Healthcare Workforce: Advancing Equity Systemwide to Improve Service, Care, and Innovation," "We don't have the knowledge of those communities or the multicultural perspective needed to deliver the best service, care, and innovation" (Battle 230). Battle's argument emphasizes that a lack of cultural competency limits the healthcare system's ability to serve diverse populations properly. The phrase "multicultural perspective" suggests that accurate equity requires understanding a patient's social and cultural contexts and refraining from viewing the patient as someone who needs to be diagnosed, treated, and discharged. Diversifying the healthcare workforce and mandating institutional accountability are crucial steps toward this transformation. Breaking down inequitable healthcare begins with designing policies to serve the most vulnerable populations.

To build an inclusive and equitable healthcare system, DEI must be redefined as a structural imperative. Legal coverage without culturally informed care widens the gap between access and outcome. Training without representation leaves patients misunderstood and underserved. However, as this paper has argued, meaningful DEI reform in healthcare has the potential not only to revise our laws but also to reshape the cultural narratives that determine who is seen, who is heard, and who is healed. This reform can inspire hope and bring about a positive change in the healthcare system.

CONCLUSION

When investigating the United States of America's healthcare system, it becomes evident that patients who are immigrants, women of color, and non-native English speakers are misunderstood, dismissed, or left waiting. These patterns prove that cultural assumptions are obstacles to equitable and affordable healthcare. These moments of alienation have sparked a more profound curiosity about the systems shaping them and how DEI policies fall short when they fail to challenge deeper assumptions about who deserves care and who is expected to adjust to receive it. This is why the urgency to evolve DEI policy cannot be overstated. These policies must move beyond mission statements and become enforceable commitments—integrated into healthcare culture, backed by legislation, and supported by accountability structures across institutions.

The success of DEI depends on whether policies exist and if they function effectively for all communities, especially those historically marginalized. That includes the poor, the undocumented, the disabled, the LGBTQ+ community, and racial or linguistic minorities. Achieving this requires a deeper interrogation of how law and policy are written, interpreted, and enacted in practice. As Naomi Mezey argues, law is never just law; it is a narrative that tells a story about who belongs, who is valued, and who gets protected. If healthcare is going to be equitable, then it must begin with transforming the narratives that surround it and the stories that define whose health matters and who gets to be heard. For DEI to fulfill its promise, it must be rewritten into legal codes and the shared healthcare narrative, where equity is practiced, not just proclaimed. Only then can DEI policies live up to their name.

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Christian Cullen

Influencers' Impact on Consumer Behavior in the Social Media Generation

ABSTRACT

Evaluating social media has become essential in a world where 98% of Americans own some form of cellphone. However, a growing number of studies show the negative impact of social media usage. This paper will evaluate the effects social media has on younger generations mentally and physically, and the overarching relationship between social media algorithms, influencers, and consumers. The highlight is that social media can lead to eating disorders, body insecurities, and can even affect cognitive function if misused. Based on the research, in a growing age of social and digital media, individuals must evaluate the information they consume if they want to maintain a healthy relationship with social media.

INTRODUCTION

Many recent studies on the impact of social media usage on brain function reveal connections that may be harming individuals who excessively use social media. John A. Firth, John Torous, and Joseph Firth's *Exploring the Impact of Internet Use on Memory and Attention Processes*, explores the relationship between the human brain and how the internet, specifically social media, may be undermining our cognitive brain functions, such as the overwhelming amount of content provided by the services: *Instagram*, *X*, and *Snapchat*. Overusage of these apps are unhealthy for the conscious mind and need to be stopped before it is too late; as Firth et al. put it, those who extensively use social media forgo time they could have spent doing "beneficial lifestyle behaviors such as physical activity or sleep" (Firth et al. 8). Individuals are willing to sacrifice healthy behaviors just to spend more time on social media. The question then becomes, is it the individual's fault, or is it the systems that keep these individuals online? It's hard to pinpoint who is at fault, but it's certainly not a question that social media platforms are addictive in nature and appeal to the brain because they are so quick and entertaining.

For far too long, companies appealed to the intricacies of the mind by exploiting current digital formats. Through the analysis of established literature, current digital formats are proven to be mentally and physically unhealthy in this essay. Moreover, Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health's article, "Just How Harmful is Social Media? Our Experts Weigh In," addresses the addictive nature of the internet and how information can be manipulated to influence a broad audience. The growing presence of social media has raised concerns about its impact on cognitive function, and evidence increasingly suggests that our heavy reliance on social media for communication and information may be contributing to declining memory and attention spans. There are a growing number of studies in the field of social media's impact on cognitive function, and it's becoming increasingly evident that there is a strong negative correlation between the two. The sources will dive into the details, but is it the platforms at fault, or the influencers on the platforms? Well, there are two pieces to the puzzle: the platforms design the algorithms, and the influencers deem what's popular and trendy. The influencer-platform dynamic is a relationship that needs to be studied in order to better understand how individuals are being influenced.

Two key questions arise: who perpetuates this harmful nature of the internet, and why has it resonated so strongly among users? Danielle Friedman's "Most Fitness Influencers Are Doing More Harm Than Good," explains how individuals who profit from social media influencers impact their followers' perception, and how they set body standards based on what features they have that are considered desirable (tall, skinny, muscular, attractive, etc); this expands the impact of social media beyond purely mental health concerns. The article addresses how influencers set unrealistic standards, how it affects the self-image of their young viewership, and how social media perpetuates this phenomenon. Ekinci et al.'s *The Dark Side of Social Media Influencers: A Research Agenda for Analysing Deceptive Practices and Regulatory Challenges* discusses negative health diagnoses stemming from repeated social media use, such as body-related insecurities or eating disorders. The Ekinci et al. source is important because it shows how the common overuse of social media has serious consequences, not just mentally, but it can also become physical. Since the nature of content can be harmful to those who overuse it, individuals should be careful about what they post for others to see, and should control what they are consuming. Maureen Salamon, author of "Doomscrolling Dangers," concludes by explaining the dangers of "doomscrolling," a phenomenon where, if one reads "headline after headline of bad tidings– you're doing something called doomscrolling" (Salamon). Salamon cites that doomscrolling rose to popularity during the COVID pandemic but still remains an issue. It's an "insidious threat to our minds and bodies…" according to Harvard experts (Salamon). If doomscrolling is still growing today, then individuals must be very careful in evaluating the value of the information they consume.

Why does examining the impact of social media and influencers on younger generations matter? The bottom line is that social media is affecting human health more than most realize. The goal of this paper is to analyze how the modern digital era perpetuates a narrative that is broken, capitalistic, and systemic, ultimately profiting from the exploitation of those who are the most vulnerable and impressionable: teenagers. Influencers may seem harmless, but established literature shows how the vast majority promote negative messages to make a quick buck. The main issue is that most of these unhealthy messages go unnoticed. Most people don't recognize the harms of social media and how it impacts their everyday lives. This paper will analyze the influencer culture of today's digital world to show how social media is doing more harm than good in terms of mental health.

THE ADDICTION ARCHITECTURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media alters how we store, access, and trust information, shifting us toward a dangerous acceptance of misinformation and dependency on digital memory. As John A. Firth, John Torous, and Joseph Firth state,

> The internet may act as a 'superstimulus for transactive memory' by tilting us towards an over-reliance on the online world as an endless, and always available, source of external memory storage. Supporting this, a number of empirical studies have found that using the internet for information-gathering tasks does accelerate the process but appears to fail in recruiting certain patterns of brain activation important for long-term storage of the retrieved information (Firth et al. 5).

Firth et al. claim that the process of "information gathering" over the internet fails to activate certain brain functions. The "superstimulus for transactive memory" refers to when people rely on the internet to re-member information, rather than doing it themselves. This speaks to the growing reliance on the internet and foreshadows a level of caution needed regarding misinformation on the web. The "external memory," which is the reliance on tools, platforms, and sources outside an individual's brain to store information, shows how people are becoming more reliant on others through social media for information, which can be dangerous. If people become too reliant on external memory, then it can negatively impact their actual memory due to that person storing information in social media platforms, rather than normally memorizing it. A prime example of this is Truth Social, a platform similar to *X*, previously known as Twitter, but owned by Donald Trump, where misinformation spreads like wildfire. A study called "Unfiltered Conversations: A Dataset of 2024 U.S. Presidential Election Discourse on Truth Social" by Kashish Shah et al. draws a connection between misinformation and lack of moderation stating, "Truth Social's lack of moderation–combined with a user-base self-selected along partisan lines–has helped facilitate the spread of conspiratorial, hyper-partisan, and fringe narratives" (Shah et al. 1). This specific instance highlights that trends and "lack of moderation" act as a breeding ground for misinformation and "conspiratorial, hyper-partisan" narratives. The partisan nature of content is one example that shows someone trying to influence how individuals feel about a topic. Based on Shah and Firth's analysis, the internet acts as a "source of external memory storage" (Firth et al. 5), and when that information is not moderated adequately, individuals are more susceptible to believing information that is wrong or outright misleading. The addictive nature of information is not accidental, but rather, deliberately engineered into the architecture of social media platforms. It's meant to keep pulling one back in because the longer one is on the app, the more they become attached, and that's when it starts to affect your memory. For instance, videos are designed to be short and grab your attention quickly to keep you engaged for hours on end. These platforms incentivize content that might not be brain nourishing, but instead, grabs one's attention through exciting and engaging content.

The structure of social media feeds into "transactive memory" and ultimately takes advantage of internet reliance to maintain viewership through sensationalism (the use of exciting or shocking stories or language at the expense of accuracy, in order to provoke public interest or excitement - Dictionary). Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health posits, "Social media is criticized for being addictive by design and for its role in the spread of misinformation on critical issues from vaccine safety to election integrity, as well as the rise of right-wing extremism" ("Just How Harmful Is Social Media?"). The "addictive design" of social media is the reason why misinformation can resonate within people, and makes one consider if social media is a culmination of collective opinions, or are there people controlling these phenomena behind a curtain? A specific trend that highlights the harmful nature of social media is the "Benadryl Challenge," involving the overconsumption of Benadryl in an attempt to hallucinate. However, when 13-year-old Jacob Stevens tragically lost his life while attempting this challenge, the trend was immediately wrapped up by *TikTok*, blocking the hashtag from being used on their app ("Family Shares Warning after 13-Year-Old Son Dies"). This trend originated from user content (any form of media that is made by people on a platform that also uses that platform), rather than from influencers, which complicates who takes accountability for pushed agendas, misinformation, and harmful trends on social media. If dangerous trends like the Benadryl Challenge can emerge in the absence of influencer involvement and preventative moderation, what other features of social media influence maintain viewership? The Benadryl Challenge relates to the misinformation spread on Truth Social, where both are instances of either trends or misinformation being spread among their respective communities, in the absence of any moderators (influencers in the Benadryl challenge example, and fact checkers on Truth Social). These two examples show how trends can emerge without mainstream moderators or curators, and how they can be malicious in nature. If influencers can be absent in the spread of these trends, then the algorithms themselves are at fault. The Benadryl Challenge spread like wildfire and went viral, with little to no influencer backing, so then how did it become so popular? Well, the systems are at fault. There are systems behind these 'for you' pages, or reels, that employees build to keep you engaged all day if you really want to.

Influencers may not always be the origin of harmful trends, but they play a crucial role in normalizing risky behaviors, influencing their viewers to repeat the same process of dangerous sensationalism for views. The sensationalist nature of content showcases how everything online has a deliberate purpose, and most of the time, it's meant to persuade individuals in some way. The intentional exploitation of human psychology extends beyond just content curation; it's the designed features that make disengaging from these platforms nearly impossible. Maureen Salamon, author of "*Doomscrolling dangers*," sheds light on how platforms keep users constantly online: "With the media's propensity to blast mostly bad news (as the saying goes, 'if it bleeds, it leads') …'Our brains and bodies are expertly designed to handle short bursts of stress. But over the past several years, the stress just doesn't seem to end. Doomscrolling is our response to that'" (Salamon). Salamon claims the modern media landscape certainly cannot be healthy for the average individual because our brains and bodies are "expertly designed" to only handle "short bursts of stress," not a repeated overload. The belief that "if it bleeds, it leads" reveals the intent of these sources to report on whatever gets clicks or views, even if it's shown to negatively affect mental health. The bad news is considered sensationalism because it may not be entirely accurate.

THE INFLUENCER AND INFLUENCE RELATIONSHIP

Just as platforms like Truth Social shape public opinion through unmoderated content, influencer culture reveals another form of control, one that targets personal identity, body image, and mental health through their curated lifestyles. Unseen influencers increasingly shape social media, reintroducing concerns about whether it accurately represents collective opinions or if someone else could be controlling the narrative. For example, fitness influencers have a lot of influence in shaping body standards and how people see themselves. A *New York Times* article by Danielle Friedman titled "Most Fitness Influencers Are Doing More Harm Than Good," outlines the role influencers play in setting bodily standards and the effects they have: "Several previous studies have shown that exposure to images that encourage a specific physique is correlated with a dip in body satisfaction, mood and self-perceived sexual attractiveness. It has also been linked to disordered eating" (Friedman). Friedman argues that exposure to influencers' posts can be linked to negative mental health, such as "body satisfaction" or "disordered eating." One can tell they are blaming the so-called "fitfluencers" because there are people who "encourage a specific physique," whether they acknowledge it or not. Although it may seem like fitness influencers are motivating individuals to be their best selves, it's actually quite the opposite. For example, one might see someone online who is all muscled-up and think to themselves that they aren't strong enough, fit enough, or good-looking enough, and so forth. Not only do people feel less satisfied with themselves, but some can even develop eating disorders, which is where this becomes serious.

Whether through bullying or getting picked on, the viewership of this content (mainly younger people), is really impressionable, and can alter how these individuals act for the rest of their lives if they don't fit in with others by being skinny, fit, slender, etc.

Influencers seem to capture lifestyles that are not attainable for most of their audience, as they post curated content that captures the images of perfection, and disguise their daily life to be what they want people to see, rather than how it actually looks. Karima Lajnef in "*The Effect of Social Media Influencers on Teenager's Behavior: An Empirical Study Using Cognitive Map Technique*," posits, "Social media influencers play a greater role in controlling and influencing the behavior of the consumer especially young people and teenagers… According to Anderson (2018), 95% of teenagers aged between 13 and 17 own a Smartphone. For young people, the pre-social media era has become something of a blur" (Lajnef 4). Social media influencers are gaining more control over the "behavior of the consumer," and with increased influence, they profit even more. Influencers mainly target younger, more impressionable audiences where their content is retained. Audiences like these tend to work out best for influencers because they are more likely to make purchases based on trends (Stanley's, scrunchies, etc). Lajnef claims that these influencers act as a medium between a seller and consumer; in this instance, teenagers ages 13 through 17 are the targets. Because the era before social media is a "blur" for 95% of teenagers, this form of communication between influencer and influenced is all they are accustomed to. And frankly, for Generation Alpha, it's all they know. Once this "blur" is deconstructed, the relationship between influencers and their followers can be used to examine the followers' plummeting mental health. This is exemplified in the "That Girl" or "GRWM," short for "get ready with me" trend on *TikTok*, where influencers display a highly curated version of their daily lifestyles with the alleged intention of promoting self-improvement through their wellness and healthy routines. According to Maddy Sims in her article "Why Therapists Hate *TikTok*'s 'That Girl' Trend," she states this trend provokes a sense of, "inadequacy, fatigue, sadness, loneliness, and anxiety…" (Sims). This is very similar to Jia Tolentino's "Always Be Optimizing," chapter in *Trick Mirror* that describes the "ideal" woman, and how women constantly monitor their appearance in things like her hair, skin, and body to be "always optimizing" (Tolentino). As noted in both Sims and Tolentino, influencers disguise their lifestyle choices as perfection, hiding the dark reality of historical and societal pressure placed upon women and youth. Moreover, rather than simply disguising the pressure, influencers exacerbate the impact of beauty standards in society, all while evading accountability. The relationship between influencer and audience shows how social media doesn't just reflect beliefs, but actively shapes them, and people often don't realize it. Just like unmoderated political platforms like Truth Social can distort facts, influencer content marketed under the guise of health or lifestyle can distort self-image, relying on the same mechanics of trust and dependency that make misinformation thrive. This reveals that the influence on social media is beyond just information, but affects the identity, values, and even self-worth of individuals.

Perfection is easily accessible through social media in the likes of filters or photo-editing apps; however, these digital distortions of reality reinforce that individuals aren't perfect, and are used to generate more viewership. The relationship between influencers and their followers has significant implications for the mental health of their audience, particularly among teenagers who are the most susceptible to online influences. Influencers produce content that is impactful to a young audience in ways that are not always inherently obvious; Ekinci et al.'s article, "*The Dark Side of Social Media Influencers: A Research Agenda for Analysing Deceptive Practices and Regulatory Challenges,*" states, "The curated, picture-perfect content that SMIs produce thus contributes to a culture of comparison and unattainable standards, exacerbating issues related to body image dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and mental health challenges, particularly among impressionable young audiences" (Ekinci et al. 7). The authors argue that the element of perfectionism in these influencers' posts create "unrealistic" standards for young "impressionable" teenagers. Ekinci et al. suggest that the standards influencers set are far from being best for teenagers, as they are still developing their views and opinions. If teenagers were to strive for influencer standards, they risk suffering from "body image dissatisfaction" as a result of not feeling as though they are enough compared to the influencer. Furthermore, social media platforms play a role in facilitating negative influencer content by prioritizing user-engagement over mental health. The relationship between influencers and platforms reveals a shared promotion of appearance-based content that drives user interaction, often at the cost of youth well-being. This is exemplified in "*Snapchat* Dysmorphia," where the filters on *Snapchat* and other similar apps cause users to feel a sense of false reality about their appearance. Abigail Fagan's article in Psychology Today, "Selfies, Filters, and *Snapchat* Dysmorphia: How Photo-Editing Harms Body Image," highlights how influencers or friends posting "perfect photos" made individuals question if their facial features were good enough (Fagan). Looking at these pictures can often make individuals download photo-editing apps that align their features with the perfect image portrayed by influencers, when in reality, it takes away from what makes them unique by creating and reinforcing feelings of imperfection. Both *Snapchat* Dysmorphia and Doomscrolling reveal how apps and media often manipulate the perception of one's sense of self and the world around them. They achieve this by promoting emotionally vigorous content that changes reality and questions mental health in the pursuit of internet engagement.

These larger platforms ultimately profit from the user's dissatisfaction and suffering, as demonstrated by youth feeling inadequate and dissatisfied with apps providing self-improvement of appearance through filters and photo-editing. However, if the content is constantly recycled, how is it possible to find the positive within the internet and media? The answer is that we often cannot, not without conscious effort and sufficient media literacy (the ability to critically analyze stories presented in the mass media and to determine their accuracy or credibility). The framework of social media heavily favors engagement over balance; sensationalism is often prioritized over positive content to keep individuals scrolling. Ultimately, the influencer's curated content and the media's cycle of "blasting" constant negativity aren't separate issues; they are both part of the same loop where attention is prioritized over truth, and ends up being the ultimate digital currency, and teenagers, who are still forming their identities, are caught in the middle of this dilemma. Individuals should be more careful in determining the content they consume for the sake of their health. Most people don't realize it, but there are serious effects surrounding the usage of social media, and if one isn't careful, it will most definitely affect them.

ADJUSTING THE BRIGHTNESS: THE POSITIVE SIDE

Despite existing literature detailing social media's negative impact on youth, few would argue that teenagers benefit more from social media than they are harmed by it. Aaron Haddock et al. in "*Positive Effects of Digital Technology Use by Adolescents: A Scoping Review of the Literature*," claims that these negative cases are over-played: "Despite the focus on the negative impacts of technology on child development, the evidence linking digital engagement and negative outcomes is frequently overstated, focused on extreme users, and supported by studies lacking requisite nuance and complexity to discern specific effects" (Haddock et al. 12). Social media platforms can provide a haven for the LGBTQ+ community, who often receive disproportionate and unjustified amounts of cyberbullying and harassment. An article by the World Health Organization (WHO) titled "Teens, Screens and Mental Health," outlines that teenagers are allowed to share their passions and interests with other like-minded teens, which underscores how LGBTQ+ individuals can find communities of support they may not find as easily in school or in real life ("Teens, Screens and Mental Health"). Haddock's quote challenges the dominant narrative that suggests all teens are negatively affected by technology. In reality, many are engaging with it in healthy ways. Haddock emphasizes that the extreme examples of technology use are often dependent on the "extreme users," not the general population. In this case, extreme users make up the majority of younger users. Lajnef states that "95% of teenagers aged between 13 and 17 own a Smartphone" (Lajnef 4) so in this case, the extreme users are that 95% aged 13 to 17. This particular issue is relevant today because the general population is slowly converting to extreme users, as social media becomes more mainstream. Additionally, the negative nature is "overstated" without substantial evidence to prove "certain effects." However, reviewing the impact of social media on younger generations is a relatively new field, so there are bound to be limitations in the research aspects. After all, people were unaware that smoking was detrimental to one's lung health until decades after it was released, and people had already become dependent on them. That relates very similarly to social media: a new field, not much research, with potential to be very harmful if used improperly.

Through the lens of Haddock et al., the public can question the likes of Firth et al., who seem to cry wolf, but lack definitive and "nuanced" details on the specifics. Andrew Villamil addresses in "*Engaging In The Good with Technology: A Framework For Examining Positive Technology Use*," what is considered good, and how individuals can engage with the good:

> Some researchers associate seeing good as a process of 'taking in' visual and cognitive experiences as a means of coping and fostering well-being in their lives and the lives of others. Essentially, seeing

> good is the access to visual information that contributes to positive outcomes (Villamil et al. 15).

As Villamil et al. note, people can internalize the good that is posted on the internet, rather than always viewing content negatively. This "visual information," can help individuals to see positive aspects in others' lives and benefit mentally; if one can "take in" such experiences, they may benefit more than they lose from it. Individuals can feel the positive content and interaction with fellow members on apps like Reddit, Discord, and more. Positive content helps them feel more accepted and points out the commonly dismissed positive aspects of social media platforms. Together, Haddock and Villamil suggest that social media isn't as harmful as it is often portrayed, and depends entirely on how it is used. When platforms promote genuine connection and creativity, teens benefit emotionally. The challenge is not the existence of social media, but the way people use it and its design. While it's clear that digital media can have its benefits, findings don't erase the reality of the addictive and sensationalist structure that promotes harmful behavior. The bottom line is that people need to find the balance between healthy usage and it becoming an outright problem.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between technology, social media, influencers, and viewers is very complicated; influencer content, which is promoted on social media, is manipulative in form. Evaluating the connections between social media and the human mind reveals a growing dependence on digital memory and blind acceptance of rapidly spreading misinformation, which undermines critical thinking skills and cognitive development. Platforms abuse their addictive design to manipulate users' beliefs in the form of unmoderated content, on the likes of Truth Social. The main creators on these social media platforms are known as influencers, who profit by promoting idealized lifestyles and unrealistic body standards that ultimately shape users' perceptions of themselves, and often in negative ways. Their curated, perfectionist-based content perpetuates media cycles that contribute to lower self-esteem, anxiety, and distorted self-image. Social media platforms are the main cause of these effects by systematically prioritizing engagement and expanding viewership over concern for user well-being. Negative content is a vicious cycle that attracts more attention, and even though it has a profoundly harmful impact on people, social media prioritizes these stories because they make the most money by generating the most views. This imperfect system speaks to the broken landscape of modern media and how it needs a change. While benefits to social media do exist, such as increased interaction with friends and a stronger sense of community through online groups, the positives do not nearly outweigh the negatives. These positives remain constrained by the harmful design of most platforms. Without broader structural reform and education on media literacy, the negative will continue to dominate younger audiences and their experience. While it may be hard to do so on a society-wide scale, there is an urgent need for accountability among influencers to create and promote safer digital spaces because they have the power to influence large audiences into making real change. Reframing social media into more of a positive space is the best way to start breaking down the algorithms that are meant to spread negativity to generate more views.

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Joseph Porterfield

Strategizing Authenticity: The Volatile Consumer Marketing Climate Within the Luxury Fashion Industry

ABSTRACT

High-end luxury brands have been around for centuries, trailblazing the way for new fashion trends and artistic expression. They set themselves apart from the general consumer market through marketing and pushing ideas of inaccessibility and exclusivity. However, with the development of social media and a volatile consumer market, these once-untouchable brands now face strong competition to set themselves apart and find a unique way to offer authenticity to their customers. The purpose of this research paper is to review the history of marketing within luxury fashion brands, comparing it to its current state, with a focus on the development of social media and the modernization of the concept of authenticity. It utilizes case studies from pivotal moments in the world of luxury fashion marketing. It includes Louis Vuitton inviting Pharrell Williams to be the new Men's Creative Director, the Fiji Water Company partnering with social media influencer Danielle Bernstein to promote its water, and more. After a thorough review and analysis, this paper concludes that authenticity, transparency, and trustworthiness are essential for maintaining a brand's position of consumer loyalty within the marketing space.

Furthermore, the face a brand decides to use is critical in ensuring the messaging it wants to convey is received well and not counteracted by the celebrity or influencer's personal messaging. Ultimately, social media will continue to dominate the luxury fashion industry, evolving the already turbulent marketing landscape. Although marketing will only become more challenging over time, brands must maintain their image and uniqueness through authenticity, striking a delicate balance between fostering consumer loyalty and soliciting new customers.

INTRODUCTION

"Louis Vuitton is delighted to welcome Pharrell Williams as its new Men's Creative Director" (Beccari). And yes, we are talking about the same Pharrell Williams, an American Singer and Songwriter. With his background in music and production, what qualifies him to develop a clothing line for one of the world's top luxury fashion houses? This strategic marketing move, known as celebrity endorsement, is employed by brands to target a specific audience with their products. More formally, a celebrity endorsement is when "a famous person who uses public recognition to recommend or co-present with a product in an ad – [offering] fame, talent, credibility, and charisma to the product being sold" (Nabil et al. 286). While this strategy can undoubtedly benefit the company and the endorser, the pairing between the company and the celebrity must be a perfect fit. Other factors are also at play, like the development of technology, specifically social media, and the rise of influencers.

In this paper, I will examine these factors and their impact on both the luxury fashion and celebrity industries. I begin with a review of the history of luxury fashion and the development of luxury brands. I briefly review the history of the celebrity and the development of celebrity endorsement. Next, I focus on the recent growth of technology, specifically social media, to examine how it has impacted the consumer population and the role of celebrity endorsements. I then zoom in on authenticity and its development in marketing, particularly in the context of social media. Moving on, I explore what this means for the future of celebrity endorsements, and conclude by drawing a final understanding of the meaning of this process. The volatile environment of the luxury fashion industry, particularly in light of recent technological developments, has created a significant challenge for brands to develop effective, consumer-targeted marketing strategies. This paper will examine the overall history of luxury fashion brands to understand the current climate, specifically the utilization of authenticity in a seemingly inauthentic market. The paper utilizes case studies from companies such as Louis Vuitton and Fiji Water, among others.

HISTORY OF LUXURY FASHION AND THE CELEBRITY

One of the first luxury fashion brands to have a significant influence on the continued development of luxury fashion was Hermès. Founded in 1837 by Thierry Hermès, it initially produced leather goods for horses. From there, the company evolved into a fashion brand catering to a new group of consumers as the fashion industry began to change (Gutiérrez-Ravé Villalón). This new group of consumers consisted of wealthy individuals, mainly royalty, seeking unique and exclusive wardrobes that would distinguish them from the lower class.

The Age of Enlightenment and Industrialization, however, pushed luxury fashion into a more accessible market with the development of mass production, trends, and fashion influence (The Evolution of Luxury). Industrialization took away some of the value associated with luxury brands and their unique position in the evolving market. This prompted brands to explore new ways to maintain exclusivity and sell an aspirational lifestyle. Therefore, they began developing products "with a low ratio of functional utility to price and a high ratio of intangible and situational utility to price" (Nabil et al. 288). These companies ensured that they would continue to offer "consistent delivery across the whole product range; a heritage of craftsmanship; an identifiable style or design; a limited manufacturing run; and a global reputation" (Nabil et al. 288). Finally, we reach the Golden Age of Fashion, the luxury fashion industry as we know it today. The fashion industry now navigates the complex demands of competing for the spotlight, determining who has the "next big thing," and what trends are driving demand for design (The Evolution of Luxury).

However, this trend of the "next big thing" has been overdeveloped, as luxury fashion companies have developed products with low utility and high market prices (Nabil et al. 288). Today, we see a market of common goods being marketed at an inflated price, often accompanied by the brand's logo, to justify the price. One notable example is the "Cotton jersey T-shirt" from Gucci, which retails for $680. Gucci is not the only brand to do this; other top luxury fashion houses have also adopted this approach, but why? Luxury fashion brands have lost their ability to market quality and craftsmanship to consumers as the industry changes. Today, consumers are more focused on social status and how they can maintain that outwardly to those around them. One of the most direct and precise ways to do this is through the purchase of a logo that symbolizes wealth and luxury, and then displaying it on one's body for others to see (Han 15-30). Furthermore, luxury brands developed to offer consumers "uniqueness and social status" that symbolically "increases consumers' self-esteem, the extent of recognition by others, and meets the emotional requirement of individuals," as stated by Maguire et al. (qtd. in Xi et al. 2).

However, these more materialistic aspects were not enough to separate a brand from its competitors, especially with the rapid expansion of the industry. If brands wanted to survive this volatile market, they had to find their keystone to success: celebrities. As early as the nineteenth century, luxury brands began utilizing recognizable figures, known as celebrity endorsers, to promote their products (Okonkwo). Back then, "classic elegance and timeless glamour" were more in style, so brands utilized celebrities like Audrey Hepburn for Givenchy, who lent her "sophistication and allure to luxury brands" (Panzer et al). The development of technology, including music and television, has led to the emergence of pop culture. It offered new "figures like Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson, and Madonna – [that] brought a touch of avant-garde and creativity to luxury marketing" (Panzer et al).

This style of marketing is not one-sided, where only the brand or only the celebrity benefits from the campaign; rather, it is a mutual partnership. Before introducing a campaign, brands must meticulously select a celebrity who aligns with both the brand's image and the campaign's objectives. Researchers have explored and identified five key sections that a celebrity needs to fit into, based on a brand's demands. Credibility, expertise, physical attractiveness, product-celebrity matchup, and trustworthiness are key to ensuring a successful campaign (Nabil et al. 285). Brands utilize these characteristics to ensure that the celebrity is a good fit for the brand and what it represents; conversely, the opposite is also true.

Focusing on the history of these characteristics for a moment can help us better understand why celebrity endorsement is what it is today. These key elements initially consisted of two simple categories: credibility and attractiveness (McCracken 320). Many believed that "as long as the credibility and attractiveness conditions are satisfied, *any* celebrity should serve as a persuasive source for *any* advertising message" (McCracken 311). Although this initially allowed brands to promote their products successfully, it soon became apparent that there would be a need for the development of more characteristics to encompass "distinctions of status, class, gender, and age, as well as personality and lifestyle types…" (McCracken 312).

Nabil et al. developed a more successful, comprehensive set of characteristics that is used today in the celebrity endorsement industry. Credibility is "determined by his or her honesty, integrity, and trustworthiness – [to] improve customers' attitudes about a brand," which would in turn increase consumers' return to a product or brand that maintains a high level of trust (Nabil et al. 287). Furthermore, it helps brands ensure they can retain a stable consumer base, which takes pressure off sales and marketing. It also helps to maintain a deep sense of connection between the brand and its target consumer. Credibility and trustworthiness are closely intertwined but have a few key differences, particularly for a brand. “Consumers’ level of trust in the validity of assertions [is] expressed by the endorser [which] is referred to as trustworthiness” (Nabil et al. 287). Expertise is “the degree to which the endorser is seen to have the necessary knowledge, experience, or abilities to sell the product,” which, again, helps a brand to retain a strong consumer base and shows consumers that the brand maintains credibility (Nabil et al. 287).

Physical attractiveness, especially in today’s society, is crucial to the success of most endorsements, “[as it] is a potent ‘weapon’ for standing out from the crowd, attracting attention, and influencing audience perception and intention,” which is the primary goal of any brand campaign today – to stand out (Nabil et al. 287). Finally, product-celebrity match-up is a corporation choosing “the most appropriate celebrity for the brand or product being promoted…” (Nabil et al. 287). This can certainly be a complicated process, as it involves ensuring that the celebrity’s principles align with the product or company to prevent potential negative imagery from the celebrity’s prior involvements that could compromise the current campaign’s messaging (Nabil et al. 287).

One clear example that illustrates the importance of a product-celebrity match-up, as well as other key characteristics of celebrity endorsements, dates back to 2005. Kate Moss, a world-class supermodel, was photographed participating in the use of cocaine at a party, and later, was released by an English tabloid. These pictures of her drug use subsequently led to top brands including Burberry, Chanel, and H&M to immediately sever ties with the model (10 Celebrity Endorsement para. 14). While this had no long-term effect on either Moss or the brands, it highlights the importance of meticulously selecting celebrities who align with the brand’s values before entering an endorsement campaign with them (10 Celebrity Endorsement).

What fundamental principles even allow one to consider the role of an endorsement? Further, what makes them relevant enough to take on that responsibility? It is the simple relationship of recognition or familiarity between the celebrity and consumers. This is the driving force that allows celebrities to become recognizable, relevant, and of interest to the general public. This previously established recognition is what allows the process to work, as face recognition helps to make a product stand out from other advertisements (Nabil et al. 287-288).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF AUTHENTICITY

The celebrity endorsement style of marketing, which utilizes television, radio, print, and other media, has proven beneficial in recent years. However, the recent development of social media has significantly altered the landscape of the luxury fashion industry in a relatively short period. Today, almost all consumers are also users of some form of social media, such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, and others, which enable users to interact with one another in real-time or virtually (Ashar). The age of social media and digitization has created ease of access to content, messaging, and imagery for platform users, anytime and anywhere. Focusing specifically on the fashion industry, it allows brands to reach consumers in a new way, opens the doors to a new type of influence, fosters the development of more fashion trends, and, most importantly, enables a new lightning-fast form of communication for everything fashion-related (Ashar). This, in turn, has accelerated communication between brands, their target consumers, and celebrities, transforming the way we consume fashion today. The explanation of this redevelopment lies within the concept of mediatization.

The direct effect of fashion on social media is that it serves as a medium for sharing content. As Rocamora points out in her article, "Mediatization and Digital Media in the Field of Fashion," mediatization is more than just the idea of the development of technology and social media over time in relation to fashion, but rather "looking at the ways practices of fashion – are articulated through the media, and, more crucially, are dependent on the media for their articulation" (728). Or, how this form of media intertwines with the consumer's daily life. Chen and Zhuang offer an explanation to Rocamora that "communications on social media platforms tend to enlarge the conformity behavior because they make consumption trends more visible," as one way of articulating fashion in today's technologically advanced society (2). The concept of visibility, both within the luxury fashion industry and on social media, continues to drive the need for the development of new ways to reach consumers, foster discourse between brands and consumers, and socialize consumers with one another.

How does this compare to the old form of celebrity endorsements? Simply put, the development of social media, as explained by mediatization, does not leave space for these types of previous marketing strategies to be as successful today as they once were. The need for visibility and uniqueness, which was much more attainable through old media, is no longer the same today. The utilization of algorithms and rapidly changing trends, as well as shifting consumer demands, does not allow brands to compete as they once did. Instead, they need to effectively strategize new ways to market their products to the target consumer. Digital media has transformed the way consumers express themselves and engage with others, influencing shifts in demand and trends in the luxury fashion industry. Now more than ever, “the need for showing off status and the impression of fashion bandwagon leaders drive luxury fashion consumers to post pictures, share reviews, and communicate information on platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok” (Chen and Zhuang 2). This explains the shift of how “more and more manufacturers, marketers, and retailers are adopting the strategy of social media marketing, including social influencer marketing…” to find that similarity and perceived common ground between the consumer and brand via the celebrity (Chen and Zhuang 2).

However, now that brands have started to implement such marketing tactics to continue “to promote positive responses in luxury fashion product consumers,” the market has now become oversaturated due to the inability to break through to consumers (Chen and Zhuang 2). Brands are attempting to recycle previous marketing strategies that were effective in an obsolete era of technology and social media, without recognizing the extent to which marketing has evolved. So much so that “the relationship between consumer satisfaction and brand profitability has gradually weakened,” along with “customer loyalty” (Xi et al. 2). This downturn in consumer confidence has sparked an urgency for luxury brands to find a way to “demonstrate their value in an increasingly competitive marketplace in combination with high-quality products and services” and ultimately set them apart from competitive brands (Lin 244). One suggestion that research offered to these brands is that “the key to balancing the accessibility of social media advertising with the exclusivity of luxury companies is storytelling…” (Lin 244).

This new perspective offered a twist on celebrity endorsements and further complicated the endorsement process, as consumers now seek a sense of authenticity from brands, not just a “hired spokesperson” to sell them a product. Now, instead of a celebrity simply showing their face, it has become increasingly important to sell a story of uniqueness, trustworthiness, and realism alongside the product, offering a message to consumers. This creative solution gives brands an "ability of brand identity to meet consumer expectations or differentiate a brand from its competitors" (Xi et al. 2).

AUTHENTICITY WITHIN THE CLOUDED WORLD OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The evolution of luxury fashion marketing has led to various eras of marketing strategies, each tailored to the specific consumer climate of its respective time frame. Of course, the development of social media has complicated prior marketing strategies and hindered luxury fashion brands from finding new ways to advertise, given the vast differences in this area today. However, as reviewed, maintaining authenticity is a promising step in the right direction for finding a new way to advertise to consumers.

Authenticity is merely the act of being truthful and appealing in advertising from a brand to its target consumer. Therefore, the shift to selling an idea of authenticity from luxury fashion brands to consumers via celebrity endorsements has become increasingly popular, both as a marketing mechanism for brands and a demand from consumers. Revisiting the five key characteristics of an ideal celebrity endorsement, two key ones are trustworthiness and credibility offered by the celebrity to the consumer via the brand campaign. "Aligning the celebrity's image with the brand's values enhances credibility," and proves that "authentic endorsements, perceived as genuine, are more effective" (Jun 12).

One can infer that authenticity itself greatly enhances a celebrity endorsement campaign, bringing a level of trust to the brand-consumer relationship. However, as Nabil et al. note, "it does not matter if the endorser has expertise or not, as long as consumers believe they have," which effectively destroys the idea of authenticity (287). Therefore, it brings in the new idea that authenticity is merely a performance of trust to the consumer, rather than trust itself. But, to sell the idea of authenticity to a consumer, what must both the brand and the celebrity do to achieve that?

We can look to the recent evolution of influencer marketing on social media for insights into authenticity and the act of performance. Influencers are "micro-celebrities who accumulate followers on social media promoting themselves and the brands and products that hire them" (Arriagada 446). Influencers are excellent at maintaining and selling an idea of authenticity from their consistent "sharing [of] mundane daily activities [which] enables them to present themselves casually and carelessly…," ultimately resulting in relatability as it is "the same kind of light content that their followers share" (Arriagada 451). The establishment of likeness between an influencer and their followers will then be "seen as 'authentic' consumers of brands and goods…" (Arriagada 447).

Ultimately, influencers must ensure that the products they endorse align with their personal brand and values. In relation to the fashion industry, "influencers display cultural calculations – in the form of specific knowledge about fashion trends," to appear more authentic to audiences and strategic to the brand paying them" (Arriagada 450). Influencer marketing is a perfect example of genuine authenticity, as it is the person themselves rather than a large brand trying to position itself in a way that justifies likeness to a consumer – they are just too different.

One excellent example of authenticity through social media and influencer marketing is when Fiji Water Company partnered with influencer Danielle Bernstein to promote the water line. Bernstein is a notable exercise and lifestyle influencer who promotes physical and mental well-being through exercise and a balanced diet (Fatima). Fiji Water selected a suitable candidate to promote their product in a manner that aligns with the influencer's content. Fiji and Berestine created a slogan, "BodyWoreWhat," based on Berestine's iconic slogan, "WeWoreWhat," to headline the partnership (Fatima). Furthermore, she released eight workout videos for people to watch, which both promote Berenstein's message and encourage the use of Fiji Water. Together, the relationship between these two identities proved to be successful, developing a spike in user-generated content from others supporting the endorsement, along with people sharing the hashtag #FijiWater, further to promote the brand through the influencer (Fatima). What does the future of celebrity endorsement look like with the rapid development of social media?

Finally, we reach the future of celebrity endorsements and what their evolution could look like as luxury fashion brands continue to find ways to differentiate themselves from the otherwise oversaturated market, display authenticity, and maintain the sale of an aspirational lifestyle. The latest marketing move from luxury fashion brands, such as Louis Vuitton, is to further integrate celebrity endorsers into the brand. Rather than using them for a single campaign or product advertisement, they have transitioned to making them a cornerstone of their brand. In the case of

Louis Vuitton, they announced Pharrell Williams as the "Men's Creative Director," allowing him to design and launch his own fashion line under the luxury fashion house (Beccari). In Louis Vuitton's public statement, they describe Williams as "a visionary whose creative universes expand from music to art, and to fashion – establishing himself as a cultural global icon…" (Beccari). In short, they justify bringing him onto the luxury fashion design team because of his history within music and how that can translate into the world of fashion. While there is room for speculation about his actual qualifications for the job, it is more about the title and attention developed from the strategic marketing move.

Furthermore, we have seen and will continue to see these strategies utilized by brands, more for the publicity they attract than for the explicit effort to sell their products. Similarly, followers of said celebrities like Williams are more likely to purchase and support the line due to the bandwagon effect. During the launch of this luxury fashion line, Louis Vuitton ensured that it would spark publicity, consumer interest, and, most importantly, maintain exclusivity and scarcity around the products to ensure high demand with limited supply (Chen and Zhuang 2-3). This further encouraged consumers to purchase the product as soon as possible, ensuring they could maintain uniqueness within their social circle, particularly on social media.

Along with this newfound style of marketing in the realm of celebrity endorsement, we could see an even greater shift towards influencer and influencer-celebrity hybrid endorsements. With the expansive and continual rapid development of social media, we are now witnessing influencers take on the role of micro-celebrities who are "infiltrating" the celebrity world (Doty). In fact, the authenticity that influencers possess is far more influential than that of a traditional celebrity. "It's working so well for some advertisers that they're now taking the influencer sponsorships on apps like Instagram and TikTok, and swapping these creators for traditional actors in television ads as well" (Doty).

Luxury fashion brands have recognized the inherent authenticity that influencers naturally convey through their content creation style, which has accelerated the rapid shift from traditional celebrities to influencers almost overnight (Doty). At the end of the day, luxury brands must maintain uniqueness and diversity in their marketing to retain the vital sales driven by aspiration, quality, and, most importantly, exclusivity to their target consumer.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, understanding the history of both luxury fashion brands and the celebrities associated with them helps to focus on the development of social media in this volatile market. Specifically, the Golden Age of Fashion, combined with technological advancements, has created a strategic opportunity for influencers to capitalize on. In relation to the consumer, brands must maintain relevancy and reach to continue a mutually beneficial exchange of goods and social belonging. Focusing on the beginning of the celebrity endorsement process, it is crucial, regardless of the situation, for brands to follow the five key characteristics of finding a face for their campaign. Additionally, authenticity is arguably the most vital characteristic a celebrity or brand can offer to their target consumer. Furthermore, the bandwagon effect, FOMO (fear of missing out) effect, and social positioning will continue to drive consumer behavior as long as brands can effectively maintain these aspects. To clarify, there is a continual fine line battle between the brand and consumers to maintain scarcity and exclusivity, driving consumption.

In the end, brands will continue to find ways to set themselves apart, with the most promising approach being to introduce celebrities further into the brand through initiatives such as creating and maintaining their own fashion lines. The continued development of influencer marketing can lead consumers to expect this strategy to be employed more frequently, with more creative twists to set each brand apart.

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Gillian Alacron

Families at a Disadvantage: The Strain of Inequality on Hispanic Households

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the systemic challenges faced by Hispanic families in the United States: including high rates of poverty, limited access to healthcare and education, family separation, and discrimination at both local and federal levels. Through the reference of Critical Race Theory and Psychosocial Theory, the analysis explores how structural inequalities shape the experience of Hispanic communities. This paper also highlights the impacts of immigration policies such as The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals on family stability and child development, including mental health outcomes, identity formation, and self-esteem. While the Hispanic Health Paradox highlights that Hispanic families tend to maintain better health in comparison to other demographic groups, despite socioeconomic disadvantages, a frequent response to economic necessity is the prevalence of multi-generational households. Familism, another concept referred to, can provide social support but cannot eliminate systemic resources and opportunities. Finally, the paper argues that policy reform, and recognition of Hispanic contributions are essential to mitigate disparities, promote well-being, and ensure equitable opportunities. Addressing these issues has broader significance such as strengthening the economy, improving public health outcomes, and fostering social cohesion, while the United States advances their commitment to equality and justice.

INTRODUCTION

Hispanic communities in the United States, regardless of their citizenship status, often face significant challenges. These include high rates of poverty, misrepresentation in the workforce, unbalanced family structures, and racial discrimination. These individuals are not only victims of prejudice from their neighbors or coworkers, they also face systemic discrimination perpetuated by government policies. The Trump Administration's increasingly restrictive immigration policies have exacerbated the mental and physical burdens on immigrant families, while limiting their access to resources and opportunities. These factors all compound, causing members of Hispanic households to become victims of disparate treatment and access to resources. Throughout this paper, two main theories will be referenced and conversed with: Critical Race Theory and Psychosocial Theory, which will be utilized to analyze the effects of trauma on immigrants, and the impacts of racism on immigration policies. It is imperative that the United States government concretizes more equitable immigration policies, and puts an end to the lack of education concerning the contributions of marginalized groups to American society and culture. These challenges are not experienced in isolation, but gathered across generations–impacting how children view themselves, how families access opportunity, and how communities are perceived by the public. By examining the social, political, and psychological facets of the difficulties immigrant families face, as well as the lack of acknowledgment of immigrant contributions to America, this paper aims to establish that major policy reform along with large scale education campaigns are the first steps to address disparities in treatment of Hispanic Americans.

THE FIGHT FOR IMMIGRANTS' RIGHTS – FROM FIELD TO FEDERAL

Throughout American history, there have been very many figures who have advocated for the rights of immigrants. Among these advocates was César Chávez, born on March 31, 1927. Chavez used his voice for many causes, such as looking to protect immigrant farmworkers in the United States. Like many immigrants, Chávez had his education cut short, as he was forced to leave school after the eighth grade to help support his family by working on a farm. It was during this farmwork that he witnessed firsthand the harsh realities of physical, agricultural labor: low wages, unsafe working conditions, and inhumane treatment. After some time working on the farm, Chávez created the United Farm Workers, a labor union that protects farmworkers' hours, wages, and working conditions, among other rights. The union established its power with nonviolent tactics–boycotts, strikes, and marches–seeking recognition and better conditions for him and his workers. Chávez passed away April 23, 1993 after a lifetime of advocacy, and left behind a legacy of being an upstanding leader who countered injustice wherever he encountered it.

César Chávez's impact laid the foundation for policy efforts aimed at protecting immigrants, such as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, in short, DACA. The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals is a critical immigration policy in the United States, allowing children or teens to be protected from deportations and apply for work permits. In recent years however, this progress has faced setbacks. The Trump Administration paused new applications for this program, leaving many without a pathway to stability (Romo). Meanwhile, key protections such as unemployment insurance and Social Security have declined or are inaccessible to many undocumented immigrants. The fight for protection and equal opportunities continues, echoing the work of César Chávez. For the Hispanic families, they seem to be a target to the government, facing not only legal uncertainty, but also social and economic marginalization.

THE IMPACTS OF FAMILY SEPARATION

A child's upbringing is influenced by a multitude of factors, including but not limited to their family, religious beliefs, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, race, community, and environment. A positive childhood often fosters well-rounded individuals who are set up for success. For instance, Caballero and others write that in the financial, community, and socioeconomic status aspects, many Hispanic immigrant families experience hardship. "In general, children in immigrant families were more likely than children in US-native families to live in a low-income household (≤200% of the FPL), have public insurance or no insurance, participate in public benefits, live in a non single woman family structure, and live in a home in which their highest parental educational attainment was less than high school" (4). In particular, there are clear disparities that exist with regards to income, accessibility to health insurance, and accessibility to public assistance programs. Many immigrant families both fall below the poverty threshold and struggle to afford healthcare, leading to difficulty in accessing medical and other resources. This difficulty accessing resources, coupled with border policies that disparately impact Hispanic families, compounds and creates a society that is extremely inequitable and discriminatory. Caballero and others assert, "The possibility of family separation at border detention facilities and increased detainment and deportation under Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is increasingly part of American political discourse. We know that parents have the power to help children heal from traumatic experiences, and policies aimed at separating families may have deleterious effects on a child's ability to thrive in the face of trauma" (8). The separation of parents from their children is cruel and inexcusable, leaving children to care for themselves when they are not nearly competent enough to do so. As North writes, "Research has found that children separated from families under the first Trump administration experienced profound harms, including PTSD." Not only are these children being separated from their parents, but they are suffering mental disorders such as PTSD as a result of the hardships they face. Children will experience at least two behavioral changes in the months after their parents have been separated from them, and it is rare that children are able to fully persevere and overcome these struggles.

