

ATRIUM

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Welcome to *Atrium*!

Atrium is the Writing Studies Program's annual publication of student work—a gathering place for words and ideas. Just like the atrium in Battelle—home of the Writing Studies Program and the College of Arts and Sciences—our *Atrium* is a space in which different perspectives come together to be heard and responded to.

The essays presenting these perspectives are organized thematically by “moves,” ways of engaging with material. These writers have made rhetorical choices in how they organize their ideas, represent experiences and research, apply theories or methods, and respond to existing conversations—in short, how best to persuade a given audience that their insights and arguments are valid. As you discuss your own rhetorical choices and expand your rhetorical repertoire in your College Writing class, look to the essays in this collection for inspiration.

Student work from College Writing classes goes through a competitive selection process for *Atrium*; each of these essays is excellent in a variety of ways. We hope that you will not only enjoy reading them but find them to be useful examples of lively, smart, well-researched, and interesting writing. And we hope that these exemplary essays will help you generate exciting research questions, provocative arguments, and compelling prose.

We look forward to reading your work!

Lacey Wootton
Director, Writing Studies Program

Atrium Selection Committee:
Cindy Bair Van Dam
Chuck Cox
Caimeen Garrett
Stina Oakes (chair)
Allison Sparks

Responding to Experiences

Our experiences shape how we react to the world around us. When responding to these experiences as academics, we broaden the definition of texts to “anything that conveys a set of meanings to the person who examines it,” including personal experiences, films, works of art, etc. In this section, these essays move beyond initial, gut-level responses to texts to investigate them in new, meaningful ways.

An Artistic Rendering of Lesbian Love and Sex: A Review of *Room in Rome*

Ava Dennis

With the cobblestone streets of Rome and an ethereal falsetto voice singing "Loving Strangers," the gentle, yet magnetic adventure of *Room in Rome* blooms into view. *Room in Rome*, originally titled *Habitación en Roma* and directed by Julio Medem, captures a single romantic evening shared between two women from the moment they meet to the moment they depart. Medem has captured the hearts and fantasies of his art-loving audience with nothing less than a vibrant and powerful depiction of a night of passion. However, in order to ensure an ethical and authentic portrayal of an affair between two women, a film on lesbian love created by a male director prompts scrutiny past the charming scenery and beautiful actresses.

The film opens with two women, Natasha and Alba, strangers who have just met in a bar, sauntering toward Alba's hotel room hand in hand. The audience learns immediately that it is Natasha and Alba's last night in Rome before returning to Spain and Russia, respectively – a heart wrenching plot from the start. The women spend the duration of their night in the dimly lit, homely hotel room, exploring one another's minds and bodies as the viewer bears witness.

Despite being criticized for seeming "drawn-out" due to a lack of extravagant plot twists by critics such as Jesse Hassenger, this film contains underlying themes of identity and vulnerability in order to convey how unexpected love is an artistically spiritual experience. Adequate communication of these themes would be impossible without the intentionally tender plot line and leisurely scenes; through Medem's technical decision to craft a slow narrative, the creeping fate of morning, signifying the departure of

Natasha and Alba, is exemplified to the audience. Additionally, as recognized by American poet and writer Djelloul Marbrook in his review of the film, *Room in Rome* is refined rather than minimalist, and the emphasis placed on the characters rather than in an extravagant plot functions to heighten the humanism and emotional intensity of Natasha and Alba. This warrants hyperbole in plot to be unnecessary and, in fact, detrimental – this film is created for an audience capable of celebrating ingrained symbolism and artistic features.

Medem's audience must additionally take an active role in order to recognize the film's full capacity. Corey Nuffer, in her critique, by stating, "over and over, I fought the simplicity and seemingly pedestrian direction the film seemed to be taking," demonstrates the understanding that all viewers of this film must have – there is more than meets the eye. The role of the viewer is an integral element demonstrated by one of the most powerful decisions employed by Medem of the camera never leaving the hotel room. The viewer is infinitely tied to the room; even in the final scenes of the film as Natasha and Alba return to the streets of Rome, a bird's eye camera shot from the hotel balcony is utilized. This perspective emphasizes the dramatic nature of the scene of departure, as well as tethers us to the room in Rome for good – our connection to Natasha and Alba's night is set in stone. We, as well as the two lovers, have experienced a night no one will forget.

Medem strengthens the effect of the bird's eye camera angle through repetition, as it is additionally used towards the end of the film in a moment of dramatic and raw emotion. Natasha and Alba lay intertwined in a bathtub, about to take part in their last supper of breakfast on the balcony. In a powerful moment captured from above, the two women cling to each other's beautiful, nude figures, and roll over one another in the bathtub over and over, splashing water over the white tile floor. This physical rotation

in a fixed point in space and time parallels the circles of identity, conversation, and sex confined to the single location of the room.

The powerful symbolism woven throughout the film by Medem takes shape most clearly, however, through Classical and Renaissance art in the hotel room that mirrors the emotions of the two women. Following a scene focused on Natasha, an art historian herself, the camera pans to Alba's bedside where a statue of the Classical figure Venus – the Roman goddess of love, sex, and beauty – sits. The statue symbolizes Natasha: her beauty as well as the love she holds. Additionally, the figure of Venus is frequently portrayed as covering herself in an expression of shame due to her nudity (Garcia), reflecting Natasha's shy undressing and apprehension surrounding having sex with another woman for the first time. Further, later on, the camera zooms in on the Renaissance fresco on the ceiling that contains a figure of Cupid with his infamous bow and arrow. Through an oblique angle camera shot that functions to emphasize perspective, Alba makes eye contact with this allegorical figure directly after gazing at Natasha in the bathroom; a direct reference to Alba falling in love with her Russian companion. With this tilted angle, the audience is witnessing the moment as if we are Alba: "the camera effectively acts as the character 's eyes [...] often used to create empathy with a character" ("The Film Shot"). These artistic motifs, strengthened by Medem's filming techniques, exemplify the deeply emotional attachment that is unfolding between the women, strengthen the connection of the audience to the characters, as well as provide an ethereal beauty to the narrative.

Another extremely important motif in the film is sex. The scenes of sex and sensuality, as undeniably passionately intense as they are, are not to be taken at surface level. Although initially this may be difficult for viewers who are easily distracted from the sight of two beautifully nude women, Medem ensures that his audience is as well-

adjusted as possible. Following approximately two conversations between the women, the audience is staring at the fully unclothed bodies of Natasha and Alba. Within minutes, the nudity is no longer noticed. By desensitizing the viewer to the uncensored bodies of Natasha and Alba prior to the arguably explicit sex scenes, Medem offers a display of nudity that is not inherently sexual, and instead allows it to function as a symbolic expression of vulnerability and emotional intimacy.

It would be wrong to ignore the fact that Medem is toeing the line of putting his film in danger of hypersexualization despite his attempt to desexualize nudity. In fact, *Room in Rome* falls under a category explicated by Mattias Frey in "Aesthetic Innovation and the Real: Academic Debate over Sexually Graphic Art Films" of sexually explicit films that support the narrative pattern of an "initiation scenario." This narrative pattern refers to a young woman's self-discovery, or the "transition from innocence to experience"(165). In *Room in Rome*, Natasha, as an identifying heterosexual woman, experiences her first dip into sapphic love with Alba and even voices her concern for being unable to be pleased sexually without penetration. Even following her first experience of lesbian sex, with her line, "This stays here, okay? In this room," Natasha voices shame and apprehension surrounding her decision to experiment. Although her shame disappears almost as quickly as her clothing does, this initial dialogue and character portrayal of Natasha represents Medem's awareness of the appeal of a woman experimenting with her sexuality and points to his undeniable play into this narrative trope.

Moreover, when creating a film heavy on lesbian sex, the abundance of steamy scenes may appear to be a mere attraction for male viewers. Within art as well as outside of it, romantic relationships between two women are frequently sexualized and depicted solely for the male gaze. In fact, in *Room in Rome*, the only supporting character

is Max, the cheerful opera-singing hotel attendant. Jesse Hassenger, in his review of *Room in Rome*, characterized Max as pointless, yet Hassenger blatantly misses the deliberate inclusion of a male figure into this heavily feminine narrative in order to comment on the sexualization of gay women by men. In the film, Max comes to Alba and Natasha's room upon a request and misinterprets the situation to be one of an invitation for a threesome. Although he handles the rejection he receives in response with grace, Max, by sexualizing Natasha and Alba for his own pleasure, functions as societal commentary. With his character, as well as Natasha and Alba's decline of his sexual advances, Medem represents his awareness of the cultural implications of the film.

Medem's awareness, although appreciated, unfortunately does not equate to his work being safe from misinterpretation and tarnishing. In fact, scenes from the film – of sex as well as mundane nudity that functions as a communication of intimacy and budding vulnerability between Alba and Natasha – are available on the internet on dozens of pornographic websites. The disappointing twist of this beautiful narrative into hypersexualized videos characterized as pornography reflects the inability to appreciate art when it's "clouded" by some girl on girl action, and the all-too-familiar pattern in the daily experience of queer women. The fight to legitimize love and sex between two women without falling into the dangerous waters of heterosexual men often feels like a hopeless one.

Although Medem's film falls outside of the category of a deliberate display of lesbian sex for the male gaze, this pattern of hypersexualization perpetrated by heterosexual men can be argued as inherently connected to attraction to women in general. Kristin Puhl suggests in her master's thesis, "The Eroticization of Lesbianism by Heterosexual Men," the "male preference for overt, and by definition sexualized, lesbian imagery is part of a positive affective reaction (...) it is not simply the presence

of two women that generates these positive attitudes; the sexualization of the women is an intrinsically rewarding component” (6-7). This assertion references the danger of exposing a wide audience to explicit sensuality between two female lovers as it inherently appeals to an attraction to women by heterosexual men. As seen in the case of *Room in Rome*, this exposure may result in branding a beautifully intimate encounter within art as meaningless and pornographic.

In addition to desexualizing nudity and introducing an allegorical character symbolizing the heterosexual man in society, Medem attempts to counteract the defiling of lesbian love by the incorporation of sex scenes through a narrative pattern. After each conversation between the women, conversations that shed layers of identity as well as clothing, the women have sex. Through this repetition of revealing dialogue followed by sex, Medem is directing the audience's attention away from the sex to the greater significance of their physical intimacy and asserting the idea that for these two women, as well as many of his viewers, it feels safer to be physically intimate than emotionally intimate. For Alba and Natasha, it is easier to share an orgasm than a secret. With this pattern, Medem stresses that Natasha and Alba's sex is more than just sex, and a central theme of vulnerability is introduced, only to be strengthened later in the light of the dreaded next morning.

The sight of the illuminated bodies of Natasha and Alba appearing for the first time in the light of day is jarring; the time of playing with the tricky shadows of identity throughout the night is over. They emerge utterly visible and vulnerable to one another as the realization of the love they now share stares them in the face. This clever technical use of light by Medem provides a visual and rhetorical climax that leaves the audience holding their breath; the women have reached an epitome of exposure to one another and are now faced with the burden of the love they have built. The sunrise comes with

the inevitable decision Natasha and Alba must make - to part with a kiss or to abandon their lives and run away with their impulse desires.

The theme of vulnerability and the pattern of sex replacing difficult conversations introduce the equally important theme of identity. The women compulsively lie to each other initially; Natasha uses the existence of a twin to muddle the realities of her life with that of her sister's, and Alba narrates the life story of her mother as her own. As they continue their bouts of speaking followed by sex, more and more truths are revealed. By the finale, any walls constructed have crumbled, and Natasha and Alba are completely bare to one another.

With technical features, such as light and camera angles, a deliberately refined plot with an emphasis on characterization, and artistic symbols supporting themes of vulnerability and identity, *Medem* gifts us all a beautiful narrative of destiny and love. Art that is impactful is nearly always controversial, and *Room in Rome* is no stranger to this. Although there are hurtful misinterpretations, those of us with the patience and heart to understand the intentions of the film are rewarded with a work of art that, as stated by Marbrook, affirms our "power to transcend circumstance" and the "power of chance encounter to transcend our settle notions." This night, saturated in the beauty of Rome, is branded on the audience as well as Natasha and Alba, and the pain of goodbye lingers on the cobblestone street that we are left staring at. Fortunately, *Medem's* audience is gifted the unique ability to return and relive this night over and over again, though the most we can do is wish the same gift upon Natasha and Alba.

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Dear PopPop,

Do you remember Christmas Eve, 2015? Everyone else was upstairs getting ready for dinner, but you and I were in the family room. I was on my laptop, the one you had given me, and you were watching the news. It was something about the 2016 election which wouldn't come for almost a year, and the reporters were talking about Donald Trump. You turned to me, and you said, "I would rather die of cancer than see that man elected president." A few weeks later, your lung cancer relapsed. A month later, I woke up and was told that I was headed to Fredericksburg. No one said why, but I knew immediately that you were no longer with us. But I don't think I fully realized then what was to come...

Nine months later, Donald Trump was elected President. I don't think any of us got any sleep that night. We knew it was going to be bad, but none of us could have predicted how bad.

I knew back then, but now...now, I fully realize why you had feared Trump's candidacy to the proportion that you did. In his speeches, you heard the words you grew up surrounded by. You saw Bull Connor, Strom Thurmond, and Mills Godwin up on the debate stage behind the podium when he spoke. You saw the same jeering white faces of the racists from 50s and 60s reflected in the faces of the supporters at Trump's rallies. In 2016.

You had spent your adult life convincing yourself that things had changed, at least enough. That we had made progress and the country was different from when you had grown up and that we were never going back – but when you saw the possibility of the country you had served overseas and at home electing a man who spewed the same bile

that you grew up in, it was a horrifying wake up call. I understood your words and why you said them, but I didn't grasp the depth or the urgency then.

Mom said that, before I was born, you used to argue that things were pretty good. Not perfect, but better. And that it wasn't a good idea to rock the boat. That changed after you had grandchildren. You looked at where we were as a country and decided it wasn't good enough after all. Not for your grandkids.

Honestly, I have a hard time even picturing you saying not to rock the boat. I remember your political and community involvement and your quiet activism. That's what I remember of you; that's the man I knew as my grandfather. You helped to push me toward the work I am doing today, working for candidates who will help people like us, fighting for students the same way you did when you were on the school board. The work you did, the way you inspired me – it's part of your legacy – and I hope it continues through the work that I do during my life.

After the work you did, I don't think you believed we would actually elect someone like Trump.

I think you still had faith in our nation – faith that we would not go back, faith that when we said “never again” we meant it, faith that a man so vile would never become our leader (not again)...a faith that I lost on election night.

Nothing I've learned since then has done anything to restore my faith to any degree. I remember the stories you told me about when you were young, and I don't think, after all, that we've come very far. I've studied the history that was absent from our textbooks, the stuff that your family went through, what happened to your cousins when they fought to desegregate Virginia's public schools, the threats our family received when Mom and Dad decided to get married as an interracial couple. I had a lot of time to do that. I left the school system to homeschool a month after you died. And I had opportunities to

study and research and to meet people I never would have if I had stayed in school. What I learned in the last few years is that the faith you had in this country was misplaced.

But maybe you realized that, and, in the end, that's what killed you – the loss of a faith that had kept you fueled through your struggle. It was not only the struggle with cancer but the struggle of being a Black man in a nation that did not value your life, despite your service as a member of its armed forces or as an elected official. Maybe at that point, you were too exhausted. Maybe you could see another fight coming, but you knew then that it wasn't your fight – that your time had passed and my time had come. This fight...was mine.

When you were growing up, the world looked like a different place than it did when you left it. There were no cell phones, no computers, no internet. When you were growing up, racists were pretty comfortable being racist. It was publicly acceptable. I'm learning that the world is not much different than the one we live in now.

Before you died, public racism wasn't socially acceptable. Racists weren't comfortable being racist. The Klan had devolved into a joke and, like other hate groups, had been driven largely out of sight. That has now changed.

Spike Lee won an Oscar – finally – for a movie about a Black man who infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan in the 1970s. At the end of the movie, the scene cut from the fire of a burning cross to the fire of a burning torch in Charlottesville in 2017. The torches were held by white men, most of them wearing khakis and polo shirts, and no hoods. Bull Connor is president, and racists are no longer uncomfortable being racist. They never really went away. But now, the internet has given them a tool to network and organize. Seeing a presidential candidate rise to power using thinly-veiled bigoted language and surrounding himself with a staff that didn't even bother masking their white supremacy

created a climate that allows bigots to feel safe. White supremacists are running for office. And they are getting elected.

The sad reality is that we did not grow up in two different worlds. We may have grown up sixty years apart, but it is still the same world. We are just two poor Black kids from the South, dreaming of a better tomorrow.

After the 2016 election, I didn't know what to do. So I emailed another poor Black kid from the south...Congressman John Lewis. He's one of the people I got to meet because I left the public school system. In your time, he was a Civil Rights leader; in my time, he's an icon. But he hasn't forgotten when he came from, and when it comes down to it, he's just like us. About two months later, he wrote me back, and he told me to come meet with him in DC. He sat me down in his office on Capitol Hill, and he told me that the fight was still going on. Just as I've learned myself, he told me that things weren't much different, and he, too, drew a comparison between Bull Connor (a man he personally went toe-to-toe with) and the man who now sits in the White House.