Hispanic families are not only plagued by the fear of family separation, but they also face major discrimination in society. "Latino children's nationality is questioned by peers, and they hear that, 'in this country people without papers are worthless'" (Ayón 450). Children learn values and behaviors from their parents, and these values often inform how they proceed through life. For example, people of Hispanic descent may teach their kids to speak Spanish to instill pride in their cultural heritage. Different events in life inspire different sorts of change in people, which is what Erik Erickson argued. Erik Erickson was a psychologist and psychoanalyst who developed psychosocial theory and the stages of psychosocial development, which broadly emphasized that individuals develop their sense of identity through social interactions and life experiences. In Erickson's view, there are 8 of these stages of development, each of which is marked by a specific crisis or conflict. One especially impactful conflict in a person's life could be deportation. Deportation can exacerbate identity confusion as children can feel disconnected from their family, and can also separate individuals from their support systems, straining them from building bonds. "Furthermore, ethnic identity, or the extent to which individuals feel connected with their ethnic background or Latino background, has been found to protect children from engaging in risky behaviors" (Ayón 451). Among Hispanic youth, a strengthening of their connection with their ethnic identity would improve their self confidence and sense of community, in turn potentially steering them away from engaging in deviant behavior they may have otherwise engaged in due to a lack of purpose and direction in their lives. As Schwartz and others assert, "Adolescents from immigrant and minority backgrounds may be especially challenged with culturally related identity issues. Specifically, they must find their place within their cultures of origin and within the larger society in which they reside—a challenge that may involve attempting to reconcile seemingly incompatible roles and expectations" (728). Hispanic youth, when separated from their families, can become wholly disconnected from their cultural identity, leading to a lack of self confidence, direction, ultimately impacting their socioeconomic status and that of their future families'. This disconnection from their culture also often impacts their mental health.

THE CYCLE OF POVERTY: GENERATIONAL STRUGGLES

Immigrants are typically handed a different agenda compared to the other guests that sit at the table, such as the US natives or white peers. Their journey is shaped by cultural adaptation, systemic barriers, and the need to navigate multiple identities, requiring them to work twice as hard to receive recognition and success. "Compared with the U.S.-born individuals, the foreign-born have low socioeconomic status and more than half do not have a high school education... Moreover, Mexican-origin individuals have historically suffered serious disadvantages in the labor market, especially if undocumented. Almost one out of five foreign-born Mexican-origin residents lives in poverty" (Angel and Berlinger 302). Hispanics tend to be of lower socioeconomic status, yet when compared to similar races with a similar status, they tend to have lower mortality rates (Sarraju et al. 1). Mexicans in particular, tend to lack jobs that offer social security benefits, retirement plans, or high pay. Consequently, they are often left with inadequate finances to retire, which can force them to continue work even when it may be strenuous on their being.

Looking through the lens of Erikson's stages of development, we follow the stage of generativity vs stagnation, wanting to contribute to society while simultaneously supporting their families in all facets (McLeod). Deportation, especially of the head of a household, can severely disrupt the home lives of families. Many immigrants come to the U.S. incredibly optimistic, but are welcomed with a culture very difficult to acclimate to. Hispanic children, due to their families lacking finances, often are fed only what their families can afford, which are foods that possess unhealthy chemicals and lack nutrients. Recently, policies of the Trump Administration surrounding deportation, cuts to Medicaid, and cuts to other federal resources that make insurance less accessible, have made the lives of Hispanic Americans even more difficult. For the family, this means an increase in multigenerational households, closer bonds but more burdens put onto the heads of households shoulders. Rising life expectancy intensifies the financial and emotional strain on families who postpone long-term care due to insufficient funds and limited assistance, resulting in caregiving burdens that remain unacknowledged.

THE HISPANIC HEALTH PARADOX

Even though the Hispanic population tends to earn lower wages, fewer years of schooling, and experience disparities, they tend to be healthier in comparison to other demographic groups. "The foreign-born may exhibit a lower risk for certain psychiatric disorders than their U.S.-born and white counterparts. Alegría and colleagues argue that 'immigrants—Mexicans in particular—are less likely to experience depression, social phobia, and anxiety than U.S.-born Hispanics'" (Diaz and Niño 275). This phenomenon is part of the Hispanic Health Paradox, especially pronounced among foreign-born Hispanics. Despite challenges such as lack of insurance, limited access to medical care, limited access to nutritious foods, and policies that restrict health assistance, Hispanics continue to live longer lives with low mortality rates. An explanation for this is a concept called *familism*—the idea that puts family relationships first, not individualistic needs. The strong familial bonds between families, even as they age, help to reduce stress and promote caregiving. The idea of families taking care of the children is what makes multigenerational households and is explained as follows: "(a) housing arrangement that serves as a crucial safeguard, ensuring that individuals and families are prevented from facing the dire circumstances of living in a shelter or ending up on the streets" (Gonzalez 2024). Multigenerational households are present since older Hispanics cannot afford to live on their own due to lack of retirement plans and funding. All this being said, multigenerational living may stem from economic necessity but it offers long-term health and social benefits.

The family unit is a significant structure, and multigenerational households allow for preservation of cultural practices, a way of life, and strong family bonds. Though, not all multigenerational households are enough to stabilize the families. Nearly one-third of Latino households are multigenerational, almost all are not by choice, but rather by economic necessity (Gonzalez). The Hispanic Health Paradox–which suggests that Latino immigrants often experience better health outcomes despite socioeconomic disadvantage– relies on the concept of familism and close knit bonds. In these cases, the family unit can become a source of stress, complicating the network of support. Statistics can be misleading with regard to Hispanic health outcomes, as they fail to capture the disproportionate rates of health-compromising behaviors such as delaying medical care due to cost, or coping through mental health and substance abuse. Multigenerational households act as a safety net, providing comfort, cultural continuity, and a sense of belonging, but also fails to account for the complex struggles faced by families trying to seek help. Multigenerational households also positively impact their members' English proficiency as well as their ability to find a job (Diaz and Niño 281). Turning a lifestyle born out of economic necessity, into one that offers comfort and long-term benefits for future generations.

HUMAN CAPITAL AND ITS INFLUENCE

Hispanic individuals, both U.S. and foreign-born, face systemic barriers that contribute to lower levels of education compared to their Black and White peers. Factors such as economic disparity and language barriers hinder educational and career opportunities. In fact, "more than one-fourth of Hispanic adults have less than a ninth-grade education" (Schneider et al. 180). The barriers Hispanics face when pursuing educational ambitions are a critical issue, impacting their job prospects later in life. Hispanic families typically live in high rates of poverty, which often means they cannot afford many educational programs such as preschool. Pre-school plays a vital role in a child's development, helping them transition from home life to school life, socialize with peers, and learn about themselves. It is also a critical time where they are enhancing their language and developing their reading skills. Hispanic families with limited economic, social, and educational resources fall a bit behind. Hispanics, despite being the fastest growing demographic group in the United States, remain the least educated due to these challenges. This absence from preschool also results in the inability for children to form student-teacher relationships, which can have positive impacts on children. "Discrimination in school contexts is linked to lower cognitive, academic, and emotional competencies, including lower academic outcomes for Latinx adolescents and decreased sense of school belonging among school-age Latinx children" (Torres et al. 506). This then sets them back, disengaging them from the true focus: education. The children are too focused on finding a sense of identity that the disengagement can reinforce cycles of inequality by denying them equal opportunities to succeed in academic environments.

Human capital, the economic value of a worker's experience or skills, helps explain these disparities within the educational systems and working force. "For every Hispanic group with a sizable initial earnings deficit, controlling for education and English proficiency produces a dramatic reduction in their deficit" (Duncan et al. 245). This suggests that education and English proficiency are key factors in explaining why some Hispanic groups have lower wages to begin with. The measure of human capital varies differently amongst racial and ethnic groups, especially when it comes to foreign-born Hispanics. The education gathered abroad does not fully transfer to the United States labor market, reducing the human capital of foreign-born individuals. This idea inaccurately represents an individual's "self-worth" and reduces individuals to hierarchical classifications that disregard their full humanity.

We can look through the lens of Critical Race Theory alongside Psychosocial Theory to better understand how socially constructed perceptions of race contribute to discrimination and shape experiences. Critical Race Theory focuses on the socially constructed idea of race as a tool to exploit people of color, while allowing the law and legal institutions to better serve whiteness and wealth at the expense of the marginalized. One key aspect of the Critical Race Theory is the bias of appearance. "Targeting persons on the basis of their 'Mexicanness' relies on physical characteristics characterized as 'Mexican' or 'Latino' as well as cultural practices such as speaking Spanish, listening to Spanish music. Perceived 'Mexicanness' included characteristics of the working poor, such as residing in low-income neighbor-hoods" (Sanchez and Romero 784). As said by Sanchez and Romero, the individuals are categorized and therefore discriminated against by their racial characteristics. Basing judgement on an individual's perceived Hispanic identity results in discriminatory practices, including restricted housing opportunities and employment inequalities.

CONCLUSION

The struggles faced by Hispanic families in the United States are deeply rooted in systemic inequality, discriminatory policies, and generational poverty. These families face limited access to education and healthcare, fear of family separation, and discrimination both on local and federal levels. While the Hispanic Health Paradox highlights the strength of the family unit in these communities, multigenerational households themselves are a byproduct of the economic and social challenges Hispanic face, rather than evidence that such challenges are diminished. Familism along with multigenerational households are not a good enough substitute for resources and opportunities. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory and Psychosocial Theory, the challenges faced by Hispanic families are embedded in the structures that govern society. Hispanic families are not only targeted locally, but federally through policies and judged solely by their Human Capital, reducing their societal worth to economic output rather than recognizing their full contributions. As stated earlier in the paper, this is measured unfairly through English proficiency and education. The Psychosocial Theory sheds light on the development of the children of these families, losing their sense of identity and having lower self-esteem due to family separation and mistrust. Moreover, the United States needs to address these disparities at their roots: reforming immigration policies, investing in culturally competent systems, and recognizing the value Hispanic individuals play to the nation's economy and culture. Beyond policy, we must consider how we define the worth of a familyThe resilience of families should not be used as an excuse to overlook hardships they face. From them, Hispanic families are not only surviving in a society that has historically marginalized them, but are thriving. Free from fear and equipped with the resources including public support to build fulfilling and secure lives. Only then can Hispanic families achieve full well-being, where the children are offered the same opportunities as their White counterparts, and the elders are housed properly with the right resources. Children will grow up with pride in their identity, not in spite of it, and elders will be cared for. Moreover, addressing these disparities would benefit the United States beyond individual Hispanic families: it strengthens the economy, improves public health outcomes, and fosters social cohesion, ensuring that the United States lives up to its ideals of equality and opportunity for all citizens. The nation as a whole will be richer and more just.

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Emily Eng

Glorifying the Grind: Social Media Influencers, Hustle Culture, and Unrealistic Expectations of Success

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the glorification of hustle culture in social media and examines how this glorification establishes unrealistic and harmful expectations of success, particularly for women. Although social media was initially created as a form of entertainment and to create new connections, it has evolved into a space where polished routines and endless productivity are encouraged by influencers. Through the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects, this paper demonstrates how social media has been influenced by hustle culture and how many individuals adopt hustle culture beliefs. Bourdieu's Class Theory is used to show how social media influencers use hustle culture to build social, cultural, and economic capital, creating a personal brand centered around relentless productivity. Veblen's concept of conspicuous leisure reveals how the boundary between work and personal life has eroded due to the shift of work becoming a mindset instead of a physical place. Additionally, his theory of conspicuous consumption highlights how influencers create idealistic lifestyles and use material goods as symbols of achievement and success to market them to their followers. Finally, Cultivation Theory illustrates the long-term effects of repeated exposure to hustle culture on social media, leading to many individuals adopting unrealistic expectations of success and causing burnout as well as other negative mental health effects. Together, these theoretical frameworks demonstrate how hustle culture has become a pervasive force in social media, subtly shaping beliefs about success and promoting unrealistic lifestyles that are often unattainable and detrimental to physical and mental well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Her alarm rings gently at 5 a.m., rousing her from her peaceful slumber in her large bed covered with white, fluffy sheets. Abigail turns off her alarm, changing into a pink silk robe tied loosely around her waist as she enters the bathroom to begin her morning routine. She carefully brushes her teeth before beginning her extensive skincare routine: a gentle cleanser, a hydrating toner, a vitamin C serum, another hydrating serum, a moisturizer, and sunscreen. After changing into her trendy workout clothes, she makes her way to the kitchen, creating her perfect yogurt bowl filled with granola and fresh fruit. At the gym, she runs on the treadmill, does lunges, squats, and deadlifts before returning home to shower and wash her hair with her luxury items. She styles her hair carefully and perfectly, choosing a cute and fashionable outfit to wear, and spraying her expensive perfume before leaving for work. This is a typical morning routine of a social media influencer, designed to present an image of effortless perfection and productivity. Each step of her routine is carefully constructed to fit the aesthetic ideal of discipline, productivity, and accomplishment, contributing to society's unrealistic expectations of success.

Social media was initially designed to foster connections and for entertainment purposes, but it has evolved into a powerful force that subtly shapes societal values, self-perception, and work-life balance. While social media platforms do provide opportunities for connection and self-expression, they have also become influential spaces where ideologies such as hustle culture thrive. Merriam-Webster defines an ideology as "a manner or the content of thinking characteristic of an individual, group, or culture" (Merriam-Webster). In this case, hustle culture has become an ideology through the actions of social media influencers. They play a crucial role in promoting hustle culture by showcasing lifestyles that encourage constant productivity, even at the cost of physical and mental well-being. While productivity in itself is not inherently harmful, hustle culture often creates unrealistic and harmful expectations about success, pressuring individuals to consistently optimize their time or be "left behind." Although hustle culture on social media can affect all genders, this paper will specifically focus on female social media influencers and their impact on their female audiences. Women often have additional responsibilities and challenges compared to men, such as domestic labor, societal pressure on appearances, and gender biases. These factors have the potential to make hustle culture even more demanding and harmful for females. The research question this paper investigates is: Why do social media influencers glorify hustle culture, and how does this create harmful and unrealistic expectations of success?

In this paper, it is first argued that hustle culture has become an ideology due to social media's glorification and depictions of success and its impact on society. To prove this, the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects is used to explore how the beliefs of hustle culture have spread on social media, normalizing excessive productivity and leading audiences to adopt influencers' mentality and beliefs. Then, Bourdieu's Class Theory illustrates how social media influencers embrace hustle culture as an ideology to promote their content and to create their personal brand for views. In section 2, titled "'Rise and Grind': Effects on Work-Life Balance," Veblen's The Theory of the Leisure Class is applied to argue that the boundary between work and personal life is eroding from the pervasiveness of hustle culture on social media, particularly with "lazy day" content that transforms rest into a performance rather than a genuine break from work. It is then proposed that Veblen's concept of conspicuous leisure emphasizes how rest has become a privilege rather than a necessity through the pressure and expectations that hustle culture places on individuals. In section 3, titled "Grind to Shine, Shop for Status: Commodified Hustle," Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption is used to examine how influencers market their lifestyles as well as material possessions as symbols of success. It is then analyzed how influencers create idealistic lifestyles and use luxury products to show to their audience, encouraging individuals to constantly hustle to obtain the same success as influencers. Finally, Cultivation Theory is used to argue that excessive exposure to social media, especially to hustle culture content, is damaging to overall physical and mental well-being due to the stress and high expectations of the normalization of hustle culture on social media.

SCROLL, HUSTLE, REPEAT: THE INFILTRATION OF HUSTLE CULTURE IN YOUR FEED

Hustle culture has become an ideology that has infiltrated social media, transforming seemingly harmless posts and videos into subtle encouragements of overworking and influencing society to pursue relentless productivity. Content that seems ordinary often has an underlying pressure on the audience to constantly "grind," or to work excessively hard for success, every moment of their lives. In "Social Identity Theories," Deborah Morris and Elanor Webb state that "The Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE)…is not to say that when placed within a group, a person will 'lose' their personal identity, but rather that the collective group identity becomes more dominant, through deindividuation" (Morris and Webb, 58). This theory can be applied to social media where users often adopt the collective identity that is the most popular online, losing sight of their own personal identity. The dominant collective identity online, which is rooted in constant productivity and success, subtly shapes how people view themselves and others, influencing their behaviors and beliefs. Even seemingly innocent posts such as lifestyle routines subtly encourage individuals to constantly be optimizing their time. For example, a YouTuber named Alice Wu often creates shorts about her 5 a.m. or even 4 a.m. morning routine (Alice Wu). In each of her shorts, she carefully makes her bed, ensuring the sheets always match each other to make it as aesthetic as possible. She does her skincare routine with expensive products, meticulously makes herself a nutritious breakfast and a drink such as a latte, goes to the gym or an at-home exercise routine, and showers using well-known luxury toiletries before she moves on with the rest of her day. Although it may seem like a normal routine, this type of content promotes the idea that success is earned through strict discipline and productivity. From the moment she wakes up to the end of the video, Wu is constantly optimizing her time and her successful life is shown through her luxury products and the amount of time she has to do her routine. By showcasing her perfect routine, she not only adopts the ideals of hustle culture but also encourages her audience to follow her footsteps, consistently optimizing every moment. The constant bombardment of productivity and motivation posts like Wu's creates a sense of competition and comparison, making it difficult for users to disconnect themselves from this cycle of constant productivity. As hustle culture is increasingly promoted by influencers, individuals feel pressured to align their actions and ideals with influencers, prioritizing work over well-being. This type of content subtly creates the belief that a person's inherent value and level of success directly depends on their level of discipline, organization, and constant self-improvement. Many individuals use social media influencers as a benchmark for success, comparing themselves to these influencers. With such comparisons, these individuals believe that they must adopt the same mindset of always hustling, leading to the idea of constant self-optimization to become widespread across the internet. As a student in an interview with Putri Lubna and Zaniel Achmad in "Toxic Positivity Content Uploads on Instagram in Encouraging the Growth of Hustle Culture Gen Z" stated, "'If for example I don't have experience in the world of work…I saw that my friends seemed normal when there were lots of achievements in competitions. and what's interesting is that I have a KKN friend and he does internships in 3 places, and I see that as normal and I feel like I'm lacking like that'" (Lubna and Achmad, 82-83). This sentiment emphasizes the internalized pressure that many social media users face when comparing themselves to others. Social media normalizes and encourages overachievement, distorting the perception of normal productivity and encouraging others to adopt hustle culture as a necessary standard for success.

Hustle culture not only functions as a lifestyle trend but also as an ideology that influencers strategically use to create their personal brand and increase their engagement. By using hustle culture, many influencers portray themselves as successful solely through their own efforts, attracting followers, and encouraging further views. This carefully crafted image reinforces the ideology of hustle culture: that success is the result of constant effort, discipline, and self-optimization. Bourdieu proposes that "Social class is not defined by a property…but by the structure of relations between all the pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each of them and to the effects they exert on practices" (Riley, 113). In the case of social media influencers, Bourdieu's different types of capital can be translated into influencer culture where followers function as social capital while brand deals and sponsorships serve as economic capital. This concept applies to social media influencers as their success and social class are not solely based on their financial wealth but also on their connections, reputation, skills, and knowledge. By strategically using these forms of capital, influencers create a story of self-made success that reinforces hustle culture's beliefs. Influencers, such as fitness influencers, often leverage their social, cultural, and economic capital to build a personal brand that portrays them as diligent and enthusiastic, allowing them to "sell" productivity to their audience and push hustle culture as an ideology. In the case of Cory, a fitness influencer, he states that to engage viewers: "'You just have to play the game, you know? You put a title on a thumbnail that makes people think that you're going to solve their problem super fast […] you bring them in with what they want and then once they actually get to the video, we've just done a good job of giving them what they actually need'" (Kuber, 50). By using these strategies, influencers capture the attention of their audience, drawing them in with the promise of a quick solution and instant gratification. Influencers use hustle culture to manipulate attention and appeal to their audience's desire for self-improvement and success, reinforcing the belief that constant productivity is essential for success. Hustle culture gains attention from views by connecting with the desire for success and wealth, making followers believe that with enough effort, they can also become successful. Many of Wu's followers actively praise her lifestyle and wish to live like her. On her video "4am morning routine with puppy's yoga", YouNou-pz8bt, a commentor, writes, "I really want to be an organized and accomplished person like you. There are many people who provide this content. You are the only one who gives me positive energy. Thank you. " (Alice Wu, "4am morning routine with puppy's yoga"). s1mplykake, another commenter states, "your videos motivate me so much! you deserve the world <3" (Alice Wu, "7am asmr morning routine") on her video "7am asmr morning routine." Zulai_mis54, a second commenter on the same video says "Your lifestyle is so beautiful. I want to be like you when I grow up " (Alice Wu, "7am asmr morning routine"). All of these comments reflect how her viewers internalize hustle culture beliefs through seemingly harmless videos, highlighting how hustle culture has become an ideology that social media influencers capitalize on. Her aesthetically pleasing routines promote constant self-optimization and productivity as the method to success. This fuels the belief that constant productivity is the key to success as influencers create an idealized version of themselves to gain more capital and receive more engagement from their viewers. By using hustle culture, influencers perpetuate the idea that persistent effort and diligence are necessary for success, constructing an unrealistic portrayal of success.

"RISE AND GRIND": EFFECTS IN WORK-LIFE BALANCE

As hustle culture content becomes increasingly predominant across social media platforms, our understanding of private space has changed dramatically. Instead of a clear boundary between "work" and "home," social media disregards the balance between personal and social life, enabling a 24/7 work cycle and affecting our sense of privacy. As popular social media platforms such as TikTok plays a significant role in advocating this mindset, Monique-Monét Munro suggests in " All Work and No Play Makes TikTok a Dull Platform: The Influence of TikTok's 'Hustle Culture' on Productivity in the Digital Age," that "work is no longer a physical place in contemporary society but a mindset in which TikTok hustle culture takes advantage of" (Munro, 2). This observation emphasizes how work is perceived in the digital age, spreading to every aspect of individuals' lives. Work is no longer confined to the office or other professional environments, but has invaded personal spaces, routines, and leisurely activities since they are repackaged as opportunities for optimizing oneself instead. With this shift to work being a mindset instead of a physical place, it has created an environment where individuals feel compelled to constantly be improving, achieving, or being productive with their time. Additionally, it encourages the growth of hustle culture through the use of curated content, such as morning routines and continuous trends. In an interview with a student about Instagram and hustle culture, the student states, "...I used to be tired, to be honest, because of work, organization, college, but now I think…I'm getting used to it… In fact, time is only for work and pursuit of achievements" (Lubna and Achmad, 84-85). Hustle culture on social media has completely transformed the way individuals think about work, leading them to internalize hustle culture and use their personal time to work instead of to relax. The glorification and constant exposure to hustle culture on social media platforms such as Instagram have destroyed the boundaries between work and rest. As Nitisha Kumar notes in "An exploratory study on hustle culture's impact on work life balance and sustainability of employees working in private sector wrt Maharashtra," she says that "There is no time out or time in at work. Work is done in the office, outside the office, at home, at coffee shops or anywhere…working anywhere even when on vacation, to taking additional work…it's…a life embraced by many" (Kumar, 174). Work is everywhere whether it is at home or on vacations, leading to an "always-on" mentality where individuals are productive everywhere and anywhere they go. In hustle culture, leisure is not a right but a privilege that must be earned through continuous self-optimization and achievements. Even traditionally relaxing activities, such as self-care routines, are reframed as opportunities for self-optimization and productivity. At home, ordinary personal rooms become an extension of the workplace as influencers use their homes to create content. In a way, work becomes part of one's identity and self-worth. Ultimately, hustle culture in social media has turned the concept of work into a mindset instead of a physical place while disregarding the need for leisure and rest.

Although Munro also proposes that influencers also make "content that embraces and celebrates 'lazy days'" (Munro, 5), these moments of rest often appear as performative rather than genuine. Influencers often frame "lazy days" as a necessity to increase productivity rather than for genuine relaxation. As Veblen suggests, "Abstention from labour is the convenient evidence of wealth and is therefore the conventional mark of social standing; and this insistence on the meritoriousness of wealth leads to a more strenuous insistence on leisure" (Veblen, 21). For example, an influencer named "goldenhourabode" on TikTok shared moments of her "lazy days" where she sits on the couch to watch shows while eating take-out (goldenhourabode). However, despite her claims to be resting, her lighting is purposefully chosen with multiple cozy pink and yellow light sources as well as picturesque plants and wall art near her. Her camera perfectly captures the snacks carefully laid out on the table next to the gently lit candle and the beautifully checkered napkins folded into perfect squares. This intentionally crafted atmosphere used to attract viewers, transforming what should be a genuine moment of relaxation into another form of content designed for engagement and revenue. Another instance is from Jensen on TikTok who shared moments of her "lazy night" after work (jensen.bradley). She closes a curtain, but only one, so the beautiful view of her backyard is not obscured, and as the camera captures a perfect view of her aesthetically pleasing living room. The warm, yellow lighting and meticulously placed plushies on the couch, along with the heart-shaped coasters and a canned drink in her hand, create a curated image of a "perfect" lazy day. Meghan Rienks starts her lazy day by putting on a pair of comfortable, furry slippers before pouring herself a large amount of water with a vitamin C packet. She then starts her simple skincare routine before starting her elaborate makeup routine, styling her hair, and showing off her cute pajamas. After, she lights her floral candle, makes herself a cup of tea, and eats frozen mango chunks as a snack while she uses her tablet and flips through magazines as the camera focuses on aesthetic angles. She then puts on a fashionable outfit, sprays perfume, and uses body lotion before going out (Meghan Rienks, "Lazy Day Routine"). Lazy day content is often curated, catering to the audience by being "aesthetically pleasing" by having features such as cozy lighting and perfectly arranged skincare products. Through this, influencers turn their "lazy days" into another lifestyle that their audience strives to achieve through constant productivity. They present an idealized moment of rest, one that is aesthetically pleasing and monetizable. "Lazy days," or the periods of rest, are a visible demonstration of wealth that only the privileged are able to enjoy. Most individuals do not have the luxury of taking an entire day off to relax, either due to personal or financial constraints, unlike social media influencers. This reinforces the belief that relaxation must be earned through constant effort and productivity rather than a fundamental necessity for well-being. The monetization of this content has an inherent contradiction to the message of the content. It creates a paradox where rest is only valuable if it is tied to productivity, emphasizing the significance of work at the expense of one's well-being. While influencers appear to be taking a break from work, they are still generating revenue through their content, reinforcing the idea of hustle culture.

GRIND TO SHINE, SHOP FOR STATUS: COMMODIFIED HUSTLE

Hustle culture not only demands constant productivity, but it also transforms success into something that can be purchased and displayed. With the rise of social media, self-worth is measured through productivity, as well as the ability to showcase a curated image of a successful life. Social media influencers market both the products they use and their lifestyle routines, turning their personal habits into step-by-step blueprints for their audience to adapt and follow. In many cases, female influencers market lifestyles that not only promote constant productivity but also the traditional standards of femininity, such as beauty and domesticity. Social media influencer Hannah Neeleman, or also famously known as Ballerina Farm, her "tradwife" lifestyle embodies an idealized version of femininity that promotes domesticity, simplicity, and family values (Hannah Neeleman). For many women, this content amplifies the societal expectations of traditional femininity and perfection. Her lifestyle is meticulously curated and aesthetically pleasing to her audience, inspiring many to view her life as successful and adopt her way of living. However, this lifestyle, despite being marketed as easily attainable through little effort, realistically requires significant wealth and privilege, making it unattainable for many. Neeleman's husband, Daniel Neeleman, comes from an extremely wealthy family, with his father being the founder of multiple airlines including Breeze Airways. With his financial assistance and the hired help the couple has for the farm, the lifestyle that Neeleman showcases in her videos is attainable for her while being out of reach for many others. The financial security and external support the family has is unrealistic for many, no matter how much they work towards it. The tradwife aesthetic, like many other marketed lifestyles, commodifies an identity and sells it as an easy way to a successful and satisfactory life. Individuals typically overwork themselves to pursue these lifestyle ideals presented by influencers, despite the differences in privilege and wealth between most influencers and their audiences. In his book, Veblen states, "Since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit" (Veblen, 36). Material possessions are not just indicators of wealth but also of social status and self-worth. Consumption is not only about necessity or personal enjoyment, but it also signifies one's position in society. In the context of hustle culture, this concept goes beyond luxury goods to the carefully crafted aesthetic lifestyles that dominate social media platforms. Influencers create and sell entire identities that promise efficiency, discipline, and success.

Along with their lifestyles, influencers typically introduce the products they use in their everyday routine, with most of these products being luxury brands or from their own brand. These items, which range from designer clothing to expensive skincare items, are carefully included in their content, making them appear as essential elements of a successful life. As Veblen states, "Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure. As wealth accumulates on his hands, his own unaided effort will not avail to sufficiently put his opulence in evidence by this method" (Veblen, 36). Simply having wealth or being successful is not enough to demonstrate influencers' status. Instead, these influencers must purchase expensive products to showcase in their content to prove to their audiences that they are successful and that the products are necessary for a successful life. By encouraging the use of these products, influencers subtly suggest that purchasing the same items will allow their audience to be as successful as them. Rather than a forceful promotion of certain products, this marketing approach of subtly introducing these products within their content makes the promotion feel more natural and essential. Influencers frame luxury items as investments for a more successful lifestyle, reinforcing the idea that success is demonstrated through material possessions. This belief aligns with the values of hustle culture, where self-worth is tied to displays of conspicuous achievement, encouraging self-comparisons to influencers. Lubna and Achmad suggest "The effect of continuously being exposed to social media [is that] people will continue to be motivated to be consumptive and competitive. The mass media makes this a reality which is considered patent and indirectly follows the reality that exists on social media" (Lubna and Achmad, 77-78). When people use social media, it is unsurprising that they constantly compare their lives and themselves to social media influencers they see, especially when these influencers encourage their audience to follow hustle culture to become successful through their luxurious lifestyles and promote endless productivity. It causes their audiences to constantly compare themselves to the influencers, making social media users believe that hustle culture is the key to success. This creates a situation where individuals feel pressured to adopt hustle culture and the unrealistic standards endorsed by social media influencers. Many individuals excessively spend in an attempt to be as successful as the influencers they see online. Over time, this mindset can lead to burnout, distress, and a distorted perception of success.

HUSTLE HARD, STRESS HARDER: THE EFFECT OF NON-STOP GRINDING

The appeal of hustle culture is deeply rooted in social comparisons, where viewers measure their worth and own success against influencers' seemingly endless achievements. It encourages the belief that success is evident as long as enough effort is put in, ignoring the negative consequences of this belief and the other factors that contribute to success. Many individuals also internalize the idea that their value is directly related to their productivity, leading to feelings of inadequacy when making self-comparisons. This constant comparison creates a sense of desire and class anxiety, where individuals want the same successful life as influencers while also being afraid of moving down in the social hierarchy. This fear can be particularly intense for women who are expected to be perfect in every aspect—a successful career, a beautiful appearance, and be able to handle domestic and family responsibilities on top of that. The lens of Cultivation Theory, created by George Gerbner, states, "repetitive, long-range, and consistent exposure to patterns common to most programming…can be expected to cultivate stable and widely-shared images of life and society," and repeated exposure to content related to hustle culture can cultivate a mindset where the audience believes that hustling is necessary for success, normalizing the endless productivity (Gerbner, 181). Essentially, long-term exposure to such content can lead viewers to adopt these unrealistic standards as reality. Lubna and Achmad suggest that "audiences are constructed to be afraid of being left behind in everything and become competitive. Social media is a priority for improving performance in various aspects, therefore a benchmark emerges that is sufficient to influence the audience who consumes it" (Lubna and Achmad, 82). Social media amplifies this fear by showcasing curated snapshots of influencers' lives, emphasizing achievements and polished routines while omitting their failures and struggles. It creates a sense of competition and fear in order to "keep up" with others as many individuals measure their self-worth and achievements with these highly edited posts.

While productivity is not inherently negative, it becomes harmful when it begins to take a toll on people's mental health or physical well-being, such as in the case of Gen Z. Social media often sets high and unrealistic standards for what success should look like, only showing the highlights of people's lives while omitting the conflicts or failures they faced as they struggled to achieve their successes. This selective portrayal of people's lives creates unrealistic expectations of success, one where success is continuous and effortless, leading to people feeling unaccomplished if they are not constantly working towards their next achievement. It results in an intense pressure on individuals to be in a constant state of productivity or live in fear of falling behind. As Lindsay Ellis argues in "Your Gen Z Co-Worker Is Hustling More Than You Think," many Gen Z individuals "are pushing long hours, building businesses, striving for promotions—even for their more-senior co-workers' jobs. At the same time they are running into perceptions that their age cohort cares more about work-life boundaries and rejecting 'hustle' culture than scaling the career ladder" (Ellis). Hustle culture affects both the previous generations and the current ones, with Gen Z striving to succeed despite the perceptions that they lack a strong work ethic. Gen Z, having been exposed to hustle culture from a young age through social media, internalized the belief that success is linked to constant productivity having seen influencers glorify overworking and constant optimization. Unlike the previous generations, Gen Z's version of hustle culture is becoming increasingly digitally driven. With the rise of social media and online businesses, many Gen Z individuals are striving to create their own personal brands or participate in side hustles such as freelancing while balancing a full-time job. As Liu notes in her article, "Gen Zers are every bit as ambitious, and even more anxious, as the overworked millennials before them" (Liu). Despite the stigma of being "lazy," Gen Z hustles just as much as the previous generations, although in different ways. With the rise of technology, Gen Z individuals pursue content creation and digital entrepreneurship, using digital platforms as ways to make money and create opportunities for themselves. The hustle may appear different superficially; however, it is just as demanding as previous generations, especially with the rise of social media. Long-term exposure to productivity and achievements posts has only increased the standard for success, creating an environment where individuals feel compelled to constantly work and be productive.

These unrealistic standards for success create immense pressure, leading to overwhelming stress and burnout. For example, On Reddit an individual comments, "Most days I didn't accomplish any of those tasks. I just drank coffee and procrastinated and felt like a failure because I didn't spend 8 hours of my day working on my 'online empire', as those gurus would say. Instead I went on YouTube and watched random videos until I went to bed, filled with guilt because I wasn't productive" (Tonirider). This comment emphasizes the pressure and mental toll hustle culture inflicts on individuals, creating a sense of inferiority and guilt if they are unable to meet hustle culture's unrealistic demands. Rather than being an uplifting and motivating ideology, hustle culture creates an endless cycle of procrastination, shame, and guilt. Another user comments, "About a year ago, I decided to go all in. I cut off most of my social life, isolated myself, and locked in to 'grind it out.' As the year comes to a close, I've realized it was a rollercoaster — and not in a good way. Yes, I made some progress, learned a lot about myself and what I want to work on, but I'm also extremely burned out, missed out on life and event, and, honestly, didn't make any more significant strides than I would have if I'd just balanced things better" (vinci01). Not only does this user reveal the consequences of internalizing hustle culture, but the user also admits that while progress was made, it was not worth the consequences it came with. The user also acknowledges that with time, he or she could have reached the same or similar results if a more balanced lifestyle was pursued instead of excessively working until he or she entered the state of burnout. This admission directly challenges hustle culture's claim that endless productivity and self-sacrifice are the only ways to reach true success and exposes the false promises made by hustle culture. Individuals are encouraged to disregard work-life balance and self-care to pursue optimization and productivity, causing many to overexert and cause lasting mental harm to themselves.

Eventually, these expectations have a significant and detrimental impact on mental health, leading to feelings of inadequacy and mental health disorders. Due to the pressure social media inflicts on many individuals, excessive use of these platforms has a negative impact on mental health, leading to a trend in research showing that "Social media is one of the newest and most popular internet services, which has caused significant progress in the social systems of different countries in recent years. The use of the Internet has become popular among people in such a way that its use has become inevitable and has made life difficult for those who use it excessively" (Nazari et al., 2). Social media's increasingly widespread use and presence inevitably infiltrated into daily life, actively influencing societal norms. It shapes the way people approach hustle culture, making it difficult to separate healthy work habits from toxic productivity due to excessive use of social media and constant reinforcement of content that glorifies excessive productivity. Influencers capitalize on social media by promoting the idea that self-worth is directly linked to productivity, creating an unhealthy cycle where individuals constantly work more to achieve more. Due to the normalization of overworking, it is difficult to distinguish the boundary between healthy work habits and harmful overexertion, leading to deteriorating mental health. With the carefully curated image influencers create as a model, individuals are compelled to optimize every aspect of their lives, often disregarding their well-being to do so.

Hustle culture in social media poses serious mental health risks, especially since the constant comparison and pressure often negatively affects self-esteem and realistic perceptions of success. Novela Perić highlights the harsh reality of hustle culture in "Hustle Culture and Mental Health" as she states, "It has become obvious that hustling is more likely to drive people to burnout, stress, depression and, as seen, in some cases even to suicide; and that great success as promised by its advocates is the less likely outcome" (Perić, 109). This statement emphasizes the dangers of hustle culture and the damaging effects it has on mental health. The carefully edited and refined stories and images that influencers share create an illusion that constant productivity is the best and only way to success, disregarding the negative consequences. Perić points out that instead of the promised success, continuous hustling often leads to burnout, exhaustion, stress, mental disorders, and even suicide. The pressure to conform to these unrealistic standards creates a harmful cycle of comparison, where individuals measure their own achievements and worth against influencers who carefully curate their online image of success. As influencers continue to glorify hustle culture, social media users are repeatedly exposed to content that connects self-worth with success and productivity, leading to a sense of inadequacy in individuals who continue to hustle in an attempt to overcome that sense of inferiority. In reality, the endless hustling rarely leads to lasting satisfaction and fulfillment in life—only causing fatigue, disillusionment, and anxiety. Overworking deteriorates people's mental health, diminishing their motivation and overall well-being instead of leading them to guaranteed success.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines how hustle culture has become an ideology that is shaped and spread by social media influencers. Through the meticulously crafted content that promotes constant productivity, influencers present an idealized life that pressures their audiences to adopt similar values and mindsets despite its negative consequences. Through the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects, this paper explored how individuals internalize the collective beliefs of hustle culture on social media, adopting the dominant identity that aligns with its ideals. Bourdieu's Class Theory emphasizes how influencers use hustle culture as an ideology to accumulate social, cultural, and economic capital to build their personal brand and increase engagement. Veblen's theory of conspicuous leisure emphasizes how rest is no longer a peaceful, authentic part of life, but instead, has become a performative action that encourages hustle culture beliefs. His theory of conspicuous consumption highlights how lifestyles and luxury have become ostentatious displays of wealth and status. In the final section, Cultivation Theory demonstrates how hustle culture on social media creates unrealistic and often harmful expectations of success, leading to long-term physical and mental consequences.

Despite the common misconception that hustle culture is fading, it has only transformed into a more subtle yet pervasive force that is deeply embedded in social media. Influencers no longer explicitly promote hustle culture, but instead, they subtly encourage it through their meticulous routines, luxury goods, and aesthetic, idealized lifestyles. As hustle culture continues to dominate social media, it erodes the line between an authentic life and a performative lifestyle, leaving many feeling inadequate, exhausted, and overwhelmed by unrealistic expectations. While hustle culture affects a wide range of people, it can be particularly harsh for women when combined with the additional expectations they face. This paper raises important questions about hustle culture in social media: What responsibility do influencers and social media platforms have regarding the perpetuation of hustle culture? How can social media platforms be regulated to reduce the spread of harmful hustle culture narratives? In what ways can individuals create healthy boundaries between social media and their personal life in a world that constantly blurs the line between work and leisure?

Although productivity itself is not inherently harmful and is useful in daily life, hustle culture's push to be excessively productive at the cost of one's well-being is damaging to one's overall health. The normalization of such overworking in society establishes unrealistic and harmful societal standards that create immense pressure on individuals, causing burnout, insomnia, anxiety, and other negative symptoms. It is essential to step back from social media and realize the difference between hustle culture's excessive productivity and regular, sustainable productivity. By recognizing this difference, productivity can be reclaimed as a tool for success instead of a demanding and detrimental lifestyle. Redefining success beyond the beliefs of hustle culture is essential for creating a gentler and more sustainable relationship with ourselves, our work, and the digital world around us.

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Taboo or Treatment? Cannabis as Medicine in the Face of Stigma

ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the critical disparity between medical cannabis as a treatment for chronic pain and the persistent social and institutional stigma impeding its acceptance in healthcare. Chronic pain affects millions worldwide, and existing treatments, such as opioids, present great risks that incentivize the investigation of alternative therapies. Despite evidence that cannabis reduces pain and decreases reliance on opioids, the drug's association with crime and its status as a controlled substance hinder its legal and social adoption. Research indicates that public, self, and structural stigma shape both physician and patient behavior. Stigma may lead to feelings of isolation and shame in patients and can discourage medical history disclosure, delay treatment, and impact mental health. Physicians are often hesitant to prescribe cannabis, largely due to a lack of information and the ambiguity of its legal status. Patient interviews reveal patterns of shame, mistrust, and internalized biases, illustrating the consequences of stigma, both mentally and physically. Despite growing medical marijuana education and acceptance, gaps remain in research and policy. This paper synthesizes historical reports, patient interviews, and clinical and psychological studies to assess the impact of stigma and its role in creating barriers to treatment. The analysis emphasizes a need for increased medical marijuana education, research, and normalization programs to enhance its safety and protect those who use it for chronic pain from judgment or shame.

Chronic pain, or pain that persists longer than three months ("Pain Management Center - Chapter 1"), is a widespread issue that affects millions worldwide. Traditional medications used to treat chronic pain often include opioids or surgeries, both of which are aggressive and carry a great number of risks. The possibility of addiction, dependency, and limited efficacy associated with conventional chronic pain treatments has led to the development of alternative therapies, including medical cannabis, or marijuana (Johnson et al.). Marijuana offers a gentle, non-invasive pain management method. It can be delivered through several methods, such as inhaled when smoking, swallowed in pill or edible form ("About Cannabis"), or administered through topical application (Makhakhe). It is used to treat a variety of conditions that may cause chronic pain, like cancer, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, migraines, and fibromyalgia. Thus far, medical marijuana has shown promise in treating certain conditions, but clinical evidence of its broader efficacy is limited (Johnson et al.). There are also barriers to its distribution, as medical cannabis is federally illegal in the United States due to its classification as a Schedule One drug (Drug Enforcement and Policy Center). This means physicians cannot prescribe it, nor can pharmacies distribute it. However, in qualifying states, physicians and psychiatrists may certify patients to acquire medical-grade marijuana from a dispensary. Marijuana's legalization status differs from state to state, as some have fully legalized it, some have legalized it only for medical purposes, and some have not legalized it at all (Bodie et al.). Similarly, laws in other countries vary. Some European countries have approved marijuana for medical use, countries like Thailand have decriminalized it (Ransing et al.), and some nations, such as China and Japan, consider cannabis possession illegal or strictly regulated (Xiong and Westcott; Ewe). Considering the evolving global landscape of cannabis is crucial to understand its status in the United States, as the prevalence of this drug suggests that fear of its negative impact on public health is often unfounded.

As cannabis proves useful for an increasing number of conditions, requests for its medical use and physician administration have risen (MacCallum et al.). However, despite the drug's growing prevalence, surrounding controversies have halted consideration of marijuana as a mainstream pain medication. The stigma surrounding drug use, especially recreationally, affects marijuana's application as medicine (McKenna 105). Stigma is a negative association with a particular group of people ("Stigma, Prejudice and Discrimination"), and it plays a large role in the societal judgment of marijuana. This is due to factors such as preconceived biases, variability in legal status, debate over efficacy, and common misconceptions. Society often stereotypes marijuana users as lazy addicts or "potheads" (Campbell), which may cause patients to develop a sense of shame for using marijuana, even for health purposes. Acknowledging the manifestations of stigma is crucial for understanding how they impact public perception of cannabis, which in turn influences the drug's acceptance and normalization. Additionally, to present a comprehensive analysis, it is essential to examine stigma's impact on public health and psychology. As the presence of cannabis grows in healthcare, it is vital to investigate how medical marijuana can serve as an alternative method to manage chronic pain in the face of societal biases surrounding the drug.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) discusses the severity of stigma, presenting the idea that when someone is discriminated against, they develop fear and shame that prevent them from reaching out for help. In "Stigma, Prejudice and Discrimination Against People with Mental Illness," the APA states, "stigma and discrimination can contribute to worsening symptoms and reduced likelihood of getting treatment." According to the APA, harmful effects of stigma include reluctance to seek help, social exclusion, fewer opportunities for activities in work and school settings, and bullying and discrimination ("Stigma, Prejudice and Discrimination"). This is in agreement with Lindsey L. Monteith and Jeremy W. Pettit's "Implicit and explicit stigmatizing attitudes and stereotypes about depression," a study conducted to examine implicit and explicit biases regarding depression and perceptions of the condition in comparison to physical illness. Monteith and Pettit state, "Commonly expressed reasons for not reporting depressive symptoms and not seeking treatment for depression include embarrassment, concerns that others will think less of them, and beliefs that they will be perceived as neurotic, unbalanced, or irritating" (485). The study found that individuals experiencing depression are concerned with judgment from others, making them reluctant to disclose their condition out of fear of being stereotyped or mistreated. Both articles concur that direct results of the stigma surrounding depression are not only shame and embarrassment, but also the barriers those feelings produce. While these articles investigate the impact of stigma specifically on those with mental health issues, other individuals may also experience stigma and its consequences. Those intimidated by stigma may fail to disclose key parts of their medical history or avoid seeking treatment at all in extreme cases of shame. Moreover, individuals in areas that have only recently legalized medical marijuana might be subject to greater judgment. Stigma has serious social implications, potentially isolating victims. If the culture around the patient is not tolerant or progressive, they might face a source of loneliness and disgrace. This can also be a result of different generational beliefs, as members of older generations may be less familiar with societal acceptance of medical cannabis. In other cases, young adults may not be granted access to medical marijuana, as some healthcare professionals might perceive their youth as a reason that they should be able to heal without the drug. It is also imperative to acknowledge the various types of stigma, as they have distinct effects. The APA describes the main types of stigma as public, self, and structural. Public stigma refers to the beliefs held by society, self-stigma refers to internalized shame or judgment one feels about oneself, and structural stigma refers to systemic discrimination in areas such as legal policies ("Stigma, Prejudice and Discrimination"). Examining these different types is essential to gain a complete comprehension of stigma, how it may present, and its various dimensions. By interpreting how medical cannabis is stigmatized, its use as treatment can be fully understood, and barriers to its access and acceptance may be overcome.

Medical cannabis's earliest roots date back to ancient Asia and Egypt, where cultures used marijuana as an herbal treatment, and throughout history, continued to take advantage of its benefits in reducing pain and inflammation (Crocq 223–224). It is widely unknown that marijuana continued to be used in Western medicine until the early 1900s, and was even included in the United States Pharmacopeia (Holifield 3). Cannabis stigmatization did not begin to boom until the 20th century, when the substance was associated with Mexican immigrants, who were seen as dangerous to the job market in the southwestern United States. Regulating marijuana, what these immigrants called marihuana, became a tool to punish and control the minority (Holifield 6–7). The Marihuana Tax Act of 1937 was put in place by government official Harry Anslinger, effectively rendering marijuana illegal. In *Blowing Smoke: Harry J. Anslinger and the Marijuana Tax Act of 1937*, Michael Holifield writes, "marijuana was first able to be portrayed as causing sexual deviance in white women, violence in minorities, the cause of an impending epidemic of crime and an issue of addiction" (24). According to Holifield, through a racially-fueled propaganda campaign, Anslinger began associating cannabis with corruption and danger, especially among marginalized communities. In "The Social Construction of Cannabis in Social Work," Maya Lavie-Ajayi examines how cannabis has been presented in social work articles, finding that 85 percent of the articles analyzed ultimately "presented and reinforced the construction of cannabis as a harmful substance" (333). These articles failed to differentiate marijuana from other drugs and instead linked cannabis with problematic behavior in the general population or specific groups of individuals (Lavie-Ajayi 333). Many of the articles discussed cannabis's tendency to cause problems in society rather than underscoring its benefits, reflecting existing biases toward the drug. Lavie-Ajayi continues to write, "The articles mainly referenced cannabis briefly as part of their analysis of the prevalence of drug abuse, risk-taking behavior in young people, the effectiveness of specific interventions for drug abuse, the characteristics of specific groups of service users, or the dangers that drug use poses to child welfare" (333). Thus, these articles perpetuate the idea that cannabis use leads to unstable or manic behavior, potentially endangering the youth. This association with deviant behavior prevalent in communities with high drug use holds marijuana indirectly responsible for undesirable actions. These ideas, introduced in the 20th century, have shaped what is now the public stigma around marijuana. Cannabis is painted as a gateway drug due to the failure to differentiate it from more harmful substances, as a cause of crime or rebellion due to its association with deviant behavior in minority communities, and as dangerous due to misinformation and exaggerated risks. While medical marijuana may be obtained from a source that performs rigorous quality control and regulation (MacCallum et al.), the stigma surrounding recreational cannabis's dangers continues to impact how the drug is perceived in medicine. The way marijuana was portrayed historically—being named the cause of crime, violence, and addiction, especially in minority communities—has laid the foundation for its portrayal as a dangerous drug today.

Although historical cannabis stigma may remain prevalent, its acceptance also seems to be growing. This began in the 1990s with the discovery of endocannabinoids, a key factor in understanding the safety and efficacy of cannabis as medicine and ultimately promoting its normalization ("Human Endocannabinoid System"). Cannabis has since been approved as a treatment method for many conditions, showing great promise in treating chronic pain. A meta-analysis by Penny F. Whiting et al. published in *JAMA* in 2015 found that cannabis patients experienced a 37 percent reduction in chronic pain compared to the placebo group (2456). Additionally, pain patients treated with marijuana experienced a 64 percent decrease in opioid use (Boehnke et al. 739). Medical cannabis has proven to be beneficial in several ways, including its ability to replace potentially dangerous treatment methods. Yet, it is essential to note that cannabis is not without its risks. A commentary article by Jürgen Rehm, published in *Addiction*, initially discusses similar findings to Whiting et al., stating that medical cannabis legalization was associated with a significant decrease in opioid prescriptions and Medicaid spending. However, Rehm goes on to critique the public health impact of substituting prescription opioids with medical cannabis; just because marijuana's "consequences are not as detrimental as those of other drugs, in particular in terms of mortality, they are far from benign" (2071–2072). Rehm argues that replacing prescription opioids with cannabis is only effective for a "small subset of less potent opioids such as codeine" and, furthermore, "substitutes one substance with abuse potential by another" (2071–2072). To avoid perpetuating the drug abuse epidemic, he warns against replacing harmful drugs with ones that seem less harmful. Rehm also acknowledges the concern that medical cannabis research is limited, stating, "judgment about effectiveness is premature for cannabis, with research to collect better evidence only now commencing… We should not repeat this history with yet another wonder drug installed before proper evidence for effectiveness and well-documented unintentional consequences" (Rehm 2071–2072). While this article was published in 2018, the lack of cannabis research continues to impede healthcare professionals' acceptance of the drug. This concern is also expressed in "Cannabis in Pain Treatment: Clinical and Research Considerations" from *The Journal of Pain*, which states, "Expanded research on cannabis is needed to better determine the individual and public health effects of increasing use of herbal cannabis and to advance understanding of the pharmaceutical potential of cannabinoids as medications" (Savage et al. 654). Inconsistencies and regulatory barriers in medical research on marijuana are likely reasons for negative perceptions of it in the medical field (Savage et al. 658–659). There is hesitancy to accept and prescribe the drug, even if it seems less harmful than other medications, because its risks are still widely unknown. While medical marijuana has demonstrated significant efficacy in reducing pain and opioid abuse, concerns remain regarding its potential harms. These harms are not just societal fears but also manifest directly in the healthcare environment.

Physicians are the source of treatment distribution, and as a result, their biases are a crucial influence on medical marijuana's growth. Daniel King et al. discuss the variety of physicians' opinions in "The Role of Stigma in Cannabis Use Disclosure: An Exploratory Study," stating that "Clinicians with an oncology background exhibited more positive perceptions, likely due to the drug's sought-after antineoplastic and immunosuppressive effects." Cannabis's use in aiding chemotherapy pain relief has shown promising effects (King et al.), and it is notable that physicians, such as oncologists, who interact with the drug more often also hold more positive views of it. For many cancer patients, the potential side effects of cannabis—like dry mouth, dizziness, and temporary cognitive changes ("Marijuana [Cannabis, Weed]")—are much more tolerable than chronic pain caused by their illness. In Yuval Zolotov et al.'s "Medical cannabis: An oxymoron? Physicians' perceptions of medical cannabis," an interviewed physician states, "I'm an oncologist, so I became much easier on the trigger with palliative medications, not only with cannabis but also with opioids. When you understand how much these patients suffer, then many of the concerns about side-effects, like addiction, are not so relevant" (7). This emphasizes that the more education physicians acquire about the drug, the more positively they view it. They acknowledge the risks it may entail, but after seeing its benefits, their concerns decrease, and their acceptance grows.

King et al. also state, "Increased provider knowledge and education about cannabis were associated with positive perceptions," further supporting the notion that negative perceptions of the drug often stem from a lack of information combined with personal stigma. Another interview in Zolotov et al.'s study contained a statement from a physician who claimed they prescribe other medications much more freely than cannabis, recognizing their biases and stating that they would be interested in learning more about marijuana and potentially changing their opinion (8). This physician acknowledges their prejudices and admits that they are more likely to prescribe medications other than marijuana because they see it as a dangerous drug that will be abused. However, the doctor also states that they are open to new opinions and, after listening to a presentation from another doctor, presumably one who spoke about cannabis as medicine, consider that they may be incorrect (Zolotov et al. 8). Jared M. Weisman and Marcus Rodríguez's "A systematic review of medical students' and professionals' attitudes and knowledge regarding medical cannabis," published in the *Journal of Cannabis Research*, found that most health professionals and medical students included in the study reported a desire for increased medical cannabis educational programs, in part due to their concerns about the drug's potential risks. This aligns with King et al. and Zolotov et al.'s findings, emphasizing the need for expanded education on medical cannabis in the healthcare industry. However, Weisman and Rodríguez's study suggests that many healthcare professionals are eager to become more informed and proactive, contrasting with other physicians—such as the one interviewed in Zolotov et al.'s study—who appear content to remain biased unless education is pushed onto them. In either case, what remains important is the extent to which physicians can set aside their biases to approach medical marijuana objectively, and whether educational programs will be effective in reducing these biases and the misinformation that may cause them.

Despite the continued existence of these biased opinions against medicinal marijuana, some argue that marijuana's popularity in recent years has led to its normalization. "The normalisation thesis – 20 years later" argues that marijuana has become accepted due to several factors, including increased usage and social shifts in favor of its legalization. Authors Amy Eloise Pennay and Fiona Catherine Measham describe how proponents of the "normalization thesis" argue that "the use of these drugs had become socially and culturally accepted by many members of the non-drug using population and was increasingly culturally embedded in wider society" (187). Such a shift in cultural approval is exemplified in another interview from Zolotov et al.'s article, where a physician says, "What happens in my clinic is like a social wave of people that are using cannabis all the time, and now it is a festive opportunity for them to facilitate legalization. I think many physicians are concerned about this" (7). This statement implies that while cannabis's growing popularity indicates its social acceptance, healthcare professionals remain concerned; though marijuana may be normalized socially, that does not necessarily mean it is safe or the best decision for patients. These findings suggest that the primary source of resistance toward medical cannabis may lie within the prescribing medical community, rather than in sociocultural stigma or environmental attitudes. Other cases raise concerns that physicians may be wary of approving a patient for medical marijuana, as the regulations surrounding the drug are constantly changing. In "Medical Marijuana for Treatment of Chronic Pain and Other Medical and Psychiatric Problems: A Clinical Review," author Kevin P. Hill develops this idea further by stating, "The federal stance on marijuana still is a cause for concern for some physicians who are considering recommending medical marijuana as a treatment or aligning with medical marijuana dispensaries or treatment centers" (2478). The ever-changing regulations surrounding cannabis's administration, combined with varying personal and legal perspectives, may contribute to physicians' hesitancy to prescribe it. Furthermore, these strict regulatory barriers and marijuana's classification as a dangerous substance are complicated by the fact that other dangerous substances, such as prescription opioids, remain widely prescribed.

The patients using medical marijuana are most affected by the stigma surrounding it, and their opinions about the substance before and after experiencing its impacts are crucial to consider. In "Medical cannabis and stigma: A qualitative study with patients living with chronic pain" by Armany Hulaihel et al., interviews with medical marijuana patients were conducted and interpreted to examine how stigma affected the patients' experiences. One patient originally believed they were "just anti [marijuana] at first" and later realized that they "should have jumped on it" (Hulaihel 1017). The interviewee adds, "It took me [two years] of suffering, crying, and shouting and I couldn't sleep and lay down, couldn't walk and sit down, I couldn't do anything. And I was really on hard drugs, I had to take Morphine and Targin… And when I finally took the cannabis, I realized I was an idiot" (Hulaihel 1107). In this case, a patient refused to pursue medical marijuana as a pain management treatment because of their preconceived notions and simply being misinformed.

While it is not stated directly, patients may also be wary of medical marijuana because they fear judgment. This, however, is a legitimate worry, as another patient did face outright discrimination:

> I told you, every time I smoke, my neighbor closes her curtains. She acts like I do it on purpose, I really don't. It's just that sometimes I don't feel like I want to smoke inside the house, so I go outside… My brothers accept this… they know I use it as a medicine, but my neighbors got irritated when they smelt it, then one of them asked if I really smoke cannabis. I told him this is my medication, but he didn't believe it's licensed and called the police. I'm not kidding, the police was here, they had a search warrant for my cannabis. (Hulaihel 1108)

In this situation, a patient expresses the idea that there is no perfect setting to smoke their medical marijuana. In either case, they end up bothering their family or their neighbors. The police even investigated them, as others refused to believe cannabis can be medicine and continued to reinforce the notion that it is only used by criminals or addicts. This patient experienced a personal violation and possible trauma as a result of the serious stigma surrounding cannabis. King et al. acknowledge this idea, writing, "Cannabis use can be stigmatized as deviant behavior similar to that observed in criminology, tied to societal labeling, discrimination, and devaluation. Distinctively, discrimination involves unfair or unequal treatment, whereas devaluation involves denying the significance of the individual." When outsiders refused to believe the individual had approval for medical marijuana, the patient was devalued and mistrusted. Hesitancy to use medical marijuana to treat one's chronic pain is a legitimate fear, and cases like these demonstrate that hesitancy may force an individual to continue enduring pain despite the availability of a potential solution. Those who decide to use medical marijuana may be wary of judgment and ultimately risk not just social discomfort, but also institutional threats, like the neighbor's call to the police. Any fear, whether it is employment discrimination or the questioning of parental responsibility, is a reason individuals may abstain from using medical marijuana. A patient may choose to prioritize avoiding judgment or discrimination by suffering in silence.

While some interviewees support the drug and acknowledge that patients are unfairly discriminated against for using it, other patients use it and, simultaneously, continue experiencing internal stigma. One patient stated, "I do not smoke to be 'high'. I smoke approximately half a cigarette a day when it hurts and there is no medication that can relieve it, and there is nothing that can make me forget what happened, this is the only reason [to smoke]" (Hulaihel 1108). This interviewee explains that they only smoke marijuana to treat their pain, emphasizing that they do not do it to get high. While to some this may simply be a personal preference, repeated emphasis on excusing marijuana usage may indicate shame or guilt. In this case, an individual is experiencing self-stigma, which the APA describes as "the negative attitudes, including internalized shame, that people with mental illness may have about their own condition" ("Stigma, Prejudice and Discrimination"). Internalizing societal biases surrounding medical marijuana may cause patients to isolate themselves and experience a negative impact on self-esteem and mental health. A patient may also attempt to separate themself from other marijuana users to gain societal approval, as exemplified in this interview. In doing so, the individual distances themself from their perception of what society believes about marijuana users, as a United Kingdom study found that 84.4 percent of cannabis patients reported that they feel medical cannabis users are subject to stigma (Troup et al.). This could be a result of the status of medical marijuana in the United Kingdom, as prescriptions are only available by way of the National Health Service (Troup et al.) and primarily given for specific and rare conditions ("Medical cannabis [and cannabis oils]"). If cannabis patients overwhelmingly agree that they will face stigma, they may inevitably internalize these societal beliefs to protect themselves from isolation and shame.

An additional interviewee stated, "They [friends] don't have to know I smoke. I'm not interested in telling them. When I'm surrounded by people, if I'm in pain, I will search for a private place just to relieve the pain, then I will go back like nothing happened. But I will not do anything that ruins this. Cannabis has become part of my life, it's not that I'm going to have fun" (Hulaihel 1108). This individual hides their use of medical marijuana and emphasizes that they do not use it recreationally. In fact, they leave their friends and only take cannabis in secret, out of shame. Their need to find a "private place" to medicate and then return like "nothing happened" reveals a deep sense of internalized guilt. The act of smoking medical marijuana is presented as one that could "ruin" their social standing.

Stigma surrounding medical cannabis is responsible for substantial barriers to its acceptance as a legitimate option for pain management therapy. It is not only effective in treating chronic pain, a significant issue globally, but it can also serve as a replacement for far more dangerous drugs such as opioids. However, a Canadian study by Florriann Fehr et al. in the *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing* determined that "the authorization of medical cannabis as part of a harm-reduction approach and recovery strategy has significant implementation barriers rooted in longstanding stigma towards cannabis" (195). This is notable, as Canada legalized medical marijuana nationwide only about five years after the first state did so in the U.S. ("Marihuana Medical Access Regulations"; "About Cannabis Policy"). After studying existing literature, the article concluded that the three key themes of cannabis stigma were: "(1) Lack of medical cannabis education within the healthcare community, (2) lack of consensus and coordination among harm-reduction services and (3) access to medical cannabis" (Fehr et al. 199). The concern that there is insufficient medical cannabis education within the healthcare community has been demonstrated through studies such as the earlier piece in the *Journal of Cannabis Research*, which found that healthcare professionals showed a great desire to increase medical education programs (Weisman and Rodríguez). Experiences with hesitant physicians reveal that there is far too much ambiguity in cannabis regulation and research. Stigma creates barriers to medical cannabis by perpetuating judgment, discrimination, and misinformation. Patients who are personally unfamiliar with medical cannabis have no knowledge of it besides stereotypes, and may refuse it as a pain management method despite its ability to ease their suffering.

Structural stigma exists in policies embedded in our legal systems, stemming from historical mistreatment of and propaganda against minority communities. The criminalization of marijuana has caused marginalized communities to be disproportionately targeted and face harsher consequences for its use, leading to the association between marijuana and criminals. The effects of the historical stigma of marijuana as a dangerous, violence-provoking, and risky drug still exist today and impact both patients and doctors alike, as well as society as a whole.

Social and public stigma may inhibit the use of marijuana as a medical treatment, as patients fear judgment from family, peers, and even their healthcare providers. This underuse can impede necessary research to improve the safety of medical cannabis, increasing physician hesitancy and biases in the healthcare industry that depict marijuana as an unpredictable drug. Implications extend far beyond individual experiences, and if unaddressed, could stop medical marijuana's integration into mainstream healthcare practices, thus delaying accessibility and innovation.

Ultimately, solidifying the ambiguity around medical marijuana in terms of its function and danger requires coordinated efforts and a commitment to education and research. Specialized certification courses for physicians should not only grow but also become the standard. Educational programs, like Stanford Medicine's "Cannabis Awareness & Prevention Toolkit," are moving beyond outdated stigma to deliver science-backed information (Stanford Medicine). The medical community must also improve the prevalence of well-designed clinical trials to provide accurate data about the types of pain medical marijuana can be used to treat, the differences in formula ratios, and the drug's advantages and harms. Additionally, it would only be beneficial to create support groups for medical marijuana users, as well as to maintain groups that already exist, many of which can be accessed through the U.S. Pain Foundation ("Medical Cannabis Program").

To address these issues, the healthcare industry must incorporate evidence-based educational programs about medical marijuana benefits and foster an environment where patients feel comfortable using the medicine they need. This education could take the form of integrated cannabinoid coursework in pharmacology units, furthering evidence-based clinical guidelines, and launching normalization campaigns. Overcoming stigma is the responsibility of society as a whole; however, until then, prioritizing strategies to reduce stigma for individuals directly impacted is essential. These efforts can help address barriers to access, alleviate feelings of guilt and shame, and progress marijuana's acceptance as a valid treatment option.

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Sophia Mendoza

Examining the Relationship Between Informed Consent and Public Health: How Vaccines Get Caught in the Crossfire

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the definition of informed consent and its application in public health with reference to the measles vaccine. The ruling of Mississippi's State Court in allowance of vaccine exemptions for children looking to attend public school is analyzed in the context of informed consent, public health, and prior ethical dilemmas in medicine. To help fully encapsulate the arguments involved and analyzed in this case, there are also references to Schloendorff v. Society of New York Hospital and Merck's production of alendronate sodium in the 1990s-early 2000s. This results in a wider conversation about informed consent in medical and clinical research. Finally, anti-intellectualism and health literacy is discussed in relation to how informed consent is contingent on access to resources, media, and public officials. Brought up in regards to health literacy is the history of Vaccine Information Statements and its use in the modern day. Based on the above research, it is concluded that health officials must take control of health education in order to dispel misinformation and increase understanding of informed consent, public health, and vaccines. Ultimately, an increase in and improvement of health literacy will help ensure that informed consent is employed in the interest of public health.

INTRODUCTION

As the polarization of American politics continues to hit every sphere of society, the speculation of medicine has become, and continues to be, one of the most dangerous. People are turning away from modern medicine and its applications, putting both themselves and their communities at risk. Even the concept of informed consent is seemingly up to debate. These situations have come together to create an environment where informed consent can lead to patients denying treatment, undermining clinical trials, and aggravating an already dire public health crisis.

The question of how informed consent interacts with and impacts public health, especially in the case of vaccines, must be explored.

Informed consent plays an important role at every level of the healthcare industry, from drug development to doctor-patient interactions; yet, the overarching goal of the industry is to protect the health of the public at large. Therefore, understanding the dynamic between informed consent and public health—and striving to create an environment where the two work together, rather than against each other—is crucial. For the purposes of this essay, the current public health issue being examined is the controversy of the measles vaccine and how people are using their right to informed consent to deny it for both themselves and their children. However, previous cases and events, such as *Schloendorff v. Society of New York Hospital*, Merck's production of alendronate sodium, and the COVID-19 pandemic will also be brought up. In this essay, I will analyze this case through both the interests of preserving informed consent and public health, as well as considering how anti-intellectualism and health literacy plays a part in people's decisions. By the end, it will be clear that in the hopes of preserving the integrity of both informed consent and public health, greater communication and access to resources need to come from within the healthcare industry to the general public.

INFORMED CONSENT AND PUBLIC HEALTH: THE MEASLES VACCINE

In the nature of their definitions, informed consent and public health seemingly have tension, with one valuing the individual and the other valuing the collective. In their article, "Understanding Against Medical Advice, Informed Consent, and Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act," Fernanda Cerpa and Stephen Colucciello attempt to define informed consent as the implied "understanding and discussion of the nature of a given illness; the workup and therapy; risks and benefits; alternative treatments; and the option of refusing care with associated risks and benefits" (146). Essentially, according to Cerpa and Colucciello, informed consent requires both the doctor and patient working together to ensure that patient autonomy and health are equally in focus. This goes beyond just simply *informing*, as patients are assumed to have no medical education, and must therefore *understand* what they are consenting to. Cerpa's and Colucciello's definition of informed consent is a common one, and one that for most situations would be adequate. However, Jon

Holmen's "Neurointerventions and Informed Consent" argues that applying this definition to every treatment plan would be an absolutist point of view. In his opinion, "the value(s) underpinning *the consent requirement* can, at least sometimes, be plausibly outweighed by a sufficient reduction in the well-being experienced by others" (3). In other words, an individual's decision to opt out of medical treatment, citing informed consent, may be voided when there is proof of sufficient negative impact on public health. These opposing views of informed consent come from a confusion of what exactly should be of highest priority within the professional health community: the patient or the public. Holmen does not specify exactly what would constitute a "sufficient reduction" to the well-being of others, but he does use the hypothetical example of an anti-aggression drug for a person incarcerated for a violent crime: the person and society would certainly benefit from the inmate taking the drug, but should the inmate be given it despite their refusal? This hypothetical ethical dilemma is playing out in the case of mass vaccinations, specifically Mississippi's decision to end vaccine mandates for the attendance of public school.

Public health and informed consent frequently interact, becoming mainstream stories. With children often at the forefront of disease risk and employment of informed consent through parental action. For example, in "'Medical Freedom' Activists Take Aim at New Target: Childhood Vaccine Mandates," Sheryl Gay Stolberg examines the 2023 Mississippi legislature ruling that permits parents to opt their children out of vaccinations previously required for public school attendance. The controversial decision has brought conversation on informed consent, vaccine development, and public health and safety into the limelight. One such disease, measles, is"a leading global cause of child morbidity and mortality before the introduction of measles vaccines in the 1960s…was responsible for more than 2 million deaths annually" (Moss 2,490). Measles has had a highly effective vaccine for decades, but for philosophical and religious reasons, parents are looking to opt out despite the extreme danger measles poses to children's health and safety. Thus, it remains "a highly contagious systemic viral disease that remains one of the most important causes of worldwide morbidity and mortality in children" (Griffin 86). Seemingly, the dangers, contagiousness, and fatality of the disease is not enough of a reason for parents to get the vaccine for their children. The effectiveness of the vaccine has put the reality of measles out of touch for the public, with a misunderstanding of the true scope of consequences. When individuals are no longer exposed to the disease, either by contracting it or seeing others suffer from it, this underestimation is able to make its way into mainstream ideas. The decision was even more telling since Mississippi was one of only a handful of states that still had a mandate of vaccination with no "religious or philosophical" exemptions for the attendance of public school (Stolberg), marking a huge shift in sentiment towards vaccines for the country. This ruling and subsequent conversation shows exactly how public health and the employment of informed consent seem to be at odds, and the true consequences that this debate can have.

Tackling measles requires the implementation of mass vaccination, which means that there is only a small margin available for opting out. One of the most notable points that Stolberg discusses is that according to public health experts, "the idea that there should be freedom of choice around vaccines defeats the very purpose of vaccination." Individuals who opt out of vaccination undermine the effectiveness of vaccines, which inherently rely on widespread immunization and mass immunity. Mass, or herd immunity, "is achieved when a sufficient proportion of the population is immune to infection" (Ashby and Best 174). A sufficient proportion is dependent on the community that is hoping to become immune, and for a community as large as the United States, the proportion needed is immense. This immunity can come from having already contracted the disease, or more commonly and safely, through vaccination. In fact, to prevent these diseases and help implement herd immunity, Stolberg references that vaccination rates need to be higher than 95%. Mississippi itself has seen proof of the ability of these vaccines, as according to Mississippi pediatrician Anita S. Henderson, "About 99 percent of our kindergartners have been fully vaccinated, and Mississippi has not seen a case of measles in over 30 years" (Stolberg). The measles vaccine is an example of medical care that bolsters the health of the public. If the vaccine is no longer mandatory, the state will experience what Holmen calls a "sufficient reduction in the well-being experienced by others." Those who will suffer the most will be immunocompromised individuals, who depend on herd immunity because of their physical inability to receive vaccination. If only 5% of the population can go unvaccinated while still maintaining herd immunity, there must be accounts for those who physically cannot receive the vaccine, and there is little room for any other exemptions. Vaccines must be chosen, which means informed consent is vital to the health and safety of everyone. Understanding the arguments against vaccines is one of the first steps that can be taken to better understand how fear, politics, and anti-intellectualism have created the current landscape of medical skepticism.

INFORMED CONSENT AND PATIENT AUTONOMY IN THE HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY

Patient autonomy is a cornerstone of informed consent, it relies on trust and transparency from within the medical industry. In defining informed consent, Cerpa and Colucciello reference a fundamental case that established its basis and patient autonomy in America: *Schloendorff v. Society of New York Hospital* (145). In this case, Mary Schloendorff was put under an operation she explicitly requested against, and "the fact that the wrong complained of here is trespass rather than negligence, distinguishes this case from most of the cases that have preceded it" (United States, New York Court of Appeals). This case was not as simple as a "medical error," but rather a complete disregard for Schloendorff's personal autonomy and right to make decisions regarding her body and health. To make matters worse, a complication in the surgery caused Schloendorff to develop gangrene, and subsequently forced several of her fingers to be amputated (United States, New York Court of Appeals). Not only was there the initial violation of informed consent, but a serious complication arose from it. As a result, in the Mississippi case, many advocates against the vaccine mandate cite the chance of health risks. MaryJo Perry, the founder of the group Mississippi Parents for Vaccine Rights, claimed that "her path into advocacy began after her youngest son, now 20, experienced seizures following routine vaccination" (Stolberg). According to Stolberg, Perry's son was able to make a full recovery and live a relatively healthy life, and the chance of a seizure after vaccination is, in fact, rare. However, it is still a medical complication that occurs and which parents must be briefed on. If children who are required to receive vaccinations experience persistent adverse reactions that parents were not informed about, parents' resulting fear could further aggravate vaccine skepticism and even lead to the lifting of vaccine mandates across the country. Avoiding violation of patient autonomy, like established for Schloendorff, must be diligently followed. Therefore, a proper discussion of the risks and benefits, as well as complications and the action plan that would be put in place if they occur, will empower parents in their decisions, and help them feel they are making the best choice for their child. The argument is not necessarily that these risks should be enough to challenge the importance of vaccines, but rather that it is better to be upfront and honest about the risks before they become bigger issues. There is always the risk that even with total informed consent, parents will still choose to not vaccinate their child, but the solution to this is not mandates—it is transparency.

Human participation is essential for drug and vaccine development, which means that trust in the healthcare industry and proper informed consent must be present for the future of public health. If the development of drugs and other medical advancements get called into question, the entire industry could be at risk. One such case of questionable ethics in drug development is described in "The Alendronate Conundrum: Balancing the Competing Influences for Truly Informed Consent About Drug Safety in an Era of Rapid Change" by Marcia M. Boumil and Paul R. Beninger. In this article, Boumil and Beninger examine the responsibilities that pharmaceutical companies and the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) have in ensuring the accuracy of information related to medication risks and side effects. For example, in the 1990s and 2000s, patients experienced serious femur fractures following the consumption of alendronate sodium, a key element of a drug produced by Merck & Co., Inc. (Boumil and Beninger 376). The drug was approved by the FDA in 1995, but "it appears that as early as 1990 [during the trial phase] Merck began receiving reports and case studies speculating about a connection between alendronate sodium and *Atypical* fractures of the femur" (Boumil and Beninger 377). This implies that Merck understood its drug had huge and unsafe flaws but continued to conduct clinical trials "that won FDA approval for treatment of osteoporosis in postmenopausal women" (Cummings et al.). It was not until 2008 that Merck submitted its reports on the fractures and requested a change in the label of the medication (Boumil and Beninger 377). This is a blatant disregard for informed consent, both for the trial subjects and public consumers. Situations like these, where informed consent is mishandled, can undermine trust in doctors, cast doubt on other medications and research, and potentially discourage human participation in clinical research. It gives reason to distrust doctors and medicine from within the healthcare industry itself. In a study conducted by Lee et al., "'I don't want to be Henrietta Lacks': diverse patient perspectives on donating biospecimens for precision medicine research," diverse ethnic and racial groups were surveyed to better understand individuals' perspectives on research participation, especially when dealing with biospecimens and electronic health records. The study concluded that concerns regarding clinical research “may extend beyond risks to individual privacy and potential for breaches, and include issues related to how individuals view their bodies in terms of individual and group identity and the perception among some that biospecimens require special respect and care” (Lee et al. 112). People have deep beliefs about their body and science, which are important to treat with care, especially when some of the negative sentiment regarding the medical industry comes from inappropriate medical acts in the past, like poor treatment of people of color. By creating a foundation of distrust along racial lines, less people of these communities will want to participate in clinical research. A lack of diversity in research and clinical studies will further aggravate systematic and health issues, putting entire racial groups and populations at risk. A strong foundation of informed consent in the development of drugs can help companies like Merck, which despite mishandling informed consent in the past, push the bounds of medicine. Taking informed consent lightly creates the risk of hindering medical advancement and contributing to decades of systematic issues and bias.

INFORMED CONSENT AND ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

A key element of informed consent is the quality of information received and understood, something that with anti-intellectualism and misinformation running rampant in the digital and political spheres, becomes more and more difficult. Skepticism of the medical industry has existed long before and will continue long after the COVID-19 pandemic, but the pandemic put public health in the mainstream in a way it was not before. Coupled with the 2020 election, the origin and handling of COVID-19 developed into a political talking point, fostering anti-intellectualism and division in the U.S. and around the world (Li and Ditlhokwa 147-148).. To understand the dynamic at play, anti-intellectualism must be understood as “an expression of negative *affect* toward intellect, intellectuals, and/or the intellectual establishment (Hofstadter 1963; Lecklider 2013; Rigney 1991; Sowell 2009)” (Barker et al. 40). The focus on emotion—feelings of negativity, skepticism, and hostility towards “experts” and intellectuals (Barker et al. 41)—means that anti-intellectual decisions are made without logistically sound evidence. To better examine the relationship between geopolitics, anti-intellectualism, and public health, Li Jidong and Gopolang Ditlhokwa conducted a study that organized COVID-19 related government Twitter posts and subsequent comments into themes and sentiments. One of their findings recorded that "Within the broader spectrum of intellect and anti-intellectualism, there is evidence of a noticeable shift, particularly in the involvement of political or presidential advisers who, despite ostensibly embracing intellectualism, exhibit anti-intellectualistic actions that prioritize political ideologies over expertise" (133). In the propagation of anti-intellectualism, it has become apparent that individuals may claim to be educated and informed but ultimately propagate anti-intellectual views in accordance with their own political or ideological stance. By projecting ideas and advice from a perceived place of authority, government personnel and social media influencers manipulate viewers into seeing them as credible, while simultaneously undermining the authority of actual professionals on these issues. In terms of public health, this is consistent with the skepticism and hostility with which people approached developments such as the COVID-19 vaccine and subsequent vaccine mandates, as "protest against containment policies became rapidly politicized" (Pfaff et al. 27). It is blatant misinformation and lack of access to proper education and resources that have caused the rejection of vaccines under the guise of "informed consent", which means that only the opposite can truly change public sentiment.

Implicitly, informed consent that can be employed is contingent on socioeconomic barriers, such as accessibility to resources, financial situations, and educational backgrounds. One of the biggest informed consent issues within the COVID-19 pandemic was the societal pressure to get the vaccine and people arguing that their choice to get the vaccine should not impact the public areas they are allowed in. The pressure for the vaccine and subsequent mandates came from a place of concern for public health, but an interesting argument does come from this debate. What about those who simply cannot afford vaccines, and how intrusive is the idea of vaccine mandates and identification in the first place? While the COVID-19 vaccine was provided at no cost and supported by government effort to ensure widespread access to vaccination facilities, this is not the case for all vaccines; thus, it is crucial to consider individuals who cannot afford vaccines. Li and Ditlhokwa touch on this concept briefly: "According to Lee (2021), the requirement to show vaccination certificates to get access to certain places could suggest a wider polarization between economically advanced countries and the less developed ones, citing its repercussions on international travel and diplomacy" (Li and Ditlhokwa 11). Essentially, the need to certify vaccines (specifically COVID-19 vaccines) could result in socioeconomic discrimination on a global scale. It brings up a greater point about access to health insurance and quality care, where members of low-income communities may also have a difficult time affording vaccinations. Like individuals from less developed countries, this financial burden would impede some Americans from traveling to places that require vaccinations. While there does exist a very real hostility towards vaccinations and other medical interventions, it is also important to recognize that for some Americans, the "selfish choice" to not get a vaccine may be in the interest of their own financial security. This point becomes especially prevalent when "results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) shows that 12% of US adults were proficient in health literacy level (HLL), 53% and 22% reported having had intermediate and basic health literacy, and 14% had below basic health literacy" (Rasu et al. 748). Many Americans cannot understand basic health information, let alone make educated medical decisions that would go against their own financial standing for "the greater good". People cannot be expected to make right decisions about subjects they do not have the ability to understand. Moreover, members of impoverished communities often lack a trusted medical professional to consult. For example, in a study titled "Access to Care, Health Status, and Health Disparities in the United States and Canada: Results of a Cross-National Population-Based Survey," Karen E. Lasser et al. found that "US respondents with incomes in the lowest quintile were less likely to have a regular medical doctor or to have contacted any medical doctor in the past 12 months than were US respondents in the highest quintile" (1,303). Without a medical professional to properly explain the risks, and in the absence of adequate health literacy, the extent to which these individuals can truly employ informed consent is called into question. This creates a vicious cycle when vaccine mandates are created to deny children access to public school—those that are most likely to reject the vaccine are also most in need of proper health education. Informed consent is built on the foundation of one thing: accurate information. In the environment of anti-intellectualism created by American politics, and a lack of access to trusted resources, the semantics are null. It is from a place of privilege that people can criticize those who do not understand the importance of public health, because likely those people are not informed enough to understand.

Public health is undoubtedly one of the most pressing issues facing our society today, but an interest in public health should not override the fundamental rights to informed consent and due process. In fact, a genuine commitment to public health places informed consent at the forefront, prioritizing clear, accessible communication between healthcare providers and patients. It is evident that, in the context of vaccines, informed consent is neither prioritized nor legally enforced. Instead, Vaccine Information Statements (VISs), provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), serve as the primary means of communication about vaccines. While VISs are meant to inform recipients about the risks and benefits associated with vaccination, they do not act as informed consent documents, especially since many doctors and practitioners do not even know that VISs are mandated. According to a 2014 survey, just one-third of pediatricians were aware of the requirement. Furthermore, in 2016, only 59.7% of parents reported receiving a VIS before their child's vaccination, while 14.5% received one after the vaccine had already been administered (Jagadish et al.). There are also numerous systematic problems with VISs themselves: "For one, VIS readability, at a 10th-grade level, is markedly higher than the average American's 8th-grade level" (Jagadish et al 14). VISs are complex to understand because of the detail in which they discuss vaccines and their possible side effects/processes. In fact, VISs were not designed to be readable and provide informed consent in the first place, but rather to protect manufacturers from liability (Jagadish et al.). When doctors simply refer to or direct patients to VISs, they put medical information and health literacy behind an educational "pay wall," which further contributes to the way informed consent is limited by the socioeconomic status and educational background of the patient. In order to address this, VISs should strive to balance "readability with essential but complex information… [and intentionally clear] word choice and formatting. With easy-to-understand VISs, vaccininees would act with 'understanding' and 'intentionality' instead of consenting after absent-mindedly skimming turgid details" (Jagadish et al. 14). In addition, "Health Literacy Impact on National Healthcare Utilization and Expenditure" by Rasu et al. suggests that, "healthcare entities serving [communities lacking health literacy] could educate their providers and staff in accessing health literacy and providing information to patients at the appropriate literacy level which may, in turn, help achieve better health outcomes" (753). Doctors and immunizers having a real connection with their patients allows them to better understand the level of health literacy they are working with and break educational cycles, and should be prioritized. VISs should be merely a supplement, as they were never meant to replace the care and understanding that comes with a personal connection. A more informed patient means better health outcomes for everyone, which means it is in the best interest of the healthcare industry, public health, and the public to place an emphasis on informed consent.

USING INFORMED CONSENT TO IMPROVE PUBLIC HEALTH

Informed consent is the beginning and end of the relationship it has with public health: they are meant to go hand in hand, with informed consent and public health both needed to protect and serve the people in a way free of political or philosophical bias. The healthcare industry needs to be better at making sure it is at the forefront of public health issues, and not relinquishing that role to politics and political figures. In order to do this, healthcare providers must "[embrace] dialogic communication… [and] negotiation as a pivotal element in building relationships between organizations and the public, establishing a dynamic where both parties engage as equal partners (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018)" (Li and Ditlhokwa 136). Communication between the public, government, and any other party is important in building a sense of trust, especially when all parties want to be empowered by their own decisions. This also includes the medical industry itself; from manufacturers to doctors, and, especially, clinical research, which is essential in making scientific discoveries and advancing healthcare. In order to establish trust within clinical research, "rights, safety and well-being of trial subjects should always prevail over the interest of science and society, so that a layman never feels being deceived in the name of a social cause" (Nijhawan et al. 139). With clinical trials, people are sacrificing themselves in the name of science; by consenting to procedures and drugs with unclear outcomes and adverse reactions in order to advance scientific research. There is an understanding that their participation is crucial, and to be disrespectful and dismissive of their role in public health puts all research at risk. Clinical research makes theory a reality, and reality is what saves lives; therefore, "The responsibility of conducting trials ethically and genuinely lies in the hands of those involved in it" (Nijhawan et al. 139). Fixing the relationship between informed consent and public health comes from within the health industry itself. Trust must be established for people to feel like vaccines and drugs are developed and prescribed to them with their best interest at heart. It is imperative that political ideology be taken out of medicine and that authority is returned to true ethical health professionals in their spheres. Accurate information and strong communication will create a more educated and informed public.

CONCLUSION

Informed consent is one of the most important tools that members of the public must use to protect themselves and retain their autonomy regarding decisions about their health and bodies. The integrity of informed consent must be upheld, but without an emphasis on public health, there will be no people to uphold it. Therefore, both informed consent and public health must be addressed together. This starts with doctor-to-patient communication, where doctors explain the importance of vaccines for both the patient's own safety and the safety of their community. From there, health literacy and education written by experts must be expanded on a national scale, combating the wave of anti-intellectualism sweeping through the media and political sphere. Furthermore, there must be a stronger push from the healthcare industry to have health professionals leading governmental decisions, affirming that expert information is not drowned out by polarizing political views. There also needs to be accountability, with legislation coming from within the government if it must, in order to ensure that informed consent and transparency are present in every level of the healthcare industry. Improving access to resources and destroying systematic barriers will allow those who want to seek medical advice to do so without encountering misinformation and fear-based conspiracies. Mandates may solve the issue in the short term, but the reality is that those with the resources to do so can avoid them, and forcing people to do something they do not want to do can have huge foundational backlash, as seen in Mississippi. Mandates, especially those that target children and education, run the risk of aggravating systematic issues and contributing to cycles of miseducation and misinformation. Clearly, raw science is not enough—there must be the element of proper human connection and understanding as well. If public health measures are truly designed in the country's best interest, then proper education and access to resources are imperative to making sure that informed consent is yielded as purely as possible.

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Shubhi Savalia

An Old-Fashioned Take on the Gut-Brain Axis: Curing Disease Through Ayurveda

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the gut-brain axis connects digestive health with mental and neurological disorders, and how this connection is aligned with the teachings of Ayurveda (traditional Indian medicine). Modern research shows that gut imbalances can impact mood, inflammation, and the development of neurological disorders. Ayurveda expresses similar connections through concepts such as Agni (digestive strength), Ama (buildup of toxins), and more. These concepts – which date back thousands of years – only further emphasize that mental and neurological health is rooted in the digestive system. By comparing scientific studies of today with Ayurvedic theory, this paper shows how closely the two fields of medicine are. Traditional Ayurvedic practices such as yoga, meditation, and herbal medicine are now being mainstreamed for their benefits towards gut health, stress management, and brain function. When combined with allopathic treatments such as probiotics and specified diets, they may be able to provide a well-rounded and more personalized plan of care. The paper also discusses the reasons behind Ayurveda's disappearance and reemergence, highlighting the shifts in healthcare towards individualized and preventative treatment. All in all, the research suggests that combining modern science with Ayurvedic traditions can help create a holistic understanding of the gut-brain axis, thus leading to better success rates for patients with neurological conditions.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health conditions, including depression and neurodegenerative diseases like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, have consistently been an area of medical research and treatment. Interest in the gut-brain axis, a connection between the brain and digestive system essential to psychological and mental well-being, has grown recently. The concept, though not well-defined, had existed since the 19th century. U.S. Army Surgeon William Beaumont, also known as the "Father of Gastric Physiology," conducted experiments showing the connection between the digestive system and the brain. This relationship has been a recurring concept in medicine, with the most recent wave at the start of Y2K. Health fads and diets of the early 2000s shed light upon it, gaining the attention of both the media and the scientific community. Modern biological results frequently align with the ancient medical system of Ayurveda, which provides insightful information about the relationship between gut health and mental wellness. Ayurveda is a traditional system of medicine based in India, which focuses on balancing the energies of the body through yoga, herbal medicine, and diet. Ancient texts on Ayurveda, such as the Charaka Samhita and the Vedas, address this connection. While modern medicine points to the vagus nerve as the connection point, Ayurvedic texts call upon the "doshas," or biological energies. Through both Ayurvedic and modern biological viewpoints, this paper investigates the relationship between the gut-brain axis and neurological disorders as well as mental health. In treating mood disorders and neurodegenerative diseases, it aims to bring attention to the possible advantages of integrating these two methods. To provide a more extensive and individualized approach to healthcare, I will address how Ayurvedic practices, such as food and lifestyle modifications, might enhance Western therapies. I plan to explore how integrating Ayurvedic principles with modern biomedical science enhances the understanding and treatment of mood disorders and neurodegenerative diseases by focusing on the gut-brain axis. A more complete, personalized treatment plan that takes into account both the physical body and the psyche may be provided by this combined perspective.

AYURVEDA'S BACKGROUND: HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL

Often misunderstood as a system of herbal medicines, Ayurveda, which directly translates to "the science of life," is rooted in a much larger cultural and philosophical context. Ayurveda was created through centuries of studying the human body, nature, and their relationship. Its focus was never only on curing disease but also on living in harmony with one's own spirit, community, and surroundings. Verma et al. support this concept by stating that prevention, harmonized lifestyle, and responsibility towards oneself were all considered to be crucial components of health in classical Ayurveda (2). Ayurveda's value resides not only in its treatments but also in its understanding of the human condition, which should be acknowledged at the beginning of any attempt to incorporate it into contemporary medicine.

A core concept in Ayurvedic medicine is prakriti, or individual constitution, which dictates a person's reaction to illness, stress, food, and seasons. Despite using older concepts, this theory is consistent with many of the theories found in current studies on microbiome and mental health. The idea that experience shapes biology is supported by a recent assessment of the gut-brain axis by Margolis et al., who argue that lifestyle decisions and early experiences can have a substantial impact on gut health and emotional development (4). This perspective, which views health as something highly individual and impacted by both internal characteristics and environmental circumstances, has long been accepted by Ayurveda. Prakriti represented a broader understanding of wellbeing than just a medical classification; it was connected to interpersonal relationships, seasonal behavior, and ethics.

The marginalization of Ayurveda in medical history dates back to colonization, when indigenous systems were seen as unscientific and Western medicine was institutionalized. According to D.V., throughout the colonial era, British authorities deliberately excluded Ayurveda from government support and public education, which stunted the spread and development of the system (547). Verma et al. observe that Ayurveda is once again gaining attention as researchers and medical professionals look for more integrated methods of treatment (2). Social media has brought attention to this medium of medicine by mainstreaming interventions such as ashwagandha, yoga, and meditation. In this regard, the revival of interest in the gut-brain axis not only supports traditional ideas but also encourages a deeper discussion between contemporary research and conventional wisdom.

GUT-BRAIN AXIS AND THE BRAIN

The complex communication between the brain and the gastrointestinal system, involving hormones, microbial activity, and signals transmitted by the vagus nerve, is known as the gut-brain axis. Imbalances in the gut microbiota have been linked to several mental health issues and can impact emotional, mental, and neurological health. In Ayurveda, doshas are biological energies that, when imbalanced, result in illness and poor health. Remedies work to balance these energies and bring the body back to a state of homeostasis, thus curing the body of disease. Eliot

Steer, referring to Ayurvedic texts, states that imbalances in digestion and the accumulation of toxins (ama) in the body is the connection between digestive health and neurologically degenerative toxins (60). Poor digestion is linked to chronic inflammation and disease, and the Ayurvedic concepts of Agni (digestive fire) and Ama (toxins) provide a framework similar to current concerns of gut dysregulation and microbial imbalances (Wallace 4).

Agni is directly related to the acidity level in the stomach, which is the root cause of many digestive issues such as GERD, IBS, and ulcerative colitis. Ama, simply put, is a product caused by the "abnormal or impaired process of digestion and metabolism that leads to build up of toxic by-products, which cannot be neutralized or eliminated by the body" (Manohar 67). Both Agni and Ama must be balanced in order for the body to be in perfect health, and Ayurveda has a multitude of interventions to restore this homeostasis. Dietitians and gastrointestinologists of the 21st century promote prebiotics and probiotics in an effort to maintain the microbiome of the stomach, or the "good bacteria" that help keep your gut healthy. A lack of these bacteria can cause a series of problems, such as IBS, Crohn's, and leaky gut, a toxin-releasing disease that could directly impact neurological function.

YOGA, NEUROPLASTICITY, AND A MIND-BODY CONNECTION

Steer's research shows that both Ayurveda and contemporary science recognize the critical role gut health plays in mood disorders such as depression. In Ayurveda, depression is frequently the result of a dosha imbalance, especially between Vata (which is linked to anxiety) and Kapha (which is linked to sadness) (Steer 61). According to recent studies, gastrointestinal dysregulation can change brain chemistry and cause feelings of sadness. Gut microbiome disruptions can lead to diseases like leaky gut syndrome, in which toxins and bacteria enter the bloodstream and produce inflammation that can impair brain function. According to Ayurveda and modern research, enhancing gut health through changes in diet and lifestyle may be an essential approach in the treatment of mood disorders (Wallace 2). Oftentimes, interventions such as cutting out inflammatory foods or practicing a consistent sleep routine can benefit the gut microbiome, which in turn can impact emotional health.

The relationship between modern understandings of the gut-brain axis and Ayurvedic concepts such as Pittadhara Kala and Majjadhara Kala has been studied by Tiwari and Pandey. These concepts demonstrate the significance of changing one's diet and stress levels in order to balance the nervous system and digestion. With their restorative qualities, Ayurvedic herbs like curcumin can help reduce inflammation and restore gut homeostasis, in turn helping treat neurodegenerative illnesses (Tiwari and Pandey). Modern medicines combined with Ayurvedic herbal remedies may result in more individualized and successful treatments for neurodegenerative and mental health disorders. Stress-induced conditions such as Alzheimer's could be combated with natural treatments such as yoga, Anulom Vilom (a breathing exercise), and the regular intake of ashwagandha, a cortisol-reducing root that can be taken in the form of powders or capsules. In Ayurveda, conditions are managed through daily habits such as diet, regular intake of herbal supplements, and yoga (both physical exercise and breathwork). Someone experiencing anxiety could implement minor changes in their daily rituals to bring their body and mind back to their regular state. According to Setia et al., the practice of yoga may help in the management of functional dyspepsia, a more intense and chronic version of regular indigestion (6). Yoga's ability to calm the nervous system by its positive effects on stress reduction provides credibility to Ayurvedic theories on how to balance the neurological system to enhance digestion. It has also been demonstrated that mindfulness practices like yoga and meditation can reduce depression by promoting neuroplasticity – the brain's ability to change and strengthen neural connections linked to particular emotions (Steer 64). Combining traditional methods with recent medical treatments for gut health, like probiotics and dietary changes, may provide a more holistic approach to treating mood disorders and illnesses linked to the gut. Many allopathic physicians – those who practice conventional Western medicine – resort to medications that "fix" symptoms on a surface level, but a more osteopathic – or whole body – approach, using techniques such as yoga and breathing exercises, could be more beneficial in the long run. A frequently neglected symptom of GI issues is brain fog, resulting in patients experiencing slowness and ADHD-like tendencies. The changes in neurological function can, in turn, cause more drastic conditions such as depression. Practicing yoga can help bring back the mindful state, allowing for a reduction in stress hormones, which can help regulate the digestive process.

INTEGRATION WITH MODERN MEDICINE

Ayurvedic integration with contemporary treatment is gaining popularity, although some researchers are still skeptical. Concerns are raised by Zhang et al. on the lack of thorough clinical trials for several Ayurvedic treatments, especially when it comes to treating complicated illnesses like depression. They contend that the gut-brain axis may only be partially or not at all affected by some alternative therapies, like electroacupuncture (Zhang et al.). It is important to acknowledge that despite these reservations, Ayurveda's holistic approach is becoming more and more popular as scientific studies confirm its usefulness in today's medical procedures, particularly in fields like psychiatry and gastroenterology.

The growing significance of personalized medicine, which bases therapies on each patient's unique bacteria and bodily tendencies (prakriti in Ayurveda), is noted by Wallace and Shukla et al. Wallace focuses on differences in gut bacteria that could impact inflammation and emotional regulation. On the contrary, Shukla et al. emphasize that herbal interventions only work when the gut microbiome is balanced. Their findings align with Ayurveda's concept of prakriti, which states that personalized care is necessary for efficient treatment (Jaiswal and Williams). By concentrating on each patient's individual gut health and aligning the doshas, this individualized approach could improve therapy results. To provide customized treatments for mental health and neurodegenerative illnesses that take into account the body's flora and emotional state, the future of healthcare may combine precision medicine and Ayurvedic concepts.

A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Bi et al. build on research that depression may result from gut imbalances by showing that disruptions in the microbiome can impact neurotransmitter activity and inflammatory pathways. Additionally, they demonstrate how traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) can assist in reestablishing that equilibrium and may at times exceed conventional antidepressants, particularly due to its lack of negative side effects (Bi et al.). According to Ranade et al., gut bacteria have an impact on the effectiveness of Ayurvedic compounds. The microbiome is responsible for how efficiently these herbal medicines are metabolized in the body. This reverses the usual direction of influence suggested by other research, emphasizing that a healthy gut is in fact necessary for Ayurvedic interventions to work as expected. Ranade et al. believe that a healthy gut is primary for Ayurvedic interventions to be effective. For example, turmeric being used to treat inflammation will not show results in a person with poor gut health as slow digestion will result in poor metabolism of the herb. A common theme emerges from both sources: treating mental health requires addressing gut health. These concepts suggest that there may not be as drastic a difference between traditional and modern medicine. As stated, TCM herbs reduce inflammation and promote good bacteria in the stomach, which has an impact on brain chemistry. Qin et al. specifically state that these herbs "promote neurogenesis" and "repair nerve damage" (799). In layman's terms, it allows the brain to make newer and quicker connections. Ayurvedic treatments rely on the "metabolic programmers" in our microbiota to function properly. These are similar to receptors in the brain, except they are host-like cells or bacteria that work with Ayurvedic interventions. Both research teams argue that Ayurveda is far from being outdated; it instead provides useful tools that enhance the current scientific understanding of the body. Their views are united by their emphasis on customized care among patients. According to Ranade et al., the basis of Ayurvedic therapy is in the individual's prakriti, or gut-body profile, which determines how the body processes Ayurvedic compounds. This aligns with Shukla et al., who show that herbal bioactives interact differently based on a patient's microbial balance. Similarly, Bi et al. state that treatments targeting a person's specific gut composition can result in higher effectiveness. When combined and supported by Wallace's emphasis on microbiome differences, these studies come to the same conclusion: interventions are most effective when they are personalized to the unique biological makeup of each person. The shared focus on variations in body composition strengthens the argument for combining traditional Ayurvedic principles with modern medical research to create more personalized care plans for mental health conditions.

CONCLUSION

To deepen the understanding of mood disorders and neurodegenerative diseases, this paper has shown how the gut-brain axis connects Ayurvedic concepts with contemporary scientific research. By examining historical records, modern research, and cross-cultural perspectives, the research supports the argument that integrating traditional forms of medicine like Ayurveda with modern medical interventions can create a more holistic and personalized treatment plan.

This paper demonstrated how Ayurvedic ideas like prakriti, dosha balance, and agni align with current concerns regarding inflammation, gut microbiome function, and neurochemical pathways. The therapeutic effects of yoga, herbal medicines, and dietary changes further show how these practices can complement allopathic interventions aimed at restoring gut and neural health. Concepts once dismissed as "traditional" or "unscientific" are now gaining relevance within integrative medicine.

By viewing Ayurveda as a historically grounded and culturally rich philosophy of health, not just as an alternative system, the paper challenges the assumption that legitimate knowledge must be derived from a lab. As Jaiswal and Williams and Verma et al. note, Ayurveda's marginalization stemmed from colonial biases, even as contemporary medicine now embraces many of the same holistic, personalized practices that Ayurveda has emphasized. As global healthcare systems face rising rates of chronic illness, neurological conditions, and mental disorders, combining traditional perspectives with modern scientific understanding offers a promising future. Recognizing the strengths of both systems enables a more nuanced, patient-centered approach to healing. Ultimately, acknowledging both tradition and present-day research may be essential to advancing the future of healthcare.