When you were here, we thought the racial divide in America was a sickness, and the path to a cure seemed difficult but not impossible – and I think a lot of people still believe that. But since then, I have come to realize that it is not a sickness that is slowly killing America, but a vital organ keeping it alive. It's a part of who we are, built into the foundations of our nation's institutions; we have never existed without it. People are not willing to work for change because – in reality – they do not actually want anything to change. White privilege is a great thing if you're someone who benefits from it. You and I just weren't so lucky. Why would someone want to change a world that puts them ahead just because they're a different race than us? I'm starting to realize that the reason things haven't changed isn't because, as white people often like to say, our country isn't ready for that kind of change, but because nobody has ever really wanted that change – not a

single U.S. President that you saw in your time and likely not a single one that I will see in mine.

But if this divide is so ingrained in our nation's past and present, if it was built into the foundations of our nation's institutions, if people are not willing to confront it and do the work that needs to be done to eliminate it, and it hasn't weakened with time over more than sixty years, will we ever see a day when it is gone?

Sincerely,

Your grandson,

Langston Carter

“The Story of Us”: *Frances Ha* in Three Parts

McKenzie Beard

“I’m so embarrassed; I’m not a real person yet,” Frances remarks over a plate of pasta at a dimly lit Italian restaurant after her card is declined. In a typical love story, Frances’ male companion would casually pull out his wallet, smirking, and hand over his platinum credit card to the waitress. Frances would smile, feign protest, and coyly tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear. The two would walk out of the restaurant, hand in hand, as a cheesy song swells to life in the background. The New York City skyline would shimmer, and the two would seal their encounter with a kiss overlooking the Hudson River. But *Frances Ha* is not your average love story--or even one at all, at first glance.

Frances Ha tells the story of 27-year-old Frances, played by Greta Gerwig, a dancer who doesn’t really dance, who lives in New York City but doesn’t really have a place to live, with a best friend, Sophie, whom she doesn’t really talk to anymore. Directed by indie darling Noah Baumbach and co-written by and starring the charming Greta Gerwig, *Frances Ha* is an endearing, quirky, and authentic portrayal of the experiences of a 20-something-year-old woman in New York City trying to make ends meet while chasing a dream. Sound familiar? Like so many other films, Baumbach and Gerwig have created a piece of work that attempts to express the awkward transition from adolescence to adulthood, a period in one's life that is frequently exhilarating, confusing, and heartbreakingly lonely. Unlike so many other coming-of age-stories, there is no man in shining armor who aids in transforming her flaws; however, this is a love story. Now, hear me out. I don't mean to say that *Frances Ha* is a romantic chick flick; instead, it is a gorgeous and *real* love story. *Frances Ha* is a three-part saga--each part more detailed

than the next--of the multidimensional qualities of love, shown through the relationships of Noah Baumbach and Greta Gerwig, Frances and her best friend Sophie, and finally, between Frances and herself.

Part I: A Match Made in Mumblecore Heaven

Noah Baumbach was born to be a filmmaker. His father a film theorist and mother a movie critic at the *Village Voice*, Baumbach has gone on to make some of the best, most complex films of the last decade (Taylor). Known for films like *Kicking and Screaming* and *The Squid and the Whale*, among others, Baumbach's style of offbeat films that are often tied closely to his own experiences has garnered the director critical acclaim. Arguably, Baumbach's best movies have been created in collaboration with mumblecore star Greta Gerwig. Maria San Filippo, author and professor of film studies at MIT, Harvard, and Wellesley College, defines mumblecore as a genre identified by its elements of low-budget aesthetic and unpolished idiom that, similar to other subcategories like film noir and Italian neorealism, are discernible through a "reflective moment of self-recognition by its creators and consumers." It just so happens that Greta Gerwig is something of a mumblecore staple. "It was a convergence of new technology and people feeling like movies didn't show how their lives were actually being lived," says Gerwig, referring to the origins of the genre and her subsequent participation (San Filippo). So when the brooding Baumbach collided with the complex and completely adorable Gerwig, the two fell in love, both literally and figuratively. Now partners in life and work, the duo wrote *Frances Ha* together, with Gerwig going on to star and Baumbach to direct the film.

"Over the decades I have learned to recognize a kind of film in which the director is doing the picture to be close to the actress because he loves her," film critic David Thomson remarks. Perhaps it's true; maybe *Frances Ha* is so effortlessly a love story

because while it was being written, filmed, produced, and released, its two creators were falling in love. It has been said that both Baumbach and Gerwig carry a notebook and pen with them at all times, scribbling down dialogue heard in passing and descriptions of the simple scenes of daily life we often overlook. The pair shares a love for the authentically mundane aspects of the human experience, a trait running through both individuals' respective works. "It's fun, being inside this imaginary world with somebody else," Gerwig remarks, thinking back to the early writing and production stage of *Frances Ha* in collaboration with Baumbach. "It's pretty thrilling when it feels like something clicks in and it seems like you're sharing consciousness." However, this sentiment does not mean that the duo is so intertwined that their intentions behind the film perfectly align. Where Baumbach is known for his sardonic proclivities, the development of his films since meeting and partnering with Gerwig have shifted towards optimism (Purcell). Despite Frances' perpetual shortfalls over the course of the film, its resolution is refreshingly sanguine--not in the way of a fairytale, but with a sense of clarity, refinement, and hope for the future. This satisfying end is shared between Frances and the audience that has watched her flail through life for the past ninety minutes. I won't go so far as declare that Gerwig and Baumbach have found their own happy ending, although their subsequent works speak to the notion that they have.

While influence of the pair's personal dynamic bleeds into the film's nature, each individual brings forth a unique set of abilities as artists that contributes to the quirky disposition of *Frances Ha*. The film's romantic nature is derived directly from each contributor's influence. For instance, Baumbach's gorgeous portrayal of New York City is compelling because of how he presents it; a breath of fresh air, the director shapes a New York that is untamed, natural, and celebrated for its imperfections. With its unique style, from shooting in black and white, to the filming on real New York City streets and

apartments, to casual camera movements, *Frances Ha* is a direct homage to French New Wave Cinema in the greatest city of the 21-century (Thomson). As for Gerwig? She makes Frances not just a character in a lovely and funny film about the struggles of a twenty-something-year-old; instead, she is indescribably real. It takes a gifted actress, an authentic human being, and a woman's eye to be able to capture the indescribable feeling of being young, confused, and alone, yet still in love with the world. Similar to its genre, *Frances Ha* is as beautifully flawed as its creators, allowing its viewers to accept their own shortfalls and relish their relationships.

Part II: The Flawed Female Friendship

“It's a party, and you're both talking to other people, and you're laughing and shining, and you look across the room and catch each other's eyes but not because you're possessive or it's precisely sexual, but because that is your person in this life”: Frances says this at a party at the beginning of the film to a group of people who are hardly listening, regarding her best friend, Sophie. *Frances Ha* is a poignantly real portrayal of the intricacies of female friendship so often glossed over in the film world.

Frances and Sophie are opposites, but their relationship is as codependent as any other of a romantic nature. As Sophie's life begins to move away from the pair's childlike antics--shown through gladsome scenes of the two sharing a cigarette and laughing on their fire escape, play fighting on the street, sharing a bed and dozing off to their favorite movie playing on a laptop, and strumming a ukulele while dancing jigs in Central Park--Frances grapples with losing the person she had, up until then, shared her life with. In a way, this loss is even more heart-rendering than a traditional breakup. “I love you, Sophie, even if you love your phone that has email more than you love me,” Frances murmurs, a piteous sentiment that reflects their foreboding distancing. Where there was

once nothing that could keep the two apart, the introduction of careers, partners, and advances in their individual adult lives underscores Frances' reliance upon Sophie and inability to find contentment alone.

With a backdrop as cutthroat as New York City, it would be far simpler for viewers to digest Frances and Sophie's dynamic if the two were hypercompetitive and ruthless with one another--a trope so many other films fall into when depicting female friendships. It is true that Sophie and Frances compare themselves, though they each relish traits in one another that, deep down, they resent in themselves. Where Frances desires Sophie's imminent successes, Sophie struggles to allow herself the freedom that Frances possess. Over the course of the film, Frances grows to resent Sophie for moving on with her life, driving a wedge between the two, yet she savors and attempts to preserve what they once had--referring to Sophie throughout the film as her "best friend," though the pair hardly speak.

In *Frances Ha*, Noah Baumbach and Greta Gerwig are able to capture the intimacy encapsulated by a relationship between two women. Ultimately, Frances and Sophie love one another; to say that they do not or that their relationship is worthy of less emotional heartache simply because it is platonic is asinine. "We're like an old lesbian couple that doesn't have sex anymore," Frances jokes to Sophie as the two brush their teeth, crowded in a small, dimly lit bathroom and clad in oversized pajama tops. Perhaps that's what makes this film so effective in the portrayal of a bond between two women. There is no underlying sexual tension between the two, nor is their relationship depicted in a way that is gratifying to the male gaze. They simply love each other. Erisa Apantaku writes to this sentiment in her article for *Margins Magazine* and brings attention to the filmmakers' choice to provide Frances with a flawed friend with whom she has a deeply intimate relationship, rather than a male romantic partner (Apantaku). Over the course of the film,

there is an underlying pretense that Frances will end up with Benji--a character who seems to be intentionally canned, and a perfect candidate for our bumbling heroine to end up with--though, thankfully, the director avoids this cliché and the romcom aficionados go without their perfect meet-cute moment. It is Frances and Sophie's platonic love story that leaves viewers with tears in their eyes, prompted to phone an old best friend and reminisce for simpler days.

Ultimately, the film closes with Frances "making eyes" at Sophie from across the room; when asked who she is looking at, Frances responds, "That's Sophie. She's my best friend." The two stare at one another, laughing, for no matter what, they have each found their person. The film is a striking, authentic, and beautiful example of the love two friends can share despite their personal shortfalls. In a way, *Frances Ha* reminds us that we are not as alone as we might believe ourselves to be, as the most authentic form of love can be manifested in endless ways.

Part III: Falling in Love With, and Accepting, Yourself in Your Twenties

We are all Frances. That is not to say each one of the film's viewers will go on to chase a pipe dream in New York City, aimlessly fumbling their way through their day-to-day existence. But life is hard enough to go through without seeing a character who is doing absolutely everything just to keep their shit together--something that most of us do as we attempt to make it through the day as well. At the beginning of *Frances Ha*, Frances is reliant upon Sophie, running from the fact that she will never be a part of a dance company, consistently making excuses for the pile of wreckage that is her life and fearful of her fleeting youth. "Frances is neither blandly agreeable nor adorably quirky. Rather, she is difficult. She hogs conversations, misses obvious social cues and is frequently inconsiderate, though more in the manner of an overgrown toddler than a queen-bee

mean girl," writes A.O. Scott. He's right. Frances is flawed and inexplicably hard to handle, but she's all the more authentic because of it.

As the film advances, Frances falls into disarray. Where she could once get by ignoring her shortcomings and go through life oblivious, the events that ensue, from rash decisions to blatant confrontations, force her to address these traits. Excuses follow one after the other with each opportunity. "I'm not messy, I'm busy," Frances remarks, a lame justification for her living situation. From statements like "I'm too tall to marry" or "I have trouble leaving places," Frances attempt to pass these off as valid vindications of her own inadequacies. As we watch Frances pirouette through the streets, painfully stand out at high-end dinner soirees, and awkwardly--figuratively and literally--dance around her future, we see our heroine spiral down the long road of self-discovery and eventual acceptance.

As we watch her drifting from apartment to apartment, filtering through friendships, and struggling to keep her head above water, we also see her grow into herself. Where she was once a gangly dancer fated to be an apprentice forever who seems to drift through life putting out fires and acting on impulse, the film comes to a satisfying close with Frances, coffee cup in hand--as if she thought far enough ahead to make it at home--walking up to view a show she herself has choreographed. It's a satisfying and endearing moment, watching our imperfect star finally get it right. In the film's final moments, we see Frances writing out her name, only for her mailbox display panel to be too small to show it in its entirety. Cutting off the final letters of her last name, she slips the label "Frances Ha" into her mailbox. This scene is not merely the explanation for the film's title, but also a final emotional resonance regarding Frances' journey, for she has grown exponentially over the course of the film; however, she is far from finished. Despite

this, Frances is content with being two thirds complete and accepts not knowing what is to follow.

“I like things that look like mistakes,” admits a slightly older, wiser, and more refined Frances. Well, Frances, so do I. If we dare admit to ourselves that some of the best things in life look like mistakes, perchance we have to acknowledge our own flaws. So when I say that *Frances Ha* is up there with *Titanic* or *The Notebook* as far as love stories go, I mean it (that’s right Rachel McAdams, Greta Gerwig is coming for you). A character who was built out of love, experiences it with others, and eventually, with herself: Baumbach and Gerwig have created the very personification of the complexities of love, all bundled up into one deeply flawed and highly captivating individual. So, take a note from Frances. Run around Chinatown while listening to David Bowie’s “Modern Love.” Hug your best friend. Smoke a cigarette out of a window in the middle of a city that you love but that doesn't always love you back. Break into dance in the middle of a park. Take that trip you’ve always wanted to go on but that is wildly unreasonable. Call your parents. Laugh. Cry. Most of all, dare to love and accept love in return--after all, life would be pointless without it.

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Warzone

“Occupied-Palestine” is what my school made us call our neighbor Israel, and whoever wrote “Israel” on the geography test was to be given an F. “We have to respect our martyrs and the young people we lost because of their evil, their selfishness,” we were regularly brainwashed. War, border problems, and a history of hatred and contempt amongst our elders. Blood, civilian blood, treason, an evasion of the land and the heist of our territory.

Jews? We don't have them in Lebanon, we pride ourselves on our land of diversity, home to eighteen religions, eighteen sects and sub-sects. Our churches are built at the edge of our mosques. While this coexistence between the cross of the church and the mosque's crescent moon in our skyline is the most famous symbol of our mother Beirut, we don't make space for the Jews – they raped our land, they burned our cedars, and they ruined our parents' childhood and memories of our beautiful country. My grandmother used to call Israel “that godforsaken forbidden word” as she recalled my father's innocence being taken away while fighting for his land and his father's legacy. Three of our homes were burned to ashes during the 1982 conflict – the picture albums, the family journals, my father's first soccer jersey, my aunt's prom dress, my grandmother's wedding wrist corsage, my grandfather's first hunting gun – all of that became ashes, ashes that Israeli soldiers stepped and spat on during what they called “Operation Peace for Galilee.”

Haunted by these scenes and memories, and carrying that heavy burden of anti-Israeli culture with me, I joined one of AU's Israeli clubs to discuss war and its repercussions on the post-war generations.

AU's Israeli Club was not the first time my assumptions had been challenged about Israelis. My first time was not a choice, nor an assignment. When I was a senior in high school, seven of my friends and I decided to attend the Barcelona Beach Festival for our senior trip. I relive this particular night every time I tell this story. It was Saturday, July 14th, 2018. I wore my prettiest outfit and my most genuine smile. I had slept fourteen hours so that I could stay awake till dawn. That night the lineup was unforgettable: Axwell & Ingrosso, Armin van Buuren, David Guetta, Oliver Heldens, Robin Schulz, Don Diablo, The Chainsmokers, and JP Candela. It was quite the party. I walked into that massive worldwide event, seeing thousands of people painted in their countries' symbols and waving their nations' flags. I, too, wore an accessory very dear to my heart; it was the huge Lebanese flag that I tied on my shoulders: our red and white colors with our proud green cedar rising from the middle.

Five minutes after walking in, I found myself on a stranger's shoulders, waving my flag proudly, making sure that people noticed our powerful cedar. Gradually, I began to realize that my flag was unfamiliar to many. To the giant countries present, countries that had invaded and easily overpowered us, it was just a drawing of a "Christmas tree," as a party-goer from Spain joked. But that night when people saw the spark in my eyes, more than fifty asked to take a picture of my flag with theirs,

and the pride I felt when explaining the meaning of our symbols and colors was incomparable. I spent the night dancing in the first row. People would carry me on their shoulders and bring me there to spread my energy.

At one point, I was dancing with a group of people I thought were the most entertaining of all. We exchanged flags and waved at the DJs and the crowd of thousands behind us. After a while, as we posed for a photographer, I looked at the flag that I was carrying, and I realized it had a beautiful penetrating blue and a strange star in the middle, one that I had seen before. I hadn't connected the dots earlier since our only way of communicating was screaming in each other's ears. Therefore, it took me a while to realize that the group my friends and I had been dancing with were speaking Hebrew with one another, a language that I had never heard before despite my thirty visits to the U.S. The fact is, I had spent half of my night carrying the "enemy" flag. I hadn't noticed that they were carrying mine, hoping to break the taboos by posting "peace in the Middle East" Instagram stories.

What makes my story interesting is that I still asked one of them to lift me up again. The second time, I was carrying their flag with an adrenaline rush that I had never felt before. I loved these people, their vibe, their company, their jokes. The hatred that my culture harvested deeply in my soul was replaced by a singular wave of excitement. While I hadn't planned on literally dancing with the enemy at that festival, that experience prepared me to take a deliberate step. In my next "dance" to understand the other side, people I had been taught to abhor, I joined an Israeli club at AU. Today at AU when I tell people where I come from, they find two reasons to make an awkward silence. It's either a silence that means, "what if she's an undercover ISIS missionary?" or one that means that they're from Israel. The ones who break that silence are the ultra-liberals who scream, "That is soooo cool!" despite not

knowing a single thing about Lebanon. Sometimes I would just break the ice by saying, “Oh, but I have a house in L.A too!” To others, I would just say, “Yeah... Well, I’d love to visit Tel Aviv, without getting imprisoned by my country!” The challenge was smiling at my Israeli peers and pretending that I didn't notice the awkwardness filling the room when we had to introduce ourselves. I believe that the biggest challenge was to put aside the continuous slideshow that my brain would create when someone from Israel would say, “I wish I could visit Beirut, I hear it’s beautiful.”



Deadly Clashes Hit Palestinian Refugee Camp in Lebanon, 2015. Photo by <http://www.vocfm.co.za/deadly-clashes-hit-palestinian-refugee-camp-in-lebanon/>

Remembering their invasion of our territory a third

time during “حرب تموز”¹, all I could see were images of our homes being devoured by flames, and all I could hear was the redundant voice of my father telling us to pack our bags because the bombs were getting closer and we had to flee the country the next day. I was only six at that time, and I was kicked out of my home. Twelve years later, my brain would choose very inconvenient times to haunt me with these reckonings.

Prior to this evening, the only Israeli person I had met here at AU was this guy from my floor; he would always say that I sounded and looked like Gal Gaddot, except that I was Lebanese and much shorter. And this is how he introduced me to his peers, members of the Hilal and Mishelanu communities on campus. These groups are meant

¹ The 2006 Lebanon War, also called the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War, and known in Lebanon as the July War.

to strengthen their Israeli and Jewish identity. I was standing there, choosing my words delicately to introduce myself, the fast forward slideshow messing with my head made that first task quite difficult for me. I mean, what was I going to say? “Hi, I’m Yura, I’m Lebanese, your countrymen are responsible for a few massacres in my country, and my writing professor made me challenge my beliefs, so I decided to join the ‘I-cannot-even-pronounce-your country’s-name’ group.” Instead, I came up with another joke, one that actually made them laugh. We hung out for hours and spent the evening laughing and sharing memories. For four hours, we rocked Centennial Hall’s third-floor lounge, sharing one another’s countries’ traditional music, food, art, dancing moves, site-seeing spots, history, and childhood memories. During these four hours, my mind was absent, I was busy enjoying their incredible stories, and the slideshows did not make their random appearance. When the Israeli groups talked about their parents and how much they miss them, it was hard for me to imagine these people harming my country. In fact, their parents educated them just the way mine did. We shared the same values and the same identity as Middle Eastern people, except that tourists are more attracted to Tel Aviv because they do not picture themselves in a “black-ops survival mission” there as they do for Beirut. I also enjoyed watching



*Tel Aviv, Israel. Photo by
<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/israel-and-the-palestinian-territories/mediterranean-coast/tel-aviv>*



*Beirut, Lebanon. Photo by Travel Guide and Information
<https://www.worldtravelguide.net/auides>*

videos of their nightlife, I thought it was very similar to mine. The reflection of the huge towers at the edge of the Mediterranean in our Zeituna Bay resembles the mirrored reflection in their Tel Aviv Bay.

Thus, that night was not only about challenging my points of view and the way my opinion was forged and fabricated throughout my childhood, but it was also more about learning how to accept and move on. As I grew up, the society I lived in made sure that I was loyal to the bloodshed of our martyrs, the stories I was told made the innocent child that I was experience hatred at an extremely young age. And being thrown away from my home only made it worse. The rancor I felt towards our neighbors of the South was deep, and a huge part of it disappeared that night as we laughed, danced and opened our hearts and minds.

The outcome of that experience made me realize that no matter what side you come from, no matter how intense a conflict is, no one should be held accountable for their ancestors' mistakes. The example shown twenty years ago during the most politically-charged World Cup match, when the United States faced Iran in a soccer game and the two teams took pictures together to leave the politics "off the field," is a perfect illustration that taboos can be put aside for greater purposes (Galarcep). No one should be judged by their ethnicity or country's history. One can only learn from those who have experienced different points of views, those on the other side. No country should harvest hatred and loathing toward another in its children's hearts. No country should be allowed to make this decision for them. I blame my school, my parents, and my government for hating Israel in front of me, I blame these adorable Palestinian refugees for making my heart melt when I visited them on our borders and I blame these people for making that judgment for me. I am sure that the people with whom I spent last Thursday did not know a single repercussion that their

countrymen's actions brought to my country, and I don't blame them for that. On the contrary, I am now confident that if I show them the old pictures that my father kept of his childhood home, our old house that we were forced to abandon, my childhood favorite restaurants and parks that were destroyed and shut down, they would feel terrible – just as I would feel if I knew the casualties that Lebanese soldiers brought to their people.

I am glad that I got to explore another angle and perspective through this experience. My takeaways are life lessons which I will pass on to my children and grandchildren. The future generations should not suffer the consequences of their ancestors' actions. We should embrace our descendants' right to have their own opinions and erase this post-war culture that harvests hatred in their interaction with others. I know now that my experience was even more fruitful and powerful than Hochschild's because the assumptions she had regarding Tea Party supporters were only guided by her disagreement. Her beliefs did not involve genocides, wars, and a personal agenda. While my aim was never to understand the reasons behind the Israeli invasion, I understood that Israeli people were people, just like us. And if the people I had spent my time with the other night had the choice, none of them would have chosen to separate me from my home, and none of them would have decided to throw thousands of refugees on our borders. My experience in the AU Israeli Club is something that my mother would probably be proud of, one that my dad would take time to digest, and one that my grandmother would never understand or approve of. Knowing that my grandmother's slideshows will never disappear, I will respect her memories of the horrors that she saw during the war and keep that experience to myself.

One of the outcomes of that experience is the text I am starting to write to my dad: “Hey Dad! In case you receive a government alert about your daughter’s Lebanese citizenship being taken away, please know that this experience was very fruitful. Believe it or not, these people I met are just young adults, living their college life just like I am, probably having spent hours on this writing assignment with a Red Bull pack to keep them up just like I did.”



Jazziam. Downtown Mosque and Church -Beirut. Lebanon, 17 June 2017.

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Engaging with the Conversation

What does an essay look like before it's an essay? Usually, we only get to read final drafts, but what about the work that comes before the final draft? Invention—the process of thinking, imagining and rewriting the work of others—is an important part of the process of creating new work. The following pieces represent the kinds of polished writing that prepares the way for further work.

Annotated Bibliography

Sophie Hathaway

Introduction

My research process began, as many research papers do, with me identifying key phrases and words that could be plugged into various databases in hopes of yielding a result. I compiled these by breaking down the various notes I had jotted down about my topic and began to cross out the ones that were dead ends. Hours passed by as I read scholarly articles about adolescent psychology, blog posts from concerned mothers about passing their anxiety down to their children, and popular news articles about anti-vaxxers. Research for me is comparable to archeology, and when I say comparable, I mean sometimes research is like digging through mountains of buried garbage looking for a tiny glimmer of something important. I found my glimmer of something important with the keywords: “emotion and decision making,” “social psychology,” “adolescent psychology,” “evolution and fear” and “media’s influence on parenting.” As my keywords narrowed so did my understanding of my topic, and I went from an abstract understanding of what I wanted to make important, to a concrete direction.

My topic started out as an exploration of fear and how adolescents, through their development, undergo a subversion of hereditary fears to evolve general thought about specific topics. Which is... somewhat vague. Through more research I have learned that what I really want to focus on is the decision-making process and how our decision-making process can be altered by fear and framing and how adolescents have a heightened ability to recognize these influencers. This conversation derives from reading Ethan Lindenberger’s actual court testimony in which he shares that his mother's ignorance around vaccination stemmed from her lack of knowledge of the true facts. This

conversation also has arisen through reading more psychological studies, specifically the two mentioned below, as they both offer a really interesting perspective about the subjectivity and irrationality of human decision making. These are not the only sources or topics that have surfaced due to further research, and I find myself being challenged constantly with what I am able to realistically unpack in my essay.

The further scholarly and popular conversations that surrounded this topic mainly seem to center on the ideas of adolescent cognitive value (i.e. can “irrational teenagers” be trusted in their critical appraisals of the world), how decision making is measured, and what the role of popular media has been in terms of parenting styles and decision making. I am most intrigued in bringing in the role of popular media, as it surfaces in Ethan Lindenberger testimony, parenting suggestion guides, and in theories of how fear and topic framing can affect humans.

However, I do not want to only accept these conversations into my current perspective of my topic, but challenge them somewhat. I currently am focusing my paper on the value of the adolescent mind and critical thinking abilities and actively rejecting studies that label teens as unable to rationally think through situations. I follow the line of thinking introduced by Ripley, that adolescent rebellion can be a powerful tool for changemaking. Overall, my perspective on my article is that it is growing into a simultaneous defense of the teenager’s cognitive ability, but also a critical look at the ways in which humanity can be misled by our instincts.

Topic

I will be using the case of Ethan Lindenberger, an 18-year-old from an anti-vaccination family who testified in Congress about the importance of being vaccinated, to

explore the greater themes of decision making, belief structures, and adolescent subversion and evolution of hereditary fears.

Source Analysis

Epstein, Kayla. "This teen got vaccinated against his mother's wishes. Now, he'll testify before Congress." *The Washington Post*, 5 March 2019,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2019/03/03/teen-got-vaccinated-against-his-parents-wishes-now-hell-testify-before-congress/?utm_term=.56facccb915b,

Accessed 28 March 2019.

1. This source is a current news article published in *The Washington Post* and written by Kayla Epstein.
2. The purpose of this source is to describe Ethan Lindenberger's story, testimony, and why this moment is significant in the overall debate about vaccination. In this piece, Epstein chronicles Lindenberger's road to the hearing, starting with his initial post on a Reddit thread about how to get vaccinated without your parents' permission. Epstein effectively establishes backstory to the hearing and creates a credible article that draws from legal, popular, and personal sources.
3. I envision using this source to create my own interpretation of Lindenberger's testimony, especially drawing up key personal facts and chronological events compiled by Epstein. This source is useful because it draws in the greater conversation about anti-vaccination and the recent measles outbreak using credible sources like the CDC. These are topics I would like to touch on, but not elaborate on profusely. The usage of Epstein's article would allow me to do just that, provide supplementary and already curated information without falling down the rabbit hole of taking on the entire history of the anti-vaccination movement or Lindenberger's personal story.

4. Epstein's article is a valuable asset because of its credibility, variety of sources, and semi-objective stance on the Lindenberger case. *The Washington Post* is a pretty credible popular resource and though it has liberal leanings, I find this article to be mainly objective and unfiltered. Epstein draws on legal, governmental, and personal sources to tell the story of Lindenberger, which I find incredibly useful and also a testament to the credibility of the piece. Finally, the piece in itself is more of a chronological report and a nod to both the greater conversation of vaccination but also addresses my secondary conversations of seeking truth, subverting fear, and adolescence.

5. The possible limitations of this article mainly stem from it being a non-peer-reviewed source published by a liberal media cooperation. There is an underlying bias towards supporting vaccination which is something that I want to avoid bringing into my piece. Though I am a firm believer in vaccination, that is not what this paper is ultimately about and not what should be heavily focused on. I will, in order to subvert this leaning, need to be explicit in the intentional lack of positionality my paper takes in the overall vaccination debate.



Front Page of the Article

Lakshminarayanan, Venkat, et al. "The Evolution of Decision-Making under Risk:

Framing Effects in Monkey Risk Preferences." *Journal of Experimental Social*

Psychology, vol. 47, 2011, pp. 689–693, doi:

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.12.011>.

1. This source is a scholarly article by Venkat Lakshminarayanan, M. Chen, and Laurie Santos that was published by the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

2. The purpose of this study is to explore the link between human patterns of decision making in risky scenarios with those of primates in order to form an evolutionary link between the two. This article offers concrete evidence behind the apparent irrationality of certain decisions and how framing can greatly influence decision making. In terms of framing, the authors explain how humans and primates choose the option that avoids risk and has personal positive gain, but the situation can be altered by framing. Consider the vaccination example, having a child that is autism free by not vaccinating is framed as a risk-avoidant and positive decision and is a strong argument for those against vaccinations. However, the extreme other side of this, having a child die of measles and infect thousands of others, is rarely addressed in anti-vaccination arguments.

3. I intend to use this source as supplementary factual evidence in my argument for why decision making can and always has been able to be influenced by the context and information that frames the situation. Specifically, the rise of popular media has contributed to a decline in logical decisions as popular media has an ability to both trigger a fear-based response and a framing-based decision. I can then tie this into my greater argument about how adolescent abilities to critically analyze sensationalized information and identify the illogical components of it is an evolutionary process.

4. This source, though it is an extremely academic one (as seen by how long explaining the author's purpose took) is worth including in my paper as it has good data for supplementing my arguments and conversations. The author's data is thorough and credible as they performed their own experiment, offered an analysis of it, and then reviewed their own work and methodology that could be improved on. Their data also heavily contributed to my points on the subversion of fear, evolution, and perhaps equalizes the bias scale in terms of why some people choose not to vaccinate their children. There is arguably a biological imperative for parents to want to make certain choices, though not always the right ones, that have framed positive outcomes for them and their children.

5. The main issue with this article is that it is highly academic and so I feel as though I will be unable to include direct quotes from it in my paper. I do not want a discordant shift in voice in my paper and if I were to include some direct excerpts from this article, that would definitely happen. This will be an ongoing internal dialogue and something I will have to grapple with once I begin writing.



First Page of Article

Lerner, Jennifer S, et al. "Emotion and Decision Making." *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 66, 2015, pp. 799–823, doi:

<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115043>.

1. This source is a scholarly article written by Jennifer Lerner, Ye Li, Piercarlo Valdesolo, and Karim Kassam published in the *Annual Review of Psychology Journal*.

2. The purpose of this scholarly study was to ascertain the extent to which specific types of emotions can affect decision making and knowledge frameworks and to contribute to the changing conversation around emotion in psychology. The authors create a framework, the Appraisal-Tendency Framework (ATF), which allows them to make predictions of specific outcomes and decisions based on what emotions were present. Most pressing to my research, the authors explore fear and how it leads to individuals seeing more risk and using less logic when making a decision (i.e. the psychological phenomenon I am curious about).

3. I will use this source to supplement my deeper analysis of the conversations of decision making that the Ethan Lindenberger case draws out and attempt to demonstrate how fear negatively impacts decision making and perception of options. Then, I will be able to draw my conclusions about the Ethan Lindenberger case being one of overcoming fear and evolving a line of thought. This article is incredibly useful as it draws upon a series of studies done in the realm of emotional psychology and so can offer an accurate and well-versed perspective without overwhelming my readers with scientific terminology.

4. I chose this article as it has a credible and highly peer-reviewed background, will act as a bridge of thought from my primary to secondary conversations, and offers useful psychological terminology that can be easily parsed down to an accessible level. The article by Lerner et al. passed the review board of the Annual Review of Psychology, and

so I can take comfort in the fact that no pseudoscience will be present in my paper that centers around a pseudoscience-infiltrated topic. The scientific study of decision making and fear's influence also offers a strong link between my primary conversations of how we make decisions and my secondary of how fear can truly corrupt our decision making and must be subverted to evolve. Finally, I like the idea of incorporating scientific terminology into my paper and found this article had incredibly fleshed out explanations of certain mental processes.

5. The main issue with this article is that I will need to make linguistic adjustments to a few of the questions I want to use, due to the scientific nature of the writing. I want to actively improve on writing more accessibly and at a reading level a wider audience can appreciate, so this article will be somewhat of a challenge to parse down.



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Emotion and Decision Making

Jennifer S. Lerner,¹ Ye Li,² Piercarlo Valdesolo,³ and Karim S. Kassam⁴

¹Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138; email: jennifer_lerner@harvard.edu
²School of Business Administration, University of California, Riverside, California 92521; email: ye.li@ucr.edu
³Department of Psychology, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, California 91711; email: pvaldesolo@cmc.edu
⁴Department of Social and Decision Sciences, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213; email: kskassam@andrew.cmu.edu

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Keywords
affect, mood, appraisal tendency, judgment, choice, behavioral economics

Abstract
A revolution in the science of emotion has emerged in recent decades, with the potential to create a paradigm shift in decision theories. The research reveals that emotions constitute potent, pervasive, predictable, sometimes harmful and sometimes beneficial drivers of decision making. Across different domains, important regularities appear in the mechanisms through which emotions influence judgments and choices. We organize and analyze what has been learned from the past 35 years of work on emotion and decision making. In so doing, we propose the emotion-imbued choice model, which accounts for inputs from traditional rational choice theory and from newer emotion research, synthesizing scientific models.