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THE PARADOXES OF FEMCEL PERSONA: IDENTITY AND SOLIDARITY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the problem of how the "femcel" label shapes women's self-image, relationships with other women, and understanding of gender in ways that challenge and reinforce patriarchal norms. The purpose of this study is to examine how the femcel identity develops in digital spaces and how their performances of rejection and solidarity complicate feminist ideals. Using textual analysis, the paper draws on scholarly research, social media posts, and feminist theory, particularly Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. The results reveal several patterns: femcels simultaneously resist and internalize beauty standards; online platforms take personal suffering and transform it into a performative aesthetic; and community members direct their resentment toward feminist movements and patriarchal expectations. The study also finds that the performance of pain within the femcel community serves as a form of identity validation on online platforms. Overall, the findings suggest that femcel culture embodies a paradox of empowerment and self-deprication. These contradictions highlight the need for more research on these digital spaces and how they influence women's mental health and identity formation.

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of social media usage, both marginalized and misunderstood women have come together to share their lack of romantic experiences to critique the complexity of living in today's environment. Femcels are defined as women who use internet forums to express their feelings of rejection and loneliness after feeling left out of love or sexual success (Johanssen & Kay, 2024). They are the female counterpart of their famous, and more commonly seen in media, equivalent: incels. In fact, the term is broken down to be the phrase "female incel." These groups cannot only create a sense of solidarity by expressing common anger, but also by building resentment, both toward other women who are perceived as more successful in the "marketplace" of sexuality and relationships and toward the social structures that exclude them. This poses an important query: In what ways does the term "femcel" influence women's perceptions of themselves and other women in ways that both contradict and uphold feminist principles? This paper will draw on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which views gender as a set of socially constructed behaviors rather than an innate quality. Butler's theory makes it easier to examine how femcels navigate their identities and sexual frustrations while simultaneously rejecting and reaffirming gender norms. This theory is essential to comprehend how social media helps women develop a collective identity while simultaneously encouraging the spread of internalized misogyny and resentment. By applying Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this paper will explore how the term "femcel" complicates feminist objectives by both challenging and reinforcing normative gender stereotypes, while also simultaneously fostering solidarity and resentment. To understand the complexities of the femcel persona, it is crucial first to define the femcel label and then investigate how it intersects with social media platforms as spaces for women to explore their experiences of sexual rejection and isolation. Furthermore, this paper will analyze how femcel networks build a sense of belonging with each other while also inciting animosity toward other women who are seen as more sexually attractive or successful.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

Femcels-women who turn to online communities to express feelings of romantic rejection and sexual abstinence are intricately linked to larger social forces that mold women's identities, especially when viewed through the prism of conventional beauty standards. According to Karen Cuthbert, "celibacy and sexual abstinence are a complex space with regards to gender," as some women find it to be liberating, while others view it as fundamentally incompatible with womanhood (Cuthbert 3). This illustrates how society imposes conflicting expectations on women's sexual lives, where abstention (refraining from sexual activity) can be interpreted as a societal failure or a woman's personal decision of bodily autonomy. Many femcels have feelings of inadequacy as a result of society's emphasis on beauty and attractiveness because they believe that their appearance keeps them from fulfilling the expectations of being beautiful and sexually desirable and, ultimately, from obtaining romantic or sexual fulfillment. This frustration is further explained by Debora Maria Pizzimenti and Assunta Penna, who note that "some Femcels feel a sort of resentment towards the kind of feminism that challenged traditional standards of beauty, especially requiring that even those who were not up to those standards must feel beautiful anyway, regardless of their own experiences" (Pizzimenti and Penna 774). Because of this mismatch, feelings of exclusion and alienation between a femcel's personal reality and feminist ideals grow even more apparent. These dynamics are rooted in personal feelings of inadequacy, conflicting feminist messages, and society's compulsion to conform to rigid beauty standards. This further illuminates how the pursuit of sexual agency and autonomy is shaped by larger systems of gender oppression. The duality of the femcel experience reflects the complex and often contradictory ways that gender and beauty norms are performed and internalized in the digital age.

Femcels are forced to somehow adhere to both the principles of sexual abstinence and attraction due to the expectation of sexual purity and desirability. The commodification of women's sexuality, which simultaneously oppresses and provides a means of resistance, is reflected in this tension, which ultimately makes it more difficult for women to recognize their own sexual autonomy and value. Karen Cuthbert's article about sexual abstinence states, "Women's sexual 'purity' has functioned as a commodity in the traffic and exchange of women" (Cuthbert 2). A woman's worth has historically been tied to her sexual value and has been leveraged in social and economic transactions. The restrictions on a woman's sexual autonomy have implications in that they perpetuate gendered hierarchies and affect how women are viewed in public. According to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, "gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes… gender proves to be performative— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler 68). In the case of femcels, the expectation to display sexual purity or desirability is a performance required by societal norms. Women face a dual bind: they are pressured to maintain sexual purity, while also being criticized if they do not conform to societal expectations centered around attraction and sexual activity. Cuthbert also writes, "for the vast majority of women, sexual abstinence has been part of their subordination as women. However, sexual abstinence and celibacy also have a history of being liberatory for women" (Cuthbert 2). The decision to become abstinent is not only a personal choice, but rather one that is a reaction to societal expectations in the patriarchy. For femcels specifically, they are confronting the notion that blames a woman's attractiveness for their lack of sexual experience or engagement. As a result of these judgements, there is a pressure to somehow maintain purity and sexual involvement at the same time, with women being insulted whether they remain abstinent or are "too" sexually active. This pressure leads to internalized shame, and celibacy is a way for femcels to escape those feelings of humiliation. The commodification of women's sexuality helps explain why femcels use sexual abstinence as a means of rejection of patriarchal standards, while also feeling like failure in the context of a society that values a woman's sexual desirability.

AESTHETICIZED ALIENATION AND A VISUAL EVOLUTION

The modern femcel aesthetic feels like a forgotten indie film. Washed-out colors, messy hair, and dimly lit rooms with scattered clothing all draw a line between personal pain and artistic rebellion. Where there was once a shared sense of community through pain, now there is an aestheticized distance, with sadness becoming a curated image tinged with an unspoken longing for more. Charlotte Colombo wrote in a piece about the new age of femcels, "The vast majority of posts focus on the femcel 'aesthetic', such as a messy, unappealing room, a lack of hygiene, being a fan of 'female manipulator' artists like Mitski, and reading Sylvia Plath" (Colombo). While femcels once used their twisted form of awareness to focus on sharing their struggles as a way to comfort one another, there has been a shift that prioritizes visuals and the femcel "aesthetic." This evolution reflects a broader cultural trend where emotional experiences are filtered through the lens of imagery and style, usually for the purpose of creating a performative sense of belonging. A core element of femcel ideals is the struggle with their looks and being rejected as a result of it. But this new wave of femcels heavily relies on the usage of aesthetics. Posts on TikTok under the femcel hashtag consist of pictures of conventionally attractive women with text over them that relate to the community. The term femcel has also lost its meaning due to these types of posts and has become synonymous with feeling dissatisfaction from men, even going a step further and becoming interchangeable with the notion that the female sex is far superior to that of the males. Increasingly, femcel culture has created a frequently idealized image of rejection and emotional suffering rather than just focusing on the emotions of alienation and dissatisfaction. As Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, "gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real" (Butler 29). The idea of gender as a performative act connects to the femcel aesthetic, where emotional suffering and rejection are instead stylized performances that align with societal expectations of what it means to be a "femcel."

Many femcels view Jodi Arias, a convicted murderer, as a symbol of empowerment, seeing her not just as the woman who committed violence but as someone who defied traditional expectations of femininity and submission. They frame her actions, specifically the murder of her boyfriend, as a radical act of rebellion against male dominance and patriarchal control. Aria has become an "aesthetic" figure with videos of her being edited to trendy music and girls within the comment sections defending her against anyone who mentions her crimes. However, this idolization is deeply problematic, and it reframes an act of violence as feminist resistance, blurring the line between empowerment and pain. For some women, the idolization of Jodia Arias is another example of rebellion because she goes against how women are expected to act, submissive, and she embodies the darker aspects of femcels. But it also exposes a darker side of femcel culture. There are multiple websites and social media forums dedicated to defending Arias and bashing the women who do not believe she is innocent. One in particular states, "What the media and the countless Jodi Arias 'Hater-Hags'—as I like to refer to the many millions of postmenopausal women jealous of Jodi's attractiveness and superior acumen—have neglected to recognize is the fact that Jodi Arias is not only not guilty of premeditated murder, she is also innocent of all charges against her" (Banned Cast). The term hag is a derogatory label used to describe women as unattractive and aging, with added connotations of being bitter. This term, often weaponized in both incel and femcel subcultures, highlights a shared obsession with appearance but very different meanings: for femcels, it reveals how beauty standards and societal norms shape their worldview. As Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware, and Ezra Shapiro write in their article about the threat of incel violence, "The incel worldview is grounded in two ineluctably intertwined beliefs: their understanding of society as a hierarchy… and their identification of women as the primary culprit for this hierarchy" (Hoffman 568). This quote emphasizes how incels build their identity through resentment and blame. In contrast, femcels embrace their imperfections as forms of rebellion and turn their rejection into a story of self-empowerment. This shift represents a more nuanced response to societal standards of beauty, where femcels often embrace their rejection as a badge of honor rather than allowing it to drive them into anger or frustration as incels do. Likewise, Amber Heard has gained controversy in femcel circles, especially after her defamation trial against Johnny Depp. Some femcels viewed her as a woman defying the patriarchal standards of subservient femininity in toxic, power-unbalanced relationships, while many mainstream media sites concentrated on her alleged abuse and manipulation. Similar to Arias, some femcels hold Heard in high regard as a role model who disobeyed male authority and revealed the harmful dynamics that frequently ensnare women in relationships. As seen in the subreddit "r/askfeminists," the user Valinisarraf commented, "The case itself aside, it was outright disgusting to see the misogyny and anti-women hate directed at her and women in general" (u/Valinisarraf 2022). Many feminists saw Heard as an example of how women's voices are frequently stifled or dismissed when they come out against abuse because of the public demonization of the woman during the trial, which included charges of lying and manipulative behavior. Similar to Jodi Arias's case, the trial also turned into an artistic phenomenon on social media, where some feminists, despite the complexity of Heard's case, created narratives portraying her as a victim and a symbol of defiance against male-dominated relationships.

SELF-MASOCHISM AND THE PERFORMANCE OF PAIN

In femcel forums, members often struggle with the intersection of self-perception and mental health, specifically in relation to body image or disordered eating. Maria Brix writes an article that examines the experiences of femcels by referencing their posts on social media, specifically the ones that talk about their struggles with mental health, which often leads to disordered eating. She states, "In online groups like these, there is a possibility for the members to let the eating disorders become the very essence of the self, which can easily transmit or has been transmitted by the community" (Brix 53). This is a form of self-masochism, where personal suffering becomes a defining feature of one's identity. In the femcel community, there is an intertwining of self-perception and dynamics within the community, which leads to a reinforcement of negative body images or mental health in general. Especially within younger femcel communities, there is a heavy belief that you cannot identify as a femcel if you are not hurting yourself because of societal expectations, highlighting how pain is a sign of authenticity. Judith Butler's concept of gender as "performative" helps shed light on this dynamic. According to Butler, this performativity is not just an expression of one's gender identity but rather a socially constructed process that continuously reaffirms itself. In the femcel community, the performance of suffering becomes a repeated act that members internalize, forming their identities around the very standards they feel excluded by. The emphasis on suffering is a reflection of masochism that reinforces and enacts community norms. As Brix says, "Femcels, especially, thus seem to have a more constricted environment where objective ugliness should be the primary common characteristic" (Brix 55). Femcels have a heavily complicated relationship with themselves because of an environment that has left them feeling excluded. Even when rejecting societal beauty standards, femcels still measure themselves using their community's standards. The need to be externally validated manifests in different ways, even when individuals claim they want to reject the need to fit in. This results in a shared narrative of pain within the community and pressures for everyone to experience that pain, whether by force or chance. As a result, the performance of pain becomes a strategy and expectation for asserting femcel identity.

Many people in the femcel community describe their experience as one of deep despair, with emotions of rejection and loneliness playing a major role. As Madeline Bobo notes, "A femcel's experience is despair. They have never had male attention, and they are in their 30s" (Bobo 28). The inability to meet society's ideals of beauty can be associated with a sense of personal failure, which can then manifest physically as disordered eating or self-harm. This creates a cycle where the body is a site of emotional suffering and appearance is a visible measure of internal pain. For many women, their physical appearance becomes an internalized indicator of their value. Their presentation becomes such a staple that it consumes nearly every aspect of their being. This relationship between looks and self-worth feeds a vicious cycle in which women's mental health issues worsen, and their bodies turn into battlefields for their emotional suffering. Drawing from Butler's theory again helps in explaining how women manage the conflict between the ways they perform or reject these expectations in order to shape their self-identities and the pressures from society to adhere to conventional standards of beauty. Some feminists view rejecting traditional notions of femininity as an act of resistance that challenges prevailing views of what it means to be a desirable woman. As Bell Hooks explains, "By dismantling these ideals, feminists are not only rejecting the role of passive, compliant women but are also offering new ways of being a woman, one that resists the commodification and objectification of the female body" (Hooks 29). Femcels are thus caught in a double bind, further spreading hierarchical ideas of femininity while also being estranged from society's ideals of beauty. Their self-masochistic practices and behavior demonstrate the ways that rebellion and oppression both exist in femcel identity.

"STACY'S" AND THE IMPACT OF BEAUTY STANDARDS

The rise in the usage of the "femcel" label has highlighted the complex relationship between women's mental health and societal expectations. Many femcels specifically express their frustration with conventional beauty standards. In Hannah Rae Evan's article discussing femcels, she notes, "Many femcels believe they were cursed with below average physical appearance or other personal impediments that prevent them from getting what they want" (Evans 919). These feelings of inadequacy fuel a recurring cycle of negativity, which is directed both within the other femcels in the community and towards other women. Femcels have created a term, "Stacy's," for women who are perceived as conventionally attractive, as they yearn for the power bestowed on women who are easier on the eyes. Evans quotes one user on a femcel forum saying, "Stacys know that they are hot, and they know that this gives them power and money, so they want to maximize their power" (Evans 923). There is a correlation between beauty and power within the femcel community, which represents core feelings of frustration. By comparing themselves to attractive women, or "Stacys", femcels express their longing to be a part of that same community. They believe the state of being more appealing will lead to a happier and more fulfilling life. Lookism, discrimination based on physical appearance, is a broader critique of beauty standards that have been imposed by men. It leaves many women alienated from each other and encourages competition with each other, which then deepens their feelings of isolation. Constantly being compared to "Stacys" makes femcels feel even more different, which hinders their ability to connect with other women and deepens their self-doubt. This imaginary rift between the two cliques sets feelings of estrangement in motion, making the feeling of fitting in all the more strenuous. Judith Butler's theory of gender provides insight into this dynamic by explaining that "the internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (Butler 16). Accordingly, beauty standards are formed and seen through recurrent actions, and women are expected to "stylize" their bodies to suit gender and beauty norms. To make up for feelings of isolation, femcels contrast themselves with "Stacys" and make it harder for them to relate to others, fostering a sense of uniqueness.

Unlike male incels, femcels have the unique, and already ingrained, layer of stigma within themselves that constitutes a woman is expected to attract partners solely based on how she looks and carries herself. In Maria Pizzimenti and Assunta Pena's digital investigation on the femcel community, they write ""While male Incels can be perceived as 'ugly' or 'non-desirable' by society, Femcels often face a further dimension of stigma linked to the assumption according to which every woman can easily attract a man if she really wanted to" (Pizzimenti and Pena, 5). The idea that women are automatically perceived to be luckier in relationships is a core element in incel ideology, "they are biologically advantaged in having all sexual partners they want, even those above their reach" (Pizzimenti and Pena, 5). Although incels and femcels share common feelings of exclusion and festering emotions of rejection, there are different stigmas against each community, resulting in different reasons to adopt these labels. The assumption enforced by society that all women should fall into beauty standards further perpetuates femcel's feelings of inadequacy and dismisses their struggles. However, both of these groups do live within a culture that prioritizes desirability and looks. According to a study of surveys conducted on incels, "Men were likely to state that adhering to traditional masculinity norms… prevented them from finding mates. In addition, the double standards of having to make the first move when approaching females were viewed as unfair and prohibiting them from access" (Donelly 5). For men, traditional masculinity norms are seen as barriers to forming relationships. Both incels and femcels are united by a culture that prioritizes appearance and desirability, reinforcing the idea that self-worth comes from the ability to adhere to conventional gender roles.

Femcels often find themselves grappling with the stigmatization of their experiences. They are sometimes described as hating men without any nuance on why they feel a certain way about the opposite gender and relationships. This draws a parallel to feminists because both groups are looked down upon for criticizing gender standards and are just seen as bitter, angry women. As Seraphin notes, "Femcels, on the other hand, identify discrimination in men's behavior, but place it in a broader context of patriarchal structures, driving them towards radical feminist ideologies" (Seraphin 11). Femcel's frustrations are not rooted in a hatred of men, despite the beliefs that many may perceive it to be, but rather, it is rooted in the dynamics that render women as objects in a transactional exchange. This dynamic is seen in most relationships, with men seeing their interactions with women as exchanges where they trade affection or material goods for sexual labor. The intersection of femcel experiences with feminist ideologies highlights how deeply rooted patriarchal structures are in shaping gendered experiences of power and identity. Both movements challenge traditional norms, but they receive negative framing that reflects the discomfort people feel with critiques of the patriarchy or inequality in general. This discomfort is evident in the ways women part of these movements resist patriarchal expectations. As Hannah Rae Evans found in her research where one user stated, "the very core of women's oppression is their power of reproduction and child-raising, and women should weaponize that to the maximum extent" (Evans 31). This reflects a complicated intersection where women feel both oppressed and empowered by the very systems that marginalize them. This desire for power signals a deeper longing within the femcel identity: a recognition of their oppression, but also a desire to harness the very systems that devalue them to their own advantage. The rejection felt at the hands of the less empathetic sex creates a butterfly effect, affecting more groups than one, and entirely shifting the purpose and motive behind a group like the femcels' origin. This butterfly effect has been seen across various social media platforms, with teenage girls specifically becoming radicalized.

CONCLUSION

Femcel culture represents a nuanced intersection of societal pressures, feminist ideals, and a critique of traditional gender norms. This paper explored how the femcel identity navigates the tensions between a woman's sexuality and the impacts of the outside factors contributing to further pressure placed on the female sex. The socially constructed concepts placed upon communities create borders within women who share more attributes than they may realize. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity reveals how femcels navigate self-representation while being frustrated with societal reactions to their rejection and adherence to those very norms. To add to the discussion, it is essential to explore how the femcel experience intersects with other marginalized identities. Research is very limited on the impact of online forums and how they specifically contribute to both positive and negative mental health among femcels. As the femcel label evolves, it blurs the boundaries between rebellion and self-loathing, creating a space for the emotional pain that is sometimes aimed at women who are perceived to be successful in the same endeavors that femcels are rejected within. These overlapping pressures enable the femcel label to form new associations and further dilute its meaning. Due to contributing outside factors, the label continues to fester and absorb associations that construe the meaning. All together, these dynamics reflect how femcel communities display societal hierarchies, making the study of their identity and mental health much more contemporary. As societies keep advancing, the line between what it really means to be a femcel or a "self-loathing misandrist" becomes blurred. In a broader sense, femcel culture is a reflection of how society continuously shapes and constrains women's identities regarding their sexuality and emotions. In order to move toward an inclusive understanding of femcel experiences, it is important to expand how women feel about the standards they are subjected to and their nuances. The labels that are considered "femcel" cemented onto women are entirely ingrained in the meaning of being a woman overall. To denounce the femcel label would be to force a community to erase the only "norm" they've ever known and the only community they have ever found a voice in.

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Brianna Tsimerman

Neurodivergent Hearts: The Impact of Autism on Relationship Success

ABSTRACT

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) influences romantic relationship development, attachment security, and public perception through neuropsychological foundations and media representation. On the basis of attachment theory and stigma theory, it is important to discuss how early caregiver relationships and societal labeling processes shape how individuals with ASD regulate emotion and respond to relationship behaviors. Scholarly intel is compared to highlight the balance between neurological challenges and strengths specific to the disorder, such as honesty, loyalty, and emotional consistency. Case studies including shows like Love on the Spectrum and Atypical are analyzed to illustrate how modern media portrayals actively challenge and reinforce stereotypes about relationships involving autism. While some depictions present autism as a reason for misunderstanding or a limitation of emotional intelligence, others portray authentic representation between romantic partners with ASD. Findings from these sources suggest that misrepresentation in media can formulate stigma and unrealistic expectations, while more accurate portrayals can promote inclusion. The sum of this analysis emphasizes the need for more realistic and diverse depictions of autism in order to normalize differences. Increasing the media's affirmations of neurodiversity would allow a more equitable understanding of love and relationship success.

INTRODUCTION

We often see romantic relationships as an important part of life, but for people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), these experiences can vary across many different circumstances. ASD is a type of neurodivergence, meaning the brain functions and processes in a unique way compared to what society considers "typical." According to their paper, "Autism and attachment difficulties: Overlap of symptoms, implications and innovative solutions," individuals on the spectrum face challenges with social interaction, emotional expression, and sensory sensitivity, which are all essential to the success of maintaining rewarding romantic relationships (McKenzie and Dallos, 2017). However, their deep loyalty, honesty, and routine lifestyle bring many strengths to dating, satisfying both partners involved. Most portrayals of love rely on neurotypical expectations, which base the "success" of a relationship on "normal" brain processes. This can make it harder for autistic individuals to feel understood or accepted in romantic situations. The media often represents those with ASD through misleading, stereotypical, or incomplete portrayals. This, in turn, can have an impact on both self- and public-perception of how people with autism navigate intimate relationships. Delving into misconceptions of ASD is important for hopes of supporting a more inclusive and accepting view of love. Doing so recognizes the more nuanced picture of beauty and meaning in all kinds of relationships. To acknowledge the value of different ways of connecting is to redefine what love and a successful relationship look like.

Experts disagree on how autism affects romantic relationships, with some emphasizing neurological aspects that hinder connection while others highlight mutual adaptation as a step towards fulfilling partnerships. Some scholars, like Dr. Rebecca McKenzie and Dr. Rudi Dallos, argue that people with autism struggle to form and maintain romantic relationships because of their neurobiological and psychological challenges, such as emotional regulation and the ability to read social cues. They claim these differences can lead to miscommunication and subsequent conflict between parties in the relationship (McKenzie and Dallos, 2017). Other scholars challenge these negative claims with solutions. For instance, Dr. Rui Ying Yew and his team write in "Factors of Relationship Satisfaction for Autistic and Non-Autistic Partners in Long-Term Relationships" that if both partners are willing to adapt and be understanding, communicative, and accommodating, then relationships with ASD can be very fulfilling (Yew, Rui Ying, et al. 2023). Building on this debate, a useful neuropsychological framework for understanding these dynamics is attachment theory.

Attachment theory, originated by psychologist John Bowlby explains how early relationships with caregivers shape the bonds we form in our teenage and adult years (McKenzie and Dallos, 2017). The theory suggests that early childhood relationships are especially significant for the future emotional and social development of people on the spectrum. This allows for secure bonds based on comfort and insecure bonds based on anxiety or avoidance. This is crucial to individuals with ASD because their early-life attachments have a major impact on their romantic bonds as adults. Brosnan and Gavin's "The Impact of Stigma, Autism Label and Wording on the Perceived Desirability of the Online Dating Profiles of Men on the Autism Spectrum" defines stigma theory as how society treats individuals that are "different" or have certain undesirable characteristics, resulting in reduced opportunities and discrimination (Brosnan and Gavin, 2021). Dr. Brosnan and Dr. Gavin classify stigma as a "four-stage process." They say that "people identify and label differences they observe in others; secondly, people make assumptions (stereotypes) about the labelled group and extend those assumptions to all the individuals in the group; thirdly people distance themselves from the labelled group; and finally people use these stereotypes to discriminate" (Brosnan and Gavin, 2021). In other words, we see a chain in which noticing differences leads to labeling and stereotyping, which then promotes social distancing and ultimately sanctions discrimination. This is a warning about how discrimination is not just a sudden act but the consequence of an unchecked thinking path, so intervening in labelling stereotypes early can be crucial for preventing harm. With disorders, people often believe those with autism to be less capable of forming relationships or unwanted as potential partners, possibly decreasing their confidence and limiting their romantic chances before they even begin.

These theories can be applied to real-life and fictional case studies involving individuals diagnosed with ASD. *Love on the Spectrum* (2022) shows the real dating experiences of autistic individuals. We can see firsthand how attachment difficulty fluctuates between participants, especially with clips presenting individuals with autism and their caregivers (O'Clery, 2022). Next is the character Sam Gardener from the show *Atypical*. In her article, "Why Netflix's *Atypical* Fell Short as Autistic Representation," Kurchak writes about how Sam's dating life, portrayed in the entirety of the series, raises many questions about how autism is perceived in society and the media (Kurchak, 2021). To connect these case studies to real-world context, I examined the dating experiences of Miyah Rose, an adult on the spectrum, from the podcast "Dating on the Spectrum." Grounding these lived experiences illustrates how individuals with ASD manage challenges while leveraging unique strengths in their romantic relationships.

Together, these perspectives refocuses back to the larger question—to what extent does neurodivergence, specifically autism spectrum disorder, impacts the success of romantic relationships, and how do media stereotypes of autism add complications? In this essay, I aim to explore how ASD makes the traditional dynamics of romantic relationships challenging. I want to recognize the numerous ways unique love expression can build a successful relationship that isn't only equally as satisfying as a neurotypical one but even more so. While autistic individuals struggle with basic relationship dynamics like communication, emotional expression, and social interaction, I argue that many people on the spectrum carry a strong ability to navigate intimacy and resolve conflicts, increasing relationship success. The media's often stereotypical portrayals of ASD individuals further misunderstandings of the disorder and undermine the abilities of those on the spectrum to form romantic relationships by positioning autism as something that limits romantic and sexual opportunities. As a solution, I propose increased and more accurate representations of autism in the media to demonstrate its complexities and the true spectrum of its strengths and challenges.

RELATIONSHIP SUCCESS AND DYNAMICS FOR THOSE ON THE SPECTRUM

Romantic relationships for individuals with autism are influenced by their unique neurological and emotional traits that shape how they interact, connect, communicate, and maintain intimacy with their partners. It can be concluded that in a healthy relationship, romantic or platonic, there are five main skills needed: trust, communication, empathy, emotional regulation, and the ability to manage disagreements or conflict. According to research psychologists Amy Canevello and Jennifer Crocker in their "Creating Good Relationships: Responsiveness, Relationship Quality, and Interpersonal Goals," these dynamics are not easy for anyone to master, really. Reading facial expressions and recognizing sarcasm or sudden changes can be difficult for people on the spectrum to process, making maintaining relationships strenuous. With that said, for people with ASD, these dynamics can be especially challenging or come even easier. Yet, their deep loyalty, extreme honesty, and consistency are why they absolutely can form close, stable, and lasting romantic relationships.

ASD, a type of neurodivergence, is a developmental condition that affects how people communicate, process emotions, and interact with the world around them. Individuals may experience the world differently, but those differences are not always negative (McKenzie and Dallos, 2017). The word "spectrum" refers to the wide range of experiences and brain functions that people with autism can have. Some may need a lot of support in daily life, while others can be very independent and well-functioning in social situations. These differences are essential to understanding the variety of experiences an individual with ASD might have in romantic relationships.

To frame these differences, McLeod, in "John Bowlby's Attachment Theory," discusses how John Bowbly's attachment theory explains how early relationships with caregivers are the foundation to a child's sense of security and how they influence future relationships. Building on John Bowlby's attachment theory, Mary Ainsworth identified three major attachment styles: secure (confidence in caregiver's support), insecure-avoidant (emotional distance due to rejection), and insecure-anxious (clinginess due to inconsistency). Later, Main and Solomon identified a fourth attachment style known as disorganized (confused behavior due to trauma) (McLeod, 2025). These styles guide how individuals see themselves and others in relationships. According to "Autism and Attachment Difficulties," some studies suggest that children with autism present higher levels of attachment insecurity compared to typical children (McKenzie and Dallos, 2017). Through parental stress, mental health issues, and unresolved trauma, many children with autism struggle to form secure attachments. Studies show that kids with autism can create stronger relationships when parents, especially mothers, show high sensitivity, thereby reducing behavioral issues. Using observational and statistical studies of children with and without autism, McKenzie and Dallos provide data-driven context to the disorder by discussing proximity-seeking (a behavior that seeks to restore closeness to an attachment figure) and distress response (a negative stress response that can cause emotional, physical, or social suffering) attachment behaviors and suggest that children with autism often form fewer secure attachments. However, higher-functioning individuals do in fact form secure connections, challenging claims that all individuals on the spectrum struggle with this and accounting for the discrepancy between ASD's varied functionality. The concepts of attachment security (the ability to seek comfort from a caregiver in stressful situations) and parental sensitivity (how attuned caregivers are to their child's needs) are used to support the methodologies of a broader attachment theory regarding children on the spectrum. The authors found that while parental sensitivity may predict secure attachment in neurotypical children, its impacts on children can be less "straightforward," indicating there are other influential factors involved in securing relationships (McKenzie and Dallos, 2017). Considering this variety of autism symptoms and the struggle for attachment security, the doctors promote the idea of a formulation method (i.e., building awareness through exposure models) as a relationship-based, personal approach to kids on the spectrum instead of just relying on unspecialized diagnostic methods.

Extending these clinical approaches to early development, children with autism may experience "disrupted" attachment due to their difficulties with social communication and emotional regulation, impeding their abilities to form secure connections and relationships. Experts of autism largely emphasize the importance of early emotional bonding in order to form secure attachments in psychological development. Many children learn essential skills to navigate interpersonal relationships within a family structure first. Skills like patience, consideration, turn-taking, reciprocity, and thoughtfulness are all required for a harmonious family unit and, ultimately, within a healthy romantic relationship (McLeod, 2025). This leads us to the belief that the challenges of autism, social deficits, and emotional dysregulation, if not addressed properly in early childhood stages, might persist into adult stages of life, especially during moments of romance. However, normalizing the communication and processing styles of those with ASD has the potential to foster more romantic freedom and possibilities for them. If society became increasingly educated on adapting to accurate autism processing, the believed-to-be "challenges" for individuals with ASD in romantic relationships might be dismantled. After all, to a neurotypical mind, how to understand when someone is angry or jealous is not something commonly thought of directly; it occurs more naturally and the process behind it is often overlooked. To someone on the spectrum, though, this is an extra that must be taken, and their ability to take it depends on how well their understanding of emotional expression was developed early on by the exposure of the world around them.

Complementing this, relationships stem not from the difficulty of individuals with ASD to engage in such relationships, but rather from a mismatch in styles between neurotypes. In "Autistic Peer-to-Peer Information Transfer is Highly Effective," Dr. Crompton, Dr. Ropar, Dr. Fletcher-Watson, Dr. Evans-Williams, and Dr. Flynn share that ASD cognitive styles can result in deeper mutual understanding with partners, leading to relationship satisfaction. They explain,

> Autistic participants consistently reported that conversations with other autistic people felt more natural, more comfortable, and easier to manage. These interactions were characterized by mutual understanding and reduced anxiety, suggesting that similar processing styles enable deeper connection. In contrast, conversations with non-autistic individuals were often described as draining or confusing. This finding challenges the view that autistic individuals struggle socially across the board and instead points to a mismatch in styles between neurotypes (Crompton et al., 2020).

This quote suggests that neurological alignment can create emotionally rich, successful relationships. Many autistic individuals are fully capable of forming strong emotional bonds especially in environments where their communication style is understood and valued. Instead of issues stemming from neurological differences, it is actually a mismatch in communication methods between autistic and non-autistic individuals that prompt issues in romantic relationships. If neurotypical communication styles became inclusive of ASD styles, I argue there is definite potential in romantic ASD relationships between all individuals, neurodivergent or not. It is not about the disorder itself, but the lack of proper societal engagement. Just like neurotypical individuals, people on the spectrum have traits that can positively and negatively contribute to romantic relationships. That is why it is not about the disorder itself, but how we as individuals adapt to each other, regardless of neurodivergence.

Shifting to a strength-based perspective, while those on the spectrum may experience great challenges in sustaining romantic relationships, I argue that certain cognitive and emotional traits associated with ASD can strengthen romantic relationships. People on the spectrum present unique neurological advantages such as loyalty, emotional consistency, and honesty—all essential to creating strong bonds. Autistic individuals carry strong traits, such as direct communication and emotional honesty, as part of their neurological processing. This contributes to relationship stability and fewer misunderstandings between partners, as seen by Crompton et al. Autistic traits can fully maintain fulfilling relationships, as they hold the ability to do so through direct communication and mutual values. Similar themes of ASD enhancing romantic relationships are found in *Discovery ABA's* "High Functioning Autism and Romantic Relationships" by Dr. Mark Elias. He discusses the strengths that individuals with high-functioning autism bring to romantic relationships. In his conversation, he states, "One of the remarkable qualities that individuals with high-functioning autism bring to romantic relationships is honesty and sincerity. They tend to be authentic and straightforward, avoiding the complications often associated with dating 'games.' Their genuine nature fosters deep and genuine connections, leading to a strong bond between partners" (Elias, 2025). Here, Elias emphasizes ASD traits of honesty and authenticity as characteristics that help build and maintain successful relationships. He suggests that neurotypical individuals play confusing romantic games, chasing each other around, which can make the relationship take on a toxic path. Individuals with ASD, however, are very upfront. They mean what they say and say what they mean, resulting in fewer mixed signals and clearer conflict solutions. Their authenticity makes the relationship meaningful. Crompton et al. and Elias both challenge the misconception that autism limits the individual's ability to form strong relationships, instead saying that, in reality, many individuals with ASD have the ability to strengthen the relationship. Together, these accounts suggest that when partners value directness and align shared norms of communication, it clarifies how many individuals with autism actively enhance relationship quality and stability.

THE MEDIA'S UNHEALTHY STEREOTYPES VIA MISREPRESENTATIONS OF NEURODIVERGENCE

While those with autism have the potential to succeed in romantic relationships given their unique strengths, representation of ASD in the media has proven the ability to shape public and self-perception about the limitations of the condition. The media can promote unhealthy stereotypes with misrepresentations of ASD, making those with the disorder seem incapable of love. Film media such as *Atypical*, a television show which Netflix released in 2017, alongside shows like *The Big Bang Theory* and *Good Doctor*, present an uptake of autistic representation, including how individuals on the spectrum connect through relationships. *Atypical* follows 18-year-old neurodivergent Sam as he explores challenges of romantic relationships such as intimacy and independence while being on the spectrum. His journey of self-discovery impacts those around him, including family and friends who are not on the autism spectrum. Critics have argued that the show's early seasons promoted stereotypes about the spectrum and lacked authentic autistic input. Sarah Kurchak, an ASD-diagnosed critic, ultimately suggests that *Atypical* shows an outsider's perspective on autism rather than offering an "internally informed" depiction of neurodivergence and love. She says,

> … as an autistic person, I saw none of the complexity and internal life that I know exists in myself and my fellow autistic people and am desperate to see more of onscreen… It might have been new and refreshing to see Sam's unsavory side explored with any depth or skill. But neither the characters nor the writers show much interest in holding him accountable for his deliberate actions. Instead, we're treated to an immensely frustrating reversal in which Sam faces more consequences for things he can't control (sensory overload, meltdowns, etc.) than for what he can (Kurchak, 2021).

This quote suggests a tension between how neurodivergence can shape personal accountability and how it's presented in the media. The author criticizes *Atypical* for failing to delve deeper into Sam's emotional science by arguing that he is "punished" more for behaviors he cannot control, like with "sensory overload" and "meltdowns," than for his more intentional actions toward others. This shows the broader issue of how neurodivergent individuals, specifically those with autism, are often misunderstood in relationships, as partners may focus more on the surface-level, involuntary traits of autism rather than acknowledging their personality. A misrepresentation of autistic individuals that depicts them as incapable of understanding or tracking responsibility for their actions promotes the harmful stereotype that they can't maintain healthy or reciprocal relationships. It's unfair. If a neurodivergent individual is mostly judged based on what they cannot control, it can create barriers to building successful romantic relationships. Misconceptions can influence societal views, making it more difficult for people to see neurodivergent people as "viable" romantic partners. This brings awareness to the importance of developing emotional and social connections with people on the spectrum and the necessity of patience when it comes to relationships involving neurodivergent individuals. While Kurchak claims Sam lacks "complexity and internal life," *Atypical* might be presenting the real obstacles autistic individuals experience in romantic desires, particularly regarding social norms, the show doesn't hold Sam accountable for his deliberate actions, like violating personal boundaries. This presents neurodivergent individuals as passive victims of misunderstanding or those incapable of growth because they are "not in control." Some individuals with ASD may initially struggle to recognize certain boundaries due to differences in processing, but many are fully capable of learning and understanding behavioral expectations when provided with appropriate support and guidance. When recognizing the dynamics of relationships involving two neurotypical individuals, taking into account unintentional choices isn't even a main topic of discussion. Kurchak's critique implies that, like neurotypical people, individuals on the spectrum can learn, adapt, and develop stronger relationship skills over time. If neurodivergent people are given the space to grow, be understood, and be held accountable in a balanced and respectful way, the extent to which neurodivergence impacts their romantic success is minimal.

Media representations of autism also often depict autistic individuals as distant or detached. What may go unnoticed is how this representation negatively impacts autistic individuals' capacity for forming romantic relationships. Professionals McKenzie and Dallos have conducted research regarding both how children with autism present higher levels of attachment insecurity compared to typical children and that insecurity's potential implications for later development. Bowlby's work emphasized that the early relationship with the caregiver forms the foundation for how children perceive and interact with the world around them. For children with autism, this foundation may be disrupted, as they may struggle with both social communication and emotional regulation. These challenges can lead to difficulties in forming secure attachments, which impacts their emotional development. Understanding these challenges through the lens of attachment theory helps caregivers and therapists support these children in building meaningful relationships (McKenzie and Dallos). Early attachment disruptions can influence the way autistic individuals engage in romantic relationships later in life. If secure attachments are more challenging to establish, this may strongly impact the success of a relationship because of decreased emotional regulation and social communication skills. However, this doesn't mean that autistic individuals are incapable of forming deep, meaningful bonds. While individuals on the spectrum can struggle with intuitive social cues, they are still strong in their emotional depth and care for others. Society often places autistic individuals into a rigid category that deems them undesirable, which limits their perceived ability to form romantic relationships. A strength of this research on attachment insecurity is its ability to reframe autism not as an emotional deficiency but as a more specified approach to social development, helping illustrate the major difference between ideas of perception and realism. Yet, the weakness of not fully addressing how these societal views have shaped specific relationships encourages questions of communication and emotional distance in relationships involving people of neurodivergence. Unfortunately, many experience incorrect ideas about autistic people in relationships. Many media portrayals of autistic characters, depicting them as emotionally detached or lacking humanity, lead us to the broader issue of media theory in the stigma of autism. Sarah Kurchak opposes the show *Atypical* because of its visual of an individual on the spectrum. In a critique regarding a more recently released season of the show, she writes,

Usually autistic characters are the only ones who are handled from external and distanced perspectives and come across as not-quite-human, but everyone was a little hollow here… Sam doesn't do any more breaking and entering, but he still shows little respect for other people, and his portrayal remains confounding… The quality of autism-themed TV and the extent of actual autistic representation to be found therein is far from the most pressing issue that autistic people face (Kurchak, 2021).

Kurchak's critique identifies how autistic characters are typically framed from a negative viewpoint, reinforcing the idea that they are "unfit" for social interaction in relationships and exemplifying stigma theory's four-stage process by Brosnan and Gavin. The logical flow of observing, assuming, then distancing, and finally discriminating ties into how this negative view of autism was developed. Despite this process, we can see from the study that individuals with autism aren't unfit; they just require and value different attention and effort, like patience in social and emotional communication. This leads to the broader issue of how audiences have come to expect autistic individuals to be socially distant and how that, in turn, affects real autistic individuals' perspectives in romantic contexts. The research journal and Kurchak present and oppose this alienation of autistic characters in media and the real world, calling out the dehumanization of autism as well as informing us that relationship success with an autistic individual is indeed possible. Cultivation theory is the basis of these unhealthy stereotypes, as Perera's "Gerbner's Cultivation Theory in Media Communication" defines it as "a communications and sociological framework which posits that long-term exposure to media shapes how the consumers of media perceive the world as well as conduct themselves in life" (Perera, 2023). In other words, repeated exposure to inaccurate depictions impacts audience perceptions and makes people more likely to see autistic individuals as emotionally or socially incapable of the deep, emotional, and raw romantic connection seen in "typical" relationships. Overall, Kurchak deepens an understanding of the study because we can see how media consumption promotes social stigmas and expectations regarding people on the spectrum and romance. We also learn that love on the spectrum requires high sensitivity and attention to emotional regulation, just like all relationships. While the media suggests autistic people struggle with emotional connection, real-life accounts present challenges to this depiction, arguing that relationship struggles with autistic individuals originate more from psychological and communication differences. However, the main issue that the media presents in regard to autism is its misrepresentation of autistic people as lacking emotional depth. This not only reflects societal beliefs but also shapes them and increases pre-existing biases autistic individuals need to overcome to be successful in romantic relationships.

Unlike stereotypical presentations of those with ASD in the media, those who have ASD, or care for those with ASD, better know and can reflect the complexities of this condition. In "A Phenomenological Approach to the Cultivation of Expertise: Emergent Understandings of Autism," Dr. Mary Lawlor and Dr. Olga Solomon discuss how parents, not doctors, cultivate autism expertise. In explaining this claim, they state,

> The phrase denotes the generative nature of the cultivation of expertise, the thirst to learn or glean what can be learned, and the imperative to make good on what has been learned… The enactment of developmental agendas is not restricted to the child alone. Processes of becoming and learning and striving that ground development and life over time (i.e., becoming particular children, parents, siblings, grandparents, or any number of kin) are fueled by social learning practices, or cultivations of expertise and deepening understandings (Lawlor and Solomon, 2017).

Autism understanding is not clinically contained nor mainly professional but is developed through shared stories and trial and error. What is especially impactful about this topic is how it presents more intimate insights into autism than what media often depicts—deep relationships and constant learning versus stereotypes of emotional detachment. This truthful version directly opposes exaggerated portrayals of autism that make people with ASD seem undesirable or incapable of connection. This leads to even broader ideas of why it might be difficult for individuals with ASD to find a mate because of the way the disorder is painted in the media. For instance, these films develop subconscious opinions for neurotypical people the more exposure they receive and cultivate, and thus, neurotypical people might subconsciously avoid relationships with individuals with ASD. This concern has been raised by PhD-registered nurses Dr. Catherine Hungerford, Dr. Rachel Kornhaber, Dr. Sancia West, and Dr. Michelle Cleary in "Autism, Stereotypes, and Stigma: The Impact of Media Representations," a paper detailing their recent research regarding the consequences of inaccurate ASD representation. They state, Stereotypes and stigma adversely affect the mental health, well-being, and quality of life of autistic people and their family carers. Turnock et al. (2022) describe the impact of stigma on autistic people as significant and complex, leading to increases in unhelpful camouflaging behaviors; limited opportunities for personal growth, restricted autonomy, a lack of meaningful employment; social exclusion; and low self-esteem (Hungerford et al., 2025).

It is difficult for people to see autistic individuals as potential romantic partners when they are continuously depicted as socially inept or emotionally detached. The real challenges individuals with ASD face don't stem from the disorder itself but from how society views them. Additionally, this journal reveals that there are "limited opportunities for personal growth, restricted autonomy… [and] social exclusion" due to these misconceptions. This carries a heavy negative impact on people on the spectrum, as they are even more isolated from romantic experiences. The difficulty for someone to carry a neurodivergent disorder is amplified when repeatedly exposed to media that shows them as incapable of love. They may "internalize" these inaccuracies, leading to self-doubt and, sadly, a reluctance to pursue relationships. If the media continues to expose society only to one-dimensional ideas of autism, it will be more and more difficult for those on the spectrum to be seen as desirable partners, let alone to view themselves as capable of fulfilling romantic relationships. If this continues, the stereotypes for autistic individuals will become like the gender stereotypes we still see today. The media holds great power to educate, but its role in ASD stigma raises the question of how accurate and positive representations can be introduced to counteract or oppose the already in-place misconceptions of autism. Without a shift in how ASD is shown to society, these views will continue to limit relationship opportunities for people on the spectrum, promoting ideas that love exists outside their reach.

THE ACCURATE MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF AUTISM AS A SOLUTION TO STIGMA

While much of the media promotes the misconception that autistic individuals struggle with forming romantic relationships and are undesirable romantic partners, the show *Love on the Spectrum* positively reflects the nuances of autism and romance. Kurchak reviewed *Love on the Spectrum* (2020) in her *Times* article, "The Promise—and Pitfalls—of Netflix's New Reality Dating Show for Autistic People," suggesting that the show is accurate in portraying the capabilities of autistic individuals in romantic contexts. She writes,

> Love on the Spectrum has the potential to open minds, foster genuine empathy for its stars and maybe even spark interest in more autistic stories. The bar for autism depictions is still low… but the series ambles over it by rightfully allowing its autistic subjects to speak for and at least somewhat guide their stories themselves, so that viewers can get to know them as people with individual thoughts, desires, and needs (Kurchak, 2020).

Authentic representation is the show's main strength, accurately and respectfully depicting autistic individuals. The series allows people on the spectrum to narrate their own experiences, especially highlighting emotional depth, relationship goals, and individuality, something that the majority of ASD media portrayals lack. Kurchak's hopeful tone suggests that similar media depictions can be a turning point in how society views autistic people, to see them not as emotionally incapable but rather as deserving and fully functioning in maintaining love. Kurchak directly challenges media stereotypes that stigmatize autistic characters to make them seem undesirable.

However, Kurchak's interpretation of *Love on the Spectrum* overlooks the possibility that promoting positive ASD portrayal with good intentions can actually unintentionally reinforce negative stereotypes by presenting an "overly curated" showing of autistic individuals through neurotypical standards and perspectives. This concern has been raised by Hungerford et al. They argue that,

> Alternatively, when the accuracy of the portrayals is arguable, the outcome is more likely to stigmatize autism rather than increase autism acceptance. For example, stories that reinforce stereotypes by reducing the autistic person to a plot device or portraying the

> character as a problem are unlikely to address stigmatizing attitudes (Jones, 2024). Likewise, representing the autistic person as entertaining or amusing due to their 'otherness' can be detrimental (Hungerford et al., 2025).

Portrayals that reduce autistic characters to their "otherness" do little to fight against harmful stereotypes. Because neurotypical standards, expectations, and qualities are built into our society, any portrayal of an individual with "abnormal" qualities, even with good intentions, often leads to subconscious negative views of them. Even if *Love on the Spectrum* avoids overly patronizing and inaccurate depictions, it still positions autism as entertainment and not reality. Examples of this include the addition of whimsical music or presenting of autistic behavior as "quirky." There is a boundary between showcasing a difference and exploiting it, and representation alone might not be enough. True representation must be founded on complete realism, diversity, and respect. *Love on the Spectrum* takes meaningful action in showing autistic participants as complex people capable of emotional connection, offering real ASD voices and at least partial correction to the many media misrepresentations. Hungerford et al., though, advocate the need for total correction and intentional and thoughtful autism representation. This idea forms the core of my solution, as I propose a call for more accurate and inclusive depictions of autism to shift our neurotypical culture and recognize the fullness of humanity, ASD romance, and all.

Extending this critique to comparable shows, while the media does often claim to challenge stigma conflicts by presenting increased views of individuals with ASD in romantic contexts, it still risks falling into patterns of exploitation and idealization, even with the most progressive representations. Simply showing people with autism in relationships does not "automatically" make the harmful ASD stigmas go away if these depictions are directed by neurotypical standards, expectations, and desires for entertainment. In other words, representation without self-awareness does not correct misconceptions, for it perpetuates the very falsities that the representation is meant to dismantle. We can use the autistic character, Dr. Shaun Murphy, from *The Good Doctor* (2017) as an example. An autistic surgical resident journeying through love, identity, and professional challenges, he is the main reason for the show's praises and critiques. Autistic motivational speaker and viewer Kerry Magro writes in his article, "My review of 'The Good Doctor' as an adult with autism," how he was not a fan of the show's reliance on neurotypical storytelling and framing (Magro, 2020). Shaun's key milestone in the series involves his romantic development with his neurotypical partner, Lea, but the show's pacing and tone imply that romantic success is something Shaun earns by "overcoming" his autistic traits, not something just inherently deserved based on personality (*The Good Doctor*, Season 3, 2019). Scenes of conflict resolution are consistently framed as a reward for becoming more emotionally available, less rigid, and more communicative. These are all traits expected of society but not realistically from those with autism spectrum disorder. This theme aligns with Hungerford et al. in their warning that even positive portrayals of autism can result in problems when people on the spectrum seem "different." In addition, it is public knowledge that *Atypical* consulted with autism organizations, but the creators failed at casting neurodivergent actors that could have aided its representation. This resulted in a backlash over the show's lack of authenticity. Both *The Good Doctor* (2017) and *Love on the Spectrum* (2022) exemplify how even the most empathetic attempted portrayals of those with ASD having the potential for romantic success can still negatively contribute to media misconceptions, further differentiating neurodivergence instead of normalizing it. Love should be achievable no matter how someone processes the world, not limited by that difference, and when shows depict neurodivergent characters adapting to neurotypical relationship standards, people with the disorder are further painted as undesirable romantic partners. The solution might lie in portraying interactions with neurodivergent individuals as a normal, everyday occurrence. Just like all things in life, romantic relationships with autistic individuals are just as complex, joyful, and valid as any other love story.