First Page of Article

Ripley, Amanda. "Can Teenage Defiance be Manipulated for Good?" *The New York Times*, 12 September 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/13/upshot/can-teenage-defiance-be-manipulated-for-good.html>, Accessed 28 March 2019

1. This source is a current news article published in *The New York Times* and written by Amanda Ripley.

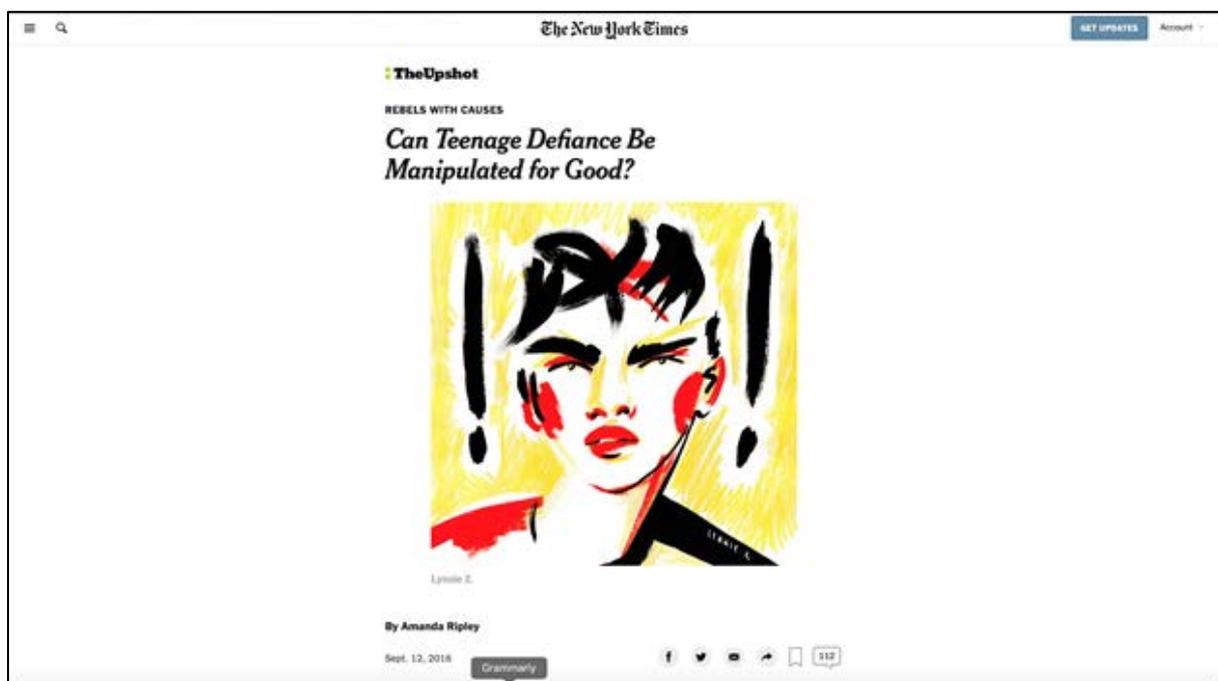
2. The purpose of this article is to present a unique way of thinking about teenage rebellion and subversion, as not a negative thing, but as a potential way of changing the world for good. Ripley makes an interesting case that by supporting teenager's critical thinking, rebellion, and pushback against societal structures and conditions that we can move forward to making more equitable and less hypocrisy-laden decisions. Overall, this article seeks to champion qualities that Ethan Lindenberger showed in his testimony: critical analysis, rebellion, and vocal activism.

3. I envision using this source as a way to build my argument about how the teenage subversion of hereditary fears and illogical beliefs is actually a positive form of evolution, as the source acknowledges the power of the adolescent critical mind. This source complicates the usual statements surrounding adolescent rebellion/development and offers an empowering supplement to my other more academic sources concerning adolescence psychology.

4. I chose this source because of Ripley's credibility, use of practical examples, and her empowering addition to my secondary conversations about fear, truth, and how adolescents fit into the creation/subversion of belief structures. Ripley has a good amount of credibility because she is published in *The New York Times*' "Upshot" section, which is a column devoted to factual analysis of things like policy and current events.

Ripley also draws on a variety of examples of positive teenage subversion, from situations like campaigns against big tobacco and soda companies, to recognizing the ways in which the media influences our daily lives. I appreciate her addition to my second conversations and find that this piece offers an aspect of empowerment that my research was lacking.

5. The main issue with this article, aside from bias due to the liberal nature of *The New York Times*, is that there are not a lot of long-term peer-reviewed studies that have been done about the lasting positive effects of adolescent subversion. However, Ripley does acknowledge this lack of data and attempts to work around it by inducing a variety of contemporary examples. In general, I will be supplementing all my popular articles with scientific studies that in some way, shape, or form can add credibility to the sometimes speculative claims being made.



Front Page of the Article

United States, Congress, Senate, Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee.

Vaccines Save Lives: What Is Driving Preventable Disease Outbreaks? United States

Government Publishing Office, 5th March 2019,

<https://www.help.senate.gov/hearings/vaccines-save-lives-what-is-driving-preventable-disease-outbreaks>

1. This source, a full transcript of the Senate Health, Education, Labour, and Pensions Committee proceedings, is classified as a legal hearing.

2. Within the source it is not so much important what the scribe of the hearing was trying to do, but what the individuals on the hearing were attempting to convey through their testimonies. The most important testimony in this hearing, in terms of my own purposes, is that of Ethan Lindenberger. Lindenberger delivers an incredibly persuasive speech on subverting his parents' ideals, the danger of falsified information on the internet, and the power of education and choice. He uses his personal experience of choosing to leave behind his parents fears of vaccination, conveyed through powerful persuasive language, to create a moving and thought-provoking speech that is incredibly compelling in the case for vaccination.

3. I envision using this source to tell the deeper story of Ethan Lindenberger's choice to seek vaccination despite his parents' beliefs and also subsequently introduce my primary and secondary conversations that are happening within this piece. This source will be useful as it is a primary one, told directly by Ethan Lindenberger himself, and so it avoids possible hyper-sensationalized popular depictions of the trial. This source is also useful as Ethan Lindenberger either directly speaks to, or implicitly ties together, the broader and secondary conversations that are emerging in my essay which will be touched on in the "why this source" section.

4. This source explicitly addresses in terms of broader conversations: what is the importance of rebellion against/subversion of hereditary belief structures, and how are decisions made and influenced. Implicitly, Ethan Lindenberger also brings in aspects of my secondary conversations like: how does fear control us, how do we break free of ingrained fear, and how do we seek truth in sources of information. Ethan Lindenberger is extremely credible in this source context as he is telling his own story and though it may be altered in some forms to be more appropriate for congress, I believe that the essence of what is being said is authentic. I think it is incredibly important that if I am using Ethan Lindenberger to tell a greater story and connect my conversations, his true voice is present in my piece.

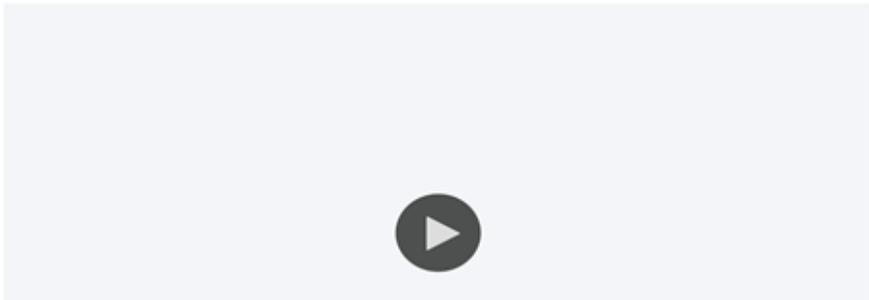
5. The main issues that I have found concerning this source is that Ethan Lindenberger, and all other members of the hearing, have created their testimonies to be persuasive in nature. The persuasive aspect of this piece opens it up to credibility and sensationalization issues, as when it comes to arguing a point, sometimes actual information is left at the wayside in favor of a pathos-heavy speech. However, this just means that I will need to fact check and cross reference what is being said with a more critical eye than I would need to with a peer-reviewed source.

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON
Health, Education
Labor & Pensions

CHAIRMAN RANKING MEMBER HEARINGS COMMITTEE ACTIONS ABOUT

FULL COMMITTEE HEARING
Vaccines Save Lives: What Is Driving Preventable Disease Outbreaks?

Date: Tuesday, March 5, 2019
Time: 10:00 AM
Location: 430 Dirksen Senate Office Building



COMMITTEE HEARING
Watch Video

First Page of Ethan Lindenberger's Full Testimony

**Testimony of Ethan Lindenberger
Student at Norwalk High school
Before the
Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee
March 5th, 2019**

Thank you Chairman Alexander, Senator Murray, and distinguished committee members for the opportunity to speak today.

Good morning, everyone. My name is Ethan Lindenberger and I am a senior at Norwalk High School. My mother is an anti-vaccine advocate that believes vaccines cause autism, brain damage, and do not benefit the health and safety of society despite the fact such opinions have been debunked numerous times by the scientific community. I went my entire life without vaccinations against diseases such as measles, chicken pox, or even polio. However, in December of 2018, I began catching up on my missed immunizations despite my mother's disapproval, eventually leading to an international story centered around my decisions and public disagreement with my mother's views.

First Page of the Full Committee Hearing

Literature Review

Ames Jewart

The eternal question of what it means to be a good person and the never-ending quest to become one are part of what it means to be human. We are constantly striving to improve ourselves, or at least we should be. Especially in our modern world of political and ecological uncertainty, and catastrophe after catastrophe, this question becomes ever more critical. In the following literature review, I will be giving a review of the field of moral psychology, a recently emerged discipline aimed to explore how humans define morality and make moral decisions from a psychological perspective. I found my first source through searching for how people defined “good” and “bad” behavior, and from there I looked at other sources referenced by that text. I jumped from text to text after that, exploring the references of each article I came across, until I felt I had a relatively complete picture of the field. In this review, I will first explore the question of what it means to be a “good” or “bad” person according to different theories of human morality. Next, I will cover the history of the field and how it’s evolved, and I will conclude with the major debate occurring in the field today: intuitionism (people make moral decisions through immediate, snap judgments) versus rationalism (judgements are arrived at through reasoning and logic).

Theories of Human Morality

There are several theories behind human morality, and in the next paragraph I will focus on two main ones. The first is the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), put forth by Jesse Graham, Jonathan Haidt, and others. They define MFT as “a nativist, cultural-developmental, intuitionist, and pluralist approach to the study of morality” (Graham et al). As such, there are four claims to the Moral Foundations Theory – nativism, cultural

learning, intuitionism, and pluralism. Nativism is the idea that humans have innate morality: there are neural pathways in our brains that prime us to be moral creatures and to have certain moral values. Cultural learning is when these set pathways are changed and shaped by experience. MFT is based on the Social Intuitionist Model (SIM) rather than the rationalist theory, both of which I will explain in more depth later. Without going into too much detail on the SIM, MFT proposes that moral judgements are made through “rapid, automatic moral intuitions” (Graham et al). It is also a pluralist approach, rather than a monist one. When the field was first developed, Lawrence Kohlberg, the father of moral psychology, took a monist approach, proposing that justice was the single foundation humanity morality was based on. By contrast, MFT is a pluralist theory; they propose that care/harm, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, and fairness/cheating are the foundations of human morality (Graham et al). In other words, people regard caring, loyalty, respecting authority, being fair, and being virtuous as morally correct while their opposites would be regarded as morally wrong. In summary, MFT proposes that there is a first draft of morality at birth (nativism) that is then edited through experience (cultural learning). This first draft is based on several foundations of moral behavior (pluralism), and moral judgements are made immediately (intuitionism).

The primary opponent to the MFT is the morality-as-cooperation theory. Oliver Curry argues that because natural selection has fostered cooperation from the very first multicellular organisms, modern day humans are evolutionarily primed to cooperate (29). The morality-as-cooperation model predicts that humans will view behaviors that exhibit cooperation – “helping your family, being loyal to your group, reciprocating favors, being brave, deferring to authority, dividing disputed resources” – as morally good and will view anything that opposes cooperation – “neglecting your family, betraying

your group, cheating, being cowardly, rebelling against authority, being unfair, and stealing” – as morally bad (Curry 39). He lists relations with kin, engaging in mutualist behaviors, exchange, and conflict resolution as the four major domains of human morality, or the four major foundations to borrow terminology from the MFT. Curry proposes that humans have evolved to live with genetic relatives and thus the problems of allocating resources among family becomes central, and he asserts that doing so equitably is a moral good (30). In that same way, coordinating activities to benefit yourself as well as others (mutualism), fostering reciprocity (exchange), and resolving conflicts are all seen as moral goods (Curry 31). These two differing approaches (morality-as-cooperation and the Moral Foundations Theory) offer two perspectives of human morality, although neither actually give any data to support their claims.

The first actual study I found in the moral psychology field, titled “The Cognitive and Cultural Foundations of Moral Behavior,” aimed to address this gap. It is an ethnographic study surveying over 600 people from eight different field sites from around the world. The field sites represented a variety of different religions – Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and unaffiliated – as well as a number of different economic models, from predominantly foraging communities to the fully market reliant. In their survey, they found that generous, helpful, honest, respectful, loving, and kind were the most popular descriptors of morally good behavior, while theft, dishonesty, violence, and the use of drugs/alcohol were the most popular for morally bad behavior (Puryzecki et al). Their research shows the most common moral values across various cultures and posits that religion has the strongest influence on moral behavior, although more research would have to be done to fully substantiate this claim.

The Evolution of Ideas in Moral Psychology

To understand the current debate, one must understand the history of the field. Jean Claude Piaget was the first to study moral development in children; he started researching in the 1930s but wasn't published until 1965. He found that younger children were objective in their moral judgements, seeing things in black and white and sticking to established rules and behaviors, but as they got older, they were able to view things more subjectively (Cortese 110). Nearly a decade later, Lawrence Kohlberg, heralded as the father of moral psychology, published his critical paper on the moral development process of adults in 1971. In his study, he established the cognitive-development theory of moral judgement: the idea that humans make moral decisions through reasoned judgement, known today as the rationalist theory. Kohlberg proposed six stages of moral development in adults, with the highest being those who utilize "a principled understanding of fairness that rests on the free-standing logic of equality and reciprocity" (Cortese 111). Kohlberg's theory has been critiqued for many reasons since his pioneering paper was first published. In the 1980s, Cortese summarized the bulk of critique against Kohlberg, arguing that his theory was unrealistic because it was not applicable to everyday life, painted the western, white man as the moral model, and ignored social and cultural factors of morality. First, Kohlberg's survey was based on hypothetical moral dilemmas rather than everyday situations, setting up moral decision making "as [a] mathematical equat[ion] rather than judgment, wisdom, and transcendental creativity" (114). Secondly, Kohlberg surveyed only western, white men, so his model does not account for most of the world's population, failing to incorporate the moral values of women, people of color, middle- or lower-class individuals, and those from non-western countries. Instead, he took the beliefs of white men as the moral norms for everyone, asserting that justice, a western and masculine value, was the moral

foundation of all humanity and designing his stages such that a high level of abstractionism, common in western culture only and dependent on high education levels, was necessary to reach the highest stages (112). Because of the limited views and experiences of his subjects, Kohlberg's theory also fails to account for an unjust world; his stages assume a utopia without patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, racism, or poverty (113). Cortese concludes that, as a result of all of the above, Kohlberg's theory cannot be taken as wholly, or even partially, correct. He closes with a critique of capitalism, stating that an autonomous self, able to make their own moral decisions independently and without regard for societal convention, is impossible in the capitalist, hierarchical world we live in (119). Although Kohlberg has been criticized by many, including Cortese, over the years, his ideas still lay at the base of the field until the turn of the century when the social-intuitionist model was developed.

The Field Today: Intuitionism vs. Rationalism

While the rationalist theory captured most of the tone of the conversation for decades, today the social-intuitionist model put forth by Joseph Haidt in 2001 holds more weight. While the rationalist theory asserts that moral judgements are made through reasoning and deliberation, the SIM proposes that "moral judgment is caused by quick moral intuitions and is followed (when needed) by slow, ex post facto moral reasoning" (Haidt 817). His claim is substantiated by a study in which he noted individuals' immediate condemnations of incest, bestiality, and other common social taboos. When probed further, however, his subjects were unable to explain why they disagreed so vehemently, leading him to judge that morality is based on intuition (814). He explains the 6 "links" that make up the social-intuitionist theory: the intuitive judgement link, the post ad hoc reasoning link, the reasoned persuasion link, the social persuasion link, the

reasoned judgement link, and the private reflection link. The first four links make up the SIM, while the latter are the reasoning links that rationalist thinkers focus on. In the SIM, however, the last two links (the reasoning one creates to explain one's judgment to oneself or others) are consequential, side effects of that first gut instinct, rather than causal (819). Haidt, creator of the SIM theory, is also one of the fiercest proponents of the Moral Foundations Theory, mentioned earlier in this review.

While some in the field still cling to the rationalist model, most of the academic discourse has turned to Haidt's SIM. However, Darcia Narvaez in her article, "Moral Complexity: The Fatal Attraction of Truthiness and the Importance of Mature Moral Functioning," summarizes and critiques both the intuitionist and rational theories in order to provide a new alternative: moral imaginism. Narvaez's main critique of the social-intuitionist theory is that it fails to account for the fact that tacit knowledge, knowledge that cannot be explained verbally, does not always equal implicit, intuitive knowledge. People learn through experiences, and they don't always realize what they've learned on a conscious level, but that does not make that knowledge innate (Narvaez 13). She also finds that it oversimplifies moral decision making, focusing on moral judgements of people or situations rather than real-life scenarios that require action and deliberation (Narvaez 9). In her piece "The Social Intuitionist Model: Some Counter-intuitions," Narvaez critiques the SIM for failing to differentiate between intuitive judgements and social conformity. According to the SIM, "a fully enculturated person is a virtuous person," but this is a very dangerous position to take up in light of cultures which directly counter moral virtues, for example Nazi Germany (Narvaez "The Social Intuitionist Model" 4). Her main critique of rationalism is that it underscores the role of emotions in moral judgements and is based on hypothetical moral dilemmas rather than real-life, everyday situations (Narvaez "Moral Complexity" 20). In this way, her critique is very much in line

with Cortese's earlier identification of rationalism flaws. She also argues that rationalism ignores tacit knowledge that cannot be explained through reasoning, emotional responses which help dictate moral actions, and gut feelings or intuitions that people often base their decisions on. She ultimately calls for the two theories to combine to form moral imaginism, a theory that uses reasoning as well as emotion and intuition to make moral judgements and engage in moral behavior. Moral imaginism calls for decisions to be made based on evaluating the consequences of one's actions for oneself and others, as well as taking others' perspectives into account when making decisions (Narvaez 22).

Conclusion

As evidenced above, there are many competing ideas and theories in the field of moral psychology today. However, this makes sense as the field is relatively new, emerging only in the last 50 or so years as an established branch of psychology. Further research will have to be done to get closer to any definitive answers. I am most intrigued by the debate between intuitionism and rationalism and how Narvaez' concept of moral imaginism seeks to address this rift. With impending ecological disaster, extremely partisan politics, and an ever-growing class divide, among other things, our nation and our world are facing tough questions that no one really has answers for. Although many theorize on what could or should be done to address these issues, consensus is nearly impossible to find, and many people seem to be frozen in the face of the magnitude of our problems. The questions of morality have become ever more important in light of this situation. How are these concepts of moral psychology represented in our current society and media? What answers can they give in helping us grow as individuals, a country and a planet? The NBC sitcom *The Good Place* is one example of how our culture today is grappling with the concept of being a good person. The show is based around a misfit

group of the recently deceased embarking on a journey of self-improvement, one that the audience goes on right along with them. Through applying concepts of moral psychology to *The Good Place*, one can learn more about both the show and moral psychology; it could also potentially shed some light on where we stand as a culture today and where we go from here.

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Research Process Synopsis and Annotated Bibliography

Chinese Feminism: Comedy Could Change the Current Situation and Push the Way to Equal Rights

Yuhong Liu

Synopsis

Although I was aware when I was growing up that there was unequal treatment between men and women, and that there were many people who fight for equal rights, I did not realize it was feminism. After learning more about feminism in the university, I started to be curious about feminism in my home country—China. How did it originate and develop? What is its condition now? What are its flaws and how can we improve it? How is it influenced by comedy? By reading some materials, I realized that there were few sources about female comedians in China. I thought it was one of the huge differences in attitudes toward feminism between China and Western countries. I was very curious about why. The source “Equality, Did You Say? Chinese Feminism after 30 Years of Reforms” mainly talked about the development of Chinese Feminism since the Reform and Open-up in the 1980s. In this source, the author mentioned that “although the principle of equality of men and women has figured in the Constitution since 1950, it remains far from being realised” (Angeloff and Lieber 17). The government had legislated gender equality in China since 1949, and the nation created an environment that simply eliminated the difference between men and women. However, this kind of “equality” was still unreal because of the Confucian culture and male-dominated governments. After the 1980s, this situation has improved, but it still has many problems for the reason of government control. Through reading the source, I started to understand why there is little comedy about feminism in China. Although Chinese feminism has developed over hundreds of years, it still suffers restrictions in an academic way. There are not many

female comedians now, and most people learn and know feminism still from western comedies and talk shows. We are still in the process.

Because I want to work with this topic, I think my intended audiences are students and scholars who are interested in comedy, Chinese culture, and international feminism.

In my proposed paper, I want to briefly talk first about the development of Chinese feminism from its origin in the late 19th century to today. Then I want to describe the general situation of comedy in China and why China has little comedy related to feminism. The government still controls entertainment today, and all the shows, movies and publications need to be censored by the government before release. The government wants to block the sensitive terms about "feminism" because the government believes it would discourage women from having babies. And the government does not want that kind of "-ism" to hinder the increase of population, for the reason that China has been in a population aging situation for years. However, more and more people from the younger generations in China are now learning from western countries. We read western literature, watch shows and movies, and we are more open-minded than the older generations. When the younger generations have a chance to work for and influence government, they will be more welcoming about feminism. Also, they could be more friendly about including topics of feminism in entertainment media. On their way to equal rights, comedy is an excellent way to become the starting point that changes the current situation in China. Most of the people in China now watch comedy shows and read novels about comedy. It is a common and accessible way to change people's minds and let them accept new concepts more easily. We still have a long way to equal rights, but I think China will be more opened-up in the future.

Annotated Bibliography

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Tania Angeloff and Marylène Lieber wrote the article. Tania Angeloff is a sociologist in Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. She researches qualitative social research, social theory in development and Chinese society. Marylène Lieber is an Associate Professor of Gender Studies at the University of Geneva. She is also a sociologist and specialist of both gender violence in public places and Chinese migration – with a particular focus on Chinese sex workers in Paris.

This is a scholarly source. It was published in an academic journal which called *China Perspectives* in January 2012. This English journal is about social science, political science and relations, and humanities that published CEFC in Hongkong since 2007.

The article is about Chinese feminism after 30 years of reforms, and its intended audience are all students and scholars who are interested in Chinese society and gender roles. In the article, the authors talk about the current situations and challenges of Chinese feminism through history after the economic reform of 1978. Since thousands of years ago, China is a male-dominated country. The basic gender role of women is just staying at home, worrying about house work and taking care of children. Although this situation has improved after the origin of feminism, China is still that much developed. The first part of the report provides a quick assessment of the inequalities between men and women. The second part examines concrete actions and programmes that have been adopted by the Chinese government since the 1990s. The last section discusses the legitimacy and monopoly of the Chinese government on the issue of equality, as well as

the natural economic pursuit of women and feminists, and introduces the general situations of some famous feminists in China. (Angeloff and Lieber)

This article is critical to me. Although it was published seven years ago, it still has many points that are not outdated. The authors talk about "Chinese feminism today is a product of both its ancient and recent history and is linked to as well as breaking away from Western feminism, with which dialog has increased since 1995" (Angeloff and Lieber 22), which fitted my aim of the development of Chinese feminism and how it is influenced by western feminism. As I said before, the younger generations are now learning from western countries, and we are eager to communicate and get knowledge that could push our countries to be closer to equal rights and become more friendly to all genders and communities.

2. He, Qinglian. "China: Wiping Out the Truth." *The New York Review of Books*, 24 Feb. 2005, www.nybooks.com/articles/2005/02/24/china-wiping-out-the-truth/.

Qinglian He wrote the article. She is a Chinese author and economist, and she is most prominently known for her critical view of Chinese society and media controls in China.

This is a popular source. It was published in *The New York Review of Books* on February 24, 2005. It is a semi-monthly journal published in New York City. It always has articles in literature, culture, economics, science and current affairs.

This article is about how the Chinese government controls the media, and the intended audience is general public that is interested in the current affairs all around the world. The article first used an example to let the audience feel what would really happen in Chinese society. Four hundred people were poisoned by eating in a snack shop in

Nanjing, but the local news did not mention that at all until that accident was spread overseas and reported by foreign countries. The author thought that even though the Chinese Communist Party and the government tried to create a freedom atmosphere to media, they did not do it actually. They did not want information that is disadvantageous to the government. (He)

I want to talk about how Chinese government controls entertainment media in my research paper, so I think this source is beneficial to me. As the author said in the article that "every Chinese publication, however gaudy, she writes, still has to be owned by a state-controlled organization," the Chinese government did not want the speeches that may impede its ideal development of future (He). For me, I want to use this source to help my audience to learn more about the current situation of China and then talk about how could it change and why we want to change.

3. Hernández, Javier C., and Albee Zhang. "Writer of Erotic Novels in China Is Jailed for Producing Gay Pornography." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 19 Nov. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/world/asia/tianyi-china-erotic-novels-prison.html?_ga=2.47091943.1776991058.1542737412-60038970.1542737412.

The author Javier C. Hernández is a China correspondent for *The New York Times* based in Beijing. Since joining *The Times* in 2008, he has covered education, financial markets, and New York City politics.

This is a popular source. It is an article from *The New York Times* last November, and its intended audience would be all people who are interested in international news. The article mainly talked about a Chinese female writer who faced more than a decade of

prison because of producing gay pornography. Also, this act triggered a large amount of protest.

Actually I want to quote this article to be my beginning. For me, it's not just an article, because the author was one of my favorite writers and I was one of the participants of protest at that time. I think it is a good example of "harmony society" in China. "'The punishment for rape can be three years,' said Deng Xueping, deputy director of the Shanghai office of Capital Equity Legal Group, a law firm. 'Selling pornography or raping a girl — which is more harmful?'" This quote expressed my thoughts perfectly. Obviously raping a girl is more terrible than just selling pornography but sentencing of raping is much lighter than selling pornography. It is ridiculous and ironic. The current laws in China are seldom friendly to women and minority communities.

4. Xu, Zhen. "Contextual Dimensions in Interactional Humour: How Humour Is Practiced in Selected American and Chinese Situation Comedies." *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 60, Elsevier B.V., Jan. 2014, pp. 24–35, doi:10.1016/j.pragma.2013.10.009.

Zhen Xu writes this article. She is a lecturer at Fudan University, Shanghai, China. And she teaches a variety of English language related subjects including Culture Reading and English Public Speaking there. She holds a Ph.D. in linguistics from Shanghai International Studies University. Zhen's research interests include humor and linguistics, pragmatics, translation, as well as intercultural studies.

This is a scholarly source. It was published in Volume 60 of *Journal of Pragmatics* in January 2014. This academic journal is a monthly peer-reviewed. It was first established and published by Jacob L. Mey and Hartmut Haberland in 1977.

This article is about “examining the role of context on the communication of humor in the American situation comedy *Friends*, and the Chinese situation comedy *Love My Family*” (Xu 24). She described the context terms—physical, temporal, and experiential—to compare and contrast the linguistic settings and how this affected the mode and effectiveness of humor delivery in those two situation comedies. Also, “it has been found that the overall frequency of humor in the American and the Chinese sitcoms are statistically similar, at 47% and 46% respectively” (Xu 35).

I think the intended audience of the article are students and scholars who are interested in Chinese culture and comedy. Although *Love My Family* and *Friends* are both comedies, they are still classical now. The article mentioned the current situation of comedy in China and America, which I think will be useful in my paper. In the article, the author thought that *Friends* “is easier for non-native viewers to understand such humor if only they have a firm grasp of the working language (English in this case)” (Xu 34). I think this sentence also represents that the Chinese comedy is more local and traditional, which means it is more male-dominated than American comedy. And it is related to the point that I want to talk about the recent situation of Chinese comedy.

5. Swink, Robyn Stacia. “Lemony Liz and Likable Leslie: Audience Understandings of Feminism, Comedy, and Gender in Women-Led Television Comedies.” *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, Feb. 2017, pp. 14–28. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/14680777.2017.1261832.

Stacia Robyn Swink writes the article. She has a Ph.D. in Sociology, and a minor in Women and Gender Studies of the University of Missouri. She is specialized in cultural studies, the sociology of gender, race, the sociology of humor, and feminist theory.

This article is published in Vol. 17 Issue 1 of *Feminist Media Studies*. *Feminist Media Studies* is a peer-reviewed journal covering media and communication studies from a feminist perspective. Routledge published it in 2001.

The article is about the interpretation of four American popular female comedy shows—*30 Rock*, *Parks and Recreation*, *The Mindy Project*, and *Girls*. In the article, the author mainly talks about how audience members think these women showrunners impact these shows, and how they see feminism playing a role (or not) in these shows (Swink 14). She thinks that “while these audience members enjoyed the shows, ambivalence permeated their understanding of and relationship to the shows, not only in their perceptions of the shows as feminist but also resulting from their interpretation of the humor and gender dynamics of the shows.”

I think the intended audience for this article are students and scholars interested in both feminism and comedy. For me, the reason that I chose this article is that those comedies the article mentioned about are also popular in China. When I look up those comedies in Baidu (the most prominent Chinese search engine), I could find them all with Chinese subtitles and many discussions about them. I want to use this source in the part of talking about how the younger generation in China is influenced by western comedies. The article said that “this lack of and insensitivity to diversity is a common critique of these four shows and the potentially homogenous audiences they appeal to,” and I think we also have this kind of comments in China. We learn the advantage of western culture, but also see it as a critical way (Swink 16).

6. Wesoky, S.R. "Harmony and Critique: Chinese Modernity, Harmonious Society, and Contemporary Chinese Feminist Perspectives." *China's Rise to Power: Conceptions of State Governance*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 49–69, doi:10.1057/9781137276742.

Sharon R. Wesoky wrote the article in 2012. She is a political science professor at Allegheny College. She focuses on Buddhist practice and political imaginaries in China, Chinese feminist thought in the context of Chinese intellectual criticism, Marxism and Buddhism as alternative modernities, and theoretical perspectives on alternative modernities in China.

This is a scholarly source. It is one of the chapters in the academic book *China's Rise to Power: Conceptions of State Governance*. It is an essay collection which balances policy analysis with a detailed investigation of escalating popular unrest to anticipate the future of Chinese governance and society.

In this particular chapter, the author examines the fraught and complicated relationship between contemporary rhetoric used to describe the China experience and feminism. She discusses some keywords like "nationalism," "harmonious society," "feminism," and their relations between the Chinese party-state and its female citizens. Although "men and women are equal" were written in the constitution, many people still have discrimination to female sometimes. Also, the intended audiences are scholars and students who are interested in modern Chinese society (Wesoky).

For me, I think it would also be a beneficial source in my paper. The terms like "nationalism" and "harmonious" are very representative of modern Chinese society (Wesoky 49). The conclusion of the article says that "the notion of harmonious society (hexie shehui) and other aspects of the China experience retain considerable contingency

in their long-term implications for gender politics” and it is actually what I need in my paper, that I agree with the points of Chinese feminism still has "conceptual hollowness” (Wesoky 49). It just has academic ideas but not much about actual application. The government claimed that we are now living in a "harmony society," but it is far away from paradise. So, our country still has much space to develop and improve.

Exploring A Problem

In exploring a problem these essays go beyond established ideas, engaging in inquiry that brings a new understanding of existing evidence. These writers raise meaningful questions about their world, and through the discovery of insight, come to new conclusions.

Insurgent or Insane: Racism in the News Media's Portrayal of Mass Shooters

Charlie Estes

Since 1966, 1153 people have been killed in mass shootings in the United States. Per the definition of a mass shooting, four or more people were fatally shot in each instance. All but three of the 166 shooters were male. Some were middle schoolers; some were senior citizens (Berkowitz et al.). Hearing the news of another mass shooting has become part of the typical day-to-day experience of living in the United States, and one of the most intriguing parts of any investigation following a shooting is the killer's motive. Current scholars are investigating how the news media describes the shooters and their motives in the hours and days following an investigation, particularly the discrepancies in the language used for white, Hispanic, and black shooters. However, there is little work done into investigating how the media covers Arab- and/or Muslim-American shooters. In this essay, I will present the current research along with my own analysis of CNN's coverage of seven mass shootings that have occurred within the past fifteen years. I argue that not only is the news media more likely to assign mental illness to a shooter if he is white, as many scholars have shown, but that when the shooter is Arab- or Muslim-American, they are much more likely to speculate that the motive was religious extremism.

In order to understand just how much the media affects the public watching, the current research on race and reporting first needs to be explored. Agenda-setting theory states that the issues and events that are reported, and how they are reported, has a direct effect on what issues the public identifies as most important (Molina-Guzman 211).

Summed up eloquently, “agenda setting scholars suggest the news media does not tell its audiences how to think but it does signal to audiences who consume high amounts of news content what to think about” (Molina-Guzman 211). For example, if the news networks devote a significant amount of time to reporting on the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border, it is likely that the public will find immigration is becoming more important to them. Because of this, the way news networks present the events of the day can have a significant impact on the electorate.

This might not have posed a problem in decades past, when the evening news was simply that—the news. But since the late twentieth-century, our country has become more polarized politically, and the news networks have done the same to cater to the changing appetites of an American public who increasingly want to hear the news that agrees with them politically. Journalists themselves are no longer just conduits for facts, but for opinions as well (Rosenthal 2). Their own personal biases and experiences come into play in which stories they report and how they are reported, and these stories impact their intended audience in different ways (Molina-Guzman 212). For instance, a story about asylum seekers coming from Syria will be interpreted differently by an immigrant than a US-born citizen. In addition, news is now reported, recorded, reproduced, and replayed for different time zones, markets, websites, and social media platforms (Rosenthal 2). This means the news is available to a broader audience than ever before, one that can find precisely the point of view they’re searching for.

Research into the racism of crime reporting is well-established, though the phenomenon of mass shootings is relatively new. Most studies analyze how often crime reports show different races as the victims or the criminals, demonstrating overwhelmingly that these reports are far more likely to show black suspects or white victims (Gruenewald et al 757). Scholars have begun looking at mass shooting coverage

in particular as its own subsection of crime reporting. Specifically, I looked at “Mental Illness, the Media, and the Moral Politics of Mass Violence: The Role of Race in Mass Shootings Coverage,” by Scott W. Duxbury, et al., which studied how the media assigns blame to black, white, and Latino men. The authors found that white and Latino men are more likely to have mental illness as a factor in the discussions of their motives on the news than black men, who are generally described as more “violently inclined” (Duxbury et al. 767). While these may seem like obvious findings, having quantifiable data to support what many people would assume to be true is no insignificant feat.