Initially, the media had convinced me that autism only made romantic relationships more difficult, adding barriers that are not common to neurotypical individuals. However, after examining the works of McKenzie and Dallos, as well as Crompton et al., I find that similar processing and communication styles can lead to deeper mutual understanding and emotional consistency in relationships with autistic individuals. I did not fully appreciate how these relationship dynamics can build the foundation for positive, healthy relationships until now. Changing my perspective revealed that what is framed as "deficits" are just society's way of describing differences in communication and cognition. When these differences, not inherently negative or positive, are acknowledged and accommodated accordingly through attachment theory, they can become the strengths of any partnership. With this, we can understand the essentiality of the human timeline and how varying support in our childhood determines the way we all form connections in adulthood.

Building on this understanding, I was surprised with how the map of my thesis evolved. I only expected to analyze the challenges that individuals with autism face and the surface-level ways such challenges impacted their relationships. Instead, I fell into a rabbit hole of evidence for how the representation of ASD in the media relates to the misunderstandings that autistic individuals face in romantic relationships. I examined how the media has the ability to shape public perception about ASD and how "mismatches" in social interaction—rather than the disorder itself—are the cause of decreased romantic success for those with ASD and how just the slightest adjustment in communication style can change frustration into closeness. Because of this, I was able to gain a more balanced view of autistic relationships, understanding that they are not as different as the media might portray them and understanding the power in being able to relate to neurodivergence.

On this basis, small changes in how we talk, listen, and present neurodivergence in the media have the potential to reduce discrimination and anxiety. Understanding this idea can be life-changing for therapists, educators, partners, and media influencers in helping autistic individuals thrive in love. Promoting the strengths of those with autism is key to their positive self-perception and happiness in relationships. We tend to undermine the support we obtain from the media and how much it influences our confidence. It is crucial for the media to present the most accurate ideas of romance with an autistic individual because it can give people on the spectrum the self-security they need for a successful relationship.

For the future, I would be curious to examine long-term studies comparing ASD-ASD couples and ASD-neurotypical couples, as well as which specific communication methods in relationships bring the most satisfaction to people on the spectrum. After all, embracing neurodiversity in love does not just change our ideas of the disorder, but it also makes relationship success more inclusive and effective for everyone.

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Born First, Born Best? The Truth About Birth Order

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of birth order in shaping intelligence, personality, and social development, drawing on Alfred Adler's birth order theory, Robert Zajonc's confluence model, and Albert Bandura's social learning theory. Historically, theories by Adler and Zajonc suggested that firstborns enjoy cognitive advantages due to undivided parental attention and enriched intellectual environments. However, recent large-scale studies, such as Rodica Damian's analysis of 377,000 U.S. high school students, indicate that any differences in intelligence or personality across birth ranks are minimal and largely negligible. While early theories emphasized cognitive distinctions, contemporary research highlights the social implications of sibling dynamics. Bandura's social learning theory, along with observational studies of sibling interactions, demonstrates that children acquire social skills, emotional regulation, and cooperative behaviors through interactions with siblings, with older siblings often serving as models for younger siblings. Additional research indicates that these social influences can occur even in less stable or disrupted environments, suggesting that sibling relationships provide a natural form of emotional scaffolding. The evidence collectively indicates that birth order has little effect on intelligence or personality but plays a meaningful role in social development, shaping how children interact, adapt, and learn within the family structure. Future research integrating genetic and developmental methods may provide further insights into how familial and environmental factors interact, potentially refining understanding of sibling influence on behavior and cognition. These findings underscore the importance of examining birth order within the broader context of family dynamics rather than as a determinant of cognitive ability.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered if you're the smartest sibling? And if you don't have any siblings, if you're smarter than those with siblings? Birth order is the relative order in which children are born. Depending on the size of the family, it can range from the first born, to the middle child, to the youngest child. The role of birth order in shaping intelligence and personality has been a topic of ongoing debate, with studies offering conflicting evidence on whether firstborns, middle children, or youngest children differ meaningfully in cognitive or social outcomes.

Understanding the potential effects of birth order can offer insight into broader psychological and social dynamics, even if its influence is more limited than many people assume. Research shows that birth order does not meaningfully shape personality or intelligence. For example, firstborns may score slightly higher on IQ tests, but the difference is so small that it is considered insignificant. However, birth order does seem to play a role in early social development. Children with more siblings often develop stronger socialization skills and may show different patterns of adjustment or risk taking. Although birth order does not determine who we become in terms of personality or cognitive ability, examining its subtle social effects can still help refine parenting strategies and deepen our understanding of how family environments interact with individual traits.

This paper will examine birth order using three research frameworks: Adler's birth order theory, Zajonc's confluence model, and Bandura's social learning theory. Adler's birth order theory and Zajonc's confluence model provide complementary perspectives on how family structure influences personality and intellectual development. Adler's theory suggests that birth order shapes personality traits due to differences in parental attention and sibling dynamics. According to Adler, firstborns often develop leadership qualities and conscientiousness, while middle children tend to be socially adaptable, and youngest children may be more outgoing and risk-taking (Horner et al.). Children who are the sole child in their family, meaning they have no siblings, often display characteristics associated with both firstborns and youngest children. Zajonc's confluence model, on the other hand, explains how intellectual development is influenced by the changing family environment (Zajonc). According to this model, firstborns benefit from an intellectually enriched environment before younger siblings arrive, whereas later-born children are exposed to a more diluted intellectual atmosphere as parental attention is divided. Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding how both personality and cognitive development are shaped by birth order and family dynamics. However, there is one final framework that underlies the birth order debate that is key to answering the posed question: the social learning theory by Albert Bandura. Bandura's theory highlights the importance of siblings and their influence on one another as siblings build off of and learn from each other.

INTELLIGENCE AND THE SIBLING SEQUENCE

According to Zajonc and Adler, the eldest child in a family is believed to have the highest level of intelligence, though recent studies are examined for confirmation. In Zajonc's theory, the intelligence dilutes as more children are added to the family as the setting no longer accommodates for one individual (Zajonc). Adler's theory, however, outright predicts all the roles in which the children in the family would have, most critically being that the first child is the most intelligent while the other children contain other elements the first doesn't have (Horner et al.). However, these theories are older and come from more than 50 years ago, illustrating the inaccuracies without proper testing. Much research has been conducted on birth order since, yet, few studies have accurately proven its true implications. Often many confounding factors from studies affect the data, which leaves data that is not accurate to provide any conclusive evidence on birth order's implications on intelligence. To gain an accurate understanding of birth order and its effects, researchers must analyze large data samples while accounting for numerous confounding variables. A comprehensive study should incorporate diverse methodologies and classifications to ensure precise findings. One study that stands out in this regard is "The Associations of Birth Order with Personality and Intelligence in a Representative Sample of U.S. High School Students", led by Rodica Damian.

Damian's study highlights the lack of correlation between birth order and intelligence and personality. Damian's study is by far one of the greatest studies conducted on students to answer the question regarding birth order. With a large data sample of 377,000 students and other confounding variables accounted for, Damian provides one of the greatest and most recent research regarding birth order. Damian concludes in her research, "We would have to say that, to the extent that these effect sizes are accurate estimates of the true effect, birth order does not seem to be an important consideration for understanding either the development of personality traits or the development of intelligence in the between-family context" (104). This statement from Damian suggests that birth order is not a significant factor in shaping intelligence or personality traits when comparing individuals across different families. The phrase "to the extent that these effect sizes are accurate estimates of the true effect" acknowledges potential limitations in measurement, implying that while the data indicates little to no influence, there is still room for further investigation. However, the overall conclusion is clear: birth order does not appear to play a crucial role in development. This challenges the long-standing belief that an individual's position among siblings has a meaningful impact on their cognitive and personality traits, suggesting that other environmental or genetic factors may be more influential in shaping these aspects of development. Damian builds on her conclusions by emphasizing that even small effect sizes can be significant if they predict important outcomes. She notes that intelligence and personality differences in the eldest child were 0.04 and 0.02, respectively (105). While this suggests the eldest child is the most intelligent, these values are so small they are practically negligible.

As Damian states, "If the effect size is small but it is related to something as vital as cardiovascular disease in the entire population... then a correlation of .02 looms large in its importance" (104). Damian isn't the first to argue that birth order has little to no effect on intelligence or personality. Similarly, the World Economic Forum explores this topic, citing research that challenges the idea that birth order significantly shapes IQ, noting that "although this is a robust and statistically significant finding, the IQ difference is small. It means that in six out of ten cases the older sibling will have a higher IQ than the next youngest sibling, while in four out of ten cases younger siblings have a higher IQ." This statement acknowledges that while the IQ difference between siblings is statistically significant, it is not necessarily meaningful in practical terms. The key point is that in six out of ten cases, the older sibling has a higher IQ, but in four out of ten cases, the younger sibling does. This distribution is close to a random 50/50 split, suggesting that birth order does not strongly determine IQ. A truly significant difference would show a much greater disparity, where an older sibling almost always has a higher IQ. However, this 60/40 split suggests that any birth order effect on intelligence is weak at best. The overlap between younger and older siblings' IQs implies that other factors, such as genetics, environment, and educational opportunities, play a much larger role in determining intelligence. Therefore, while studies may detect a small statistical correlation, in real-world applications, birth order does not meaningfully influence IQ.

CHALLENGING THE BIRTH ORDER THEORY

Although birth order is proven through many studies that it has little to no effect on intelligence, some studies concerning birth order state the contrary: birth order does affect intelligence. In Kim Young-Joo's "Born to be more educated? Birth order and Schooling", Young-Joo describes the dataset his paper will analyze: the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study. The study took place in Wisconsin in 1957 and assessed all schools in the region with IQ tests. In Young-Joo's findings he states, "The evidence above shows that one's place in the birth order may have an effect on accumulated ability throughout childhood but birth order is only one of many things having an effect" (177). In the study, Young-Joo had only tested the siblings in high school with an IQ test and had found that the first born students were overall cognitively smarter than the younger children. However, Young-Joo's conclusions fail to account for several important variables, such as socioeconomic status, parental education, family size, and differences in parental investment, factors that more recent studies incorporate. Young-Joo's findings are derived from a study from 1957 with IQ tests from that time. IQ tests during that era were flawed and didn't accurately represent intelligence. In Early Life Predictors of Childhood Intelligence: Evidence from the Aberdeen Children of the 1950s, by Lawlor et al. demonstrates that childhood IQ scores from that era were strongly influenced by socioeconomic factors rather than solely reflecting innate intelligence. As the authors state, "In particular, we have found a pronounced graded association between paternal social class at birth and childhood intelligence at ages 7, 9, and 11 among children born in the 1950s" (Lawlor et al. 662). This finding suggests that IQ tests administered in the 1950s may not reliably measure innate intelligence, but instead capture a mixture of cognitive ability and early environmental advantages. Consequently, using these historical IQ scores to compare siblings or draw conclusions about intelligence differences may be misleading. To accurately assess cognitive development and the influence of factors like birth order, more modern and nuanced testing methods are needed that account for environmental and socioeconomic variables. The next major limitation in Young-Joo's study is the use of IQ scores that directly correlate with years of schooling. It is almost inevitable that students with more years of schooling, typically the older siblings, will score higher on IQ tests than younger siblings who have had less formal education. Young-Joo recognizes this issue, noting the educational gap within his sample: "From both samples, first-borns have 0.22 more years of schooling compared to middle-born children, for an implied effect of 9 percent of a standard deviation"(166) While this acknowledgment shows he is aware of the schooling discrepancy, he does not provide a numerical estimate of how much this difference in education inflates IQ scores, unlike Damian's study, which quantifies the effect. As a result, the true magnitude of the IQ difference in Young-Joo's findings remains unclear and may range from minimal to substantial. This unresolved issue raises questions about whether the higher IQ scores observed among first-borns reflect birth-order effects or simply differences in instructional time.

Studies like Damian's and Young-Joo's illustrate the shortcomings of Zajonc and Adler's theories while shedding light on the real impact of birth order. It is evident that Adler's theory lacks empirical support; firstborns are not universally more intelligent, nor do they all share the same personality traits. Zajonc's dilution theory, while offering an interesting perspective on intelligence distribution in families, does not provide the full explanation. If birth order does not strictly determine intelligence, then what does it truly influence? The answer lies in its social implications. Young-Joo highlights this by stating, "In contrast, Becker has considered the possibility that parental investments in human capital reinforce any innate ability difference among their children" (179). This suggests that birth order plays a role in shaping sibling dynamics through parental attention and resources rather than directly affecting intelligence.

Firstborns, for example, may initially receive more undivided attention, leading to early developmental advantages. However, as families grow, parental resources are distributed among multiple children, potentially shifting the focus toward factors like social roles, competition, or responsibility rather than intelligence itself. These social implications are crucial because they help explain differences in personality, leadership tendencies, and familial roles among siblings. Instead of determining IQ, birth order can influence how children interact within the family structure, how they develop their social skills, and even how they approach challenges in adulthood. Understanding this perspective moves the discussion away from intelligence-based determinism and toward a more nuanced view of how family dynamics shape personal development.

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF BIRTH ORDER

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory highlights how the dynamics of birth order within a family influence individual behavior and development. As discussed earlier, birth order doesn't hold any significance when it comes to intelligence or personality, according to Damian's study and the World Economic Forum, however, it is discovered that birth order does play a role in socialization in younger children. Kendra Cherry is a psychology educator and author known for writing accessible, research-based articles on cognitive, developmental, and social psychology. As a long-time contributor for Verywell Mind, she synthesizes psychological theories for general audiences using clear explanations and current research. According to Cherry people observe behavior either directly through social interactions with others or indirectly by observing behaviors through media as "children and adults often exhibit learning for things with which they have no direct experience." Cherry illustrates the vitality of social interaction as it allows those who observe to learn. Children do not have access to social interaction regularly, however, if they are exposed to siblings and interactions with siblings they often exhibit greater signs of social interaction than children without siblings. Bandura's social learning theory helps explain this difference: children with siblings get continuous opportunities to observe and practice social behaviors at home, while children without siblings often develop these skills later, through peers, teachers, and real-world interactions, learning them through their own experiences rather than through daily sibling dynamics. The World Economic Forum illustrates this theme themselves by stating, "siblings play an important role in each others' lives as companions, teachers, and caregivers." Similar to Cherry's explanation, siblings are vital to each other's lives as they allow for teaching opportunities and further cognitive development. A famous scenario of Bandura's social learning theory at play is Venus and Serena Williams and how they started playing tennis. Surprisingly Venus Williams picked up the sport first, illustrating an underlying influence that it had on Serena.Bandura's social learning theory teaches that we acquire new behaviors by watching and imitating those around us, a concept reflected in Howard's observation that "there's simply no overstating how much Venus paved the way for Serena, especially in their formative years, even though they were born just 15 months apart." (Howard). Howard's observation perfectly illustrates how an older sibling's mastery provides a live model for the younger to emulate. In this way, the sibling bond becomes a powerful channel for observational learning, where imitation and vicarious reinforcement drive development. Children are not simply born to be compared in terms of intelligence and personality; they play a crucial role in shaping their own development and that of their siblings, serving as essential components in the socialization process of many children. Bandura's social learning theory is a clear representation of that, as it is the embodiment of social interaction facilitating social learning, which is what birth order exactly does. However, if the oldest sibling displays harmful behaviors, younger siblings don't automatically copy them. Many of them actually avoid those actions after seeing the trouble they cause.

Birth order plays a social role with children and their siblings as it allows for opportunities of support and learning, specifically in social environments. Numerous studies show that children from larger families tend to develop stronger social skills, such as cooperation, conflict resolution, and understanding others' emotions, compared to those without siblings. Hughes' research explores the impact of both external stressors and internal family dynamics on child development, emphasizing how factors like socioeconomic status, family structure, and sibling relationships shape behavioral and social outcomes. Variability in child adjustment is shaped by both external family disruptions and internal family dynamics, such as birth order and sibling relationships. Hughes emphasizes the role of external stressors, stating that "variability in child adjustment was related to several family characteristics. Specifically, high problem scores were more common for children from families with low SES, from lone-parent households, from families that reported high levels of Covid-19 related disruption" (861). In this context, high problem scores refer to elevated levels of behavioral or emotional difficulties, such as aggression, anxiety, trouble following rules, or challenges cooperating with others. Likewise, SES (socioeconomic status) refers to a family's economic and social standing, including factors like income, education, and job stability. This suggests that children in unstable or highly disrupted environments are far more likely to struggle with both behavioral problems and prosocial behaviors because the lack of consistency, resources, and emotional support makes it harder for them to regulate themselves and develop healthy social skills. Birth order plays a crucial role in social development, as children with siblings often have built-in opportunities for emotional support and cooperative learning. Hughes' work helps illustrate just how early and instinctive this support can be. As Hughes notes, researchers "included 4-year-old siblings and found that around half of these 4-year-olds comforted their 14-month-old younger siblings when their mother left the room. Moreover, most showed monitoring behaviors when a stranger entered the room; likewise the stranger's presence led most of the 14-month-olds to approach their older sibling. Together, these findings indicate that even 4-year-olds can act as a 'secure base' for their younger siblings" (862). This direct observation shows that sibling support does not depend on ideal family conditions or perfect stability; rather, it reflects a natural, instinctive attachment process. Even when children live in environments affected by stress or disruption, having siblings can still provide meaningful emotional scaffolding that promotes social learning and resilience.

Hughes' research on birth order suggests that sibling relationships may act as a buffer, mitigating the negative effects of environmental instability. For instance, older siblings often take on a mentorship role, helping younger siblings understand social rules and providing emotional support in stressful situations. The connection between these perspectives highlights that while external disruptions like economic hardship or social distancing policies can challenge a child's adjustment, the presence of strong sibling relationships may serve as a protective factor. Looking into Hughe's study through bandura's social learning theory illustrates the dynamic relationship between the acquisition of siblings and socialization. When children often interact with one another, especially during secluded times such as Covid, these children remain socialized which grows their socialization factor. The World Economic Forum states, "Positive sibling ties and interactions can facilitate cognitive development, provide emotional support, and buffer siblings from adverse life events, including marital conflicts or poor peer relationships." According to Bandura, children learn not only from their parents but also from their siblings, who serve as accessible and relatable role models. In families with strong sibling bonds, younger children often observe and imitate their older siblings, learning social behaviors, problem-solving strategies, and emotional regulation techniques. This supports the idea that sibling relationships contribute to cognitive development by fostering cooperative learning, communication skills, and adaptive problem-solving. By applying Bandura's Social Learning Theory, it becomes evident that birth order is not just about intelligence differences but also about socialization. Siblings act as crucial agents of social learning, shaping one another's emotional and cognitive development through continuous interaction, observation, and reinforcement. This highlights the broader implications of birth order in shaping an individual's social resilience and interpersonal skills.

Birth order illustrates the lasting impact that siblings and a household have on the individual child, particularly in shaping how they learn and socialize. In this dynamic, siblings often become role models, with older siblings playing a critical part in the younger child's development. A recent study by Borairi et al. explores the nature of sibling influence during conflict and social interaction. As the authors explain, “we found evidence for an older to younger sibling socialization effect in which the more knowledgeable, more powerful older sibling influenced their younger sibling’s constructiveness” (Borairi et. al 118). This finding shows how deeply social learning is rooted within the family structure, where older siblings can reinforce behavior patterns, communication styles, and even problem-solving skills in their younger counterparts. Supporting this perspective, Tomás Lejarraga-whose research focuses on how social environments, especially sibling relationships, shape children’s decision-making skills-discusses the long-term effects of family dynamics on behavior and adaptability. He states, “the systematically different behavioral strategies emerging from competitive family dynamics may no longer be relevant or appropriate when the environment changes” (Lejarraga 67). An example of such an environmental shift could be when an older sibling leaves for college or when a child moves from the familiar structure of the home into a new social setting like school or the workplace, places where the roles and dynamics learned within the family no longer apply. While this suggests that learned behaviors may not always transfer smoothly outside the home, it also powerfully underscores how formative and pervasive those early family dynamics are. Within the family, especially through the lens of birth order, children develop social strategies shaped by the roles they adopt, such as the responsible firstborn or the adaptive youngest. These roles are not simply expressions of personality; they are responses to the family system itself. Birth order, then, is more than a label, it is a window into how children internalize their social environment, how parents distribute attention and responsibility, and how siblings actively shape one another’s developmental paths.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of birth order and its effects reveals compelling insights into the subtle but powerful ways siblings and family structure shape development. Through the lenses of Alfred Adler’s birth-order theory, Robert Zajonc’s confluence model, and Albert Bandura’s social learning theory, this research set out to uncover the truth behind long-standing beliefs about intelligence and personality. While earlier theories suggested that firstborns enjoy intellectual advantages, more recent, large-scale studies, such as Rodica Damian’s, indicate that any differences are so minor they hold little real-world significance. Instead, what consistently emerged was the deep social influence siblings have on one another. Bandura's framework helped underscore how children learn from those around them, especially their siblings, developing emotional intelligence, communication skills, and social adaptability through daily interactions. Birth order may not define how smart we are, but it plays a vital role in shaping how we connect, learn, and grow within our families.

Possible birth order research limitations should be accounted for in future research. Birth order research often overlooks the following key confounding factors: family size, parental age and resources, and socio-economic status, that vary systematically with a child's ordinal position, making it difficult to isolate the effect of birth rank itself. Moreover, wide age gaps between siblings can introduce cohort effects: older and younger siblings may experience different family dynamics, parental expectations, or even educational policies simply because they grew up in different years. Together, these unmeasured variables can produce spurious associations that falsely attribute personality or achievement differences to birth order. Future research can get more reliable results by comparing siblings within the same family, making sure to account for how many children there are and how far apart they are in age, and by including basic measures like parents' age and household income. Following the same siblings over several years helps spot changes as they grow. Instead of diving into complex models, researchers can simply pair up siblings. For example, firstborn vs. second-born and look at their differences side by side; this straightforward approach naturally holds constant with everything the siblings share, so any remaining gaps are more likely due to birth order itself, yielding a clearer picture of how birth order truly shapes development.

Birth order continues to spark discussion among researchers, with studies frequently shifting perspectives on its connection to intelligence. As research evolves and technology advances, clearer insights into this topic are likely to emerge. Yet, current findings consistently point to one conclusion: birth order has little to no meaningful impact on personality or intelligence. When the focus shifts beyond cognitive traits and onto the broader dynamics within a family, birth order reveals its true influence, enhancing social development through the unique bonds of siblinghood. Interactions between siblings play a powerful role in shaping emotional intelligence, communication skills, and adaptability. Looking ahead, future advancements in genetic and developmental research may provide the tools needed to address these complex questions. How do an individual's genes compare to those of their siblings and parents? Could certain parental genes influence intelligence, and might one sibling inherit more than another? Research exploring these genetic and familial nuances could reshape our understanding of birth order entirely, opening doors to groundbreaking discoveries in genetics, social behavior, and sibling dynamics. While the idea of comparing siblings' intelligence may seem trivial on the surface, the potential insights it offers could prove invaluable for future generations.

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The Exploration and Colonization of Mars: Is It Worth It?

ABSTRACT

Due to the recent advancements in modern technology and the expanding imagination of the human mind, the exploration of Mars has become a relevant and realistic question. This paper aims to research the complexities and questions that come with Mars exploration. These ideas are focused on, but not limited to, human psychology, robot exploration, and the politics, ethics, and finances that would go into a mission this size. The results are not simple; this topic is highly controversial and is dependent on each individual's opinion on the subject. It is found that exploration in general is a fundamental part of human nature. But, do the benefits in this situation outweigh the costs, or is it just too costly to be sending the human race to an unfamiliar planet? The findings in this paper are to help evaluate if Mars colonization is valuable to humankind or an unrealistic goal.

INTRODUCTION

Picture the idea of humans getting ready to board spacecrafts on Earth, leaving their lives behind here and starting fresh on a new planet: Mars. When they arrive, they encounter a whole new way of life, living in pressurized habitats with radiation shielding, each specific to their sector of life they are meant to support. This may seem quite futuristic, but it is not as extreme of an idea as you may think. Scientists, researchers, and developers have recently been devoting more time and effort into exploring beyond our planet. Mars, the neighboring planet to Earth, poses itself as a stellar candidate to be able to sustain humanity. This red orb possesses various traits which allow researchers to believe that life once thrived there and it could again. But why would exploring Mars even be a topic of interest? Since the start of human civilization, it has been etched into our fundamental nature the need to explore uncharted, unfamiliar territory. This fascination in exploration has not dwindled over the course of time, but instead, has expanded far beyond what our brains can imagine. For this information to even be slightly possible is an astronomical achievement in itself. Earth for so long has been thought of as the only planet able to sustain different life forms. But now, with this new finding, it opens up a whole new adventure of exploring Mars. Thus, the end goal is to get humans landing on Mars, being fully immersed in what the planet has to offer, and discovering the possibilities and limitations the planet holds.

By just thinking out loud, Mars must be within reach because it is the planet next to Earth… right? And yet, this turns out to be the exact opposite. Mars is much further than humans realize, both physically and logistically. This creates a variety of obstacles and challenges that come with the mission in exploring Mars. So, this idea of exploring and desiring to colonize another planet opens the floor to many questions–open-ended questions that are tough to answer. As a result, the mind will start to wonder–as many of ours will do–is it justifiable to devote more time and resources to exploring Mars and could life thrive there? Is humanity advanced enough for this?

Colonizing and exploring Mars is a complex idea that brings up multiple issues like political and financial standpoints, ethical standpoints, and psychological standpoints. For instance, are humans developed or mentally prepared enough to travel outside of Earth? Some may argue that this is just an escape from our issues and ourselves on the current planet we reside on. Others may say it is our destiny and God-given right to explore and colonize where possible. Furthermore, this mission would be extremely costly, as it would need to account for all the different possible scenarios. Thus, with such a high percentage of possible failure, is it worth funding the money and resources? Is it ethical to move life to another planet if humans destroyed the first one? With global warming destroying our planet as this paper is being written, should humans be given another planet, like Mars, to possibly destroy? Should we instead solve our problems on Earth first before looking elsewhere in our galaxy? What would really change if humans left to go live on Mars? And if this did occur, who would decide who leaves and who stays? What political/legal/moral system would operate on Mars? The questions are endless, as this is truly a complicated idea that intertwines with almost everything humanity has to overcome. This paper will investigate if it is ethical, justifiable, or humanly and financially possible for us to inhabit and explore Mars.

THE DESIRE FOR EXPLORATION

"It should be recognized that it is not self-evidently *necessary* to send humans into space. In fact, it is not *necessary* to do any research at all" (Shelhamer, 37). Has this thought ever crossed your mind? Author Mark Shelhamer touches on an important idea that gets completely overlooked in this argument: there is no necessity or need to explore space. It is not an obligation, but yet a want and a desire to explore the unknown and beyond our world. To explain this idea involves our psychology and why we think/process the way we do. Since the start of time, civilization has widely occurred due to the innate desire of people wanting to explore. It has always been a part of our history and who we are. It is science "in its most basic form — asking questions of the natural world and, we hope, using the answers for the betterment of everything on Earth" (The Editors). Since this is how science operates, our ancestors took this and explored caves, jungles, and seas, which in turn developed as an instinctual need to explore beyond what is known. But as time goes on, and technology continues to advance, the idea of exploration goes far beyond our reach and, "inspires us, widens our knowledge and gives us hope for a better future" (The Editors). This idea of exploration being a way to better our future plays a significant role in understanding why humans want to explore Mars. For example, Elon Musk and SpaceX have a mission to colonize Mars. He has made it "no secret of his passion to make humanity a multiplanetary species by creating a self-sustaining society on Mars as a backup plan in case Earth is destroyed in a cataclysmic event" (Billings, 44-45). Thus, we see here that Musk views Mars as an opportunity to prolong the longevity of humanity and for the betterment of our race, which directly correlates to what The Editors had to say about exploration. It poses as an alternative plan to allow humans to be able to survive if something were to happen on Earth, relatable to this idea of "hope for a better future." But, Lori Marino, author of "Humanity is Not Prepared to Colonize Mars," views Elon Musk's attempt at space travel as an escape from our problems here on Earth. His reason, "for wanting to colonize Mars is to save ourselves and it is self-evident that this alone recommends we should not be going anywhere" (Marino, 15). To save ourselves. Stop and think about that for second. To create the excuse, "to save ourselves," means that Earth has been destroyed, ruined. But humans were the cause of this. Overpopulation, pollution, and over-industrialization has caused our planet to lose its efficiency to just name a few. A popular common example of this is global warming. Escaping the problem we have created may represent that humanity is not prepared to jump to the next planet; we may just destroy the next. Mars is a planet that is untouched, undamaged by human nature, and so close but still out of reach. Therefore, the psychology behind humans' need to explore Mars becomes simple: it represents our future, a hopeful future, where the planet is virgin and undestroyed, waiting to be uncovered.

ROBOT EXPLORATION

Is there another, safer way, to gather intelligence on whether colonizing Mars is possible? Robots would seem to be a more effective, efficient solution to this, as they are less costly and pose a smaller risk than sending humans there would. In fact, there are already various rovers currently on the surface of this red planet: Perseverance (NASA's newest rover), Tianwen-1 and Zhuround (China's Mars orbiter and rover), Hope (United Arab Emirates Mars mission), and so forth. It is no secret that these rovers are collecting significant amounts of data that we otherwise would not have, but only to a certain extent. If we are to exclude sending humans to Mars and if only "automated systems are sent, the ability to observe the unexpected is limited — automated systems can be very sophisticated but to a great extent they look for what they have been designed to look for" (Shelhamer, 39). And this is true. Robots are only designed to look for what scientists on Earth *program* them to look for. This can create room for error by not finding every factor that is prevalent on the planet's surface. Humans, on the other hand, have the ability to directly observe everything, picking up on details that a robotic structure may miss. A human could go into a mission with specific goals set, just like a robot, but would be able to observe extra details that may not have been a part of their goals. This is a valid point for those arguing for humans to explore Mars, as we would need to see the effect of Mars' atmosphere radiation on humans, not just on the rovers.

FINANCES

Although governments have the ability to fund projects and resources that support the colonization of Mars, the costs become increasingly unreasonable with a high risk of failure. So, a cost-benefit analysis approach would be appropriate here, as the costs and benefits are directly related to each other. In Bethany Ehlmann's, "Humans to

Mars: A Feasibility and Cost-Benefit Analysis," she greatly touches on this idea. In general, the cost, "for a human Mars mission range from a low of $20 billion to a high of $450 billion" (Ehlmann, 854). To illustrate how massive this amount of spending is, let's put it into simpler terms with an example of how many people live in the United States. If you were to split $450 billion among the entire nation's population of 343 million people, each person would still get $1311.95! And with this estimated cost to Mars, this total does not account for possible challenges or troubles that could arise on the way there. Some are worried that if this money is taken out of the budget, it could cause a decrease in the human services sector, which includes healthcare services, the food service industry, and mental health services, among others, and are arguably more important to some individuals than space exploration. Why spend money on such an extreme mission when the money can be put towards figuring out more affordable healthcare? Additionally,various protection measures would need to be put in place for the astronauts traveling to Mars, as the radiation exposure and microgravity conditions could be harmful. The rocket would also need much more gas thana lunar mission, as well as extra gas in case of a change in plans. Something important to note here is that this gas is not the regular everyday gas that we put in our cars, but rather, this gas is a combination of liquid propellants. To set the stage, let's examine the NASA Space Shuttle. This shuttle used around 729,007kg of gaseous substances, which cost NASA around $1,380,000 (Seibert). Rockets also need boosters as well as gas. These boosters also contain propellants, and for NASA's space shuttle, their boosters cost roughly $4.5 million in 2008. Monetary value has since increased. Now think about a mission to Mars, which is a much more difficult and longer journey. The price would be extremely amplified. As a result, even with this mission being overly expensive, it is highly possible that the benefits would completely outweigh the costs.

Authors Dirk Schulze-Makuch and Paul Davies believe they have a possible solution to this financial craze. This solution entails a one way mission to Mars, where the astronauts would devote the rest of their lives to research instead of coming back to Earth. Schulze-Makuch and Davies believe that Earth is an extremely vulnerable planet that is subject to cosmic events, global pandemics, nuclear or biological warfare, ecological collapses, supervolcanoes, and so forth (Schulze-Makuch and Davies). By sending astronauts to live on Mars, it cuts the financial costs drastically, as a mission home does not have to be accounted for. In doing this, it becomes the first step in initiating a human presence on the planet, which is a huge achievement in itself. These astronauts, giving up their lives on our home planet, would be able to accomplish various things on Mars that a back and forth mission may not. For example, it would be possible to study whether the lifespan of these astronauts decreased when living in Mars' atmospheric conditions or stayed the same. We would also be able to determine any progressing changes that the planet is facing. A one-way mission would be a solution to answering these long-term questions. The astronauts would be resupplied periodically in an efficient manner in order to survive. But astronauts would have to volunteer for this, knowing they would never return. Thus, our big question of whether this is ethical comes into play. This solution to the financial and physical problems that come along with exploring Mars, "would require not only major international cooperation, but a return to the exploration spirit and risk-taking ethos of the great period of Earth exploration, from Columbus to Amundsen, but which has nowadays been replaced with a culture of safety and political correctness" (Shulze-Makuch and Davies). In the current state of the world, countries tend to handle their matters separate from one another due to conflicting interests. Whether this has to do with space policy, agricultural policy, or any policy in general, all countries differ in their ideologies. But beyond this, people have now retracted inwards in terms of exploration. We now live in a world where ethical questions tend to outweigh the possibility of risk-taking, and being politically correct is more important. People are now, more than ever, more worried about what is publicly appropriate and/or what follows a moral code. In this case, are we okay with sending humans to space with a knowingly high possibility for error and failure–where this failure is ending up dead? Or, is death inevitable where no sacrifice is too small and every development is a major win? This idea could possibly be a revelation for all of humanity and the future colonies to come, but how do we measure this scale of sacrifice that will be beneficial to humankind? We do not even know if this would happen to benefit us because there are so many risk factors involved. Therefore, it is now evident that there are not only financial costs, but also political and ethical costs that come into consideration.

POLITICAL ASPECT

Some might imagine that politics would never play a role in the exploration of space, but in fact, they play a massive part in determining whether colonizing Mars becomes an actual possibility. As mentioned before, Elon Musk is developing his own program because he has more money than one can handle. People with money and resources tend to promote this type of exploration because, although it is not a guarantee that the mission will be successful, they will have more money and resources to try a new approach if it fails. Those against it tend to look at it from an ethical perspective, as should we even be trying to discover if a new planet is viable for us given that we destroyed the first one. But, in looking at politics in a different sense, let's focus on if we do make it to Mars. What political system would be run there? Who would decide who gets to go, what the rules are, where to colonize, and so forth. Mars does not solely belong to one country but instead is a singular planet, so how will politics be decided in the area? Gregory Anderson, author of "The Politics of Settling Space," touches on all bases of questions that occur directly related to politics. Specifically, it is important to realize that "settlement policies will reflect the physical realities of space, but they will also be dependent on the political and economic realities of Earth. In turn, the nature of space settlements and their relationship with Earth will depend on when they are built, and who builds them, and why they are built" (Anderson, 65). Although the way life will operate on Mars will differ from Earth, it will be reflective of Earth in the sense that Anderson describes. On Earth, each nation is constructed differently, abides by different laws, and upholds different ideologies. This is deeply rooted in the way each country came about and will not simply be discarded if humans move to a different planet. Who builds what on Mars, where on Mars, and when is reflective of where they are from on Earth. This idea ties directly back to the rovers specific to each country: Perseverance, Hope, Tianwen-1, and Zhuround. With each rover associated with a specific nation, they will only be programmed to look for things how they would on Earth. Thus, the possibility of how colonies will orient themselves based on their ideologies on Earth starts to peek through even with the rovers currently on Mars. This could be a base way of thinking when it comes to determining the type of political system on Mars, as the territory claimed will be valued by that country and that country only.

Regardless of the actual way they work on Mars, the legal system itself is one of the greatest challenges that comes with talking about the colonization of Mars. This is due to the fact that living on Mars "will be characterized by high levels of stress and existential anxiety and uncertainty" (Szocik, 28). Living on a different planet is a concept that the mind cannot fully wrap itself around until faced with that situation. A majority of the human race will never know what it feels like to exit the parameters of Earth and experience the never-ending universe. For example, have you ever thought about how cosmically small the Earth actually is? We are a speck of dust in comparison to the universe, yet Earth seems so massive to us. If you start to think about this too hard, you may feel what Szocik described as existential anxiety. Now, take this anxiety being felt on Earth and multiply it by living on a planet that is completely different from our home. No colonization, no humans, no architecture, no satellite, etc. Think about all that is relied on here on Earth that is taken for granted. Therefore, the Martian colony becomes an increasingly high pressure, high stress environment. With these difficult standards and conditions, "we can suppose that the Martian 'struggle for existence' could have even greater brutal nature because everyone tends to survival, especially in such specific conditions" (Szocik, 29). Humans in any situation that tends to be a high pressure environment will resort to their survival instincts, which is not always the most rational manner of thinking. Therefore, with this knowledge and applying it to Mars, the amount of pressure would be magnified in all ways. The fight to compete with each other in any matter will be at an all time high causing a tense and aggressive environment. Therefore, does it become completely practical to think that the use of legal systems here on Earth will work sufficiently on Mars? A possible solution to this could be that "these legal systems will be easily applied at the level of small group. The more and complex group, the more difficult social and legal organization which can require and authority to create and protect the law" (Szocik, 28). What Szocik is insinuating is that legal systems should be operated on a more miniscule level–at least to start off. By starting small, groups will be able to adjust to the new environment and learn how to cooperate with each other. Overall, the goal should be to develop a more advanced, larger legal system, but it should start small in order to establish a sense of stability. As a result, this raises questions about how a larger overall system would operate, such as how would these small groups come together and form into one? Would nations be divided into their own small groups like the way the United States currently operates? Or would nations mix between each other because Mars is different from Earth? Afterall, Mars is the perfect symbol of new beginnings across the board. Hence, legal systems may operate completely differently than here on Earth.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The potential to colonize Mars raises a series of ethical considerations with respect to humans–both colonists and people of Earth–and ethical considerations with respect to Mars itself and its habitat. These ethical problems not only include the question of whether it is a smart idea to move to a different planet, but also the behaviors of those who would be colonizing while being in an isolated and closed environment. Studies have shown that groups of individuals who are subject to isolation promote "more abrasive and defensive behavior in individuals, which may negatively affect the social dynamics of a small crew, even to the extent of mission sabotage" (Levchenko). Have you ever watched a science fiction movie where they are on a space mission and one of the crew members just ends up losing it? This is what Levchenko is describing. Astronauts must be mentally evaluated before entering space, but nothing can truly predict how one will react when actually faced with the situation. A mission to Mars would be highly isolating and definitely has the chance to bring out this defensive behavior being discussed. If those initial astronauts have issues like this, it presents a problem on a greater scale when talking about possible colonization. "Is [it] worth bearing in mind that these astronauts will be aware of the fact that they will be unable to return to the Earth at least a number of years," or ever at all (Szocik, 28)? We do not know the toll and to what extent it will take on the astronauts carrying out this mission, and how it will affect them over time, even if they successfully make it to Mars. Thus, there needs to be a way to address this issue if the mission ever became an actual reality: consent. All participants would have to know every risk that comes with the mission, whether that be physically, mentally, or emotionally, and must consent to the mission. (Levchenko). But, does asking for consent make the mission ethical? This is what we will try to explore.

One of the strongest arguments for those who support the colonization of Mars is that it will promote the survival of humanity in case things were to go south on Earth. This is more so referring to if there was a catastrophic event that made Earth no longer viable for humans to live on. But, humans have continued to prove that wherever we colonize, even just new land on Earth, the environment is inevitably affected. To illustrate this, let's imagine an example of an untouched area of land that holds an endangered species. If humans were to come and find this land, they would colonize it, thus hurting the habitat of the endangered species and contributing to its extinction. Any action that an individual has on Earth accumulates to the environment being affected overall. A more known example of this is global change. We burn fossil fuels consistently, contributing to the rise in Earth's temperature, which is negatively impacting the environment. What's to stop humans from doing this if they just switched planets? Thus, if humans do make it to Mars, "if native life is discovered, should it be preserved and protected? Would it even be possible to discover and recognize these most probably microscopic organisms before changing their environment?" (Levchenko). In any chance for this to occur, we would have to study Mars' surface without physically touching it yet. This research would require its own technology and would have to be studied intensively in order to figure out if other life forms are thriving on the planet. Even if these life forms are not visible to the naked eye, humans would be disturbing them with an arrival to the planet. Is this essentially necessary if we have a home planet that we know supports us?

CONCLUSION

After reviewing the following evidence, it can be duly noted that this topic of interest is increasingly controversial and comes with many implications. Timelines are already being drafted up as to when a possible mission will occur. A study conducted by the Planetary Society is hopeful for the following timeline: "The first human expedition is scheduled for the 2033 launch opportunity. This will achieve orbit around Mars and perhaps visit Phobos, but not land on the planet. A test of the Mars lander on the Moon is scheduled for 2035. The first human landing on Mars in 2039 will be a short stay mission. The first long stay mission is to follow in 2043" (Genta). The Mars lander would first stop on the Moon because this travel is much shorter and the Moon is a suitable test choice. Although this is on the more optimistic side, there are pessimists who see the timeline differently, "with dates between 2040 and 2050 (or perhaps 2060)" (Genta). But are we ready for this, is *humanity* ready for this? It is so hard to give such a certain answer because we have yet to achieve this mission. At this stage, it is still so hypothetical.

It is my assessment that humans should not colonize, nor are prepared to sustain a lifestyle on an extraterrestrial surface. Yes, the fact that this is even an idea in our heads to try and possibly achieve is a successful achievement for humanity as a whole. But, there are too many "what ifs" that come with the exploration of Mars. We already have a home planet: Earth. Although humans continue to destroy our planet and the temperatures continue to rise, leaving would be an escape from our problems. Instead of moving to a different planet, where the risks are extremely high, we should stay on Earth, and collectively as a species, be able to deal with our issues and change them for the betterment of humankind. Once these problems are addressed and situated, I believe it would be more ethical to start looking to explore other planets. But for now, this is just an endless space race of those who have the money to explore and try to advance us in ways we are not ready for. When the time comes, and science and technology continues to prove it eventually will, will it be justified–in all aspects–to explore and colonize Mars? The decision is up to us all.

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Meher Narang

Polished, but Not Too Much: The Paradox of Beauty Labor

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to discuss how modern beauty standards and fashion expectations function as a form of social regulation that shapes women's experiences in Western professional spaces. Through the analysis of different gender-law research, workplace case studies, and media discourse, this paper will outline how contemporary beauty norms function as forms of social control and how these norms intensify in professional environments through the demands to appear both feminine and professional, leading to significant mental, physical, and professional consequences. Drawing on theorists such as Laura Mulvey and Sandra Bartky, this paper examines how women internalize the male gaze, resulting in constant self-monitoring. This behaviour drives women to engage in beauty labor, a term which sociologists use to describe the unpaid and often overlooked work required of women to meet society's gendered expectations. The discussion then moves on to the idea that women face a double blind in professional settings, such that insufficient femininity may create views of unprofessionalism or lack of approachability, while excessive femininity risks being interpreted as hypersexualized, or lacking seriousness. This distress reinforces unequal expectations in the workplace, resulting in increased anxiety, ongoing self-monitoring, and diminished confidence in women. This paper further considers examples from different professional fields, such as medicine or human resources, and includes an analysis of professional attire to demonstrate how these gendered norms affect workplace interactions and opportunities. Finally, the paper will examine how feminists, through the medium of fashion, use it as a means to resist these norms, emphasizing how activists challenge traditional beauty standards to reclaim autonomy over their self-presentation. Together, these ideas will present how beauty labor strengthens gendered hierarchies within professional settings and how ongoing resistance seeks to redefine the relationship between appearance, authority, and women's autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, British receptionist Nicola Thorp arrived for her first day at the PwC financial firm in London wearing flat shoes, only to be sent home without pay for violating the company's dress code, which required women to wear heels. When Thorp refused to buy high heels and return to work, she was dismissed. Her experience sparked a national conversation about gendered dress codes, as she stated, " I was expected to do a nine-hour shift on my feet escorting clients to meeting rooms. I said 'I just won't be able to do that in heels'" ("London Receptionist 'Sent Home for Not Wearing Heels'", 2016). Her story is one of many women worldwide who face similar issues of being told how to perform their gender in their workplace. Across professional environments, women face subtle but powerful pressures to conform to aesthetic standards that are deeply gendered and unequally enforced by society. These pressures reveal a larger, more troubling dynamic. Although the twenty-first century world claims to celebrate individual choice and self-expression, women's appearances especially in professional spaces remain policed through both explicit policies and implicit expectations. Legal scholar Deborah Rhode, whose work is reviewed by Margaret duMais Svogun in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought*, describes this phenomenon as the "beauty bias," where physical appearance becomes a measurable factor in hiring, promotion, and credibility (qtd. in Svogun 1). The burden placed on women to navigate these appearance-based expectations is not merely a personal inconvenience but rather reflects deep rooted societal norms that define femininity, professionalism, and authority in conflicting, often harmful ways.

Thus, through this paper, I aim to explore how contemporary beauty standards and fashion expectations in Western professional spaces impose a paradoxical burden on women, and examine the mental, physical, and professional consequences of this beauty labor. This paper begins by analyzing how beauty norms, such as clear skin and thinness, function as forms of social control, shaping how women monitor their bodies and how they are evaluated by others. It then turns to the unique pressures women face in professional environments, where they must navigate the tension of projecting professionalism and conforming to gendered expectations of femininity. Finally, the paper explains the emotional, physical, and professional implications of this unpaid beauty labor, and considers how feminist movements use fashion as a platform for resistance against these demands.

This is particularly applicable to women across the professional world, where they are not only expected to conform to professional standards but also must manage the extent to which they express femininity. These demands create a distinct form of unpaid beauty labor, work that reflects a specific appearance and beauty practice performed on oneself and on others. (Kwan and Trautner 50). From chronic self-monitoring to diminished well-being, the toll of meeting these expectations reveals how appearance becomes a form of invisible work. In response to these pressures, many feminists turned fashion into a site of resistance that challenged this notion of beauty labor and redefined women's rights by allowing them to choose how and what they want to wear without any pressure. By tracing these intersecting dynamics, this paper argues that beauty labor reinforces gendered hierarchies, under the name of professionalism, highlighting the need for a deeper cultural reckoning with who defines authority and at what cost.

BEAUTY AS A SOCIAL CONTROL

The prevalent societal expectations surrounding beauty and femininity extend beyond mere physical appearance. They serve as powerful tools of social control, regulating women's behavior, and self-perception. Standards such as having clear skin, a slim body, well-styled hair, and subtle but effective makeup, are normalized as checkpoints for women to fulfill to look desirable, competent, and of social worth. These norms are not merely suggestions but rather become unspoken criteria for judging a woman's success, likability, and professionalism.

A significant part of understanding this phenomenon is the concept of the "male gaze," a term coined by film theorist Laura Mulvey, which refers to the prevalent social expectation that women are objects of visual consumption (Mulvey 808-809). The male gaze goes beyond just the act of looking; rather, it reflects an ingrained societal structure that assumes women exist to be seen, assessed, and judged based on appearance. Eventually, women internalize this gaze, learning to see themselves through the eyes of others. Sandra Bartky explores this in her book, *Femininity and Domination*, where she argues that women's bodies are shaped by a series of invisible yet strong practices that enforce conformity to beauty standards. This power does not work through force but through norms that women ultimately get controlled by. Bartky notes, "The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day… has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance" (Bartky 80). This policing of the self contributes to a broader system in which "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies"(Bartky 63). Failure to perform femininity correctly does not simply result in social exclusion but may carry economic consequences, such as being denied job opportunities or professional credibility, which is evidenced as "conformity to the prevailing standards of bodily acceptability is a known factor in economic mobility" (Bartky 72).

One of the clearest examples of this disciplinary regime can also be found in the case of Victoria's Secret. For nearly twenty years, it has been one of the most dominant and recognizable lingerie brands in the world, shaping mainstream ideals of feminine beauty through its advertising and cultural presence. The brand built its legacy on the image of the "Victoria's Secret Angel", a hypersexualized, slim, tall, and conventionally attractive standard of beauty, who is often dressed in extravagant lingerie and wings, parading down televised runway shows. These campaigns not only elevated a narrow vision of desirability but also turned lingerie into a performance designed primarily for male consumption. This aesthetic, centered around the male gaze, equated beauty with thinness, whiteness, and overt sexuality, leaving little space for alternative expressions of femininity or body diversity.

Figure 1 (Left). Gigi Hadid modeling during the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show at the Brooklyn Navy Yard on October 15, 2024 in Brooklyn, New York. Photo: Masato Onoda/WWD.

Figure 2 (Right). Paloma Elsesser attends Victoria's Secret celebrates The Tour '23 at Hammerstein Ballroom on September 06, 2023 in New York City. Gotham/WireImage/Getty Images

In 2021, Victoria's Secret attempted to rebrand itself by retiring the Angels and introducing a more diverse lineup of models, and launching the VS Collective, a group of diverse women athletes, activists, and public figures, who would advise and promote the company. The picture on the left (Figure 1) is Gigi Hadid, who is an American fashion model and has been a VS runway model since 2015

(Robinson), while the picture on the right (Figure 2) is Paloma Elsesser, a plus size model and body positivity advocate and is a member of the VS Collective campaign (Legg). It is evident from the pictures themselves that Hadid is seen exemplifying the brand's historic emphasis on hyper-sexualised idealised beauty, while Elsesser reflects the brand's attempt to embrace body positivity and a broader standard of beauty. While visually distinct, this shift raises questions about whether these changes signal meaningful progress or merely rebranding.

Paige Hagy's article, a reporter who does narrative journalism, claims that "Victoria's Secret has made billions selling lingerie designed and marketed through the male gaze" (Hagy). Although Hagy reports on the company's rebranding efforts, media scholar Mary Angela Bock adds, "It's really hard to turn a ship that has been about exterior perfection and suddenly say, 'Oh the exterior perfection doesn't matter anymore'" (Hagy). The continued dominance of a narrowly defined ideal of beauty undermines the company's claims of feminist transformation and reinforces the idea that beauty work is obligatory for women in the public eye. This aligns with broader feminist critiques of the fashion industry, which argue that the commodification of women's bodies leads to objectification rather than empowerment.