Mental illness has been a serious topic of the discussion around mass shootings, particularly in the media and politics. In the hours after a shooting, much speculation takes place on the motive of a shooter that can have little to no basis in fact. In seeking to assign a motive, many times a “mentally ill” label is assigned by one of the guests or anchors on the show, whether or not the suspect has ever been diagnosed with a mental illness of any kind. Based on the shooter’s name alone, the news networks will make determinations of his race, and therefore a perceived motive. The research done by Duxbury et al. shows that the news is very likely to assign mental illness to white men, somewhat likely to assign it to Latino men, and unlikely to assign it to black men (788). By receiving the mentally ill distinction, a mass shooter is perceived as less personally responsible for his actions, i.e. “a good person suffering from extreme life circumstances” (Duxbury et al. 788). However, this study has a large and rather obvious gap: it does not delve into the effect of the rise of islamophobia and Islamic extremism on how Arab- and Muslim- American shooters are described and reported.

In order to fill this gap, I examined CNN’s coverage of seven mass shootings of the past 10 years. The clips analyzed were from the first twenty-four hours of a shooting; this is before police investigations have confirmed any motive, so the comments of those on

the news are simply speculation on the part of law enforcement officials, analysts, guests, and the anchors themselves. In the analysis, I do not compare what the analysts are speculating to the facts of the case that were revealed as the investigation progressed. Whether or not their guesses were correct, the analysts, guests, and anchors spoke without knowing the full story and based their information on incomplete and sometimes inaccurate information. CNN was chosen because it was the first 24-hour all-news network and could therefore be indicative of the larger phenomenon at work within the industry. Below is the city, state, date, shooter, ethnicity of the shooter, and the name by which the shooting is typically referred.

Name	City	State	Date	Year	Shooter	Shooter ethnicity
Sandy Hook	Newtown	CT	14-Dec	2012	Adam Lanza	White
Chattanooga	Chattanooga	TN	15-Jul	2015	Muhammad Youssef Abulazeez	Palestinian /Jordanian-American
San Bernardino	San Bernardino	CA	2-Dec	2015	Syed Rizwan Farook	Pakistani-American
Pulse Nightclub	Orlando	FL	12-Jun	2016	Omar Mateen	Afghani-American
Las Vegas	Las Vegas	NV	1-Oct	2017	Stephen Paddock	White
Sutherland Springs Church	Sutherland Springs	TX	5-Nov	2017	Devin Kelley	White
Marjorie Stoneman Douglas HS	Parkland	FL	14-Feb	2018	Nikolas Cruz	White

Together, the four white shooters above killed 137 people and injured 893 in four different states. Adam Lanza, the Sandy Hook shooter, was 20 years old when he killed 27 people, adults and children, at an elementary school in 2012. His mom was found dead at her own home at the same time, and he perished at the crime scene. CNN's reports described him as "a very bright young man," and floated the rumor that he was autistic (*CNN Newsroom*). Analysts and anchors mourned the fact that he was a "mentally disturbed child," and reiterated that both the gun laws and mental health issues of this country need to be studied more fully (*CNN Newsroom*). One analyst remarked, "It's usually from someone with some type of assault weapon and someone who has a sick mind who goes in and does these sorts of things" (*CNN Newsroom*). Another commented, "The real unfortunate part is that [the gun] is coupled with a sick mind or derangement or delusion..." (*CNN Newsroom*). At this point in CNN's reporting, a law enforcement official had confirmed that Lanza had a form of autism (*CNN Newsroom*). There was no mention of Lanza's religious beliefs, nor was there any sort of speculation about any possible right-wing motive. The CNN analysts knew Lanza had autism, but they went further to categorize him as someone with a "sick mind."

The deadliest mass shooting in American history was perpetrated by 64-year-old Stephen Paddock in Las Vegas, Nevada during a music festival (Berkowitz et al.). The day after the shooting, reports by CNN made it clear that Paddock had no history of mental illness, no PTSD, no service record, and no criminal record, and therefore the police had not yet confirmed a motive. However, only minutes after, the anchor and his guest speculated, saying that Paddock had a "god complex," and that he was probably harboring anger about his father, who was on the FBI's most-wanted list in the 1960s and 70s for bank robbery. They also wondered what could have triggered Paddock, including his girlfriend, who was deemed not to be a co-conspirator. The segment ended with the guest

insinuating that Paddock had a “neurological issue” (*CNN Tonight*). This coverage was different from the others in that CNN went out of its way to say there was no history of mental illness, nor any connection to hate or right-wing groups. Despite this, the segment did bring up his family history of criminality and insinuated that this shooting was part of a vengeful act on the part of a mentally unwell man wanting revenge on the American people and their government for prosecuting his father.

Devin Patrick Kelley was a dishonorably discharged former member of the United States Air Force who served time for abusing his wife and child (Berkowitz et al.). He shot and killed 26 people at Sutherland Springs Baptist Church dressed in “all black... wearing a ballistic vest” (*This Is Life*). After noting that there was no confirmed motive, the CNN analysts went on to speculate: “well I mean obviously he’s deranged, but until we know the motive, it’s going to be difficult to tell exactly what was on his mind, but clearly, he’s just deranged” (*This Is Life*). The analysts also mentioned that, because Kelley attacked a church, there is a possible hate crime motive, before wondering if “he started to become more and more destabilized over the last few months” (*This Is Life*). This is the second instance in which the word “deranged” has been used, the first being for the Sandy Hook shooter, Lanza. The comment about the shooter’s derangement is interesting, because it seems to discount the need to figure out any other motive, now that the shooter has been described as some sort of mentally ill. Because this shooter was a member of the US Air Force, there is already bias to excuse him of his crimes because of his service, however, this is complicated by the dishonorable discharge Kelley received for abusing his family. Despite this, the *CNN* anchor and guests described him as mentally ill, seeming to remove the blame anyway.

In Parkland, Florida, a 19-year-old former student of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School fatally shot 26 and wounded 20 (Berkowitz et al.). CNN reported that the

mother of the shooter, Nikolas Cruz, died two months earlier, and his father died 13 years previous (*Early Start with Christine*). They also mentioned “reports” that Cruz had received “mental health treatment in recent years” (*Early Start with Christine*). One analyst remarked, “I’m not anti-second amendment... we need to make it at least difficult for people that are suffering from any kind of mental illness or too young to really understand exactly what it is they’re doing to own such a powerful weapon” (*Early Start with Christine*). Like some of the other shootings, the commentators in the coverage of Parkland go into the shooter’s home life and family history, this time the death of both parents, the aftermath of which would most certainly involve therapy for the child. Many young people lose parents and other significant family members and receive mental health treatment, but what the commentators seem unwilling to point out is that not all of them decide to bring a gun to school and kill former classmates. Still, CNN focused on this history of mental illness, rather than any other factors that could have influenced Cruz to commit this crime.

The initial coverage of these four mass shootings has one very obvious common theme: the language of mental illness assigned to the shooters, some of whom had never been formally diagnosed or treated for mental illness. Though there was a brief mention of a possible hate crime element to the Sutherland Springs, it was not explored, nor was any possible right-wing or religious extremist elements that could have been at play in any of the shooters’ motives. The mental illness labels seem to excuse the crime committed by the shooter because he was affected by circumstances seemingly beyond his control. This, of course, is not a new result; my findings completely adhere to and support those of Duxbury et al.

The non-white shooters addressed next killed 68 people and injured 46 (Berkowitz et al.). The three Arab- or Muslim-American shooters I examine are

Muhammad Azbulazeez, Syed Rizwan Farook, and Omar Mateen. The latter two shooters were born in the United States to immigrant parents from Pakistan and Afghanistan, respectively, and the other was born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents but became a naturalized United States citizen.

Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez was 24 when he fatally shot four people at a military recruiting center and a U.S. Navy Reserve (Berkowitz et al.). CNN reported that an agent within the FBI said the investigation had not yet determined whether the shooting was a criminal or terrorist act, and that the president's statement reiterated that there was no confirmed motive (*Early Start with John Berman 17 July*). The anchors at CNN described the shooter as well-liked by high-school classmates, someone who "fit in," and a "Tennessee country boy" (*Early Start with John Berman 17 July*). They then go on to discuss an overseas trip Abdulazeez took to the Middle East: "now I'm not one to speculate, but what happens overseas in a certain different environment, I don't know" (*Early Start with John Berman 17 July*). There is a brief mention of Abdulazeez's DUI arrest from the previous April, but it is then swallowed by the speculation on whether, like many other terrorists, he was on narcotics during the incident, despite the fact that the motive had not been confirmed as terrorism at that time. One analyst suggests, "I don't think we can necessarily put too much importance on a DUI. Regrettably, a lot of people can commit DUIs and that doesn't mean they will perpetrate an act like this" (*Early Start with John Berman 17 July*). The comparison between that statement and the way mental illness is discussed with the white shooters is stark. Though the DUI could have pointed to an alcohol and/or drug dependency, the topic is not explored further, and the commentator points out that many people who are charged DUIs do not become mass shooters; the same qualification is not made in the coverage of the "mentally ill" white shooters.

The San Bernardino shooting was perpetrated by two shooters, a husband and wife, Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik. During a work event, Farook left, returned with his wife, and began shooting. They killed 14 and injured 22. Again, CNN made it clear that no actual motive had been announced by the FBI at the time of broadcast but said the theory was a combination of terrorism and workplace dispute (*Early Start with John Berman 4 Dec*). And again, the anchors said the shooter was well-liked by his coworkers, who once threw him a baby shower (*Early Start with John Berman 4 Dec*). They described one of those coworkers as an outspoken conservative Jewish man, an argument with whom could have triggered Farook (*Early Start with John Berman 4 Dec*). Farook had had contact with someone the FBI suspected of terrorism, and so the anchors reported his assumed radicalization (*Early Start with John Berman 4 Dec*). This is the second of two similar narratives—a good, smart, “well-liked” Muslim boy is radicalized by travel or by contact with a threatening character.

Pulse Nightclub shooter Omar Mateen’s case was much more cut-and-dried than the others, if only because he called the police and pledged allegiance to ISIS. After shooting up Pulse, a gay club in Orlando, Florida, Mateen took hostages and made a call to 911, claiming credit for the shooting. Though it may seem that he is not applicable to this analysis because a motive had already been assessed, this is not true, because he had no formal ties to ISIS or other terrorist organizations. In addition, because of the announced motive, there was even less speculation into some of the other motives that could have influenced Mateen, including the rumor that he may have been gay, as he had been to the club several times before. CNN had on as a guest the Executive Director of the Los Angeles Division of the Council on American Islamic Relations, who expressed the strength of the bond between the Muslim and LGBTQ community, which seemed to surprise the anchor. However, most of the discussion focused on the shooter’s previous

interviews with the FBI and how more security measures could have stopped the attack, rather than mental illness concerns (*CNN Newsroom Live*). This coverage, like that of the other two shootings with Muslim-American perpetrators, shows that the speculation was almost entirely focused on connections to terrorist organizations, whether through travel to the Middle East or interaction with a person of suspect.

The pattern of opposing narratives for white and Arab-/Muslim-American shooters in this analysis is so obvious, it is abhorrent. The results of both Duxbury et al. and my own research suggests that white men are more likely to be excused from their crimes by media pundits due to a mental illness label, whether there is proof of an illness or not. The suspects are portrayed as lone wolves who never fit in when they were in school. Their family histories are examined for death, abuse, and/or criminality as an explanation for their crimes, but very rarely was the possibility of religious, right-wing, or hate-based crime explored. This creates a picture of a fundamentally good person who was negatively affected by circumstances they could not control, such as a family death at a young age.

For Middle Eastern and Muslim shooters, a very different narrative is formed. They are shown as having normal, American childhoods, being smart and well liked, before something changed them. Often, their travels overseas and their personal connections to the Muslim community are scrutinized for possible radical intentions. Contrasting with the white shooter narrative, this story is about a perfectly normal boy, the child of immigrants, who was given everything this country had to offer and welcomed as an American, but because of the influence of Islam, became a terrorist. Both are extremely harmful to white and Muslim shooters, because it reinforces racial stereotypes and prejudices in the minds of the audience. It also makes a presumption that

only white people are the victims of mental illness and circumstance, which is far from true.

The CNN analysts' narratives not only reinforce racial stereotypes with these narratives, but the labels themselves are harmful to the large populations of Americans who struggle with mental illnesses and disabilities. Adam Lanza, the Sandy Hook shooter, had a form of autism. Knowing this, the CNN analysts described him as someone with a "sick mind," adding to an extremely negative discourse surrounding autism and those who have it. Those with autism are not mentally ill, and yet CNN drew a direct line from autism to mental illness to a deadly mass shooting. Other shooters, like Nicholas Cruz, who do have a history of being treated for mental health problems that are more common, such as anxiety or depression, also have their motives connected to these issues. These narratives are linking those with mental illnesses, disabilities, and disorders to violent crimes they, like many Muslim men and women, had nothing to do with.

The 24-hour news network lends itself to guesses on the part of its reporters and anchors, because dead air and old news means viewers change the channel to whomever has the most interesting perspective, leaving channels to fight for their audience's attention with bold and attention-grabbing theories. CNN itself was the first 24-hour news channel, started in 1980, but since then many more have cropped up; if the same analysis were done with other news channels, it is almost assured there would be similar results. It is up to these news networks themselves to control their content and make sure the story they present to the public is completely factual. In the days of fake news, when the American people no longer know which sources can be trusted and call into doubt the integrity of many journalists, getting facts straight before going on air could not be more crucial.

This is fundamentally important because television news helps the American public make sense of the world and what happens in it, particularly when there is a crisis. These news outlets are what many people turn to for live updates of everything from elections to terrorist attacks, and they need to know the news they are getting in tense times is reliable and comprehensive (Rosenthal 1). More than ever, these networks are influencing what their audiences find important and why; continuing to propagate harmful stereotypes about people of color is a gross misuse of the power of the airwaves. The way the networks use their time can promote equality and acceptance or incite violence and fear.

Clearly, more research needs to be done, not only into the subtle discrimination against black and Latino people in the media, but also how Middle Easterners and Muslims are portrayed in a post-9/11 world. Because Middle Eastern immigrants are one of the most recent waves of migration into the U.S., they have not been fully integrated as their own ethnic group in the scholarly conversation of media portrayals. It has been proven that most Americans, particularly those in rural areas, learn about other cultures primarily from the media (Molina-Guzman 212); it is imperative that a terrorist is not the only image of a practicing Muslim that Americans see (Rosenthal 3). Pew Research Center estimates that 60% of U.S. Muslims believe that the media coverage of Islam is unfair, and 62% of them believe that the American people do not see Islam as part of mainstream society (Pew Research Center). These media portrayals can have real-life effects on Muslim men and women of faith, who are not and should not be associated with either the insurgent nor the insane.

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Finding the Middle Place: Moral Psychology in *The Good Place*

Ames Jewart

How does a person who has been selfish and egocentric their whole life transition to being a kind, compassionate, and altruistic one? In other words, how does a bad person become a good one? This is the question the NBC sitcom *The Good Place* (TGP) sets out to answer. TGP is a primetime comedy show about ethics and moral philosophy currently airing its third season. The show is about four people who have died and find themselves living in the show's version of Heaven, *The Good Place*, until it's revealed at the end of season one that all the characters are actually terrible and that they've been in *The Bad Place*, being tortured, all along. At its core, TGP is about a group of flawed individuals who are trying to become better versions of themselves through the study of ethics and moral philosophy. It is ultimately a call to the goodness within all people, demonstrating the tenacity of human beings to change the course of their lives (or afterlives) for the better.

The show is based on concepts of moral philosophy; its characters read famous philosophers like Emmanuel Kant and learn about different theories of ethics from utilitarianism to virtue ethics to moral particularism. Not only does it feature different ethical theories and philosophers, *TGP's* fictional nature is able to create a space in which its characters play out various ethical debates and situations. While it is clear what moral philosophy brings to the table in the show, I was curious about what the study of psychology could add to the conversation. In this essay, I will explore how *TGP* relates to modern moral psychology. I argue that *The Good Place* and its characters represent the chief debate occurring in the today: are humans motivated to make moral decisions by

intuition or by rationality? *The Good Place* can be used to frame this debate, with main characters Chidi and Eleanor representing rationalism and intuitionism respectively; however, both Eleanor and Chidi are judged as bad people by the end of their lives and are forced to learn new types of moral behavior in the afterlife. In the end, *The Good Place* can be viewed as an argument for Darcia Narvaez's concept of moral imaginism, which is a combination of the two theories. In this essay, I will first highlight the history of the field of moral psychology, explaining key terms and theories that have emerged. Next, I will explore how Chidi's and Eleanor's characters represent the two sides of this debate; I will close with how the concept of moral imaginism applies to the show.

History of the Field

To understand the current debate, one has to know the history of field. Jean Claude Piaget was the first to study moral development in children; he started researching in the 1930s but wasn't published until 1965. He found that younger children were objective in their moral judgements, seeing things in black and white and sticking to established rules and behaviors, but as they got older, they were able to view things more subjectively (Cortese 110). Nearly a decade later, Lawrence Kohlberg, heralded as the father of moral psychology, published his critical paper on the moral development process of adults in 1971. In his study, he established the cognitive-development theory of moral judgement; the theory proposes that humans make moral decisions through reasoned judgement, known today as the rationalist theory. Kohlberg proposed six stages of moral development in adults, with the highest being those who utilize "a principled understanding of fairness that rests on the free-standing logic of equality and reciprocity" (Cortese 111). Kohlberg's theory has been critiqued for many reasons since his pioneering paper was first published.