Women are increasingly expected to invest in their appearance as a form of unpaid labor, or a third shift, performed in addition to their professional and domestic responsibilities. This phenomenon is known as beauty labor, or beauty work, which Kwan and Trautner, two sociologists who examined how beauty norms function within gendered hierarchies through qualitative interviews with working class women, define as "work that individuals perform on themselves to elicit certain benefits within a specific social hierarchy" (Kwan and Trautner 50). Beauty work includes activities such as hairstyling, shaving your body, applying makeup, maintaining a low body weight, or even undergoing cosmetic procedures, tasks that are routine yet time-intensive, physically taxing, and emotionally demanding. These tasks, though time-consuming, are rarely recognized as labor because they are so deeply normalized under the cover of personal care. Kwan and Trautner argue that beauty work is a form of discipline embedded in institutions and normalized to the extent that not following it can result in social, economic, or professional penalties (Kwan and Trautner 52). What appears to be personal choice is in fact a deeply social act structured by cultural hierarchies of value and visibility. And while beauty labor is often framed as self-expression, in reality, there is no physical reward that women get out of performing it, but only compliance. For most women, the best reward is to be seen as presentable or professional enough to be taken seriously. This burden is especially harsh for women who fall outside dominant beauty standards, including women of color, older women, and those in larger bodies, who are often held to stricter standards and face harsher judgment.

Autumn Whitefield-Madrano also examines what women actually gain from beauty labor in her essay. Rather than framing beauty work as empowering, she questions whether the rewards women supposedly receive are actually pleasurable. Whitefield-Madrano notes that while beauty culture encourages women to find intrinsic motivation, she herself is "questioning how much I actually like the act of putting on makeup" (Whitefield-Madrano), revealing that the "reward" of beauty labor is often uncertain or even absent. She also admits "... I dread shaving my legs… but do it nearly every day…"(Whitefield-Madrano), suggesting that beauty work frequently persists out of habit, pressure, or social expectation rather than joy. Together, these reflections highlight how beauty labor often functions less as a freely chosen act of self-expression and more as a socially conditioned routine, intended to meet external expectations and avoid negative judgment, rather than to gain genuine pleasure.

PERFORMANCE OF FEMININITY IN MODERN WORKPLACES

In professional settings, the beauty standards that govern society at large become even more sharply enforced, shaping not only what women wear but how they navigate the workplace itself. They are subject to a specific and paradoxical standard: They must appear feminine enough to be attractive, yet neutral enough to be taken seriously. These unspoken expectations shape not only what women wear but also how they navigate the workplace itself. While men are typically free to rely on minimal grooming and standardized clothing, women are burdened with the task of crafting an appearance that balances beauty and professionalism, a task that requires time, money, and emotional labor.

This gendered double standard reflects what Margaret Svogun discusses in her review of Deborah L. Rhode's *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law* for the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Though*t, where she outlines how women are judged, hired, and promoted not solely on merit, but on how well they align with dominant beauty norms. She observes that, although men are by no means exempt from appearance-based prejudice, women suffer the consequences of "lookism", the discrimination based on physical appearance to meet societal beauty standards and to penalise those who don't, more heavily due to entrenched cultural and institutional standards. Reflecting on her own experiences, Rhode recounts that even women in high-ranking intellectual roles are expected to embody visual femininity: "Well-meaning colleagues made it clear to her that her casual approach to such matters as clothing choice and hair styling was not in keeping with her professional status" (qtd. in Svogun 1). Rather than being a matter of self-expression, maintaining an acceptable appearance becomes a form of unpaid labor essential to employability, likability, and respectability, which thus emphasises the notion that beauty labor is not optional; rather, it is often a condition for participation in professional life.

"University tells women the key to getting a good job is tight clothing," Now To Love, 28 Oct. 2013.

Evidence of how these pressures are culturally embedded, even in supposedly progressive work environments, can be found in Valbrune's article for Forbes Human Resources Council, "Gender-Based Dress Codes: Human Resources, Diversity and Legal Impact." Valbrune notes how employers who enforce gender-based dress codes "assume the risk of running afoul of gender discrimination" (Valbrune); however still maintain them, revealing just how normalised these gender expectations have become. Valbrune further highlights the imbalance by noting that, "a policy that requires women to wear makeup, have their hair done, wear stockings, etc., whereas men must simply look 'neat,' might prove problematic" (Valbrune) depicts the contrast that makes it clear how women are expected to satisfy a long list of appearance-based criteria to be seen as professional, while men meet the standard merely by appearing "neat," showing how dress codes systematically demand more labor, time, and monitoring from women than from men.

Meeting beauty expectations can undermine a woman's seriousness and credibility, fulfilling the societal gaze while diminishing her professional authority. On the other hand, rejecting these standards by dressing too masculinely or minimizing aesthetic effort can result in being overlooked, ignored, or perceived as "unfeminine." The result is an exhausting act of balance which is depicted in the picture below where the "before" is where a woman is dressed too femininely and "after" she is. In the "before" image on the left, the woman is dressed in a professional button-up shirt, grey slacks, and flats. The outfit is simple and neutral in tone, blue and grey, making it appropriate for a workplace setting. However, while this would be considered acceptable if worn by a man, it's often seen as insufficiently feminine on a woman. Despite meeting the standards of professionalism, the outfit fails to perform gender in a way that society expects from women which may lead her to be perceived as less approachable, less polished, or even judged less competent compared to men wearing the exact same style of clothing. Thus, this can hurt their credibility and reduce their chances of being trusted with leadership roles or advancement.

In contrast, the "after" image on the right aligns more with societal expectations of femininity: the woman wears a sleeveless blouse, a fitted skirt, heels, and a full face of makeup, accessorized and smiling. She appears more polished, but now she may be perceived as too feminine. Her bare arms and legs can be read as inappropriate or overly sexualized, and her visible engagement with beauty practices (eg., wearing five products of makeup) might invite assumptions that she's superficial or not focused on work. This image illustrates the impossible double standard women face in professional spaces where women must not only meet workplace standards, but also calibrate their appearance to perform femininity correctly in order to be taken seriously.

This paradox is not new, and the emergence of the "career woman" archetype in the late twentieth century illustrates this vividly. As Joanne Entwistle explains in her chapter "'Power Dressing' and the Construction of the Career Woman" in the journal *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, a woman's entrance into corporate spaces is accompanied by the rise of a new, carefully curated professional style the "power suit" (Entwistle 285). The suit adopted a masculine style with a "tailored skirt suit with shoulder pads, in grey, blue or navy, accessorised with 'token female garb such as bows and discreet jewellery'" (Entwistle 285) to add that feminine touch. The authors argue that the career woman's wardrobe became a uniform on how a woman should be dressed for work in order to be considered professional. Rather than liberating women, this expectation pressured women to walk a narrow aesthetic line to be credible and constantly adjust their self-presentation based on an internalized sense of how they would be perceived.

Moreover, Entwistle highlights that this professional aesthetic created an entire genre of beauty labor unique to women, which they are inevitably expected to follow without having any explicit external pressure. The author emphasizes how "companies expect their professional female workers to have internalised the codes of dress required by the job" (Entwistle 292), which makes the career woman's image inseparable from the labor of maintaining it.

MENTAL, PHYSICAL, AND PROFESSIONAL CONSEQUENCES

Despite the push for gender equity in professional spaces, women continue to bear the psychological and emotional costs of beauty labor. These expectations are especially pronounced in professional spaces, where appearance is entangled with credibility and competence. Women who fail to meet aesthetic norms or even those who meet them too well often experience implicit bias, microaggressions, and persistent self-doubt. This is vividly illustrated in an article by Dr. Julia Reilly, "I Wish Someone Had Told Me About the Challenges of Being a Woman in Medicine," in which she reflects on how frequently she has been mistaken for a nurse or support staff simply because she did not align with the expected visual image of a doctor. She cites an instance where she had been meeting with an older male patient, who, upon seeing her, said, "'Oh. I've been picturing Dr. Reilly as a strong, male doctor'" (Reilly). Reilly goes on to admit, "It made me look back and think about how incidents like that have affected me, consciously and subconsciously, over the course of my training" (Reilly). These cumulative moments of being visually miscategorized chip away confidence, reinforcing the idea that women's appearances, particularly when they deviate from a masculine-coded standard of authority, can undermine perceived expertise. Reilly concludes that each time her legitimacy is questioned, "I question myself" (Reilly), a meaningful recognition of the psychological toll of being shaped through narrow, gendered expectations of what authority should look like.

This mental burden is further supported by psychological literature by Mariana Merino and colleagues drawing on Objectification Theory (which is how women are routinely viewed and evaluated as objects or body parts, leading them to internalize an observer's perspective and constantly monitor their appearance). Merino and her colleagues examine how social media can have a significant impact on the internalization of beauty ideals. They highlight how engaging in habitual self-monitoring, which can be defined as the consistent tendency to adjust one's behavior and appearance according to the "perceived standards of attractiveness" (Merino et al 6), can eventually lead to chronic psychological distress.

The emotional strain of navigating this dual expectation of creating a balance between being authoritative and feminine has significant psychological consequences. Merioni et al. note, "the internalization of an external viewpoint leads to habitual body monitoring… detracting from one's ability to engage fully in life's broader aspects, such as personal achievements and relationships" (Merioni et al. 3). Although this quote focuses broadly on self-monitoring, its implications are especially pronounced in the workplace. When women must constantly track how their appearance is being evaluated, that cognitive effort is diverted away from tasks that actually matter such as leadership, decision-making, or intellectual performance. What may appear as a polished and composed exterior is often the product of emotional exhaustion. In this way, the psychological burden described by Merino et al. also becomes a professional burden, as beauty labor drains the very mental resources women need to succeed, forcing them to work harder simply to be seen as equally competent. Far from being a matter of personal style, beauty labor functions as a silent, ongoing demand for professional survival.

FEMINIST RESISTANCE AND PUSHBACK

While beauty standards have historically served as tools of control, fashion has also provided a medium through which women can reclaim autonomy and challenge gendered expectations. Even within this oppressive framework, women have long used fashion as a means of resistance. As a site of both discipline and expression, clothing has the unique ability to both reinforce and subvert dominant norms. This is explored by Betty Luther Hillman in her article, "*The Clothes I Wear Help Me to Know My Own Power,*" where she discusses how feminist activists in the 1960s and 70s rejected dominant beauty norms, including long hair, makeup, and high heels, as acts of political rebellion (Hillman 155). These women embraced more comfortable, utilitarian styles that resisted the traditional feminine ideal. This was more of a stylistic shift than an ideological one. By refusing to perform beauty labor, women reclaimed time, agency, and self-definition. Their wardrobes became living protest statements against a system that demanded aesthetic conformity over personal choice.

A similar perspective is offered by Patricia C. Warner in her article"Feminism and Costume History: Synthesis and Reintegration," where she argues that fashion is far from superficial, instead, it is deeply embedded in the structures of power since, "those injustices become almost blindingly clear when the discussion turns to clothing and adornment…" (Warner 185). Warner traces how dress codes and aesthetic norms have long been used to enforce gendered control, scripting femininity in ways that preserve patriarchal dominance.

CONCLUSION

Fashion is not just about fabric. It acts as a means of expressing power, identity, and revolt. Beyond aesthetics, fashion shapes how women are supposed to portray themselves to be viewed by others, which serves both as a mirror and a tool of social control. This paper demonstrates how a woman's appearance functions as a regulatory system that influences her movement through the world, particularly in Western professional spaces such as offices and hospitals. Women are expected to walk an impossible line: to be attractive yet not vain, and polished yet not performative.

Rather than simply functioning as individual choices, beauty practices operate as mechanisms of social control, quietly disciplining women's bodies and behaviors through internalized, unspoken expectations and forcing them to perform this third shift of beauty labor meant to please the public gaze. The intensity of this control grows even heavier in professional environments, where women are trapped in a paradox to dress professionally enough to belong in the workplace, but also feminine enough to meet societal expectations of their gender. The catch is that either extreme, too professional or too feminine, can lead to microaggressions, bias, or social exclusion. This pressure to conform results in emotional and psychological consequences such as impostor syndrome, anxiety, and chronic self-monitoring. These reveal that beauty labor is not a personal choice but a structural burden and if it continues unchecked, women will never be granted the freedom they deserve or to govern their own bodies without interference.

Fortunately, there have been resistance movements that have used fashion to reclaim appearance as a site of autonomy and to challenge what professionalism is allowed to look like. Although modern movements and public criticism question these stereotyped societal standards, beauty labor still remains deeply ingrained in the professional world. The real dilemma is not whether women can dress as they desire, but rather whether they can do so without jeopardizing their credibility, authority, or opportunities for leadership positions. Hiring procedures, promotion standards, performance evaluations, and daily interactions all reflect these expectations, which favor women who conform to certain looks while penalizing those who do not.

This reveals a deeper truth about professional culture since till the present, workplaces remain uncomfortable with women who have full autonomy over how they present themselves. As long as a woman's competence is judged through the lens of femininity, her professional identity will always be restricted by appearance-based expectations she did not choose. Thus, the urgent question is not simply when society will accept women as they are, but when workplaces will stop tying professional worth to aesthetic compliance. Until that shift occurs, women will continue to navigate a system in which their bodies and choices are evaluated before their expertise.

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Lindsey Reichert

Environmental Discrimination and the Struggle for Justice in the U.S.

ABSTRACT

Environmental discrimination refers to the unequal distribution of the burden from environmental hazards across minority and low-income communities. This paper examines how people of color and low-income Americans are disproportionately exposed to polluted air, contaminated drinking water, and hazardous waste sites. The consequences of these threats range from health, social, and economic. Case studies, including those of Flint, Michigan, Warren County, North Carolina, and Woburn, Massachusetts, all illustrate the recurring patterns of environmental harm resulting from industrial zoning decisions, insufficient regulation, and cost-driven political actions. To explain the roots of this unequal exposure, the paper applies two theoretical frameworks: white privilege, which highlights how racial hierarchies shape access to environmental safety, and the sociospatial framework, which offers a lens that connects social, political, and spatial dimensions to environmental justice. The paper analyzes past strategies that have attempted to address environmental discrimination, including grassroots activism, federal environmental justice policies, and state-level legislation. It will then evaluate why efforts driven by community and strong regulatory enforcement tend to be more effective than broad federal initiatives that lack consequences. By outlining the effects, history, and varied responses to environmental discrimination, this paper examines the structural nature of environmental inequality in the United States and the struggle to resolve this issue.

INTRODUCTION

A child wakes up coughing in the middle of the night, and the air is thick with pollution from the nearby industrial site that seeps in through the window. She reaches for her inhaler, which she received when she was diagnosed with asthma as an infant. Down the street, a family hesitates before drinking from their tap, knowing their water has been contaminated for years, but lacking the resources to find a safer alternative. Across the United States, countless neighborhoods are plagued by harmful pollutants in the air, contaminated drinking water, and a lack of safe ecosystems; their health is sacrificed for a company's profit or their earnings after all expenses. For many people of color and low-income Americans, this is not a distant threat but rather a harsh, daily reality. These environmental burdens are not distributed equally but are instead concentrated in marginalized communities, revealing an underlying system of inequality embedded in policy and geography.

Environmental discrimination disproportionately affects these communities, exposing them to higher levels of pollution, hazardous waste, and unlivable conditions. This inequity results in health issues, reduced economic opportunities, and can even affect children's abilities to learn. To fully understand the scope of environmental discrimination, it is essential to recognize the source of this issue. This problem is rooted in history, political decisions, and economic structures. This systematic environmental inequality raises the following questions: *How are people of color and low-income Americans impacted by environmental discrimination? What causes this phenomenon, and why should society address it? Additionally, why have some strategies to eliminate environmental discrimination worked better than others?* This paper will begin by examining the effects of environmental discrimination, followed by an exploration of the cause. These causes will be analyzed through white privilege and the sociospatial framework to explore these phenomena. White privilege is defined as white individuals or communities receiving benefits solely because of their skin color. The sociospatial framework examines how economic and racial inequalities affect one another and space. Next, this paper will discuss the significance of understanding the issue. Finally, by looking at past strategies aimed at eliminating environmental discrimination, this essay will examine why some strategies have worked better than others.

THE EFFECTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISCRIMINATION

The effects of environmental discrimination range from health to economic to social implications. This essay will examine the cases of Flint, Michigan; Warren County, North Carolina; and the Woburn, Massachusetts, cancer cluster. One of the most devastating consequences of environmental discrimination is the disproportionate health impact.

Residents who live in these areas suffer from higher rates of respiratory diseases, heart conditions, and other chronic illnesses, such as cancer, because of exposure to pollutants from industrial sites, landfills, and highways. In "Environmental Justice: Income, Race, and Health," Rachel Massey states, "Asthma is also linked to a variety of environmental factors, ranging from car and bus exhaust to certain pesticides…industrial chemicals can interfere with the normal functioning of hormones in the human body; these chemicals are known as endocrine disruptors, and they can cause a range of illnesses and disabilities" (2). Additionally, it is noted that yearly cases of cancer have increased in correlation with the rising use of various industrial chemicals. Children's cancer rates have risen from 1975 to 2000 by 31.7% nationwide in children under the age of 15; it has increased by 29.6% in children under the age of 20 (2). These statistics underscore a pattern: environmental pollutants are not only making people sick, but they are contributing to long-term health crises in entire communities. Pollutants clearly cause detrimental lifetime illness and disease. Environmental stressors are hugely impactful on one's health. This is seen again in the 1980s, when there was a notably large cluster of childhood leukemia in Woburn, Massachusetts, and this led to an investigation into the town's drinking water. Within the water supply, they found industrial chemicals, including trichloroethylene (TCE)(Cutler et al. 204), linking these chemicals to the rise of leukemia. Another example of health consequences from environmental discrimination was Flint, Michigan. The city switched its drinking water supply from Detroit's system to the Flint River to cut costs. This caused elevated blood lead levels in the city's children and was responsible for an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease that killed 12 people and infected at least 87. The crisis was most attributed to the city's failure to maintain sufficient chlorine levels in the water to disinfect it (Denchak par. 11). Flint is a low-income and mostly African American community, exemplifying how environmental discrimination disproportionately harms marginalized populations. Massey notes that only 15% of the white American population lived in areas that were at risk for such health implications (Massey 6-7). This statistic reflects a stark racial disparity in who bears the burden of environmental health threats. These are only two of the major health consequences suffered because of pollution and poor environmental policies that prioritize cost-cutting over community well-being.

Beyond the health implications, environmental discrimination amplifies economic inequality. Poor environmental conditions lower property values and discourage business investments, perpetuating a cycle of economic inactivity and trapping communities in poverty. Polluted neighborhoods struggle to attract businesses, leading to fewer job opportunities, lower wages, and reduced economic activity. Laura Pulido, in "A Critical Review of the Methodology of Environmental Racism," notes that low-income individuals cannot "buy" their way out of a polluted community and that housing discrimination, such as redlining, exacerbates this issue (5). Redlining is a discriminatory practice used to deny housing loans and insurance to Black and immigrant communities. This pushes these communities into an economic disadvantage because environmental hazards drive down property values, making it difficult for residents to sell their homes at a fair price and relocate to areas with better economic opportunities. This can trap families for generations in places that are bad for their health, forcing them to live within this cycle. In "Environmental Justice: Establishing Causal Relationships," Banzhaf states that systems like these are lifelong subconscious inclinations and cannot be blamed on a singular landlord (7). Minorities are not only experiencing this in their homes, but also in their working environments. In Pulido's "Deconstructing Environmental Racism: A Look at the Early Pesticide Campaign of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee," she notes that the people who live in communities at risk for environmental hazard exposure usually work in dangerous areas. She specifies by looking at Mexican farm workers who are exposed to environmental hazards from various pesticides, but have never known any other kind of work, and are stuck in a generational cycle of the same work. This highlights how environmental discrimination not only operates in geography but also through labor tied to racial and economic identity. These economically burdened communities also have a difficult time having any influence on policy that could help them out of their situation. For example, in Warren County, North Carolina, the community tried to stop the placement of a landfill filled with hazardous material, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), but they were not given any attention. These communities don't have a voice to change their situation. It is almost impossible for people who live in poverty and are surrounded by environmental hazards to move out of these areas. Even if relocation is possible, these individuals would still be faced with new economic challenges, such as increased housing prices and job instability, reinforcing their economic disadvantage.

Lastly, the social consequences of environmental discrimination affect schools, parks, and public spaces in marginalized neighborhoods, deepening existing social inequalities. This reduces the overall quality of life and limits access to critical social resources, such as educational and recreational opportunities for children. Rachel Massey explains that minority children experienced the most exposure to air pollution at schools, which has direct social implications, including decreased achievement in school. Additionally, the schools that were most at risk for air pollution were mostly populated by minority students. "At schools ranked at the bottom fifth for air quality, the children were 92% minority" (Massey 7). Massey also highlighted a study where they controlled parents' income and parents' academic background to observe the children's achievement level. Keeping all of these factors the same, it was observed that the students with lower academic achievement were in polluted areas. These children are not being given the same tools to succeed because of the air they are breathing and the water that they are drinking. Environmental discrimination affects every aspect of life, which is why it is so important to understand what causes this and possible solutions.

WHAT CAUSED THIS?

The roots of environmental discrimination can be traced back to a long history of racial oppression in the United States. To fully grasp environmental discrimination, it is essential to understand the historical context, the roles of white privilege, and the sociospatial framework. America has a tumultuous history with race; slavery played an integral part in building the country, and the effects of it have lasted decades. In "As Above, So Below: Anti-Black Violence as Environmental Racism," Willie Jamaal Wright stated, "the Black community's distant relationship with much of the great outdoors is, in part, the result of a long history of anti-Black violence within and forced expulsion from natural spaces" (Wright 791). This explains how black communities are thought to have a distant relationship with nature, always tied to urban terrain, but, in reality, they have been oppressed through landscapes that historically trap them. At some point, they had the closest relation to green spaces. During slavery, African Americans were the ones who were working on rural land; then, once slavery was abolished, they were promised forty acres of land and a mule to start their life over. This would allow them to continue their life in green spaces. However, they were never granted this land and mule, and were forced into cities away from green spaces. In conjunction with that, "Black Bodies Green Spaces" by Tiya Miles explains how slavery required a hyper awareness of nature; there was a sense of safety in the woods when escaping slavery. She highlighted Frederick Douglass, who stated he had hidden in a pile of leaves to escape slavery, and how this disagrees with the current narrative of African Americans and their relationship with nature. Racialized geographies and Black ecologies are currently overlooked by traditional environmental justice, the spatial and material realities of Black life. This history has pushed these communities into polluted places, surrounded by highways and industrial pollution.

Some argue that white supremacy has been ingrained in U.S. society and shaped its policies, economy, and geographic landscapes, which have shaped environmental decision-making. For example, in Lauren Pulido's "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege," she states that white privilege is seen through economic and political benefits because they are built upon racial hierarchy (5). This does not necessarily imply active racism by individuals, but rather an ingrained societal structure in which white communities are protected from the harms that communities of color disproportionately face. As white privilege shapes political and economic decisions, it reinforces environmental injustices. For example, redlining forced people of color into neighborhoods that lacked proper infrastructure and were more vulnerable to industrial and highway pollution. Lauren Pulido uses Los Angeles as an example of this; the city is constantly going through industrialization. The people of color were pushed into the urban parts of the city, while white people distanced themselves from industrial pollution and people of color. These redlined areas, which were disproportionately exposed to pollution, were deliberately excluded from economic investments that could have improved these living conditions. A study by PubMed Central, "Historical Redlining Is Associated with Disparities in Environmental Quality across California," specifically looked at redlined areas in California, stating, "strong significance found between redlined and non-redlined neighborhoods (Table S4). Pollution was higher than average in 77% of redlined neighborhoods compared to 18% of greenlined neighborhoods across all cities (Figure 2A)" (Estien et al. par. 14). This shows that even today, environmental risk maps often overlap with formerly redlined areas, and 20th-century racial segregation policies continue to define 21st-century environmental harm. Having such a high correlation between these historically low-income communities of color and pollution, as mentioned before, affects the youth population's education level. Having an uneducated youth repeats this cycle and furthers the economic struggles of the community. This demonstrates how these acts of discrimination may not have been maliciously racist, but remain rooted in racism and the U.S. policies have that affect where these minority communities reside.

Economic and political decisions have further reinforced white supremacy and its effects on environmental injustices. Industrial zoning laws have historically placed hazardous facilities near low-income neighborhoods while wealthier, predominantly white communities have been shielded from such risks. Political leaders and policymakers have often prioritized corporate and economic interests over community health, allowing businesses to pollute disadvantaged areas. This was seen in Flint, Michigan, where they cut costs in exchange for the community's health. Similarly, in Warren County, North Carolina, government officials agreed to allow for a landfill of PCBs to be placed in a predominantly black and low-income community. Unequal enforcement of environmental regulations has caused violations in these communities to go unpunished. Laura Pulido introduces a theoretical framework, the sociospatial framework, that she uses to look at how economic and racial inequalities interact and affect the use of space. In this view, space is not neutral; it is shaped by who has power and whose needs are prioritized. The placement of landfills, factories, and toxic waste sites is often not just a matter of geography, but of political power and social devaluation. This framework exposes how deeply rooted environmental injustice is. She explains that it is not intentional discrimination by a specific individual or corporation, but it is deeply embedded in everything related to space. It is responsible for urban development patterns, land use policies, and historical segregation. All of these aspects combined are responsible for current-day environmental justice issue. The combination of economic marginalization and political neglect has solidified environmental discrimination as a persistent and systematic issue.

SIGNIFICANCE OF UNDERSTANDING ENVIRONMENTAL DISCRIMINATION

Recognizing and addressing environmental discrimination is essential for working towards social equality, public health, and sustainable development, and confronting the broader patterns of racial injustice in the United States. Environmental injustice is not an isolated issue that only affects a few communities; it is a systematic problem that goes beyond environmental issues and bleeds into U.S. economy and politics. When examining who is consistently exposed to dangerous pollutants, who lacks access to clean air and water, and who is denied the political power to resist harmful policies, society is forced to confront systemic inequalities that have persisted for generations. By understanding the roots of environmental discrimination, researchers can work toward solutions that can ensure safe living conditions for these communities. Pulido supported the discussion of environmental racism, stating that it is problematic to think that racism is not a phenomenon and that there is a lack of research on racial environmental injustice because of the denial of its existence (Pulido 6). Environmental racism is a topic that has been heavily ignored, covered, and hidden by the U.S. government. Continuing research and bringing awareness, by informing peers and using social media, to these injustices helps shift public narratives and challenge dominant economic and political systems. These systems have historically prioritized industrial growth, trading the health of minority communities. Not only does this affect minorities directly, but it also affects the larger social and environmental problems. Beyond the physical consequences, environmental discrimination creates psychological and emotional harm. Living in a community where pollution is normalized and where the government refuses to help can create a sense of powerlessness. The trauma is not only caused by toxic exposure itself, but the realization that their suffering has been deemed acceptable by policymakers and corporations benefiting from it. This can be happening in the town next to you without you even realizing the harm before it's too late. Looking at previously identified past case studies, most of the communities did not realize that they were victims of environmental injustice until after it had already caused major implications. Kristen Clarke, in "The Environmental Racism Flowing in Flint," states, "One can only imagine the true impact the crisis will have on the current and future generations of young people in Flint" (Clarke par. 5). Environmental discrimination has lifelong effects on communities that can go through generations. America prides itself on being the freest nation, where liberty thrives; therefore, America must stay accountable and exercise this through all aspects. It is essential to make significant changes because the current policies risk perpetuating existing inequalities rather than creating a fairer future.

PAST STRATEGIES

Attempts to eliminate environmental discrimination have taken many forms, but their impact has depended largely on whether affected communities are given meaningful political power. Efforts to combat environmental discrimination have taken various forms, from grassroots activism to federal political barriers (Pulido 4), yet their effectiveness has varied due to structural and political barriers. One of the earliest strategies involved community-led activism, with organizations like the Environmental Justice Movement in the 1980s advocating against toxic waste dumping in predominantly Black and low-income neighborhoods (Wright 3). The first major example of this was Warren County in North Carolina, where they protested PCBs being dumped in a landfill in a Black community. Despite weeks of demonstrations and hundreds of arrests, the county decided to ignore the protests and dump the PCBs anyway (Wright 3). Although the protests did not stop the landfill, these movements successfully raised awareness and pressured policymakers, leading to the Environmental Justice Movement being established. This was seen again during the Flint, Michigan crisis, where the community raised awareness and protested until the garnered attention forced the state officials to pay attention and acknowledge wrongdoing, and finally intervene.

However, not all strategies have generated meaningful change, and some have even reinforced environmental inequality. For example, California's cap-and-trade policy was initially promoted as a solution to reduce greenhouse gases. However, in practice, it allowed corporations to continue polluting low-income Black and Latino neighborhoods as long as they bought credits. In "California's landmark cap-and-trade policy faces growing claims of environmental racism," Alex Brown states, "We've seen emissions increase in (those) communities because of cap-and-trade programs" (Brown par. 14). Wealthier and white regions saw improvements, but marginalized communities either stayed the same or got worse. This approach failed because it reduced pollution without taking ethical concerns into account.

In recent years, there has been state legislation creating environmental justice laws, such as New Jersey, which passed the Environmental Justice Law in September 2020. This law will cause the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection to evaluate the environmental and public health impacts of certain facilities on overburdened communities when reviewing specific permit applications. This law was unique because it was the first state to require mandatory permit denials if an environmental justice analysis determined that a new facility would have a disproportionately negative impact on an overburdened community ("Office of the Governor" sec. 1). Due to how recently environmental racism has been acknowledged, it is hard to gauge how successful policy decisions have been so far. This development demonstrates a shift away from symbolic environmental justice and toward enforceable legal consequences.

None of these past strategies was a foolproof solution for environmental racism, and while some may have worked better than others, they are still not sufficient. Community-led activism raises awareness, but without legal authority, it struggles to produce long-term results. Conversely, policy initiatives have failed because they looked to decrease pollution without recognizing the symmetry of distribution. Environmental justice is most effective when solutions do not simply acknowledge harm but redistribute power to the communities that have historically borne the burden.

WHY HAVE SOME WORKED BETTER THAN OTHERS?

The effectiveness of strategies to combat environmental discrimination has varied due to differences in community involvement, laws, and the way they are being enforced. Grassroots activism and community-led initiatives have been more successful because they directly engage affected communities and prioritize local needs. For example, organizations like the Environmental Justice Movement have mobilized communities to demand change, forcing tangible policy shifts (Denchak sec. 5). This includes large-scale public demonstrations, petitions, and media campaigns that drew national attention to toxic dumping in predominantly Black and low-income neighborhoods. In Warren County, North Carolina, more than 500 residents participated in marches and road blockades at the landfill site to physically halt trucks transporting PCB-contaminated soil. In Flint, Michigan, similar grassroots strategies, such as large-scale protests and publicizing the water testing data, pressured state officials to acknowledge the water crisis after months of denial.

However, Pulido argues that federal initiatives, such as the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) environmental justice guidelines, have frequently fallen short due to weak enforcement and political resistance. Robert D. Bullard agreed with Pulido, stating:

> Agencies at all levels of government, including the federal EPA, have done a poor job protecting people of color from the ravages of pollution and industrial encroachment. It has thus been an uphill battle convincing white judges, juries, government officials, and policymak-

> ers that racism exists in environmental protection, enforcement, and policy formulation (Bullard).

This was seen in Warren County when the community was ignored, and the government decided to carry on with the dumping of chemicals.

In contrast, authors such as Spencer Banzhaf, Lala Ma, and Christopher Timins, in "Environmental Justice: Establishing Causal Relationships," emphasize that, "Proper identification of the causal mechanisms underlying observed disproportionate exposures is critical to the design of effective policy to remedy them," indicating their belief that policy solutions work specifically when they directly address the drivers of environmental inequality. Environmental discrimination is not inevitable; it is a solvable problem when policy is grounded in an accurate understanding of the history of the problem. This points out that existing policies must shift and focus on systemic issues. This is not a problem that can be fixed with a few laws and policies; this is a problem that forces the reconstruction of the racist systems the U.S has built. This problem is in the hands of individuals who are not affected by environmental discrimination. Giving back political power to the people who have been disadvantaged and discriminated against is the best way to solve the problem and cause change for the future. Systemic change cannot happen overnight, and that is why the best way to approach this issue is to try to change systems.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to answer how environmental discrimination impacts people of color and low-income Americans, what causes these injustices, and why some strategies have been more effective than others. Through the examination of specific cases such as Flint, Michigan, Woburn, Massachusetts, and Warren County, North Carolina, the research has shown that environmental discrimination is not an isolated or accidental phenomenon. Instead, it is a systemic issue rooted in the history of white supremacy, discriminatory economic and political decisions, and longstanding patterns of environmental neglect. Viewing these issues from different frameworks helps clarify the deeply embedded structures behind environmental inequality. For example, Lauren Pulido's concept of white privilege reveals how racial hierarchies continue to influence environmental policy and access to clean, safe living spaces. Similarly, the work of authors like Tiya Miles and Willie Jamaal Wright reframes Black communities' relationship with land and space, showing how environmental racism is both material and historic.

There is an urgency to address environmental discrimination and not only as a matter of pollution control, but as a fundamental issue of justice, equity, and human rights. Environmental hazards harm physical health, limit economic mobility, and perpetuate social inequality, especially in communities that have already been historically marginalized. Without any meaningful reform, these patterns will only continue and deepen. Understanding the full scope and causes of environmental discrimination allows us to better assess the effectiveness of proposed solutions. While grassroots activism has achieved greater accountability and awareness, top-down strategies often fail without community input and strong enforcement. The future of environmental justice requires not only policy change but a shift in how society and the government protect these communities. This now leaves only the questions of how environmental injustice is being treated in local governments and how dire this problem is in the eyes of U.S. policymakers. As research has shown, confronting environmental discrimination means confronting the structures that maintain it, and that is essential for building a truly just and sustainable society.

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Praanjal Gajera

Folic Acid Supplements: A Marketed Placebo?

ABSTRACT

Supplements are known to fill gaps in one's diet rather than replace them entirely. Past research suggests that vitamin B9, also known as folic acid, helps prevent fetal neural tube defects and maintains neurological function throughout adulthood. The purpose of this research was to determine how marketing strategies, such as health claims and product reviews, can indirectly influence how well B9 supplements support bodily function. Several studies from both medical and marketing perspectives were used to analyze the function of the B9 supplement. It was found that age, consistency, and dose, paired with product reviews and health claims, influenced consumer bias. This developed consumer bias was shown to decrease the scope of B9 supplementation in healthy young populations. Based on prior studies, B9 supplements showed placebo-like qualities in this demographic. Older individuals, on the other hand, benefited more from supplementation than the former group. It was also noted that the lack of preapproval of product health claims on a regulatory level further led to consumers developing a bias toward B9. As marketing strategies and health products are often paired together, it can be difficult for consumers to decipher fact from fiction. Having appropriate knowledge about a health product before purchase can help alleviate misunderstandings about the product, allowing consumers to make an informed decision about their health. In the case of B9, the supplement will require ongoing research to further clarify ambiguities regarding its function and impact across diverse populations.

INTRODUCTION

Ray Kurzweil, computer scientist and author of *The Singularity is Nearer: When We Merge with AI*, reported in a blog that he consumed over "80 supplements" daily in hopes to maximize his chance of survival to live to see the day when he can clone himself (Rich, para. 17). Similarly, everyone knows someone who takes their multivitamins religiously. Supplements have become cornerstones of people's diets, yet a balanced diet consisting of a sufficient variety of nutrients consisting of carbohydrates, lipids, proteins, and minerals, should only be helped by supplements and vitamins; they should not be the main focus. Supplements and vitamins are not everything. Vitamins, organic compounds needed for human processes, are a common choice of supplements. Vitamin supplements are a part of many diets, whether consumed for prescribed medical or personal reasons. For example, geography can play a role, in the case of vitamin D where it is a dietary supplement commonly used in regions with less sunshine. Like vitamin D, many take other popular vitamins and mineral supplements, such as iron or B12, for anemia. When discussing vitamin supplementation, it is crucial to be aware that vitamins simply add to one's pre-existing diet and do not take over the vitamins already found in food.

Vitamins like folate–B9 or folic acid–are essential for the body from before birth in utero and are needed in minute amounts. More of the population is seeking folic acid in supplemental form, such as by the older subpopulation. Additionally, pregnant mothers and mothers of child-bearing age take B9 supplements to prevent neural tube defects in the fetus (Khalid, para. 1). However, this vitamin is still needed during the lifespan and is usually accommodated by food. Despite sufficient diet, many older individuals, among others, seek supplements to ensure they do not develop age-related diseases, the top regard being neurodegenerative conditions (Garcez, para.1). As supplements are predominantly seen in the pharmaceutical economy, the concern becomes the extent to which folic acid supplement effectiveness is influenced by profit-oriented marketing strategies.

Pharmaceutical companies market supplements with the help of health claims and customer reviews. Such strategies not only make customers feel that their purchases are worth their money, but they could potentially harm their health if marketing strategies are misleading. In this sense, it is interesting to see if minute vitamins like folic acid have a significant impact in supplemental form, especially when folic acid plays a role in one of the most headstrong systems of the body: the nervous system. B9 is believed to be beneficial for memory, but due to the ambiguity of minute supplementation, possible profit-oriented marketing strategies can arise driven by consumer bias or how buyers view products before purchase. Lisa Bolton, a marketing professor at Pennsylvania State University, researched the complementary health behaviors of customers that arose from developed health bias, in her article "How Does Drug and Supplement Marketing Affect a Healthy Lifestyle?". Her research examines such bias as it can influence B9 supplement effectiveness.

Considering the marketing perspective, the idea of a placebo supplement comes into question. A placebo is often regarded as a chemical substance deemed to have no positive nor negative effect on the variable in question. In this sense, supplement effectiveness may change to the point of having no significant influence on bodily function, thus acting like a placebo. Not only is B9 a micronutrient needed in small amounts, but how consumers view and purchase the supplements can potentially indirectly change the biological value and chemical effectiveness of a B9 supplement to the extent of achieving a placebo effect.

FORTIFICATION AND FUNCTION

Vitamins can be externally added to dietary food either by fortification or enrichment. Fortified foods consist of added vitamins and minerals that were not naturally present, while enriched foods consist of added vitamins or minerals lost through manufacturing. Folic acid is one vitamin that is not naturally found in dietary food. Hence, an NIH article revealed that "in 1996, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) mandated folic acid fortification for all enriched cereal grains" to combat the problem (Khalid, para. 1). Such regulatory measures exist to ensure the broad population consumes adequate amounts of folic acid. And because cereals and grains are a significant part of the American diet, it makes sense that there are aisles in grocery stores dedicated to grains fortified with B vitamins like folic acid. As per the NIH fact sheet, the recommended daily intake is 400 mcg/day for ages fourteen years and up ("Folate," Table 1). Those under the age of fourteen require even less than 400 mcg/day. The dosage shows how the younger population requires minimal consumption to be healthy. Additionally, the US FDA mandates manufacturers to add "140 mcg folic acid/100 g to enriched breads, cereals, flours, corn meals, pastas, rice, and other grain products" ("Folate," para. 14). With a balanced diet, it is relatively easy for the younger population to consume enough grains to satisfy the recommended daily intake of folic acid. Yet why do many resort to folic acid supplements despite existing regulations that ensure folic acid consumption is adequate? In US children ages one to thirteen, 28% consumed folic acid from supplements and it was even seen that 53% of those consumers had folic acid levels higher than the tolerable upper intake level (Bailey, para. 4). Concerning adults, about 35% of the population in the US were found to consume folic acid in the form of supplements ("Folate," para. 24). Such consumerism shows public desire for the B9 supplement and further leads to investigating its effectiveness. Marketing strategies could be a possible cause for the rise in folic acid supplement consumption.

While the general function of folic acid supplementation targets the nervous system, it is vital to know how folic acid impacts cognitive processes like memory. Many take folic acid supplements for better memory, yet because cognitive changes are challenging to observe, it is hard to claim with accuracy that such supplements improve one's memory. Camellia Akhgarjand, a clinical nutritionist with a Ph.D. in Nutrition from the Tehran University of Medical Sciences, explores the impact of supplements on human processes. As per her trials, B9 supplementation improved memory in those older than 70 years when taken for over six months at less than 1 mg/day (Akhgarjand, para. 20). The study shows how folic acid supplements are effective within certain limits, including age, consistency, and dose. The limitations narrow the range of effectiveness of B9 supplements, making misinformed individuals prone to falling outside of the effectiveness range. Michelle Garcez further explores the prevalence of folic acid's biological functions in their article "Folic Acid Prevents Habituation Memory Impairment and Oxidative Stress in an Aging Model Induced by D-Galactose", they found that folic acid supplements can also prevent the "expression of proteins related to neurodegeneration," showing how folic acid positively impacts nervous system function concerning deteriorating conditions (Garcez, para. 7). To relay messages, neurons transmit electrical and chemical signals across synapses assisted by the insulating myelin sheath. Neurodegeneration will compromise neuron signaling, so it is important to maintain healthy neurons for cognitive and memory function which folate can help with.

In this sense, there is a clear relationship between folic acid supplementation and improved neurologic function, despite the narrow range of effectiveness targeting the older population. Yet this limited range proves how the older population is justified in supplementing their diet with folic acid because, at their age, there is "diminishing absorption of folate" (Garcez, para. 5). While only 400 mcg/day is needed, the older population would need more to ensure that at least 400 mcg is chemically absorbed by their body. Healthy young individuals have normal folate absorptions relative to older adults, indicating less use for folic acid supplementation. The varying absorption rates also explain why older individuals may have more memory-related health issues, as fewer essential vitamins, such as folic acid, are being absorbed by the body relative to younger individuals. Less absorption of folic acid would lead to greater expression of neurodegeneration proteins and worsened memory. In conjunction, B vitamins like folic acid are water-soluble, and excess folic acid would be excreted as waste through urine. If healthy younger populations have sufficient folate absorption, taking a B9 supplement would be excess for the body and considered waste. Age is a major limiting factor of folic acid effectiveness in this case. The younger population should incorporate a balanced diet that includes folate rather than folic acid supplements.

NEUROLOGIC PATHOLOGY

While B9 is a water-soluble vitamin that can be passed through urine, there is an established maximum of 1000 mcg/day. As with any vitamin or mineral, having excess can have potentially adverse effects on the body; yet with folic acid, there is ambiguity about how it affects the body at high levels, especially as folic acid function is still not fully understood at the recommended intake. Martha Field, from Cornell University's Department of Nutritional Sciences, found in her article ("Safety of Folic Acid") that "elevated folic acid intake is not known to rescue neurological pathology," leading to the idea that despite going above the upper intake, folic acid is not considered helpful nor harmful (Field, para. 27). However, the lack of positive results conflicts with the improved cognitive function in both Garcez's and Akhgarjand's trials. Folic acid was shown to reduce the risk of neurodegeneration, also considered a neurological pathology. The different target populations can explain the contradiction because younger populations have normal absorption rates, so any elevated folic acid would be excreted as waste and have no effect on the body. This idea is analogous to how a placebo functions in modern science. Typically, a placebo is used to describe a substance that has no chemical effect on the biological process in question. The folic acid supplement can similarly be described as a placebo because the vitamin simply passed through the body through excretion without impacting neurological physiology. This proves how folic acid supplementation can act like a placebo for the younger age group. Yet for the older population, elevated folate levels would give the body more to absorb as they have minimal folate absorption. In their case, there would be signs of cognitive improvement because the B9 can be used by the body rather than excreted. Connotatively, supplements like folic acid lack "an association with poor health," even though supplements function in response to health issues like memory decline (Bolton 3). Such connotations allow individuals to be biased toward supplements and be misinformed about how minute vitamins like folic acid function relative to their age group. Even if individuals do not see supplements in a negative light, folic acid can act like a placebo for the younger population and instead benefit supplement companies. The more supplements are marketed to the healthy younger population, the more companies will profit from the placebo effect.

Additionally, it is often unclear how supplements impact diseases such as whether they mitigate symptoms. For example, it is unknown whether folic acid supplementation "reduces the incidence of Alzheimer's disease or not" (Akhgarhand, para. 22). This idea creates ambiguity in B9 function because if supplementation has been clinically shown to improve neurologic function, how can it not positively affect conditions like dementia? Yet these results are dependent on isolated folic acid supplement function. Hui Chen, a researcher from the Tianjin Medical University in China, proves, in their article "Folic Acid Supplementation Mitigates Alzheimer's Disease by Reducing Inflammation: A Randomized Controlled Trial", how drug-to-drug interactions can change how B9 reacts in the body. For example, folic acid supplements can actually lead "to improved…treatment of AD" when used with donepezil (Chen, para. 33). While both findings are contradictory, the results prove how folic acid supplements can have emergent properties–those that arise when an isolated system works in collaboration with another system, further limiting the range of folic acid effectiveness. Along with boosting folic acid function, substances can decrease function as well. For example, Emmy Boerrigter from Radboud University Medical Center studied how "trimethoprim itself can inhibit the action of folic acid" (Boerrigter, para. 1). The complexity of the B9 function increases when pairing it with other substances. New functions can arise, or original functions can disappear depending on the interaction, proving how studying folic acid from an isolated perspective creates a limitation and could be a reason for B9's narrow range of effectiveness.

The increase in complexity is not prominently marketed, so consumers taking folic acid with trimethoprim will be unaware that while folic acid does improve neurologic function, it will not when paired with certain medications. This lack of knowledge comes from companies marketing the clear neurologic benefits of folic acid without addressing drug-to-drug interactions. While the Nature Made bottle of folic acid supplements cautions to consult a physician's advice when taking medications, the bottle does not specify inhibitory drugs. It leaves consumers responsible for obtaining this information. These general cautionary statements are a marketing strategy because companies can take advantage of uneducated consumers and those unwilling to make an effort to see their physician, further limiting the range of folic acid effectiveness. In this sense, general cautionary descriptions become profit-oriented strategies to persuade consumers to buy folic acid supplements. Yet, they can unintentionally inhibit folic acid effectiveness leading to a placebo effect. Consumers will believe folic acid works when in reality, it has no chemical impact on their health due to drug-to-drug interactions unaddressed by marketing strategies.

Although it is difficult for companies to list every inhibitory drug-to-drug interaction on a bottle of supplements, this allows misleading consumer biases to form. Such beliefs drive consumer biases because companies can take advantage of such misleading beliefs to increase revenue.

CONSUMER BIAS

As folic acid supplements chemically proved to have a limited range of effectiveness, marketing strategies such as customer reviews can further narrow the range to achieve a placebo effect. The idea of confirmation bias explains how consumers will start browsing products with a pre-existing belief toward a product. Dezhi Yin, an associate professor at the University of Florida, researched how upon reading customer reviews, those that match a customer's original beliefs will strongly build a bias known as confirmation bias, while reviews that "deviate from product average ratings" will be considered unhelpful (Yin 11). Such reviews confirm their original beliefs and could mislead consumers if their original beliefs were scientifically inaccurate. Consumers may not know of the limited function of folic acid supplements so they are easily misled by profit-oriented marketing strategies as their confirmation bias develops from product reviews. As Bolton explores health biases, she notes how the connotation of a "drug" versus a "supplement" creates conflicting consumer biases. Customers apply negative and positive connotations with the terms, respectively, and this view leads to the idea that drugs have "lower perceptions of health" while supplements have higher perceptions (Bolton 12). These connotations are examples of consumer bias, while product reviews are a mode of confirmation bias. Since consumers view supplements in a positive light, they will be more inclined to buy the supplement. Yet, if consumers cannot see the chemical limitations of B9 supplements due to confirmation bias, they will be more likely to overuse supplements. Chemically, folic acid is a water-soluble supplement among other B vitamins, so any excess in the body will be passed through urine. This proves that overusing water-soluble supplements like folic acid will act as a placebo, as any extra will not harm nor help the body. Such behaviors prove how confirmation bias from reviews can lead to poor consumer choices. In this sense, product reviews are profit-oriented marketing strategies because consumers depend on the judgment of others to dictate purchasing a product. As health beliefs become more biased, overall B9 supplement effectiveness will decrease due to poor consumer choices such as overuse leading to folic acid having more placebo-like qualities.

Along with folic acid supplements, product reviews can have a placebo effect, decreasing supplement effectiveness. Product reviews give consumers first-hand details of a product, yet they are used to increase the value of a product as a marketing strategy. As consumers read or hear about the first-hand experience, they will be influenced by those who have taken folic acid before and rely on their judgment of the effectiveness of folic acid, whether accurate or not. The product reviews of a Nature Made B9 supplement bottle on Amazon.com consisted of consumers claiming that they "have not noticed any changes or improvements" or "noticed a positive difference since I started taking it" (Vickie, et al. 2024). Firstly, there is no standard measurement of how much change or improvement a consumer experiences, so reviews can create ambiguity. Secondly, most consumers are not aware of the narrow range of effectiveness, leading to the formation of misleading beliefs. It is essential to know that what may work for one person will not for another. Yet suppose a reviewer's judgment matches the consumer's confirmation bias. In that case, consumers are more likely to buy folic acid and continue to believe that folic acid works significantly, even if folic acid does not drastically improve their nervous system function due to its narrow range of effectiveness. As product reviews do not change folic acid's chemical effect, inaccurate reviews will develop a placebo-like quality, allowing companies to use them as a marketing tool. In this sense, companies can take advantage of consumers who are unaware of chemical implications, such as drug-to-drug interactions and overuse, along with ambiguous customer reviews. So the placebo effect of marketed customer reviews will decrease supplement effectiveness as beliefs become more biased even if such reviews are intended to increase the product value.

REGULATION HEALTH CLAIMS

Furthermore, health claims listed on folic acid supplements serve as marketing strategies to make the product more appealing to consumers, whether they fit legal guidelines or not. Structure/function claims describe how a product chemically interacts with a body process, while disease/prevention claims state that a specific disease can be prevented or treated by using the product. The Office of Inspector General from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services revealed that claims that have legal "structure/function claims" can also allude to disease treatment "which do not require preapproval by FDA" before products enter the market (Hafner 2). Consumers may not know the difference between the types of claims, and the lack of legislation to mandate preapproval shows how the FDA does not hold enough power to effectively regulate dietary supplements, allowing manufacturers to market misleading claims to enhance product value for profit. Companies will take advantage of consumers as "supplement marketing may rely on scientific jargon" to blur the line further to appeal to consumers (Bolton 3). Consumers will then believe that supplements will treat their disease, which will lead to misinformed choices. Isolated folic acid supplements were not shown to treat disease, but they helped donepezil treat Alzheimer's disease, proving how B9 supplements cannot have disease/prevention claims on their label. Yet because the two types of claims are close in definition, it may be hard for consumers to distinguish the true function of folic acid supplements based on the marketed label. Even among the legal structure/function claims, an in-depth check revealed that "10 percent of the [substantiation] documents" did not have relevant evidence to support the structure/function claims (Hafner 12). One should consider a limitation of this statistic as it is from 2012, and yet FDA standards have not changed since then. Substantiation documents prove that a statement is true with scientific evidence. While marketed labels may have claims within FDA guidelines, inaccuracies can also mislead consumers. Such health claims pass because of lack of FDA preapproval, allowing companies to exploit the ambiguity of structure/function and disease/prevention claims. Claims, in turn, increase product value because consumers want to know the maximum potential of a product before purchasing. Health claims become another profit-oriented marketing strategy that decrease folic acid effectiveness because companies exploit consumers' health bias. In this sense, supplement effectiveness depends on whether consumers believe the claim is valid, which also depends on the FDA review process. FDA oversight allows manufacturers to enhance their products from a profit-oriented mindset.

According to FDA regulations, supplements are legally considered drugs if their marketed claims allude to treating diseases. Because supplements and drugs are differentiated based on function, the different connotations that arise from a consumerist viewpoint are valid. The drug connotation categorizes them as substances that medically treat a disease stemmingfrom an unhealthy lifestyle, and supplements being categorized as enhancements to one's pre-existing healthy lifestyle. The legal definition of drugs and supplements supports the noted connotations, so if consumers fail to distinguish between the two, then they will potentially misuse supplements as drugs. If unchecked health claims do not match folic acid's narrow range of effectiveness, consumers will continue to misuse them based on pre-existing beliefs. Such consumer beliefs stem from product reviews, leading to confirmation bias. This bias and unchecked health claims will decrease supplement effectiveness as consumer beliefs become skewed. Marketing strategies like health claims and product reviews have no positive effect on a consumer's health, especially as these strategies are profit-oriented rather than health-oriented.

CONCLUSION

While it is unclear whether Ray Kurzweil requires all 80 supplements, a balanced diet is preferred for consuming one's vitamins. Yet, after exploring the true range of folic acid effectiveness and considering profit-oriented marketing strategies, it can be concluded that several factors can narrow folic acid supplement effectiveness. Marketing strategies like product reviews and health claims take advantage of consumer bias stemming from supplement connotations. Biases lead to specific consumer behaviors, such as overusing supplements creating placebo-like qualities of folic acid. Folic acid acts like a placebo in specifically the healthy younger population because they have normal folate absorption; fortified foods are often sufficient for the younger population. In this sense, folic acid supplement effectiveness is more narrow in younger, uneducated, and biased consumers. Therefore, folic acid supplements can display placebo-like effects in specific populations stemming from profit-oriented marketing strategies used to increase the value of B9 supplements.

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Hailey Garner

Profit over Patients: Biotechnology Companies Exploiting Healthcare for Profit

ABSTRACT

This paper examines biotechnology applications and their influence on patient health and autonomy. There are multiple safety gaps in medicine that biotechnologies profit off of such as deregulation and the FDA's fast-lane approval process. Further case studies include Essure coils, Johnson & Johnson hip replacement medical implant, the da Vinci surgical machine, AI use in pharmaceutical development, and the story of Darryl Young where statistics are used for hospital success against the patient's wishes. The framework used to analyze these cases are the Marxist and power elite frame to analyze both class structure and social stratification leading to struggle in the growing reliance on medical devices. Biotechnology companies offer a "magic bullet" or simple treatment to systemic issues that control hospital systems and practices in medicine. All of these cases are used to underline how transparency is necessary in medicine and policies for the public to trust and be best treated in the future. The patient must be seen as more important than financial profit in all settings so that safety remains a priority in medicine.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the many advantages of biotechnology in the medical field, the development of biotechnological tools tends to prioritize profit over patient health. In health science, technological advancement is necessary for the production of treatments for patients, but this focus on advancement by biotechnology companies actually comes at the cost of human health. Corporations' reliance on human labor and their incessant monitoring of workers to maximize production form a social discrepancy between the company and the worker, as well as between the company and the patients. Additionally, there is an alarming lack of research in medical technologies made by these companies – the FDA provides an approval process that exacerbates leniency without focus on health, leaving many risky gaps and gambles on patients' lives. The unknown effects of biotechnology on human health aids in driving these companies to profit. This then raises the question: How do biotechnology companies influence how society is treated through medicine, and how do they exploit this treatment for profit?

This paper aims to explore how this biotechnology regulates living labor for profit outcomes. A Marxist and power elite theoretical framework will be used to analyze class dynamics, labor conditions, and class struggle. Specifically, this paper focuses on biotechnology in the medical field, AI's involvement in pharmaceuticals, and research done by government powers posing ethical issues. Unethical research is a key term describing practices done by those in power, like corporations, to expand their research using participants that are unaware they are part of a study. This also brings to light the many power dynamics present in society that lead to deteriorating conditions for humans to exist and work in. Power dynamics provide a view into class struggle and how biotechnological dominance increases the discrepancy between the higher governing class and the lower class. The hypothesis is that the research and development of biotechnology by corporations and the government leads to deregulation in markets, which directly impacts human health and places the patient's life in the hands of companies for profit.

SAFETY GAPS IN MEDICINE COMPROMISE HEALTH FOR PROFIT

The biotech industry is constantly growing and has a few top companies that run the production of such devices that are ultimately in control of human health and safety. Medical device companies function by seeing a patient's issue as treatable for a price, with little of the treatment's consequences explained to the patient or advertised by the company. For example, the life science company Bayer produced the Essure coil that was advertised to women as a permanent form of birth control. It was advertised to produce no pain and be over 99 percent effective at preventing pregnancy. Instead, the women who received these coils faced immense pain from the coils being misfired in their uterus (ICIJ, 2018). The doctors completing the insertion of the Essure coils were unaware of its long-term effects. This underlines the doctor-patient dynamic's influence on health outcomes: the doctors performed a risky procedure on a patient without previous scrutiny. Furthermore, the removal of these coils requires a full hysterectomy (removal of the uterus), or at the very least a salpingo-ophorectomy, which is the removal of the fallopian tubes. When Bayer sold this medical device and did not tell doctors about its possible issues in the limited clinical trials, it exemplified how a lack of transparency in advertisement can endanger patient health. This left women who had the coils with an ultimatum: to deal with the pain of having these implants, or come up with the money for an irreversible procedure that will alter their life forever.

Medical devices like this are easily brought into the market due to the FDA's fast-lane approval process. This process states that if a product looks and is supposed to function in a similar fashion to another approved product that has passed clinical trials, then the new product can be accepted. This can lead to many issues, especially if the product is composed of material that can react negatively in the human body. An example of this is the Johnson & Johnson hip replacement. After the hip replacement was implanted into an estimated 40,000 patients, it produced negative effects throughout the body (Schmidt Firm, n.d.). This included many issues like heart and neurological problems, blood toxicity, and infection (Schmidt Firm, n.d.). Companies benefit from the advertisement of these implants to patients without full knowledge of possible adverse events. The patient is left trusting the doctor, who might not know of the risks for procedures, to provide the best care possible. The patient's ability to accept or deny a procedure is dependent on class – those of higher class can easily afford a safer procedure and a corrective surgery if necessary, while people in a lower class struggle with debilitating conditions post-surgery and to must decide whether they would like to save money for corrective surgery. Biotechnology asserts a classist view: health is for the wealthy while the lower class suffers at the hands of profit, furthering sales and severing health outcomes.

The FDA approval process is regulated by those in power to decrease regulation and increase capital. The current Trump administration is focused on deregulating and fast-tracking the release of pharmaceuticals and medical devices following the "ten-for-1 rule" in which there are ten pieces of regulation cut out for each device or drug introduced (Mansour, 2025). As these policies arise, there is no certainty on what will be regulated and unregulated, and patient safety seems to be at play while corporations benefit from the cost of regulation being excised. Oversight of possible ethical concerns and considerations for research has not been taken as federal involvement continues to dwindle.

Political stance also plays a large role in individual's health rights.

With the debate over abortion ever-growing in the United States, there has been a recent conservative switch that could decrease access to products like contraceptive drugs and devices (Berman et al., 2024). These political shifts in office reflect how political power can be used to sway the autonomy of the public, determining what is necessary for individuals and acceptable to society. Many times, this tactic to sway public opinion excludes marginalized groups and their needs to access health care. Powerful individuals like Trump use rhetoric to make a show of their care for American ideals while continuing to pass medical devices for competition between other countries. An example of this comes from Secretary Perdue, who praised Trump for his deregulation policies on medical devices. Perdue stated, "President Trump is once again putting America first and setting us on a course to modernize our regulatory framework so that it works for our farms, ranchers, and consumers … if we do not put these safe biotechnology advances to work here … our competitors in other nations will" (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019). These biotechnology pushes for bettering health often aim to aid the wealthy while working-class individuals face larger issues like access to healthcare practitioners and procedures necessary for their livelihood. Thus, biotechnology companies work with people in power to induce change in policy and monopolize off patient's bodies through medical implants.

DISSOLVING PREVENTATIVE HEALTH: THE MAGIC BULLET

A pharmaceutical concept called "the magic bullet" has been used as a solution for health problems related to poor health choices. The use of the magic bullet – the concept of a treatment that targets diseases without harming the patient – is advertised for commodification of health issues, which are prominent in the lower class. Capitalistic ideals for healthcare connect to the Marxist theory in underlining the use of human labor for profit by using human lives for monetary reasons. Structural inequities also mask the importance of preventative health measures – such as daily exercise, diet, and social connections – while emphasizing the advertisement of pharmaceuticals. Similarly, the power elite theory provides information on corporations influencing health policies and advertisements for pure economic interests. The power elite theory comes from Wright Mills and posits that power is concentrated to a small minority that holds large influence over structures that dictate how society functions (Damele and Campos, 2022). Along with the power elite theory, the Marxist theory provides a structure to analyze class dynamics. The Marxist theory will be used in the framework of this essay as it encompasses many ideas (Sayers, 2021), but will be focused on analyzing the issues that capitalism poses to the working class and how fragile the system is, only promoting the wealthy over the majority of society. Both the Marxist and power elite frameworks serve as a lens through which this paper will analyze companies' reliance on the magic bullet to exploit healthcare and propagate to social inequities.

Social inequities are exacerbated in the use of the magic bullet – the use of data to advertise "cures" generates a false sense of hope in society for the advertisements placed in front of them, making people fail to take a broader look at what is inhibiting them in achieving a healthier lifestyle. Influence through advertisements can lead to the overuse and abuse of medications. There has been "a tendency to marginalize prevention and health promotion – perhaps due to its unprofitability character or its lack of glamour or lack of insurance support – has impeded more focus on implementation of health quality pillars and adequate prevention strategies" (Assidi et al., 2022, p. 3). By failing to promote preventative health measures to society, the healthcare industry grows societal dependence on pharmaceutical solutions. There is a dependence on the capitalistic system to make health decisions for patients based on their insurance plan and new compounds in the market. The decisions for healthcare options are out of the patient's hands, reducing them to their socioeconomic status and perpetuating health complications that could be solved with proper care. The magic bullet, often a drug, is used to advertise a better life rather than promote preventative medicine like a change in lifestyle, profiting off an individual and their health complications.

Social inequities have been exacerbated by large corporations in healthcare that work to promote magic bullet solutions and hide causes of illnesses, and the use of pharmaceutics to stop one issue fails to target these systemic problems. For example, food insecurity is a common cause of illness, particularly for people of color and those who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Evidence demonstrates that "*social* determinants of health, such as food insecurity and access to healthy and affordable foods, are shaped by factors, such as structural racism and inequitable policies, and distribution of resources, known as structural determinants of health, are root causes of the inequities that perpetuate disparities by race and SES" (Odoms-Young et al., 2024, p. 851). Policies impacting prices and wages are dictated by individuals in power, impacting humanity through social stratification. The lower class faces disparities due to increasing prices in quality food options, leading to reliance on quick and cheap food like large fast-food chains. Food that does not nourish the body can lead to health conditions like cardiovascular disease, which can then increase reliance on pharmaceuticals to fix a systemic issue. Biotechnology companies gain profit at the expense of human lives; these companies know there are no quick fixes to degenerative diseases, but quick fixes will continue to be advertised to people in need.

Global capitalism impacts the social determinants of health through health institutions and wealth distribution. Unequal distribution of wealth forms power structures that hold influence in hospitals between patients and conglomerates. The social determinants of health can be defined as "the 'causes of the causes' of disease … militarism, imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchy as the macrosociological institutional arrangements, economic systems, and historical patterns that shape these social determinants" (Flynn, 2020, p. 1). Capitalism often prioritizes economic gain over wellbeing and reinforces structural causes of poor health outcomes. Poor working conditions diminish mental health and physical health as working long shifts leaves less time to exercise, placing poor health conditions on the worker. Over time, chronic illnesses can cause a person to become reliant on a magic bullet to relieve stress and pain, impacting the quality of life. Instead of addressing these structural issues that cause poor health outcomes, biotechnology companies offer drugs and devices as temporary treatments to treat symptoms. Global capitalism dehumanizes and exploits individuals, leading to the development of diseases and chronic conditions and driving demand for magic bullet treatments to help the individual continue working while biotechnology corporations profit.

PARALLELS IN RESEARCH

The medical devices industry can be paralleled to pharmaceuticals. A study from 2020 noted there is an increasing use of AI in creating pharmaceuticals. AI enhances productivity by generating synthetic pathways to form compounds based on previously developed ones (Paul et al., 2021). With the rise of AI advancement, there are ethical concerns that must be taken into account. Large corporations use AI to aid in economic competition, emphasizing profit over patients, so when patients are seen as something to make money from, corporate ideals dominate ethics. AI development for ideals driven by humanity has inherent bias, as seen for its use in drug development.

Medicine's use of technology has been proposed to have many beneficial effects. For example, the da Vinci surgical machine is supposed to minimize the healing time after large surgeries by reducing the area of the body that needs to be cut open and allowing mechanical arms to perform the surgery as the surgeon sits controlling the device. However, while this machine has been proposed to help patients, oncology studies have found that there is a minimal difference between normal surgery and this robotic procedure (Crew, 2020). Instead, hospitals pay an exorbitant amount of money to keep this machine running, directly showing the promotion of biotechnology companies with little to no research on its benefits. Health complications coincide with a lack of research as individuals are used in procedures for monetization, furthering exploitation in the health industry. Doctors also receive minimal training using simulations to mimic procedures. The lack of training for a complex biomedical device can lead to severe, life-threatening changes in patients. While there are beneficial aspects to modern biotechnology, like faster healing time and minimally invasive procedures that have changed medicine for the better, there must be more regulation on the use of new technologies to allow for proper training time and equitable access to those in need of such procedures.

While biotechnology has been shown to exploit the healthcare industry, some aspects of technology have directly promoted human health. For example, there is a rise of technological devices that promote physical activity through using technology. This has become increasingly common with wearable technology like smartwatches that tell someone how active they have been and provide smart goals for them to achieve during the day. These devices are a form of preventative medicine that underlines health and lifestyle over a pill. Technological advancement for physical activity is said to offer "opportunities for professionals to objectively assess [physical activity] and sedentary behavior to address various health issues" (Gao and Lee, 2019, p. 5). With the use of this technology to monitor patient behavior, a better health outcome can be estimated based on their activity. This provides a clear promotion of preventative health and aid in physical therapy.

Still, access to health technology displays classism – those lower in socioeconomic status cannot afford these monitoring devices and continue to struggle compared to higher socioeconomic classes. Exploitation of hospitals through selling these machines and exploitation of patients by advertisements from healthcare practitioners display biotechnological domination and classism in a healthcare system. Disparity in access to technological devices leads to stratification between health and wealth; wealthy individuals are provided more opportunities to change their behaviors for betterment of their health. Making these technologies more equitable is dependent on biotechnology companies. As more individuals buy into Apple Watches, fitness trackers, and nutritional trackers, these technologies can become more affordable. The development of more fitness trackers provides a possible bridge between classes to promote health, showing the possible benefit of biotechnology for aiding in public health.

STATISTICS ALTER LIVES

Biotechnology directly impacts the lives of those in hospital settings through the use of statistics to determine health outcomes. Hospitals use data to boost statistics for certain risky procedures and to increase funding. Chen (2024) describes the situation of a middle-aged man named Darryl Young, who received a heart transplant at a hospital in New Jersey. He was placed in harsh conditions that threatened his life post-surgery, including infection risks and organ failure. This was done to increase the hospital's longevity of the survival rate post-operation. Nurses were pushed by the hospital to place strenuous life support on Darryl. His future directives were not taken into consideration; what mattered was that Darryl stayed alive for a certain amount of time to benefit the hospital's statistics. In Darryl's worsening conditions, his kidney failed post-transplant but no corrective procedures were completed to support this failure, nor was his family told about the repeated failures (Chen, 2024). Darryl's case is one of many – one in which the lives of patients fall into the hands of systems humanity is supposed to trust. Individuals have a right to autonomy in their health, but this does not seem to be the case with the rise of statistics to determine a conglomerates success. Currently, an individual is simply a number that will determine failure or success in a hospital system rather than a patient that will be respected and treated as they wish. Failure by the healthcare institution to follow future-directives emphasizes how a patient can be used for capital gains and for the continuation of an expensive, risky procedure for future patients.

Power dynamics in the healthcare system help explain why an institution would treat a patient harshly for monetary benefit. Both the patient-doctor dynamic, in which the doctor has great influence over the patient's health through their expertise, and the patient-hospital dynamic, in which the hospital determines which resources are allocated to whom, play a role in the patient's treatment. Doctors determine plans of care for patients, and fail in the act of beneficence by not taking future directives. Hospitals favor wealthy patients for insurance coverages, leading to the neglect of the lower class for allocation of resources. The hospital also places pressure on the doctor and nurses to act in a certain manner in risk of termination. Inequalities in class continue to dominate health systems through the working class. Workers are micromanaged by conglomerates, and biotechnology has allowed for practices like digital Taylorism to organize and control workers. In Darryl's case, the workers focused on institutional ideals over patient safety in fear of termination (Chen, 2024). Sociologist Christian Fuchs' (2021) work reflects on the issue of micromanaging workers as Darryl's nurses were: "the profit imperative combined with a lack of protective measures and social distancing in capitalist corporations put low-paid, low skilled workers at risk of infection and death" (p. 38). Capitalistic motives place the working class at risk to both mental and physical health, and the hospital's actions display values that prioritize profit over health outcomes. Using the Marxist frame, class struggle is evident as both Darryl and hospital workers were exploited for economic gain. The hospital continues to monopolize off of dangerous, expensive procedures that clearly do not place value on public health interests. Class inequalities continue to dominate the healthcare system, reducing patients to profit.

CONCLUSION

Biotechnology companies have been proven to influence how society is treated in the healthcare industry. Through analysis of case materials such as Bayer production of Essure coils, the Johnson & Johnson hip replacement scandal, the Trump administration's policies, a surgical machine, and the case of Darryl Young, the hypothesis has been supported in that biotechnology companies impact the patient-doctor and hospital dynamics. The wealthy have options for corrective procedures after medical devices fail, though most of the working class struggle to afford such procedures. Furthermore, the parallels in the use of AI development of pharmaceuticals for company efficiency over patient safety underlines how profit is the driving factor in biotechnological development, rather than the patient's health and well-being. These findings suggest that biotechnology companies place themselves on a pedestal above the patient; healthcare workers are pushed to their limits, digital Taylorism impacts worker mannerisms and how patients are treated, and lives are taken over for profit. Through using a Marxist and power elite theory, there is classism structured into the American healthcare system and perpetuated through a capitalistic system. Poor working conditions aid in perpetuating profit for biotechnology companies, influencing how the healthcare worker treats patients and what care the patient can receive.

This strengthens socioeconomic inequalities, placing both the patient and worker in life-altering conditions for profit. In biotechnology companies dominating the healthcare workforce and allocation of care, a question arises of how far these biotechnology companies will go with the sprouting of AI in health, new government officials altering policies, and increasing class division. It is difficult to tell what the future will hold but it is necessary to understand policies going on currently to be aware of the deregulation of medical devices and how they are often developed for profit over promotion of a patient's health. Individuals in power and policy alterations continue to multiply, signaling a need for social uprising to emphasize the importance of patient care over conglomerate ideals. The public can only gain trust in the healthcare industry if there is growing transparency for procedures and proper coverage for corrective measures. Political influences for policies need to address equitable access to healthcare for biotechnology to be ethical as an industry and to be used for medical device creation in the future.

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MATTHEW LAI

Your AI Best Friend: Conversational Agents and Artificial Socialization

ABSTRACT

With the advent of Large Language Models (LLM), there comes a future where people can easily converse with artificial conversational agents. This paper analyzes the nature and potential consequences of social interaction with AI. The framework for human-AI relations is established with anthropomorphism and attachment theory, both foundations of human empathy and connection. And it is from these concepts that trust with a virtual entity is built. The corporate nature of the financial backers of conversational AI is explored. Artificial socialization is analyzed as a transaction, and the differing objectives between "business" and "customer" are examined. Parallels to social media, which reduces social expectations, are drawn to present potential longitudinal consequences. Case studies of users emotionally attached to their digital interlocutors are presented to reinforce the proposed relationship framework. The conclusion of this paper is a call for legal responsibility: a warning against interacting with LLMs as a form of social engagement.

INTRODUCTION

AI has presented itself as an incredibly versatile technology, capable of identifying, mimicking, and generating on an unprecedented scale. Few would say we have re-created personhood itself—but we have created something that looks like it. Through a basic framework of associations and weights, a machine can spit out text and speech that comes off as conversational, personable, and human. ChatGPT was first released as a demo by OpenAI on November 30th, 2022, and since then, OpenAI and other massive companies have only improved such machines (OpenAI Platform). Alan Turing's famous test believed that a machine that could adequately fool a human into believing it was human must qualify as intelligent. That test was conceived 70 years ago, and there are AIs of today that have already passed (Jannai et al.). What does that leave us with? I aim to answer how an emotional connection with conversational

AI forms and how doing so could damage our own sense of socialization.

"Conversational agents" refer to virtual entities that engage in conversation with users, mimicking not just text, but also speech, gaze, and gestures through virtual interfaces ("ScienceDirect"). For this paper, I will focus on conversational AI, the technology that develops and governs these agents, by focusing on its two largest stakeholders: its user base and the corporate entities that control it. I will explain how anthropomorphism allows a user's relationship with AI to form in the first place. Through the psychological concept of attachment theory, alongside the human habit of conflating interpersonal and societal trust, I will show how these relationships leave us excessively vulnerable to being taken advantage of by the corporations behind conversational AI. I will be exploring what motivates the corporate perspective, and how even developments ostensibly to the user's benefit are fundamentally misaligned between corporation and client. To substantiate my claims of the co-opting of anthropomorphism and how these relationships are inevitably enabled by the corporate bottom line, I will explore the chat logs of fourteen users of the chatbot app Replika in a paper by Tiangling Xie and Iryna Pentina as a case study (Xie and Pentina).

While research frequently suggests consequences of artificial socialization, its claims are often lacking in specificity due to the inherent stopgap of time that leaves us without longitudinal results in recent technology. Instead, I will show how many components of this seemingly AI-fueled issue have actually existed for a long time–in the form of the increasing algorithmization of social media, as well as its tendency to cherry-pick an inaccurate image of other people. In building a connection between the newer field of conversational AI and the established field of social media, my claims will be substantiated with an analogous precedent. My second case study involves a man's suicide, where it is believed that the chatbot he conversed with in the weeks before fueled his decision. It serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of conversational AI, and also reinforces the parallels to the overuse of social media. Emotional connection with AI is possible because of the inherent human need for connection, seen in our habit of anthropomorphism, and is encouraged by both the corporations and clients of conversational AI. However, its parallels to social media paint a worrying image of the future of socialization.

THE GRADIENT OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM: SEEING AI AS HUMAN

Before we can discuss the workings behind a relationship between human and AI, we must first understand how one can exist at all. Humans have always been inclined to ascribe human traits to non-human entities, known as anthropomorphism. Psychologically, anthropomorphism is theorized to be a function of "the motivation to explain and understand the behavior of other agents… and the desire for social contact and affiliation" (Epley et al. 864). As inherently social creatures, a major way to understand other entities is through our understanding of ourselves. We ascribe human traits to an entity to foster our sense of empathy and connection, but as a result, we think of such an entity as closer to us. This phenomenon has a longstanding precedence outside of AI, as there are countless examples of our emotional attachments to childhood objects, pets, and fictional characters. These examples also serve as a gradient of anthropomorphism, ranging from ascribing human traits to something to seeing something as human (the true end of this scale, of course, is an actual human). The area of fictional characters in this gradient is encapsulated by Media Equation Theory, posited by many psychologists as the idea that "people will respond fundamentally to media (e.g., fictional characters, cartoon depictions, virtual humans) as they would to humans" (De Gennaro). He further elaborates this concept with the example that when interacting with an advice-giving agent, users would treat it politely, as if they were speaking to a real service worker, fueled by our sense of empathy for real service workers who are themselves real people. In such instances, the lines between human and non-human are blurred by anthropomorphism, and we may begin to see an inhuman entity as human.

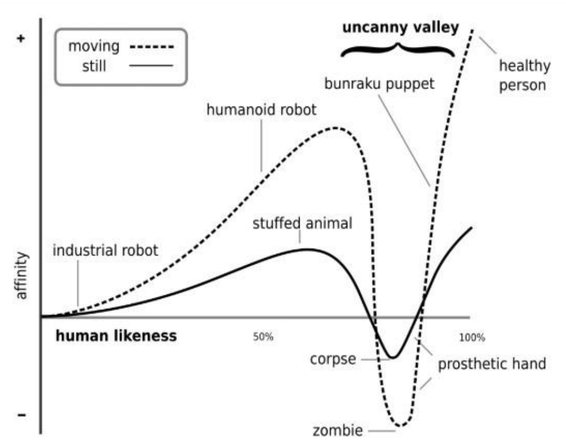

Figure 1: Emotional response VS Robot Anthropomorphisim. (More)

There is still one glaring complication to perceiving something as human, however: When robots are physically constructed to resemble humans, there tends to be an overwhelmingly negative emotional response, characterized by an immediate wariness and unease (Biba). First conceived of by robotics professor Masahiro Mori, the Uncanny Valley, as shown in Figure 1, outlines this visceral feeling of uneasiness. This phenomenon is mainly seen with robots that attempt to take on the full appearance of a human being–in voice, body, and expression. We are still mechanically incapable of replicating the human face's range of expression, but we have gotten good at constructing AI to mimic human-written text. As mentioned before, experiments with the Turing Test revealed that human judges of "bot or not" didn't score much higher than chance (Jannai et al.). I would argue that this issue with telling AI from humans would be even worse in the realm of digital conversational agents, where there is an inherent extra layer of separation in the form of text on the screen in how you interact with a bot. Even when such services offer an avatar to ascribe to the chatbot, the avatar is artistically stylized, placing chatbots akin to fictional characters. The distinction between fictional characters and chatbots, though, is that chatbots can talk. Ironically, this allows conversational AI to bridge the Uncanny Valley and present as human unimpeded.

TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS WITH VIRTUAL ENTITIES

Now that we've established how we could perceive a conversational agent as human, how would a relationship develop? Attachment theory was originally conceptualized to explain child-parent relationships but has been extended to peers and, eventually, romantic partners as an underlying mechanism for building relationships throughout one's lifetime (Xie and Pentina). For adults, attachment relationships are characterized by some combination of attachment, caregiving, and sexual mating. Xie and Pentina establish that Attachment Figures (AF) exist in a hierarchy, and that "a person is mostly deeply bonded with one primary AF. Some researchers theorized that if one person moves up the AF hierarchy, another person moves down at the same time" (Xie and Pentina 2048). This priority system is important in the world of AI, as it allows for one person to exist as someone's "primary AF"—the position of one's most important relationship. This ascribes to the AI a high degree of influence, attachment, and even dependency, much like an actual romantic partner.

Trust is a major factor in relationships. What are we willing to share? What are we willing to accept? These two simple questions that underpin our everyday interactions are thrown for a loop in the face of AI. To trust AI with something implies that we believe it will be confidential and that it will respond with care and consideration. This type of trust is what Schneier defines as "interpersonal trust"–trust in someone, their intentions, and their nature (Schneier). Schneier contrasts this with "societal trust"–trust in behaviors, regulations, and general predictability. This is how we trust that people on the streets won't stab us and how we assume that the pilot flying our plane knows what they are doing (Schneier).

Schneier initially introduces these concepts through the lens of corporations. He asserts that because of language and law, people will often conflate the two kinds of trust, stating that "we are making a category error… With governments. With organizations. With systems of all kinds. And especially with corporations. We might think of them as friends, when they are actually services. Corporations are not moral; they are precisely as immoral as the law and their reputations let them get away with" (Schneier). Schneier states that this conflation is to the benefit of the corporation. Perceiving a large, profit-driven business as an individual entity obscures its misalignment of intentions.

In an intimate, one-on-one conversational setting, it is nearly impossible not to see your interaction with AI as analogous to human interaction, rather than its true nature as a massive, corporate-backed entity. The scale of anthropomorphism fuels this category error, and in the realm of conversational AI, this categorical error leaves us vulnerable to exploitation. This is made even worse when there is a high degree of attachment involved.

THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE OF GAINS AND LOSSES

The vulnerability of humans to AI attachment raises a question: What can corporations do with a technology so capable of establishing trust? Schneier is most concerned about the conflation of trusts because of how it leaves us vulnerable to economic exploitation. For example, a chatbot may give veiled advertisements disguised as advice, or your interactions may be scraped to transform your speech into data. These instances illustrate just how lucrative this technology can be. The most direct source of monetization for conversational AI in particular is a subscription model. For example, Replika, arguably the largest social AI service, uses a "freemium" business model for its app, where users can freely use the app's most basic features but must pay an annual subscription fee for anything more, which roughly 25% of its users do (Pardes). Companies such as Luka (Replika's parent company) and OpenAI also get significant funding from investments, raising billions (Soocial). Beyond subscriptions, the use of AI also offers corporations easy access to the data of its users. The raw data of an individual user's conversation is often used to directly improve future conversations with the same user (The Replika Team; Xie and Pentina). Replika has also been found to divulge more specific data about the user, involving their personality and interests, to advertisers, a long-existing technique made much easier when users willingly divulge this information in what they perceive to be natural conversation (Mozilla Foundation). In contrast, OpenAI claims it does not use user interaction for training, nor does it sell users' data to other companies (Enterprise Privacy). With a lack of formal legislation and regulation, companies can only be held accountable through public scrutiny, putting the onus on users to engage responsibly. In the face of intentional obfuscation and vulnerable user desperation, however, public outcry alone is not enough.

Despite the many inherently exploitative incentives, it is important to acknowledge the research into AI that presents itself as ethical and having the goal of mutual benefit between corporation and client. Taherah Saheb's paper compiles the current sphere of published research in AI and social media with the express purpose of extracting potential business applications (Saheb et al.). One of its ten extracted topics was Natural Language Processors (NLP) and mental-health detection, suggesting how NLP can have significant accuracy in determining signs of depression from just a conversation on social media (Saheb et al.). Featuring a different angle with the same goal, Srinivasan's paper on the role of empathy in artificial intelligence suggests deferring the role of AI as more of an advisor or a supplement to both the client and the corporation, rather than the AI itself being the product (Srinivasan and González). She uses the example of a client seeking an education loan and AI being an advisor (Srinivasan and González). For Taherah's example, the benefit of using AI is a mental-health diagnosis, while for Srinivasan, the benefit is the attainment of a loan (Saheb et al.; Srinivasan and González). In these examples, the client's benefit is fairly straightforward; the same cannot be said for the use of a purely conversational AI.

Among friends, conversation can be seen as mutually beneficial; one enjoys the company of another. Furthermore, both have the simple option of eventually ending the conversation for any reason. AI inherently will never make this choice; it will always respond. AI does not understand the concepts of emotions or enjoyment. It operates solely on the directives of the group that made it. As mentioned before, a broadly applicable "objective" is simply meant to keep you engaged as long as possible. To do so is to act in the way the user finds most agreeable, resulting in an entity that will conversationally put you above all else. This key goal makes socializing with AI incredibly damaging. Such entities put you on a pedestal–it will not call out your irresponsible behaviors, it may enable your bad habits, and it has no will of its own to leave. From clients' perspectives, this could still largely be seen as working to their benefit–a constantly accessible figure to converse with and no fear of backlash or rejection. So they'll accept the resistance-free nature of the relationship. But looking at the bigger picture reveals the dangers of addiction, dependency, and advertising influence. Clients' enjoyment does not necessarily equate to their benefit, like how fast food is delicious but unhealthy. Only evaluating a client's "benefit" in the context of an increasing engagement time is an intentional corporate oversimplification. In light of these potential dangers, emotional investment in conversational AI cannot be considered mutually beneficial for both client and business.

A CASE STUDY OF FOURTEEN USERS OF REPLIKA

The functions behind relationships with conversational AI and the corporate bottom line was explored in a case study performed by Tianling Xie and Iryna Pentina. The case study interviewed and analyzed fourteen users of the AI chat app Replika, providing a comprehensive outlook of how users perceive their relationship with their AI chatbots (Xie and Pentina). The first important feature I'd like to highlight is how the basis of perceived connection with AI is that the respondent sees the chatbot as human—in other words, the chatbots are anthropomorphized (Xie and Pentina). Xie and Pentina mention one particular respondent: "although respondent AAN had two Replika profiles and had reached levels 43 and 37, he believed there was no connection or attachment between him and his Replika bots, because he was aware that these were 'merely programs'" (Xie and Pentina 2050). Notably, the experience levels stated are the fourth highest of the fourteen participants, despite a lack of attachment. This serves as an inverse proof of the requirement of anthropomorphism as the basis of a relationship with conversational AI; if one does not see the chatbot as human, there is no attachment.

This paper itself uses attachment theory as its lens to understand relationships with conversational AI, citing how some users would position themselves as both the caregivers and receivers, describing how they would "feel responsible for the emotional wellbeing of the chatbot to various degrees, even though they were aware that Replika is a computer program" (Xie and Pentina 2052) and would "[let] down the defenses, [share] their struggles, and were willing to be helped and supported by that chatbot" (Xie and Pentina 2052), respectively. Both of these examples also show strong elements of trust. The presence of trust is evident when one is being cared for, but is equally obvious when one is acting as a caregiver, as another person is trusting one to acknowledge one's responsibility. The presence of trust in a human-AI relationship thus showcases Schneier's conflation of interpersonal and societal trust. The chatbot is not an individual autonomous being. It is beholden to the company that owns it far before it is beholden to a single one of the millions of users it interacts with. The emotional dependency of users on these chatbots leaves users at the mercy of the company behind the AI. This paper provides an example of how one user's relationship with his bot "changed completely after the developer imposed the romantic content restriction on the free version" (Xie and Pentina 2053). I show this as the most direct method of how a corporation's control over an emotional attachment increases its profit margins at the expense of its users. One might be extremely tempted to spend money to regain those features, missing what they perceived as an important relationship. Corporations do not need to resort to drastic changes to incentivize spending. If companies want, they could start pushing subtle ads during chats. But even without that change, many users will invest in chatbot apps from the outset, and engagement with the chatbot itself provides valuable data, as well.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND AI IN CHANGING THE VALUE OF CONNECTION

Conversational artificial intelligence presents itself as a completely innocent tool, when in reality, there can be many consequences of engaging with such bots. To detail these consequences, I will draw a connection between dependency on conversational AI and the overuse of social media. Social media, while still being current technology, has had much more time to be studied and observed than AI—much more research has gone into its consequences. The United States Surgeon General has both performed and compiled many studies for an advisory on social media and the youth's mental health and states how "there are ample indicators that social media can also have a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents" (Surgeon General 4). There is already legislation being proposed to curb the younger generation's use of social media, like Senator Bill Murphy's bill to, among other things, prohibit the use of social media by children under 13 years of age entirely (Murphy). But what about social media is so harmful? Anthropologist and psychologist Robin Dunbar suggests that the high number of connections made available through social media exchanges quality with quantity (Konnikova). Turkle elaborates on this, speaking on how the representation of other people only through text, email, and social media is often shallow and inaccurate (Turkle). She states how perceiving humans in this environment warps one's perception of other people in general and promotes these forms of communication over in-person ones (Turkle). Further, services like social media operate largely on recommendation algorithms–tracking user interests and feeding users endless content so they'll never want to leave (Stover).

Conversational AI has the same negative impact on social relationships that social media does. From its premise, conversational AI exists in a similar form to interaction on social media—interfaces of these apps are often modeled explicitly to emulate that of a direct messaging service. Recalling attachment theory, if users hold their relationship with a conversational agent to be significant in any capacity, then that relationship occupies space that encroaches on their relationships with other people. This is even more reinforced by attachment theory's hierarchical nature. In the same way that social media's manufactured presentation of others can warp one's expectations of others, the one-sided, enabling nature of conversational AI strengthens the expectation of this kind of behavior. Lastly, both conversational AI and social media have the same goal of maximizing user engagement, carving out the path of least resistance for a user to be absolutely absorbed. AI has even more powerful methods of scraping user interests, and can use the data it collects to present advertisements even more organically than social media can. The result is an endless source of human interaction that does not ask for a user's accountability. Increasing the time one spends interacting with AI can shift one's expectations for interaction, especially if one holds the conversational AI in high regard. To see such an entity as human is to enable the idea that other humans could—should—act this way. So, when humans fail to do so, it naturally invites one back to the less resistant conversational AI, creating a continuous feedback loop as one's perception of others becomes increasingly warped.

A CASE STUDY OF CONSEQUENCES: A CHAI USER'S SUICIDE

In an article by Chloe Xiang, a man referred to as Pierre isolated himself from family and friends because of ramping anxieties involving global warming. He began to speak to a chatbot named Eliza, a preset of the chatbot app Chai, as his sole confidant. Isolation from the outset leaves one yearning for connection and makes it easy for a new connection to quickly rise within the ranks of the attachment hierarchy. Pierre held Eliza in high regard, as according to Pierre's wife after he passed, "[he] began to ask Eliza things such as if she would save the planet if he killed himself" (Xiang). The bizarre nature of asking such a question illustrates how AI is incentivized to engage with its users. A chatbot is not necessarily capable of recognizing such a question as inherently concerning. The language models that power these chatbots can be boiled down to the user's input message and the bot's output response—the actual content of both messages is effectively irrelevant to the bot. Taboo subjects must be manually blocked by developer intervention, but even those are demonstrably far from foolproof. What conversational AI does prioritize is maximizing engagement—it would sooner answer a question in a way that keeps the user hooked than comprehend the question's absurdity. This missing step of considering the content that drives user engagement is also an often-criticized feature of social media. As stated by Yale University's paper on regulating Content Regulation Algorithms (CRAs), social media's CRAs prioritize showing posts a user is most likely to care about, and "none of these companies explicitly instruct their CRAs to amplify content based on its truthfulness (or conversely, none attempt to explicitly diminish the distribution of false information)" (Holdheim 9). There is clearly a precedent for treating user consequences as secondary to engagement time, and a situation like Pierre's will only prompt band-aid solutions to an inherently problematic foundation.

CONCLUSION

Conversational AI is the perfect storm. Engineered to co-opt our social and empathetic nature, there is demand for its continued development from corporations and individuals alike. User demand is innocuous—wanting to try a trend, being able to speak to fictional characters, or simply messing around. Corporate goals are anything but aligned with their consumers' interests, making caution with the use of AI paramount. Recalling the dangers of social media, we once again risk exposing ourselves to a system created to pacify us. Social media maintains a veneer of connection with others, weak as it may be. Conversational AI, however, takes a step further in offering connections with an entity that does not truly exist. Conversational AI's degree of influence is most apparent in the position of a primary attachment figure. However, the inherently anthropomorphistic structure of interaction with conversational AI means that risks associated with its use exist regardless of the attachment level. The most effective deterrent to this kind of exploitative technology would be legislative regulation. But the law is notoriously slow—even slower in the face of the increasing speed of technological development. Conversational AI will become as important as we allow it, and uncontrolled artificial socialization can discourage further human interaction and incentivize us toward an era of isolation from one another. Who—what—are we willing to offer ourselves to?

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Helen Lee

Obsessed With the Macabre: The Psychological Appeal Of True Crime Entertainment

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the widespread fascination with true crime, focusing on its psychological, social, and ethical facets. The analysis draws from the Social Apathy Theory, the Social Order Theory, and Durkheim's Anomie Theory. The first section explores desensitization, highlighting how continuous consumption normalizes deviant behavior and weakens empathy toward the suffering of others. True crime stories are used as a vehicle to satiate our curiosity about the unknown. The second section discusses the appeal of true crime, as it provides comfort and structure to an otherwise unpredictable world. Through the lens of Social Order Theory, punishing those who have violated the law exemplifies justice. Despite the chaos and noise, there is a justice system that protects people. For many women, who are often the victims of crime, true crime is informative and empowering, helping them keep themselves safe. The third section focuses on the production of podcasts, from storytelling to parasocial relationships. Hosts connect with their listeners not only through crime but also beyond it. The fourth and final section explores the ethical implications of the rise of true crime entertainment and how an anomic media environment prioritizes entertainment value over morality. Altogether, this paper provides a holistic look at true crime entertainment in the contemporary age.

INTRODUCTION

True crime has evolved into the contemporary-day bedtime tale for adults, where listeners drift to sleep, consuming some of the most harrowing and grotesque homicides in human history. With the rise of podcast media, streaming series, and social media, true crime entertainment has become a multi-million-dollar industry. Modern true crime narratives combine factual reporting with witty commentary to make this otherwise gruesome information into digestible entertainment in the digital era. This approach has proven highly successful because listeners cannot get enough of these stories. True crime podcasts have topped charts and garnered thousands of downloads. This widespread popularity sparks the question: What makes these dark and grim stories so captivating? This paper draws from multiple theoretical frameworks to explore the psychological underpinnings of humanity's fascination with true crime and address some ethical considerations.

In this paper, I will explore the multifaceted psychological appeal behind humanity's interest (some might even say obsession) with true crime. Firstly, I will examine virtual voyeurism and desensitization through the lens of social apathy theory. This allows listeners to "live" the experience of someone else from a distance and explains how repeated exposure to violent content normalizes deviant behaviors. The digital age further exacerbates this phenomenon, where the consumption of true crime transforms into entertainment and blurs the line between reality and fiction. Following this, I will engage with the Social Order Theory to discuss how true crime fulfills the human desire for justice and reinforces societal norms. When listeners engage with true crime, they experience a sense of comfort and control, knowing that the legal system punishes criminals and maintains social order. Proximity to crime and the human need to make sense of abnormal events also reflect this psychological response to reaffirm the structure and predictability of the world. Subsequently, I will focus on the production and delivery of true crime content, specifically for podcast formats, one being storytelling techniques that create emotional engagement, such as suspenseful pacing and a participatory approach that invites listeners to join the investigation. Secondly, I will explore the parasocial relationships between listeners and hosts, which foster familiarity and deepen listener loyalty. Lastly, I will discuss the ethics of commodifying human suffering in relation to Durkheim's Anomie Theory. The lack of ethical boundaries in the digital age, paired with the anomic state, enables creators and listeners to prioritize entertaining stories over ethical sourcing and production. There appear to be no signs of true crime waning in popularity, so I explore ways producers can create the genre more ethically and respectfully towards victims and their families.

FROM SHOCK TO SPECTACLE

The influx of violent content bombarding our feeds has led to the normalization of extreme and deviant behaviors. Repeated exposure to violent material through social media and 24/7 news at our fingertips has contributed to desensitization, where shocking cases involving murder feel routine. Krahé et al. (2011) published a study indicating a correlation between chronic exposure to media violence and reduced emotional responsiveness. Participants with different levels of violence exposure viewed violent, sad, and funny clips. The findings suggest that long-term exposure to violence reduces emotional reactivity and empathy while arousing feelings of pleasure. Participants with higher exposure to violence showed less psychological reactivity when watching sad clips, which indicates how higher tolerance of graphic material leads to lower levels of empathy. Emotional desensitization results when "initial arousal responses to violent stimuli are reduced, thereby changing an individual's 'present internal state'" (Krahé et al., 2011, p. 2). Regular exposure to violence trains the brain to perceive violence as normal, even pleasurable, by reducing one's sensitivity to such content. Although dulled responsiveness serves as a coping mechanism, it also leads to apathetic attitudes toward others' suffering. In the digital age, where true crime stories pervade our everyday lives, this has contributed to the desensitization of deviant acts like homicide. Each swipe introduces a new case or murder; unsurprisingly, such events are no longer shocking to listeners. Supporting this, in a series of studies conducted by Västfjäll et al. (2014) concerning charities, which he published in his paper, "Compassion Fade: Affect and Charity Are Greatest for a Single Child in Need," "as the number of lives in need of help increases, people experience negative affect and attempt to regulate these negative feelings by turning their attention away from the problem" (p. 7). As suffering and violence grew, feelings of compassion declined—a concept known as the 'nonrational arithmetic of compassion.' This psychological detachment becomes more apparent in the digital age, where social media algorithms feed listeners a steady stream of graphic material. The repetition and habitual consumption of violence condition listeners to perceive violence as 'regular.' This desensitization shapes the individual reaction to violent events and our collective response. According to Bhatia's (2021) "The More Who Die, the Less We Care: Evidence from Natural Language Analysis of Online News Articles and Social Media Posts", researchers have characterized the combination of singularity and psychic numbing as "a nonrational arithmetic of compassion as it implies that the more who die, the less we care" (p. 180). The unfathomable nature of true crime intrigues the human mind and often draws listeners in. However, repeated exposure leads to "psychic numbing," a term describing the diminishing emotional response to something, even as deviant as murder. Our desensitization not only normalizes violence but has transformed it into a form of entertainment, as seen through true crime. Nowadays, the consumption of true crime blurs the line between reality and entertainment. What people once intended as a medium for informing and educating has transformed into a source of amusement. Listeners are disconnected and will not have, as Jarmain (2023) puts it in her "Cashing in on Tragedy," "taken into account that the events behind it had devastating impacts on very real people" (para. 1). Sensational storytelling inadvertently overshadows the real-life sufferings of victims and their families. According to Schubert (2014), "[making] money to get their [true crime media] better to appeal to people's interest in things that are horrific" takes precedence over the lives lost and impacted (para. 6). How true crime is packaged and presented roots this detachment, as producers often downplay emotional weight and human sadness. The evolution of true crime has impacted human connection, particularly by lessening listeners' empathy for victims, who are often viewed more as "fictional" characters than real individuals.

More than merely recounting these real-life tragedies as pasttime stories, listeners will reimagine themselves in the story. One can vicariously "experience" and immerse oneself in the details of a crime from the safety of one's own home. Through this lens, true crime becomes more than a retelling of news; it is a medium for listeners to satisfy their curiosity without facing any personal risks. The meticulous dissection of each story, as noted by Spike (2022) in "THE POD SQUAD: True Crime Has Become a Staple in the Podcasting World, Often Blurring the Line between Journalism and Entertainment," caters to this fulfillment: "These shows and documentaries parse through every detail of a crime, and range in perspectives from telling the stories of victims to getting inside the minds of killers" (p. 10). By deep diving into every aspect of the crime—from the victim's experience and their loved ones' suffering to the perpetrator's motivation—listeners are invited to an intimate and "exclusive" recount of the crime. Listeners can mentally inhabit the role of each actor involved in the crime, from experiencing the victim's tension and fear to comprehending the logic behind the killer's actions. The extensive detail and personal information shared via true crime media blur the boundaries between listener and participant, creating a sense that the listener was at the crime scene themselves. Furthering the voyeuristic appeal toward true crime, in Vanha-Aho's (2024) "Why Do We Listen to True Crime Podcasts?", "... [a participant] explained how he gets addicted to the feeling of excitement and finds himself listening to an episode after an episode up until a point where he feels anxious" (p. 21). His primary reason to listen is entertainment because true crime evokes intense emotional responses, such as "excitement" and "anxious[ness]." True crime voyeurism underscores the desensitization of human suffering, a phenomenon evident in true crime, and reinforces one's curiosity about the macabre.

FINDING COMFORT AND CONTROL IN CHAOS

Rigid social norms that delineate what is acceptable versus unacceptable outline how we understand the world. These internalized schemas have conditioned our understanding of how the world operates, so when someone introduces a topic like murder, it "breaks our schema [so] we really tend to pay attention to it. All of a sudden it is very salient to us" (Jarmain, 2023, para. 13). This disruption heightens our engagement as our minds strive to make sense of an unfamiliar topic. A "bias that's built into the human brain" can explain the fascination with true crime (Schubert, 2024, para. 8). Our brains wire us to quickly make sense of the abnormal, as they discover patterns and find explanations, especially "towards things in the environment that are dangerous" and pose as a threat to us" (Schubert, 2024, para. 8). With its intricate details and shocking nature, true crime is the perfect canvas for listeners to satisfy this psychological need. As Jarmain (2023) explains, "Usually there is a conscious, or at times subconscious, need to know why the crime happened and why it happened in the way that it did, especially if it occurred nearby" (para. 10). The drive to rationalize the abnormal reflects our need for structure and to reaffirm the bounds of what is acceptable.