In the 1980s, Cortese summarized the bulk of critique against Kohlberg, arguing that his theory was unrealistic because it was not applicable to everyday life, painted the western, white man as the moral model, and ignored social and cultural factors of morality. First, Kohlberg's survey was based on hypothetical moral dilemmas rather than everyday situations, setting up moral decision making "as [a] mathematical equat[ion] rather than judgment, wisdom, and transcendental creativity" (Cortese 114). Secondly, Kohlberg surveyed only western, white men, so his model does not account for most of the world's population, failing to incorporate the moral values of women, people of color, middle- or lower-class individuals, and those from non-western countries. Instead, he took the beliefs of white men as the moral norms for everyone, asserting that justice, a western and masculine value, was the moral foundation of all humanity and designing his stages such that a high level of abstractionism, common in western culture only and dependent on high education levels, was necessary to reach the highest stages (Cortese 112). Because of the limited views and experiences of his subjects, Kohlberg's theory also fails to account for an unjust world; his stages assume a utopia without patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, racism, or poverty (Cortese 113). Cortese concludes that, as a result of all of the above, Kohlberg's theory cannot be taken as wholly, or even partially, correct. Although Kohlberg has been criticized by many over the years, his ideas still lay at the base of the field until the turn of the century when the social-intuitionist model was developed.

The Field Today: Intuitionism vs. Rationalism

While the rationalist theory captured most of the tone of the conversation for decades, today the social-intuitionist model (the SIM) put forth by Joseph Haidt in 2001 holds more weight. While the rationalist theory asserts that moral judgements are made

through reasoning and deliberation, the SIM proposes that “moral judgment is caused by quick moral intuitions and is followed (when needed) by slow, ex post facto moral reasoning” (Haidt 817). His claim is substantiated by a study in which he noted individuals’ immediate condemnations of incest, bestiality, and other common social taboos. When probed further, however, his subjects were unable to explain why they disagreed so vehemently, leading him to judge that morality is based on intuition (Haidt 814). The SIM is made up of six “links,” as Haidt puts it; the first four links are the social-intuitionist model and feature intuitive judgements while the last two are the thought process one goes through when rationalizing one’s decision to oneself and others. The rationalist theory only includes these last two links, but Haidt argues that there are a range of intuitive leaps people make before they get to them (Haidt 819).

While some in the field still cling to the rationalist model, most of the academic discourse has turned to Haidt’s SIM. However, Darcia Narvaez in her article, “Moral Complexity: The Fatal Attraction of Truthiness and the Importance of Mature Moral Functioning,” summarizes and critiques both the intuitionist and rational theories in order to provide a new alternative: moral imaginism. Narvaez’s main critique of the social-intuitionist theory is that it fails to account for the fact that tacit knowledge, knowledge that cannot be explained verbally, does not always equal implicit, intuitive knowledge. People learn through experiences, and they don’t always realize what they’ve learned on a conscious level, but that does not make that knowledge innate (Narvaez 13). She also finds that it oversimplifies moral decision making, focusing on moral judgements of people or situations rather than real-life scenarios that require action and deliberation (Narvaez 9). In her piece “The social-intuitionist model: Some counter-intuitions,” Narvaez critiques the SIM for failing to differentiate between intuitive judgements and social conformity. According to the SIM, “a fully enculturated person is a virtuous person,”

but this is a very dangerous position to take up in light of cultures which directly counter moral virtues, for example Nazi Germany (Narvaez “The social-intuitionist model” 4).

Her main critique of rationalism is that it underscores the role of emotions in moral judgements and is based on hypothetical moral dilemmas rather than real-life, everyday situations, which Cortese also wrote about (Narvaez “Moral Complexity” 20). She also argues that rationalism ignores tacit knowledge that cannot be explained through reasoning, emotional responses which help dictate moral actions, and gut feelings or intuitions that people often base their decisions on. She ultimately calls for the two theories to combine to form moral imaginism, a theory that uses reasoning as well as emotion and intuition to make moral judgements and engage in moral behavior. Moral imaginism requires that decisions be made as a result of evaluating the consequences of one’s actions for oneself and others (Narvaez 22). There is also a strong emphasis placed on taking on another’s perspective; in other words, one must *imagine* how another person is reacting to the current situation and what their response would be to any action taken in the future.

Intuitionism in *The Good Place*

Eleanor Shellstrop is the main character of *The Good Place*; the show is told primarily from her perspective, and she is the first person to realize she is not supposed to be in the Good Place. The whole first season revolves around her relationships with the show’s other characters (Chidi, Michael, Tahani, Jason, and Janet) and her journey towards self-improvement. The audience also learns to identify with Eleanor through flashbacks to her life while she was alive. In the first half of the season we see mostly flashbacks of Eleanor, but as the season progresses, we learn more about the other characters as well. Before she died, Eleanor was a self-proclaimed “Arizona dirtbag” who sold fake medicine to old

people, resisted making and valuing friends, and never had a serious relationship (“...Someone”). Throughout her life, she made decisions according to the social intuitionist model: she didn’t think about or evaluate her actions; she simply did what she deemed best in the moment.

In the sixth episode of season one, “What We Owe to Each Other,” Eleanor says that thinking only about how to have the most fun was “practically [her] mantra” while she was alive (“What”). In the flashbacks of this episode, Eleanor agrees to dog-sit for a friend who’s out of town moving her mother into assisted living. However, when her roommate shows up with Rihanna tickets, Eleanor abandons her responsibility, resulting in the dog becoming morbidly obese (“What”). This decision fits with Haidt’s intuitionist theory because Eleanor is making decisions based on her first, immediate judgement, without spending too much time analyzing whether it is the right or wrong thing to do. Some might counter that Haidt’s SIM cannot be applied to Eleanor’s decision because she was not making a moral judgement consciously. However, I would argue that all decisions have moral ramifications to them if one looks closely enough and that Eleanor’s choice to break a promise to her friend is seen as a moral no-no by most ethical standards. The idea that Eleanor’s actions support Haidt’s SIM also fits with Narvaez’s critique that intuitionism can’t distinguish between social conditioning and gut feelings. America has long held the value of individualism; compared to other cultures, the US is competitive rather than cooperative and individualistic rather than community-oriented. Eleanor demonstrates these beliefs in her actions: bringing her own birthday cake rather than accepting the cake from her co-workers (“...Someone”) and abandoning her duties as designated driver to hook up with a hot bartender (“Flying”). In each of her decisions, she chooses the selfish route automatically. According to intuitionism this would be because it’s her natural, gut instinct and therefore the most moral choice, but Narvaez would

argue that the social conditioning she's experienced through American cultural values motivate these instincts as well.

I would further add that Eleanor's upbringing had a strong influence on how she makes moral decisions. Throughout Eleanor's flashbacks, we learn more about her family situation and how she was raised. Her parents were very strong negative influences on her moral development, resulting in a moral decision-making strategy in which her first gut instinct was always to protect herself. In episode 12 of the first season, Eleanor admits that she had been using "their crappy parenting as an excuse for [her] selfish behavior" her whole life ("Mindy"). As a child, she had taken in their behavior towards her - selfish and uncaring - and formed it into her own method of dealing with the world. Deep down she believed that the whole world didn't care about her, so she decided it wasn't worth it to care about anything but herself. This self-defense mechanism became her gut instinct, motivating all of her future moral decisions.

Rationalism in *The Good Place*

Chidi Anagonye, a professor of ethics and moral philosophy, can be seen as a representation of the rationalist theory. All his life, he thought so much about each and every one of his decisions that he found it impossible to make any choices. He was so caught up in the consequences of his actions, the good or the bad according to any number of philosophers, that he thought himself into a stomach ache on a regular basis. We see in a flashback that in elementary school, Chidi was asked to pick kids for his team in soccer. He took up all recess thinking through all the factors: "Athletic strategies, the fragile egos of my classmates, and gender politics. Should I pick a girl as a gesture towards women's equality, or... or is that pandering? Or do I think it's pandering because of my limited male point of view?" ("Chidi's Choice"). Even a young child, Chidi was very the perfect

representation of rationalism, and as he got older, the more he learned about ethics and different theories of what was the right decision, the worse he got. For example, in that same episode, we see a flashback to him at dinner with his childhood best friend, Uzo. When asked what he'd like to eat, he asks for another few minutes as he is "just mulling the ethical ramifications of various soups" ("Chidi's Choice"). At this same dinner, Uzo asks him not to be his best man at his upcoming wedding because making all the decisions required of the job would drive Chidi insane. Later, we see that Uzo was right - a sweating, stuttering mess of a Chidi was utterly unprepared for the wedding to take place later that day. Chidi has to think through every single aspect of any decision, not allowing himself to respond using his gut feeling or emotions as Eleanor might.

Additionally, while Eleanor always has a new plan or a workaround for any moral dead-end, Chidi holds himself to a strict ethical code. He refuses to break from his principles for any reason; one of the best examples of this is his staunch opposition to lying. In "The Eternal Shriek," flashbacks tell the story of Chidi's friend Henry and his boots. Henry asked Chidi's opinion on a pair of garish cowboy boots that he had just purchased, and Chidi didn't have the heart to tell his friend that he hated them. After lying to Henry, Chidi is wracked by guilt and indecision and resolves to tell Henry he hates the boots; however, shenanigans ensue and Chidi ends up telling Henry his boots are hideous while he's recovering from a terrible accident in the hospital, making an already miserable situation for Henry even worse ("The Eternal"). Chidi refuses to allow white lies as social niceties to be ethical and holds himself accountable when he fails to live up to his ethical standards. Even though the reason for his lie was to spare his friend self-doubt and embarrassment, this lie haunted Chidi for three years, and he ultimately came out with it at a very inopportune time.

Even when his own life is at stake, Chidi refuses to bend from his Kantian principles that lying is always bad. When the four humans have to go undercover in the real Bad Place, Chidi refuses to lie about his identity to avoid being discovered. When Eleanor attempts to convince him otherwise, he responds that “principles aren’t principles if you can pick and choose when to follow them” (“Rhonda, Diana”). Even when Eleanor was ultimately able to change his mind, she did so through rationalism: by giving him another theory of ethics - moral particularism - to cling to instead. Rather than allowing one’s instincts to help with the decision-making process or leaving room for exceptions, the rationalist model holds that there is always a right or wrong decision, and deliberation is always required to discern them.

Moral Imaginism in *The Good Place*

The Good Place can be viewed as an argument for Narvaez’s concept of moral imaginism. Chidi was a strict rationalist all his life while Eleanor was an indifferent intuitionist, but the show ultimately places both of them in the Bad Place, indicating that solely following either theory will end up causing people to make the wrong moral decisions. Eleanor was selfish and apathetic about any of the consequences of her actions, while Chidi cared so much about the consequences of every action that he drove everyone in his life crazy and himself miserable. Throughout the course of the show, Chidi learns to care less about the strict rules of moral behavior and to keep in mind how his indecisiveness can affect other people, while Eleanor learns to think more rationally through her actions and their consequences in order to be less self-centered. In other words, Chidi learns to make use of intuitionism while Eleanor learns to practice rationalism, and they both start to consider the consequences of their actions for others.

Throughout seasons one and two, Eleanor learns to start thinking more about what it actually means to be a good person and to consider her effect on others. A great example of this is in the episode “What We Owe to Each Other.” Eleanor has promised Michael to help him find the problem with the neighborhood, but she can’t do so without giving herself away as the problem in the neighborhood. Rather than just lying to Michael out of self-preservation, like she would have before she died, Eleanor considers the ethical ramifications of her actions and decides to find a way to help Michael without giving herself away. A few episodes later, after Chidi accidentally kills the AI Janet who runs the neighborhood, Eleanor gives herself up as the mistake to save Chidi (“The Eternal”). This is a decision the old Eleanor never would have made because it didn’t come to her immediately and it wasn’t easy or self-serving. Instead, Eleanor sees her friend in pain and wants to help him, so she sacrifices herself to protect him, going against her intuitive reaction. This decision also aligns with moral imaginism because she puts herself into another’s point of view. Rather than just considering the ethical consequences for herself, she employs moral imaginism to consider the perspectives of others. She realizes how Chidi must be feeling, and his safety and well-being factor heavily into her decision. Eleanor exhibits this same mode of thinking when she chooses to turn herself in to the afterlife authorities to save Chidi and Tahani from being sent to the Bad Place in her stead (“Mindy”). In her life on Earth, she would have just chosen the easy way out – to stay safe and comfortable, no matter who else had to take the fall for her actions. But in the afterlife, she learns to reason through her decisions rather than just following her instincts blindly. She begins to consider the ethical ramifications of her actions, and the feelings and opinions of others start playing into her decision-making strategy.

Meanwhile, Chidi must learn to be more intuitive and emotional in his decision-making processes in the afterlife. When confronted with three women whom all declare

their feelings for him, Chidi panics; Michael tries to help him by spurring an intuitive reaction out of him, attempting to break his pattern of over-rationalization (“Chidi’s Choice”). Later, after one of the women (for those familiar with the show - Real Eleanor) tells him she loves him, he turns to Eleanor for advice (“What’s My”). Although it seems like a weird choice to get advice from the only person he knows really belongs in the bad place, at this point in the timeline, it actually makes a lot of sense. Chidi, as a rationalist, gets bogged down in different ethical theories and implications, rendering it impossible for him to make an actual decision. Eleanor is an expert in everything Chidi is lacking: intuitive reactions and emotional decision-making, so she provides the perfect sounding board, giving him great advice and urging him to talk to Real Eleanor about his feelings and concerns. The example mentioned earlier, when Eleanor convinces Chidi to sway from his moral principles to save his own life, also shows how Chidi is beginning to let go of his strict moral guidelines in the face of reality and its complexity. Chidi lived life inside his head, obeying strict rules and taking as much time as he deemed necessary to make each and every decision. However, throughout the show, he encounters obstacles that cannot be solved in the manner he is used to, so he has to learn to adapt. He starts employing some of Eleanor’s strategies – listening to his gut instincts and taking into account his own emotions – in order to make decisions.

Conclusion

Through watching *The Good Place*, viewers of the show gain a nuanced understanding of the field of moral psychology – specifically in regards to the debate between rationalism and intuitionism. Although *TGP* is merely a TV show and cannot prove any one theory or another, its fictional nature creates a space to explore these concepts and how they interact with each other just as they do in real life. Chidi and Eleanor’s moral

growth makes an argument for moral imaginism, showing how they navigate real-life scenarios using this decision-making strategy. It's hard to imagine that a show about what it means to be a good person could do so well as a primetime comedy, but its success shows that at this moment in time we, as a culture, are willing to engage with these questions of morality. *The Good Place* demonstrates a new, secular interest in the definition of a good person and the challenges of behaving in moral ways. We're drawn to the story of these flawed humans trying to make it through their (after)lives as best as they can because it resonates with our own experiences, hardships, and goals. Everyone wants to be a good person, but it is often difficult to know what the moral choice is in any given situation and then to follow through even though it's often the more difficult decision. However, *The Good Place* presents a template of what being a good person could look like in the 21st Century, and through its humor and relatability, inspires us to work towards goodness.

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Why Would You Feel Bad for the Bad Guy?

Todd Silberglied

There is a teenage boy who lives in New York City. He comes from a loving, caring family of five. With two little sisters, he is looked up to as a role model, and he tries his best to fill these big shoes. He excels in school and often helps his classmates when they get confused or ask for help. The community sees him for who he is: a kind, gentle boy with a bright future ahead of him. And his parents? They could not be prouder. Every day they have a family dinner where this boy tells his family, in the most modest way possible, about all he accomplished that day in school and in his extracurriculars. His parents express their pride for having raised such a perfect, young man. But he is not perfect. After a routine trip to the doctor, this boy's father is told that his son has Facioscapulohumeral muscular dystrophy, a genetic disorder that will make his bones weaker over time until he is left in paralysis. This boy does not know that there is anything wrong with him because his father does not have the heart to tell him. So, the boy goes on living his exemplary life, but occasionally, has a few slip ups. One time he fell down the stairs while carrying textbooks, and another time he fainted in public.

This sweet, innocent boy starts to realize that something is wrong with him, but he knows that people with genetic disorders are not allowed in their society. Upon finally realizing the truth, this boy decides to do what is best for society. Although his father wanted to keep the disease a secret because he did not want to lose his only son, he also raised him to be so perfect in every way. He had impeccable behavior, a positive attitude, and followed all of the rules. Following his dad's example of how to live a good, proud life,

this boy turns himself into the local authorities to be killed. Do you feel bad for this young, innocent boy?

What if I now told you that this boy, Thomas Smith, was a Nazi and that his father was Obergruppenführer John Smith, one of the highest-ranking members in the entire Reich. Have your feelings changed? Does being a Nazi make things different? Do you sympathize with him less? He is still the same boy described earlier. Nothing has changed, except possibly your perception of this boy.

The television show, *The Man in the High Castle*, takes place in the 1960s in a world where the Allies lost World War II (Thrall). Because of this, Nazi Germany took over the eastern half of the United States, now called the Greater Nazi Reich, and the Japanese took over the West coast, now called the Japanese Pacific States (Thrall). There is a neutral zone in between the two empires that acts like a lawless wild west. The show is about a woman named Juliana Crain who finds films that seem to show a different world; one where the United States of America actually won the war. In order to figure out how to stop the oppression from the Nazis and the Japanese, she goes on a journey to find the person responsible for the films: The Man in the High Castle.