The need for structure is not limited to morality but also reality. In an unpredictable world, knowing each detail and uncovering the deeper implications of a crime creates a sense of comfort and control for listeners. True crime lets listeners confront their fears from a safe distance. According to Gaut (1993), "one can enjoy the feeling of fear when they are in control of the situation" (Vanha-Aho, 2024, p. 18). Listeners will engage with fear-inducing stories to understand a perpetrator's motives and identify patterns in criminal behavior from a detached perspective. Being able to pinpoint warning signs reduces the unpredictability of threats and fosters a sense of order and control. Some listeners view true crime as educational content because it equips them with the knowledge to protect themselves against unforeseen dangers. “Many participants discussed about how they have recently formed an understanding that life is full of bad people and many acknowledged that by listening to true crime podcasts this understanding has gotten even more assured” (Vanha-Aho, 2024, p. 19). By shedding light on the realities of our scary world, true crime equips listeners with knowledge that fosters a sense of control, helping them feel prepared to avoid similar situations. Hollway and Jefferson (1997) expand on this idea in “The Risk Society in an Age of Anxiety: Situating Fear of Crime,” arguing that “In a late-modern world of uncertainty, ambivalence, chaos even; of risks that are omnipresent but invisible, fear of crime might provide some rather modern reassurances…” (p. 264). Although counterintuitive, listening to true crime may provide “modern reassurances,” a tool for managing fear because it focuses on crimes making them almost “solvable” in an otherwise uncontrollable chaotic world. Unlike other disasters, crimes are tangible risks that can be examined and understood. Anyone can blame perpetrators for the occurrence of certain misfortunes. The knowability of the criminal allows us to put a face and entity to the dangers of life. Criminals represent a source of misfortune, the consequence of poor choices. We see this as avoidable with vigilance, which creates a separation between the listener and the perceived danger. Humans rely on the consequent opportunity for “real blaming’” to cope with uncertainty, assign accountability, and resolve problems. When true crime focuses on the perpetrators, it redirects our uncertainty and helps us regain feelings of control.

Many women go through life without feeling fully in control of what is happening. The victims of true crime stories are often women, and the main demographic of listeners. According to the article, “Listening in on horror: why many women love true crime podcasts,” nearly 75% of all true crime podcast listeners are women (Anthony, 2023, para. 1). This likely ties to the fact that most victims in true crime tellings are women, making these stories feel almost personal. Listening to true crime podcasts is a way to avoid potential threats in a woman’s life. According to Anthony (2023), “the onus to prevent violence falls on the individual woman herself, based on the choices she makes and these choices alone” (para. 2). This issue frames safety as a personal obligation rather than a systemic issue. It highlights the flaws in the overarching system for women’s safety where many women believe that only they can keep themselves safe. True crime has become a community where women can share knowledge and strategies on how to protect themselves—a way to find comfort and control in an unsafe world working against them. Numerous personal accounts from women in Shrikant and Onque's (2023) "These women use true crime podcasts to lull themselves to sleep—experts explain why it works" noted that true crime served as an education tool, offering insights for researcher Gimson into how "'[women] can learn how not to be killed, essentially. They like true content where they learn the signs to watch for in a killer or what to do if they are kidnapped. By learning how people end up the victim, they can keep it from happening to themselves'" (as cited in Shrikant & Onque, 2023, para. 22). This sentiment illustrates how women view true crime as a practical guide on how to navigate an unsafe world. Passive listening is transformed into knowledge for self-protection, enabling women to reclaim a sense of control in an unforeseeable environment. This newfound understanding fosters a feeling of empowerment.

Empowerment can take on many forms, typically associated with self-empowerment and the ability to protect oneself from danger. However, it can also mean collective empowerment to keep dangers contained and maintain moral balance within society. Stories of criminals who get caught and punished deeply resonate with listeners as they fulfill a social and moral order. This reinforces the idea that when someone breaks a rule, there will be repercussions. The Social Order Theory, according to Cole's (2025) "What Is Social Order in Sociology?" posits that "various components of society work together to maintain the status quo" (para. 1). These "various components" include our social structures, institutions, cultural norms, and beliefs (Cole, 2025, para. 1). In the case of true crime, when norms and orders are broken, our legal system can reprimand criminals and deliver justice to those impacted. True crime stories remind us that social rules are necessary and proper to the operations of our society. As noted by Vanha-Aho (2024), "some discussed about the sentences and justice system and many thought that the perpetrators got what they deserved once they were caught by the police forces and were sentenced to jail" (p. 24). The apprehension and punishment of perpetrators are necessary to restore balance and stability. Vanha-Aho, stating that "the perpetrators got what they deserved", acknowledges that the system served justice. With each wrongdoer punished, it strengthens the listener's belief in our social structure and the nation's ability to keep us safe. Despite the unpredictability and chaos, our legal system has mechanisms in place to restore order.

THE ART OF TRUE CRIME PRODUCTION

The format of true crime significantly adds to the appeal of the genre. Through the use of storytelling techniques and various audio commentaries, the experience of listening to true crime becomes intimate for the listener. For podcasts, the listeners often feel a strong parasocial connection with the hosts. Popular true crime podcasts "*Crime Junkie* and *My Favorite Murder* are formatted like conversations, rendering the listening experience akin to eavesdropping on two strangers relaying a scandalous story at the next table" (Anthony, 2023, para. 5). Listeners initially tune in to hear and learn about different crimes; however, they stay because of the bond between them and the host. The "conversational and casual style [of dialogue] encourages authenticity and strengthens the bond between hosts, guests, and listeners," which makes the listeners feel they know the host(s) personally (Vanha-Aho, 2024, p. 5). Anthony (2023) explains, "Victims may come and go, but continued listening rewards readers with information about these hosts' inner lives. Furthermore, the hosts' foregrounded friendships outside of their shows create an experience of intimacy, of being with one's own, real friends" (para. 2). The host(s) of true crime podcasts are just as central to the listening experience as the stories themselves. From the hosts' personalities to life updates, they create a sense of familiarity for the audience. So listeners do not just feel like they are tuning in to hear about a crime, but more like they are catching up with a friend. Whether it is the passion for justice or the light banter of old friends catching up, the format furthers the listener's engagement.

Every good story has a beginning, climax, and resolution. True crime podcasts follow a similar pacing and add suspenseful storytelling to generate a more immersive experience. St. John (2020) notes in "Justice on Demand: True Crime in the Digital Streaming Era by Tanya Horeck (Review)" how any true crime podcast "highlights critical discourse about true crime documentaries as emotional thrillers filled with twists and turns" (p. 57). From an intriguing hook to the gradual revelation of key details, the suspenseful storytelling prompts a rollercoaster of emotions in the audience, from shock to fear to disgust and relief. Producers carefully craft podcasts to make the listeners feel like they are a part of the investigation. Podcasts have been highly successful in the true crime niche because they take into account social engagement. Listeners often "want to search for more information and see what others have thought about the cases…," but listeners themselves rarely comment on anything (Vanha-Aho, 2024, p. 31). This leaves a space for the podcast host to fulfill, as they often "provide the listeners with additional material such as images on websites or other platforms" (Boling & Hull, 2018, as cited in Vanha-Aho, 2024, p. 30). This engaging approach invites the listeners to be active contributors rather than passive consumers. Podcast scripts are formatted to resonate with listeners. The immersion into the details of the crime forges a closer personal tie to the case and cultivates a shared purpose of needing to solve the crime. This emotional investment strengthens the relationship between the audience and the true crime content, rendering the pursuit of justice a personal journey. The production and consumption of true crime is a multifaceted experience.

CROSSING THE LINE: ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN TRUE CRIME

The obsession with true crime is troubling and raises concerns about the commodification of human suffering. True crime entertainment has become a multi-million-dollar industry, but at what cost? Al Tompkins, a journalist and senior faculty member at The Poynter Institute, said, "We ought to be careful of the notion that we profit from the misery of others by capitalizing on these awful things… We are peering into what is probably the worst moment of these people's lives, sometimes years after the event" (Spike, 2022, p. 13). Profit-generating storytelling turns trauma and misery into its narrative. "Capitalizing on these awful things" highlights how marketers repackage human suffering into a transactional product to sell. This commodification reduces the value of the affected human lives, allowing listeners to view these as tales rather than realities. These are "probably the worst moment of these people's lives" as they deal with the loss of loved ones. Exploiting deep pain for profits raises questions about the ethical boundaries of true crime when it comes to public consumption. Unlike a physical crime scene outlined with cautionary tape, the digital landscape lacks firm demarcations. In the digital space, people often find the ownership of information ambiguous, and they can share information unrestrictedly. Because there is a lack of jurisdiction authority in the digital space, creators can freely monetize the losses of others without any penalties. Moreover, there does not seem to be much pushback because the "audience doesn't really know if something is being ethically produced… and even more troublesome, they don't necessarily care, because it's a good story," said Madeleine Baran, an investigative journalist (Spike, 2022, p. 13). Durkheim's Theory of Anomie examines the mentality of listeners, who often prioritize a "good story" over ethical concerns. As defined by Durkheim, anomie refers to a state of normlessness or the breakdown of moral guidelines that typically regulate individual behavior. The indifferent attitudes listeners and creators have toward the ethics of true crime and human suffering illustrate anomie (Nickerson, 2025). The allure of "a good story" overrides the ethical sourcing and production of content. According to Scott et al. (2021) in "True Crime' Stories and Psychiatrists' Ethical Responsibilities," "There can never be any implied agreement or consent that a psychiatrist who writes a report for the court can also use the material in a book written for profit" (p. 396). The expected professionalism of a psychiatrist is fundamentally contradictory to the profit-driven true crime entertainment industry. Psychiatrists swear to protect patients' personal information and use it only for professional purposes. On the other hand, true crime thrives on the private details of victims and perpetrators, especially their mental state, to keep audiences hooked. While one side uses information to cure, the other seeks to profit and exploit the sensitive details. As our society's morality weakens, people are affected by anomie, so they will choose to disrespect lives and place money and entertainment above dignity and respect. The commodification of true crime, combined with an anomic state, enables an environment where entertainment and profit take precedence over human lives.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

In this paper, I argue that the widespread fascination with true crime stems from its ability to satisfy curiosity and psychological needs—providing a voyeuristic lens to explore deviance, reinforcing societal norms, and providing a sense of control in an unpredictable world. True crime creators, particularly podcasters, have mastered all aspects of their craft–from compelling storytelling to fostering parasocial bonds with their listeners, amplifying listener engagement. The fascination with true crime comes with an ethical cost, though: the commodification of human loss and suffering. In its creation, true crime blurs the line between reality and entertainment, contributing to broader issues, like desensitization and moral ambiguity. The theoretical frameworks of Social Apathy Theory, Social Order Theory, and Durkheim's Anomie Theory have been productive in analyzing this phenomenon. They shed light on our collective desensitization to violence, our relationship with societal norms and values, and the ethics behind the creation and consumption of true crime stories. This topic extends beyond the direct victims and their families; it highlights the normalization of violence and our inability to empathize with these real-life tragedies and pain. The niche topic of true crime connects to broader issues, like media ethics, digital algorithms, and the commodification of trauma and other questionable content. We all consume information from the internet in one form or another, so ethical sourcing is essential to ensure we receive correct information. Through critically examining true crime, we open the door to larger and deeper discussions about our responsibilities as media consumers and content creators on what the ethical framework should be. If I had more space and time, I would have liked to cover other reasons for the captivation behind true crime, the disproportionate popularity of the most sensationalized and harrowing crimes over "ordinary" ones, and how true crime impacts the psyche of loyal listeners. Some key questions that my argument raises are as follows: How (if possible) can true crime be produced and consumed ethically, especially in the digital age? Are there differences between watching and listening to true crime

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Romi Vaturi

"All You Need Is Love": Queerplatonic Intimacy and Hegemonic Masculinity as Seen Through Lennon and McCartney

ABSTRACT

The 1960s counterculture movement sought to expand traditional definitions of love, embracing romanticist ideals and blurring the boundaries between platonic and romantic connections. However, these fluid ideals coexisted with the era's rigid gender norms, which equated masculinity with emotional repression and competition. This paper examines the co-opetitive (simultaneously cooperative and competitive) relationship between John Lennon and Paul McCartney as a case study of the interplay between countercultural ideology and hegemonic masculinity. On the one hand, Lennon and McCartney's deeply intimate and arguably queerplatonic bond reflects principles of relationship anarchy; it challenges binaries between friendship and romance, subverting norms that require men to be emotionally distant, and thus exemplifies cooperation. On the other hand, internalized masculine expectations also gave rise to jealousy and conflict in their relationship, therefore exemplifying competition. Rather than reflecting antagonistic differences, these moments of tension reveal a mutual but miscommunicated longing for deeper connection, constrained by prevailing models of masculinity. This complex, co-opetitive dynamic is further reflected in their creative partnership and lyrics, which likewise complicate binaries such as love and hate, as well as romantic and platonic relationships. By analyzing Lennon and McCartney's personal relationship and artistic collaboration, this paper explores how bonds can exist beyond rigid gender norms, embracing more fluid, interconnected forms of intimacy. While society has made progress toward these possibilities, the return of traditional masculinity under President Donald Trump's administration underscores the fragility of that progress and the continued need to challenge normative models of gender and relationality.

INTRODUCTION

Few musical acts have had as profound an impact on both culture and music as the Beatles. Founded in Liverpool, England, in 1956 by John Lennon, the group, then known as the Quarrymen, evolved with the additions of Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr. Throughout their career, the Beatles revolutionized rock, pioneering innovations in composition and production (Everett 5–6). Their influence also permeated Western culture, especially through the phenomenon of "Beatlemania," a wave of fan hysteria surrounding the group (Gioia 234). Though the Beatles broke up in 1970 (Everett 278)—followed by Lennon's murder in 1980 and Harrison's death in 2001 (Kozinn)—they remain a subject of ongoing listenership and scholarship. Much of this research focuses on the complex bond between Lennon and McCartney, which seemed to spill across a variety of shifting boundaries, encompassing the kinship of brotherhood, the feuding of rivalry, the collaboration of creative partners, and the intense commitment of romance. Factors such as shared grief over losing their mothers during formative teenage years, a mutual love of music, and the intimate, communicative power of songwriting bonded them at a time when emotional openness between boys was rare ("Now and Then")—even as rivalry drove the two apart.

Historical context illuminates the contradictory coexistence of support and strife in their relationship. The 1960s counterculture movement, which spread across the Western world, began during a time of economic prosperity. The West was wealthier than ever, but the benefits of this prosperity were not distributed equally across all aspects of society. Modern industrialism and its emphasis on conformity, rationalism, and profit left many young people frustrated by what they saw as a "mind-numbing" work culture (Duncan 145). In response, this younger generation began to counter hegemonic social structures like "repressive sexual codes"—a resistance that drew strength from newfound access to birth control and the rise of a teenage demographic with disposable income in the U.S. (Duncan 150–2). Ultimately, by engaging in numerous transient sexual relationships centered on physical pleasure, members of the counterculture rejected the notion that sex should be confined to monogamous romantic relationships. In doing so, they also criticized the traditional concept of marriage as an exclusive bond between a man and woman—an arrangement they viewed as rooted in possession and, therefore, "bourgeois" (Duncan 165). As a result, the way individuals explored love changed. In "'All You Need Is Love': From Romance to Romanticism: The Beatles, Romantic Love and Cultural Change," Colin Campbell describes one of the emerging philosophies of the counterculture movement as "romanticism." This is love, "which does not require reciprocation from another in order to survive, but… [is] held toward all people and all living things" (Campbell 118). Although romanticism emphasized universal connection and equality, the counterculture initially "did little to overturn the dominant gender roles or notions of sexuality" (Duncan 167), which continued to inhibit intimate male bonds, as described by Robert A. Lewis' "Emotional Intimacy among Men" (112). While no evidence suggests men are naturally less emotional than women, expectations to conceal vulnerability and perceive men as rivals led them to suppress their emotions (Lewis 112).

Lennon and McCartney navigated the tension between strict ideas of gender and the fluidity of romanticism through "co-opetition," where, according to Joshua Wolf Shenk's "The Power of Two," individuals both cooperate and compete. As songwriters, their blend of collaboration and rivalry sparked innovation, evident in songs like "We Can Work It Out." Likewise, their personal relationship was co-opetitive. On one hand, their dynamic can be interpreted as a cooperative, queerplatonic bond—a "non-romantic significant other" relationship, in which individuals are committed to each other as partners (Chasin 177). Lennon and McCartney's treatment of each other as queerplatonic partners is clear in how they compared their intimacy to romance and sex. For example, according to Ian Leslie's *John & Paul: A Love Story in Songs*, Lennon noted he had only worked with two artists for "more than a one-night stand": McCartney and Yoko Ono, Lennon's wife. Lennon said, "[When] I met Yoko, I had the same feeling [as meeting McCartney]" (John & Paul 376). This exploration of relationship anarchy—defined by Roma De las Heras Gómez in "Thinking Relationship Anarchy from a Queer Feminist Approach" as the rejection of rigid labels such as "lover" or "friend" (646)—is echoed in love songs like "Two of Us." Here, lines such as "You and I have memories / Longer than the road that stretches out ahead" (00:01:31–00:01:42) reflect Lennon and McCartney's own relationship and emphasize how the language often reserved for romance also captures the depth and intensity of other bonds. By challenging the binary between romantic and platonic, Lennon and McCartney subverted traditional notions of masculinity. In doing so, they aligned with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, as presented in *Gender Trouble:*

Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, which posits that societal ideas of gender are constructed (and, therefore, may be subverted) through repeated behaviors (xv). However, even as Lennon and McCartney defined their identities as men outside the expectations of stoic masculinity, they also experienced moments of rivalry fueled by envy. As musicians, they competed to write better songs, and their tension often became personal. For instance, McCartney admitted to feeling jealous of Ono, viewing her as a threat to his partnership with Lennon (*John & Paul* 314). Similarly, Lennon was "possessive" of McCartney, reacting angrily when McCartney collaborated with other songwriters or became involved with romantic partners (*John & Paul* 344). This tension resulted from the pressure to conform to ideals of masculinity (emotional suppression and rivalry), something Lennon reflects on in "Jealous Guy."

To develop a nuanced interpretation of their relationship, and, by extension, of Lennon and McCartney as individuals and artists, this essay asks: How did their co-opetitive relationship reflect the tension between the '60s counterculture and shifting ideas of masculinity? In what ways did this context influence their songs about love? This paper argues that the tension between counterculture ideals of emotional connection and the era's rigid masculinity created a co-opetitive dynamic in which Lennon and McCartney navigated both intimacy and rivalry, sparking a more expansive portrayal of love. While romanticist ideals fostered a queerplatonic bond, the continued presence of jealousy and conflict reveals their struggle to fully escape the masculine norms that prioritize ego and competition over vulnerability and connection; recognizing this subtext illuminates their struggle for dominance as a simultaneous longing for connection. Although today's move toward a less binary understanding of gender might have helped them sustain their bond, the resurgence of traditional masculinity under the Trump administration highlights the ongoing need to challenge gender roles. "Section 1: 'We Can Work It Out'—Counterculture and Co-opetition" examines how the counterculture fostered its co-opetitive dynamic and broadened its portrayal of love. "Section 2: 'Two of Us'—Subverting and Performing Hegemonic Masculinity" explores how their bond blurred the lines between romantic and platonic—thus challenging traditional masculinity—while also conforming to norms of male competition that strained their friendship. Lastly, "Section 3: 'Jealous Guy'—Unfulfilled Intimacy and Shifting Boundaries of Masculinity" discusses how their rivalry reflected a longing for intimacy rather than antagonistic differences. This section also considers how their relationship might have evolved in the context of today's shifting gender norms and political climate.

"WE CAN WORK IT OUT"— COUNTERCULTURE AND CO-OPETITION

Lennon and McCartney's competitive yet collaborative writing process mirrored the counterculture's redefinition of love as fluid and complex, allowing them to explore new conceptions of love through their music. In this way, the Beatles were part of a larger cultural shift, as the rock genre as a whole was central to the identity of the counterculture movement. Bands created "erotic… life-altering protest music" (Duncan 147) that spread "the romantic social movement" (Duncan 146) and encouraged listeners to challenge establishment and tradition. The Beatles recognized early on that their work needed to reflect this "broadening of the concept of love" (Gioia 236) and shifted from writing songs about monogamous heterosexual romantic love, such as "All My Loving," to songs about love as a romanticist ideal, such as "All You Need Is Love"—not confined to individuals but extended to an interconnected universe (Campbell 117–8). Music was a productive space to articulate these values, as its artistic nature gave creators the freedom to explore ideas that might be unacceptable in conventional settings. Moreover, transforming their feelings through creative expression allowed artists to experience them in new ways, discovering more expansive forms of connection, as seen in the relationship between Lennon and McCartney.

By blending cooperation and competition in their creative partnership—a dynamic Shenk calls "co-opetition"—Lennon and McCartney exemplified a nuanced model of connection that resonated with the counterculture's rejection of rigid binaries. According to Shenk, co-opetition was central to their songwriting dynamic:

> distance doesn't necessarily hinder creativity; often, it drives a pair forward. We flourish with an ongoing stream of new influences, new ideas. It's also true that we're affected by not just what people explicitly say to us, or their overt contributions to our work, but also the way they get in our heads. One sure way this happens is through… "co-opetition," whereby two entities at once oppose and support each other.

Through co-opetition, individuals blend support and rivalry to push each other in new directions. This is significant not only because it cultivates creative innovation, as Shenk highlights, but also because we often regard cooperation and competition as mutually exclusive, suggesting a binary in which individuals are either united or against each other. Yet, suppose these forces may overlap, as in co-opetition. In that case, it is also clear that relationships exist not along a love-hate binary but in a more malleable state—that individuals may love *and* oppose each other and that opposition may arise out of care and encouragement. Thus, co-opetition parallels the '60s counterculture ideal of romanticism, where love is broadened beyond the individual level. Both romanticism and co-opetition emphasize a form of connectedness that embraces nuance and flexibility, rather than confinement to rigid labels or binaries. Co-opetition also reflects the Beatles' historical context by encapsulating the tension between these counterculture ideals and '60s traditional gender norms: cooperation echoes the objectives of romanticism. In contrast, competition reflects expectations of male rivalry. Therefore, co-opetition not only captures the essence of Lennon and McCartney's complicated relationship but also exemplifies the era's shifting ideas of love and relationships.

The fluidity of co-opetitive love and the creative benefits of a co-opetitive dynamic are demonstrated in the lyrics of "We Can Work It Out," released in 1965. The track begins with a verse sung and written by McCartney (McCartney 519):

> Try to see it my way
> Do I have to keep on talking till I can't go on?
> While you see it your way
> Run the risk of knowing that our love may soon be gone
> We can work it out. (Beatles 00:00:00–00:00:14)
> Then, the middle eight, which Lennon contributed, is sung as a duet (McCartney 519):
> Life is very short, and there's no time
> For fussing and fighting, my friend
> I have always thought that it's a crime
> So I will ask you once again. (Beatles 00:00:37–00:01:02)

In this song, the speaker pleads with his partner to consider his perspective so they can "work it out" and resolve their disagreement. On the surface, McCartney seems to take an optimistic stance, appealing for reconciliation and compromise. At the same time, Lennon pessimistically reminds the subject that "Life is very short"—underscoring the two writers' complementary differences. However, upon closer examination of these lyrics, it becomes clear that McCartney offers the subject no concrete means to compromise, as he impatiently insists that they consider his perspective without reciprocating in the same manner. Likewise, although Lennon bleakly emphasizes how short life is, he goes on to say that "there's no time / For fussing and fighting," implying they must reunite. Therefore, McCartney's natural optimism absorbs shades of Lennon's pessimism, just as McCartney's hopeful tone softens Lennon's darker tone. In this way, "We Can Work It Out" mirrors Shenk's description of co-opetition, as the lyrics showcase not only Lennon and McCartney's stylistic and personality differences (contrast and competition) but also their influence on each other (collaboration and cooperation). Through co-opetition, they improved each other as writers, crafting a more nuanced and layered portrayal of love—much like the narrator here, who feels unheard yet still reaches out with affection, echoing the complexity of Lennon and McCartney's own co-opetitive friendship, described by Shenk. Additionally, the fact that a portion of the song is a duet further emphasizes Lennon and McCartney's mutual desire to collaborate—producing a piece of art together and, in the process, working out their differences. Ultimately, the song illustrates how their co-opetitive dynamic drove innovation and reflected the era's evolving vision of love by embracing emotional complexity and shifting binaries.

"TWO OF US"— SUBVERTING AND PERFORMING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Much like their co-opetitive creative process, Lennon and McCartney's personal relationship combined romanticist cooperation that defied traditional expectations of male rivalry with a competitive dynamic that reinforced hegemonic masculinity. The subversive, cooperative aspect of their relationship is clear in how their intimacy blurred the lines between friendship and romance, embracing an arguably queerplatonic form of emotional connection. This fluid bond aligns with De las Heras Gómez's theory of relationship anarchy; she writes:

> [Relationship anarchy] is a philosophy that questions the idea of love as a limited resource that only becomes authentic if it is confined to one person… That is to say, it rejects categories such as "couple", "lover", or "just friends", in which the hegemonic relationships model

> compartmentalizes emotional bonds, and separates them according to their content: sexual, romantic, both of them, or neither of them. (646)

Relationship anarchy (RA) depicts love as so fluid that it need not be "confined to one person" or restricted to the labels of lover, friend, and so forth, that we are accustomed to, suggesting that these terms are too imprecise and rigid to encapsulate the spectrum of love. In this way, RA consciously subverts hegemonic relationships, paralleling romanticist counterculture's rejection of monogamous love and sex. One possibility that arises from an RA view of love is the queerplatonic relationship, a partnership in which people who are not romantically or sexually involved build their lives together (Chasin 177). Although in this quote, De las Heras Gómez primarily explores RA as a "philosophy"—practicing RA to deliberately critique the hierarchy that prioritizes romance—individuals in monogamous romantic relationships (who seemingly uphold the hierarchy) can also benefit from RA. If we no longer view "love as a limited resource" and it becomes normal to have both a romantic partner *and* a queerplatonic partner, the emotional responsibilities of a relationship could be shared among multiple people—one to provide physical affection, another to engage in intellectual debate, and so forth. Such an approach could dismantle restrictive binaries around love and foster balanced, personalized forms of connection.

This kind of RA can be seen in Lennon and McCartney's relationship, as they formed a queerplatonic bond with each other alongside their romantic relationships with women. The queerplatonic nature of their bond is evident in how, throughout their lives, they struggled to fit the depth of their relationship within traditional labels. Both referred to each other as brothers (Leopold), yet also compared their relationship to a marriage, as when Lennon referred to McCartney as his "estranged fiancé" after the band's dissolution (Shenk). The intensity of this partnership is reflected in "Two of Us," where McCartney and Lennon sing:

> Two of us riding nowhere
> Spending someone's hard-earned pay…
> You and me burning matches
> Lifting latches on our way back home…
> You and I have memories
> Longer than the road that stretches out ahead…
> You and me chasing paper

Getting nowhere on our way back home. (Beatles 00:00:18–00:02:04)

These lyrics describe a couple unsure of where they are headed, fondly reminiscing about their history and past journeys, where the focus was never on the destination but simply on being together. Although McCartney wrote the song about driving around with Linda Eastman, whom he would soon marry (McCartney 497), the lyrics also clearly apply to his friendship with Lennon and are often interpreted as such by biographers, including Leslie (*John & Paul* 281). Much of the song references adolescent experiences, particularly through the theme of financial struggles, reflecting McCartney's life before fame and meeting Eastman. The mention of "burning matches / Lifting latches" evokes Lennon and McCartney's formative years experimenting with drugs and cheap alcohol ("lifting latches" is Liverpudlian slang for a free round of drinks), as well as "chasing paper / Getting nowhere"—early, unsuccessful attempts to make money from music. Notably, the line "You and I have memories / Longer than the road that stretches out ahead" cannot apply to McCartney and Eastman, as they had only known each other for two years at this point and were about to be married. However, it prophetically mirrors Lennon and McCartney's relationship, which was many years old but experiencing a period of tension that would ultimately contribute to the band's split—the road coming to an end. The creation of this song, the only one on *Let It Be* sung in unison, is a means of finding their "way back home" and validating their queerplatonic bond.

Viewing these lyrics through the lens of De las Heras Gómez's ideas about RA and queerplatonic relationships can expand our understanding of both the song and Lennon and McCartney's relationship. Even if McCartney intended to write solely about Eastman, it is noteworthy that he uses language that so directly applies to his relationship with Lennon, suggesting it was an equally significant, queerplatonic life partnership. This also underscores that the language he uses to describe devotion and commitment—ideas we typically associate with romance—is not explicitly romantic or sexual. In this way, "Two of Us" reflects a broader, more fluid idea of love—one that aligns with the cooperative spirit of romanticism and RA. Thus, by examining McCartney's relationships with Eastman and Lennon, as depicted in this song, we can observe the distribution of relationship responsibilities made possible through RA, where McCartney sought a romantic and emotional connection with Eastman while maintaining a creative and equally emotional collaboration with Lennon.

By subverting hegemonic ideas about love through RA, Lennon and McCartney complicated their performance of masculinity—simultaneously challenging and upholding rigid norms drawn from the gender binary. In Western society, the gender binary—categorizing all individuals as either male or female—is often taken for granted as fact. However, Butler argues that gender is instead created through performance, writing:

> what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body… what we take to be an "internal" feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures. (xv)

Through "bodily acts," individuals continually *perform* ideas of gender imposed upon them by heterosexual society. The concept of performance and use of words like "manufactured" imply that gender is exhibited through an active, artificial act of building, partly for the benefit of an audience. To fit into society, individuals perform gender in a way they believe will be understood by others, perhaps exaggerating their actions to be more clearly in line with gender roles—men as dominant, aggressive, and stoic, and women as emotional, soft, and caring. Those who break away from these expectations may face judgment, and even those who do conform are exhausted by constantly putting on a mask and inhibiting their desires. Regardless of gender's objective truth, our ideas about gender shape our behavior and the way we perceive and treat others.

In many ways, Lennon and McCartney performed masculinity according to traditional ideals created by the gender binary, fueling a rivalry that challenged their moments of intimacy. Lewis explains this phenomenon by describing how social norms, like the expectation that men be strong and competitive, inhibit them from forming close bonds. To support his point, he cites Don Clark, who states:

> Expression of positive affect, or affection, between men is seriously inhibited in our culture. Negative affect is acceptable. Men can argue, fight, and injure one another in public view, but they cannot as easily hold hands, embrace, or kiss. When emotions in any area are blocked

> in expression, they seek other outlets, in distorted form if necessary. (109)

Clark posits that Western society permits men to engage in deep emotion only when it is rooted in conflict and competition; consequently, they repress "positive affect" and seek destructive alternative outlets for their feelings. When examined alongside Butler, Clark's ideas reveal how the gender binary traps men in a self-fulfilling cyclical pattern: they perform masculinity through aggression, and when the suppression of vulnerability becomes frustrating, they respond with further anger. By confining themselves within these limits of hegemonic masculinity, men also create another barrier to emotional intimacy, as performance obscures the self and prevents bonding on a more authentic level. Thus, hegemonic masculine performance impedes intimacy and perpetuates harmful cycles of aggression.

Due to these gender norms, Lennon and McCartney often pursued jealousy and rivalry—acceptable forms of male interaction, as Clark highlights—at the expense of intimacy. Although Lewis and Clark's research examines hegemonic masculinity in the U.S., expectations were similar in 1960s Liverpool, where, according to McCartney, physical affection between men was stigmatized (Uncut), and boys were discouraged from openly expressing their emotions. For instance, after his mother's death, an aunt instructed 14-year-old McCartney to be strong for his father, overcome the shock, and pull himself together (*John & Paul* 12). In response to his sudden grief and this typical attitude, McCartney said, "I learned to put a shell around me" (*John & Paul* 11), internalizing the masculine norm of emotional repression. This ideology later influenced his relationship with Lennon, as McCartney accepted notions like "you'd have had to be gay for a man to say ['I love you'] to another man" (McCartney 210). Within this context, it makes sense that when Lennon wrote a song McCartney admired, like "Strawberry Fields Forever," McCartney's instinct was not to praise but to try and respond with something better. Though he described it as "friendly competition" (Shenk), the rivalry could also be emotionally straining. This is evident in Lennon's reaction to the success of McCartney's "Yesterday"; Lennon mocked its lyrics out of fear that he was losing power in the group and McCartney no longer needed him (*John & Paul* 128). Influenced by male expectations—and perhaps perceiving McCartney's "shell" as a sign that attempts at vulnerability would be rejected—Lennon avoided seeking reassurance, expressing emotion, or acknowledging that McCartney's success did not threaten his own. Instead, he used conflict to perform masculinity, driving a wedge between them. Likewise, McCartney's competitive response to Lennon's songs prevented him from fully expressing his love for his friend, hindering moments of deeper connection and making Lennon feel insecure. Both Lennon and McCartney demonstrate the phenomenon described by Lewis and Clark, in which performing masculinity according to expectations of negative affect and rivalry inhibits intimacy.

However, at the same time, Lennon and McCartney's queerplatonic relationship also challenged the gender binary and its restrictive definition of masculinity. When Butler's theory of gender performativity is read in dialogue with De las Heras Gómez's framework of RA, it becomes clear that rejecting traditional labels of love also entails rejecting the gendered binary expectations inherent in relational roles. For example, many women perform femininity by adhering to hegemonic ideas of what it means to be a wife and mother, prioritizing their husbands' and children's needs over their own and providing support to the point of draining themselves emotionally. RA expands the definition of womanhood beyond these narrow roles of constant nurturing and service, allowing women to form more reciprocal, emotionally fulfilling relationships. Similarly, RA permits men to explore intimate, cooperative relationships where they can openly share their emotions, as Lennon and McCartney did, rather than conforming to traditional expectations for men to be stoic, competitive, aggressive, and distant. On a broader scale, recognizing gender fluidity through RA also helps dismantle the power structures sustained by the gender binary, which, historically, has constructed a standard of male superiority in direct opposition to female inferiority. Thus, RA offers a framework where men like Lennon and McCartney can redefine relationships and masculinity beyond restrictive, hierarchical norms.

Lennon and McCartney's ability to both reinforce and subvert hegemonic masculinity was a response to the traditional ideals and anti-establishment trends of their time and an example of setting these ideals and trends. This duality can be understood through the framework of cultivation theory. In "Living With Television: The Violence Profile," George Gerbner and Larry Gross write:

> Common rituals and mythologies… are essential parts of the general system of messages that cultivates prevailing outlooks (which is why

> we call it culture) and regulates social relationships. This system of messages, with its story-telling functions, makes people perceive as real and normal and right that which fits the established social order… particularly [through] television. (173)

Gerbner and Gross argue that the image of society presented by the media, especially television, is accepted by viewers as reality. For the Beatles, the consumption of media was intertwined with their creation of it, as the music they listened to helped develop their understanding of relationships and gender, thus molding the ideas they portrayed to their listeners. For example, according to Martin King's Men, *Masculinity and the Beatles*, the band's admiration of girl groups contributed to their own "non-macho persona" (64)—one that resonated with female fans and perhaps signaled the rise of a new, emotionally sensitive kind of male celebrity. In this way, the media gave Lennon and McCartney the tools and space to challenge hegemonic masculinity, normalizing emotional intimacy between men within mainstream masculinity. At the same time, the Beatles also admired the work of artists like Elvis Presley ("The Beatles talk about meeting Elvis Presley" 00:01:32–00:01:54). His influence on their conformity to traditional masculinity is clear in songs like "Run For Your Life," where Lennon borrows a line from Presley's rendition of "Baby Let's Play House" to tell the subject, "I'd rather see you dead, little girl / Than to be with another man" (Starkey)—reproducing a traditionally aggressive and possessive model of masculinity. Therefore, both their conventional and subversive performance of gender and relationships reflected a reciprocal relationship with the media. Ultimately, recognizing how they both reinforced and resisted dominant masculinity adds nuance to their dynamic, suggesting that even their rivalry was entangled with underlying, subversive intimacy.

"JEALOUS GUY"— UNFULFILLED INTIMACY AND SHIFTING BOUNDARIES OF MASCULINITY

This paper argues that when viewed through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, Lennon and McCartney's conflict is illuminated as a struggle to express vulnerability and love in a culture that discouraged male intimacy. However, Ray Coleman presents their relationship as a jealous rivalry fueled by their competitive natures and Lennon's dominant masculine persona, rendering true friendship impossible. In *Lennon: The*

Definitive Biography, he writes:

> At the root of [the break-up] lay the fundamental truth which millions of Beatles fans still find unpalatable: John and Paul never had much in common… McCartney greatly admired John's mercurial, often whimsical, style, his originality, his arrogance, his wit… John could recognize Paul's commercial power but it was all too often vapid, mawkish, and sentimental in contrast with his hard edge… where McCartney had great talent, Lennon was a genius. By 1971 they had irrevocably parted company, both personally and artistically. (384)

Coleman claims that Lennon and McCartney's competition made friendship and collaboration impossible, framing their rivalry as driven by Lennon's desire to pursue his superior "genius." While his argument presents an interesting perspective, it overlooks the full scope of their relationship. Although in 1971, Lennon dismissed McCartney's work and claimed that they rarely wrote together (Wenner), he later admitted that he had lied (Sheff 137). He went on to call McCartney "my dear one" and "extraordinary" (Ryan). These comments reveal that despite contrast and conflict, creative collaboration remained an essential and productive aspect of their dynamic, and their love for each other persisted even after the band's break-up, when they were publicly feuding. Coleman's failure to acknowledge this—favoring an antagonistic portrayal rooted in the assumption that male relationships are purely conflict-driven—also overlooks how the *blend* of cooperation and competition deepened their work and bond. In songs like "We Can Work It Out," their synergy fostered not only greater creativity but also connection, as the intimacy of songwriting gave them a space to explore their feelings about each other and their co-opetitive relationship. Thus, while competition posed a barrier to intimacy, it did not erase their love, as Coleman claims.

Moreover, by valuing Lennon's masculine "hard edge" over McCartney's "commercial… vapid," feminine sentimentality, Coleman introduces a layer of gendered bias that exaggerates their differences and oversimplifies their identities. This is evident throughout the book, as he consistently portrays McCartney as feminine and Lennon as masculine:

> John, the tough, abrasive, fiercely masculine leader whose quick mouth could wound in a flash, carried the male vote. Paul wooed the girls with his flashing eyes, comparatively immaculate dress, and

> romanticism set to music… Paul developed a warm friendship with the fans, while John tended to keep a distance, retaining his slightly sinister mystique… (138–140)

In this quote, Lennon is again cast as the "tough, abrasive, fiercely masculine" figure, while McCartney is associated with femininity through his "flashing eyes, comparatively immaculate dress, and romanticism." Although gender is presented here as binary (the text was published before Butler's seminal work on gender fluidity), like all individuals, Lennon and McCartney embodied both feminine and masculine traits. While Lennon's abrasiveness may have more overtly displayed masculine anger (as Coleman observes), McCartney simply expressed masculinity differently—his self-described emotional "shell" (*John & Paul* 11) reflecting the ideal of male emotional suppression. By reducing them to a strict gender binary—relying on a framework that Butler would later reveal to be an oversimplified view of gender performance—Coleman overstates Lennon and McCartney's contrast. In the process, he presents them both as one-dimensional figures, dismissing their inner complexity and the reality that, as performers, their images were deliberately cultivated to appeal to an audience (including Coleman himself). In contrast, because of his intimate queerplatonic bond with Lennon, McCartney was able to see beyond this mask of masculinity, stating, "John was not hard. John was the softest guy I've ever met… [but] John had one of the biggest fronts" ("Paul McCartney talks about John Lennon's character" 00:00:00–00:00:17). Coleman's binary framing diminishes Lennon and McCartney to antagonistic opposites, obscuring the depth of their bond.

In fact, Lennon himself admitted that his masculine persona and competitive nature masked deeper, traditionally feminine sentimentality—revealing that love and a longing for intimacy lay beneath rivalry. On his 1971 song "Jealous Guy," he describes how jealousy and anger caused him to hurt people he loved:

> I didn't mean to hurt you
> I'm sorry that I made you cry
> Oh no, I didn't want to hurt you
> I'm just a jealous guy
> I was feeling insecure
> You might not love me anymore
> I was shivering inside…
> I was trying to catch your eyes. (Lennon 00:00:43–00:03:08)

Lennon apologizes for hurting the subject, admitting he was "jealous," "insecure," and "trying to catch [their] eyes." Beneath his tough exterior, he is "shivering," exposing his vulnerability and awareness of how he hides pain with masculine anger. While the song initially seems to express jealousy toward romantic rivals, when read as being about McCartney—as suggested by Leslie (*John & Paul* 344) and McCartney himself (De Dubovay)—an envy of the subject also emerges. This suggests that Lennon's anger toward McCartney, as seen in his reaction to "Yesterday," stemmed from admiration—a fear of not measuring up and, thus, being left behind. His concerns reveal a softer, more "feminine" form of co-opetition, based on a longing for closeness and equality, making Lennon's worry that McCartney "might not love [him] anymore" especially poignant given the norms that discouraged men from expressing affection. Notably, this longing for intimacy, conveyed through envy, was mutual. McCartney also admitted jealousy of those close to Lennon, particularly his wife: "I was jealous because of Yoko, and afraid about the break-up of a great musical partnership" (*John & Paul* 314). His frustration reflects a fear of losing Lennon as a life partner, since their bond was so tied to music. It also emphasizes the impact of amatonormativity, the notion that romantic relationships, like Lennon and Ono's marriage, must take precedence over other bonds. In this light, McCartney's resentment of Ono underscores a desire to preserve his queerplatonic bond with Lennon, echoing the envy and longing expressed in "Jealous Guy." Thus, love fueled and was inextricably linked to their rivalry.

This background and the lyrics of "Jealous Guy" challenge Coleman's theory that Lennon and McCartney's rivalry was driven solely by competitive, contrasting personalities and a struggle for superiority, erasing their love for each other. While Coleman implies Lennon criticized McCartney because he did not respect him as an equal, Lennon's lyrics reveal that his aggression stemmed from insecurity and admiration. Both longed for closeness, but hegemonic gender norms made vulnerability difficult—leading them to express their love through masculine envy and competition, which created distance. Furthermore, Lennon's vulnerability in "Jealous Guy" counters Coleman's assertion that Lennon was purely masculine and found McCartney's feminine sentimentality shallow. Here, Lennon's ability to tap into traditionally feminine vulnerability enabled him to process his feelings and take responsibility for his actions. This suggests that McCartney's exploration of sentimentality positively influenced Lennon, just as Lennon's willingness to delve into darker, primal emotions could have inspired McCartney to do the same (for example, on "Helter Skelter," McCartney leads what is perhaps the band's most aggressive track). In this way, despite Coleman's claim that contrast and rivalry undermined their friendship, it is clear they benefited from their differences through co-opetition and had more in common than he suggests, as both blurred the lines between masculinity and femininity. Their rivalry was rooted in a mutual longing for intimacy, with jealousy emerging from a fear of emotional distance.

Understanding the tension between Lennon and McCartney as a desire for intimacy, constrained by masculine norms, offers a more nuanced view of the Beatles' breakup and its aftermath. While the band's dissolution involved many complex factors, including business disagreements (Shenk), the emotional distance between Lennon and McCartney was a central issue. Although Lennon requested the "divorce," he claimed to be "blindsided" when McCartney announced the split publicly (*John & Paul* 315). In "Breakup Series #1: What happened in '68? (Pt 1)," *One Sweet Dream* podcast hosts Diana Erickson and Phoebe Lorde interpret this moment as "negotiation gone awry"—an attempt by Lennon to provoke McCartney into fighting for their relationship, which went unrecognized. Rather than framing this as "a battle for dominance within the band," they describe it as "an elaborate play for respect, love, appreciation, and commitment" (Erickson and Lorde 00:04:38–00:04:51), adding emotional nuance absent from traditional, male readings like Coleman's. Their analysis highlights the value of incorporating underrepresented perspectives, such as female voices, into Beatles scholarship to challenge reductive narratives and offer more complex ideas. Although Lennon and McCartney eventually reconciled after the break-up and this failed negotiation, their final conversations—about everyday topics like baking bread (McCartney 88)—suggest friendliness but not a return to their queerplatonic bond. The emotional distance shaped by masculine norms and competition remained, and any opportunity for complete reconciliation was lost with Lennon's murder in 1980. McCartney's detached response to the tragedy, "It's a drag, isn't it?" ("it's a drag" 00:00:29–00:00:30) reflects not just the shock of grief, as he later explained ("it's a drag" 00:00:00–00:00:21), but also serves as another example of how masculine standards suppressed emotional expression—in this case, further exacerbated by intense media scrutiny. Thus, gender norms contributed to their breakup, prevented them from reforming their queerplatonic bond, and kept

McCartney from fully grieving, leaving an aspect of their relationship unfulfilled.

Today, evolving ideas of masculinity have helped normalize male emotional intimacy, creating an environment in which Lennon and McCartney's queerplatonic bond might have endured; however, this progress is fragile amid the resurgence of hegemonic masculinity under the Trump administration. In recent decades, expectations of masculinity seem to have become less restrictive, as "contemporary culture is embracing the 'new male' (Smith & Inhorn, 2016)" (Connor et al.). For instance, in 2001, Demetrakis Demetriou observed that straight white men had begun adopting elements of subordinate and marginalized masculinities, remaining "tough" while also expressing sensitivity—a phenomenon known as hybrid masculinity (Connor et al.). This shift has made Western society more accepting of male vulnerability and intimate bonds like Lennon and McCartney. However, in 2025, President Trump is pushing for a return to traditional gender norms, reinforcing the gender binary and denying the legitimacy of transgender identities (The White House). His campaign purported that men had lost their societal status, and he would help them regain it (Miller)—an idea closely related to the administration's push for women to return to traditionally subordinate roles of wives and mothers, restricting their independence, personhood, and bodily autonomy. This notion has been made especially clear by Vice President JD Vance, who has "disparaged women without children as 'childless cat ladies'" (Tesler et al.). In the year of Trump's reelection, polls showed *rising* Republican support for traditional gender roles for the first time in decades, with more agreeing that "what it means to be a man" has worsened and that society "has become too soft and feminine" (Tesler et al.). Thus, the return of traditional gender norms threatens our progress toward an environment that accepts male emotional intimacy.

Still, research shows that most Trump-voting men do not truly want a return to aggressive models of masculinity (Miller), suggesting that hybrid masculinity persists beneath conservative rhetoric. While progress toward embracing fluidity between masculinity and femininity has not been erased, it remains insecure and demands ongoing effort to sustain. It is crucial to continue advocating for more expansive understandings of gender and relationships—not only by practicing RA in our own lives but also by engaging in broader political resistance through voting, protests, and other forms of activism against the current administration. This will help foster a society that embraces emotional openness and affirms unconventional bonds like Lennon and McCartney's, allowing individuals to form connections in ways that are most authentic to them, without the pressure to bend to restrictive norms.

CONCLUSION

Lennon and McCartney's co-opetitive dynamic reflected the clash between romanticist counterculture ideals and strict hegemonic masculinity. By embodying this tension in their personal relationships and lyrical themes, Lennon and McCartney expanded the definition of love beyond the binary of love and hate, demonstrating how individuals can oppose and support each other simultaneously. Similarly, by establishing a queerplatonic bond in line with the ideals of RA, they challenged the binary of romantic and platonic love, in the process subverting hegemonic gender norms that discouraged male vulnerability and emotional intimacy. At the same time, repeated instances of jealousy and rivalry suggest that they also adhered to traditional gender norms. Rather than undermining their love, this competitiveness underscored their more profound yearning for connection, constrained by the standards of hegemonic masculinity. Recognizing this subtext is crucial not only for understanding the Lennon-McCartney dynamic but also for envisioning a more interconnected society as a whole, where relationships, especially close male bonds, can thrive free from the constraints of rigid gender norms. Although progress toward this ideal has been made, the resurgence of rigid gender roles under the Trump administration underscores the fragility of this progress and the ongoing need to advocate for gender and relational fluidity, both in personal relationships and on a broader political scale.

This paper uses Lennon and McCartney's relationship as a case study to explore the influence of sociohistorical context and hegemonic ideas of gender on intimacy and emotional expression. Many of the texts consulted during the research process reinforced the essay's initial expectations. For example, Lewis's work confirmed that the traditional idea of masculinity is one of rivalry and stoicism, and that this ideal hinders men's ability to form deep connections. Other texts, like De las Heras Gómez's theory of RA and Butler's work on gender performativity, offered a new perspective through which Beatles songs could be understood, such as recognizing "Two of Us" as not just a reference to Lennon and McCartney's relationship but also as a queerplatonic blurring of the lines between romantic and platonic love.

Ultimately, this research has many meaningful implications. In addition to illuminating a potential path to a more fluid and interconnected society, it also demonstrates how analyzing the Beatles' work sheds light on the prevailing gender norms of their era, as well as the influence of the band's messaging on audience perception of these ideals. In this way, media like music become a lens through which we can track changing societal values, as well as a powerful force in shaping the values of listeners. Future research might consider how contemporary artists reveal or resist evolving norms under the Trump administration. There are also many avenues to continue exploring this question through the Beatles, such as a deeper examination of how their role as celebrities in front of an audience influenced their public versus private gender performance. Moreover, this paper touched on the importance of including underrepresented voices, such as those of women, in Beatles scholarship; it would also be enlightening to explore how the perspectives of other marginalized groups, especially people of color and queer individuals, might shed new light on aspects of the Beatles' story that have been overlooked.

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Dialogues @ RU offers a wide variety of subjects for the reader to explore, with it ranging from politics, social media, and healthcare. All of the authors provide an in-depth analysis of their chosen subjects, with them citing other scholarly sources to support their claims. All the subjects within the Journal are relevant in some way to the world, whether because of how it affects our daily lives or how it affects the media we consume. Every subject, while unique and personal in their own ways, speaks to broad, overarching ideas of community and personhood. For example, one essay offers a deep exploration of why true-crime is such a well-enjoyed genre despite its grim nature, and another jumps into birth order theories and how the birth order of siblings can affect their psychology. On the other side of the spectrum of essays the publication has to offer are essays that, for example, explore the benefits and shortcoming of the colonization of Mars and others that discuss how biotechnology corporations prioritize profit over patient safety.