The audience of the show is introduced to Thomas Smith early on in the show's three-season run, and it is clear that the boy is a Nazi. What the producers and directors of the show do, though, is show Thomas as an average, likable character. He helps his classmates, plays with his sisters, and makes his parents proud, but he does all of this with a big swastika patch on his arm. Now you may think that you could never feel bad for a Nazi, right? That is what I thought too before Thomas found out about his disease. In this world, anyone with a genetic disorder is to be exterminated so that the unfavorable genes do not get passed onto the next generation, and after two entire seasons of watching Thomas grow into the passionate, sweet young man that he is, the audience is

taken for an emotional roller coaster ride when Thomas volunteers to turn himself in without telling his parents or sisters. The reason why this moment is so bittersweet is because even though most of the audience grows to love Thomas for the gentle, kind boy he is, we all know that he would have grown up to be just like his father and the rest of the Nazi party, killing minorities and pushing agendas for the master race. *The Man in the High Castle* challenges us to feel sympathy and empathy for just about anyone, no matter who they are and what they have done.

I wanted to explore why I felt sympathetic for Thomas after my first time watching the show, even as a Jew. I wondered how I could be rooting for and against the Resistance, the Japanese, and even the Nazis, all within the course of a few episodes. According to Liza Aziz-Zadeh of the Brain and Creativity Institute of the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, people often have a strong interest in paying close attention to, and potentially empathizing with the pain of our enemies (Dvorsky). Aziz-Zadeh conducted a study by using and reviewing fMRI brain scans. She brought in a handful of volunteers who were all white, Jewish, males, and showed them two different videos. The first video depicted an anti-Semite in pain, while the second showed a non-hateful, likable person in pain. In a bizarre finding, the volunteers' pain matrices were most activated while watching the anti-Semite feel pain (Dvorsky). The implications of this study are astronomical and relate back to another character in *The Man in the High Castle*: Frank Frink. Frank's sister, niece, and nephew were all killed in a gas chamber simply because their grandfather was Jewish. Frank also had half of his body scorched by a fire when he was in a building that was bombed in the season two finale. There is a lot to feel bad about for Frank, and yet, Thomas is arguably easier to sympathize with. When connected to the study, Frank would represent the "likable" person in pain while Thomas would represent

the anti-Semite in pain. Just like the data indicated in the study, people like Thomas will receive more sympathy.

In order to figure out why the audience can sympathize with Thomas more than Frank, we need to take a step back by looking at sympathy as a whole. According to Craig Taylor in his piece called "Sympathy" published in *The Journal of Ethics*, sympathy is "the phenomenon of being moved by the suffering of another." He also argues that sympathy is a primitive response, meaning that it is done almost immediately without thinking and that it is extremely complex. He also states that we usually cannot explain our feelings of sympathy. Often times we cannot pinpoint a specific reason why we sympathize with someone. So the question now becomes, how do we explain our feelings of sympathy for people who do bad things if sympathy really is that complicated?

One way to answer this question is to look at science, and more specifically, psychology. There are many different interpretations from esteemed psychologists that could help us figure out why we feel sympathetic for people that do bad things. Psychiatrist Carl Jung believed that in order to grow as human beings, we need to confront our "shadow selves" (Langley). The shadow self is basically the part of your mind and personality that is the exact opposite as your own (Langley). Jung said that by understanding our shadow selves, we can get stronger. So too, we like to understand villains because they often reflect the protagonist and make them stronger. In the process of understanding them, we often feel their emotions, including pain (Langley). The easiest example of this comes from the 2007 movie, *Spider-Man 3*. In the movie, Peter Parker's suit turns black, controlling him and bringing out the darker side of his personality. In order to overcome this challenge and grow stronger as a person, Peter needs to fight the darkness within himself. This emphasizes the ideas behind Jung's model of the shadow self because Peter Parker is able to grow as a human being and become stronger after

confronting his opposite personality and character traits. Jung's theory would point to feeling sympathetic for the bad guy as a way to make the good guy that much better.

Another interpretation comes from Sigmund Freud who believes that every person naturally gravitates toward the id, which is the concept of acting with innate instinctive impulses (Langley). Instead of following the id, though, Freud thought that people were confined by society, forcing their id to hide within. This interpretation would make an audience connect with the villain because they are the ones that do what we all want to do: let our id take over. After all, characters in movies and shows seem to have two things that many people would want: unlimited freedom and a lot of power (Langley). To see Freud's work in action, one can look towards the extremely popular 2008 drama and thriller, *The Dark Knight*, in which Heath Ledger's performance of the Joker made the entire movie. There is a reason why people loved the Joker in that movie and it has to do with the appeal of running around the city like a mad-man doing whatever you want. It is clear that the Joker takes joy in what he does and treats his crimes as an elaborate game. This joyous freedom and power combined with a big smile and laugh from Heath Ledger, makes the audience connect to the villain, even if just slightly. The interpretations of both Jung and Freud play into *The Man in the High Castle*. The shadow self example is important for members of the resistance, like Juliana, because Nazis like Thomas end up making them stronger through their complex relationship. Freud's beliefs are reinforced, too, as the Nazis and Japanese flaunt their ids throughout the series, something that the resistance members cannot do.

The other way of looking at why we sympathize with characters that do bad things has less to do with science and more to do with how filmmakers want you to react to a movie or show. According to Professor Joseph Magliano and Associate Professor Angela Grippo, filmmakers have two main cinematography techniques that they use to force the

audience to feel a certain way. The first way is done by the actors. Facial expressions are often universal across cultures and are a great way to show the viewer how a character may be feeling (Magliano and Grippo). In our case, with sympathy, filmmakers can make the audience sympathize with even the worst characters by using an actor or actress with very passionate facial expressions. Although Quinn Lord, the actor who plays Thomas, is only a teenager, he gives one of the best and most convincing performances out of the entire cast. This alone is not going to get people to feel bad for a Nazi, though.

The second main technique that filmmakers use is even more important; it is using point of view (Magliano and Grippo). Any time the director can give the audience a backstory for a villain, they will. This is because they want their main characters to be dynamic, not static. A dynamic character is one with many complicated aspects to their storyline, and they often experience change over the course of the movie or television series. Most good villains are dynamic to make them more interesting. A villain who does bad things for no apparent reason will not play as well with the audience as one that has some prior motivation or traumatic life event that sent them down the wrong path giving their inner id a way to get out. Once a filmmaker can tell the story from the villain's perspective, the audience begins to understand what they are going through and can then sympathize with them more (Magliano and Grippo). Unlike other characters in the show, the audience gets to see what happens in Thomas' personal life. We see how he lives his life at home, at school, and in public. We watch him care for his sisters while his parents are not home and help his classmates out with schoolwork. Seeing things from Thomas' perspective, it is clear that all he is trying to do is make his father proud and wear the Smith family name with dignity. These are common struggles that many teenagers go through, building a connection with the audience. Is this enough for the audience to overlook his Nazi roots, though?

Developing a strong point of view for a villain does not seem like a compelling enough reason to sympathize with characters who commit such horrific crimes. That being said, the power of point of view is stronger than you may think. Take Walter White, for example; he is the perfect example of what is called an antihero. The *Merriam Webster* definition of an antihero is “a protagonist or notable figure who is conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities” (“Antihero”). If you have ever seen the TV show, *Breaking Bad*, then you know that Walter White, played by Bryan Cranston, is a protagonist who is anything but a hero. Trying to describe to someone who does not watch the show why anyone would root for Mr. White as he uses his chemistry knowledge to cook and sell methamphetamine while killing people who get in his way is nearly impossible. And yet, we do root for him. A great deal of the audience loves Walter White while buying into his point of view. This can be seen in numerous fan pages and reviews of the show. There is even a “Save Walter White” site modeled after the one created on the show to accept (fake) donations to support his chemotherapy. Mr. White develops lung cancer that will most likely kill him, so the meth selling was a way to leave money behind for his family. Not convinced to root for him yet? The directors went even further. This family that Walter wants to leave money for consists of both a newly born baby and a son with cerebral palsy, Flynn. Is it a coincidence that his son has a disability and his daughter is a baby? Not in the slightest. All of these contributing factors lead a lot of the audience to jump on board with Walter’s mission, no matter how far it takes him. Since the show ended over five years ago, people have had time to go back, rewatch it, and really analyze Walter’s character, and yet, the online support is still there.

So, let’s bring the conversation back to Thomas Smith in *The Man in the High Castle*. Why might the audience feel bad for him while not feeling bad for some of the other notable Nazis in the show like Erich Raeder, Martin Huesmann, or Heinrich Himmler? All

three of these Nazis were killed at some point during the three seasons, but it does not really seem to matter to the audience aside from the fact that it contributes to the plot. The answer here also comes back to those two cinematography techniques. The facial expressions are subtle throughout the series but escalate in the conversation that Thomas has with his parents when he finally learns about his incurable disease (Tallerico).



Thomas: "I've let you down. I'm a useless eater."¹

Helen (Thomas' mother): "No, you haven't..."

Thomas: "I'm so sorry."

John (Thomas' father): "Do you have any idea how proud we are of you?"

Thomas: "But I'm defective."

Helen: "Don't you ever say that. No, to us you... you are perfect" (Dick).

As you can see from this snapshot of a conversation, emotional words paired with powerful facial expressions could very well do the trick. The tear trickling down Thomas' face was yet another trick production threw in to really toy with the audience's emotions.

Many of the other prominent Nazi characters that died did not have scenes with very heartfelt facial emotions. In addition, the audience never really sees their points of view. The only time these other characters appear is as a byproduct of more important

characters being on the screen. For example, Erich Raeder is John Smith's main assistant who often takes care of all of the dirty work. The viewers of the show never see Raeder alone or see what happens in his personal life. The only times he really gets to be on the screen is when John Smith tells him to do something, making him a static character. The view into Thomas' thoughts and feelings as a scared teenager wondering whether or not he is good enough for society makes a strong enough impact to the audience for sympathy to come into effect. Here is another conversation that Thomas has with the main character, Juliana.

Juliana: "We all have flaws... all of us, every single one of us. It makes us who we are."

Thomas: "What if my flaws are the kind to be eradicated for... for the good of everyone?"

Juliana: "Do not think that way. You cannot think that way."

Thomas: "Then why does everybody think that way? Why is it the law?"

Although Thomas is a proud Nazi, for the first time he questions the values of the party by challenging what the law states. Since Thomas clearly does not agree with the law, it makes his final scene even more emotional when he pushes down his feelings and does what he thinks would be best for society: turning himself in. The same kid that started questioning Nazi law ended up following it to his grave. Like previously mentioned, sympathy is thought to be primitive and uncontrollable. With all of the tricks *The Man in the High Castle* uses, it is perfectly normal to instinctively feel sympathetic for Thomas, even as a Nazi.

With all of this in mind, the main question that can be asked is why we should care. So what if filmmakers make you feel sympathetic towards a questionable character? Maybe psychology points to this as well, but does it really matter? The main lesson to get

out of all this is that things do not have to be black or white. You do not always have to agree with everything the “good guy” does nor despise everything the “bad guy” does. There are so many shades of gray that make looking at television shows, movies, or books more complicated. Most importantly, you are allowed to sympathize with the villain, even if you are not rooting for him or her. This is especially the case in *The Man in the High Castle* where the author, Philip K. Dick, creates a fictional world that defies normal expectations of what and who can be characterized as good or bad. Maybe this just makes for a more interesting story, or maybe people like Dick are trying to push your expectations for our own capacities to show human emotions.

Now think back to the boy described at the beginning of the essay. Regardless of psychology and techniques used by filmmakers, he is still a Nazi nonetheless. But these things combined with his attitude, behavior, and friendliness make many of us feel sympathetic after he is diagnosed with his disease. These feelings are not something that we should feel bad about.

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Who Saved *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*? An Investigation Behind the Politics of Television

Chloe Irwin

I never *meant* to become a fan of the television show *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*; it just happened. I decided to try out a Hulu subscription because they were doing a Christmas sale where you got the first month free, and so I figured that I would take advantage. I answered some questions about my television preferences, and a box popped up, urging me to click on *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, which is a fictional sitcom that focuses on the dynamics and relationships within Brooklyn's 99th precinct.

Brooklyn Nine-Nine revolves around a core set of characters, but the star of the show is Jake Peralta. Peralta is a talented carefree cop who always seems to land himself in a sticky situation, and he is constantly looking toward the bright side of a situation. He is head-over-heels in love with his partner, Amy Santiago, and he looks at his Captain, Ray Holt, as a father figure and mentor. The show breaks boundaries by featuring Holt as an openly gay captain and having two Hispanic female leads, one of whom is bisexual.

As I started watching, I was not impressed with the show. I had heard a lot about its diversity and how its comedy was not at the expense of others, so I knew that I should have liked it. I just simply did not find it that funny. So, when my free month of Hulu ended, and I went to unsubscribe, I was confident that I would not miss the show. But later in the year, I could not stop wondering about what happened in the season that I never got around to watching.

Eventually, I caved. I did not realize how much I had become attached to the show, and I missed it. Hulu was right after all. I bought the rest of the series on iTunes and fell in love with the show and the characters.

So, when I heard that *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* was being cancelled two short months later, I was devastated. I had just started to understand the appeal of the show; FOX could not possibly be planning on taking it away. When I opened *Buzzfeed*, I saw that was not the only one who felt this way. The #Save99 began to trend on *Twitter*, and famous viewers such as director Guillermo del Toro and Broadway Lin Manuel Miranda tried to leverage their star power to get *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* renewed for a sixth season (McKee; Wanshel). Articles started popping up titled things such as “‘Brooklyn Nine-Nine’ Has Been Canceled, And Twitter Mourns” and “Fans in Mourning: Brooklyn Nine-Nine Cancelled After 5 Seasons” (Wanshel; “Fans in Mourning”).

The mourning did not last long, thank goodness. Just one day later, good news arrived: NBC was going to pick up *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* for another season, saving it from the cuts that FOX had made (Heritage). New articles were popping up everywhere, but this time they were spreading a happier message. Headlines like “Brooklyn Nine-Nine Saved by NBC After Outcry on Social Media” and “Brooklyn Nine-Nine: NBC Saves Cop Show After Outcry Online” (McKee, “Brooklyn Nine-Nine: NBC Saves Cop Show After Outcry Online.”). Stuart Heritage of MSN fittingly wrote that “even Jesus stayed dead longer than *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*” (Heritage).

But the articles got it wrong: NBC saving *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* was not due to fan outcry. According to an interview with *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* writer Dan Goor, “Bob [Greenblatt] has always said, for the last five years, every time I’ve seen him, ‘I really love Brooklyn. I’d love to have it on NBC’” (Goor). FOX had been thinking of canceling *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* for some time before they actually made the cut: it barely even got renewed for

a fifth season. This information was no secret and it means that NBC has been able to plan on making arrangements long before the show actually got canceled, swooping in at the last minute in order to act as a savior to fans, and the fans fell for the trick (Heritage). This is problematic because of the false attribution that NBC gave to the fans that took to *Twitter*.

Both the fans and the cast were thrilled by the news that *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* would be saved. NBC suddenly became a hero, who falsely “rescued” the show from its death. FOX was vilified for cancelling the show, and it was almost like it had killed it along with its characters. When I heard the news, I was elated: I felt like I needed to celebrate the news somehow.

The cast, fittingly, tweeted to their fans, thanking them for saving the show. Dan Goor, the lead writer of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* tweeted “Hey everyone, just wanted to say no big deal but.... NBC JUST PICKED #BROOKLYN99 UP FOR SEASON 6!!! Thanks in no small part to you, the best fans in the history of the world! Nine-nine!!!!!!!!!!” The actors mirrored the sentiment tweeting things such as “THANK YOU INTERNET!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” and “SQUAD YOU DID IT #BROOKLYN99 WILL BE ON NBC FOR OUR 6th SEASON.” Actress Melissa Fumero even went as far to say “... You [the fans] did this!! You got loud and were heard [sic] and you saved our show!! Thank you...” (*BBC*). All of the tweets by the actors and director made the fans feel directly responsible for the salvation of the show, perpetuating the falsity that NBC created.

Even though I do not even have a twitter account, and never once mentioned *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* being cancelled to any of my friends, I felt seen by this sudden revival. NBC actually listened to the people, and everyone who banded together actually got things done. This movement felt like such a relief from all of the other bitter battles that our country is fighting today. Grassroots movements have become a popular way to make

a difference during this presidential administration, and people have been speaking out through movements such as Black Lives Matter and the Women's March. But the administration has seemingly continued to turn a blind eye to these movements: until *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*.

As Melissa Fumero said, “[we] did this”; we participated and made our voices heard and it actually made a difference. It felt like a scale model for the other, larger movements. I could not help thinking that this is how things are supposed to go.

This feeling was not a lucky coincidence; the producers at NBC knew exactly what they were doing. According to a *Vulture* interview with writer Dan Goor, NBC gave the cast the good news and then told them all to “tweet about it at 9 p.m.” (Jung). This was a strategy employed by NBC in order to gain a stronger viewership.

By increasing participation, NBC ensured that their viewers would feel more connected to the show, and therefore would be more likely to continue watching it through its transition to NBC. People form connections with others and feel as if they are taking control of their own life by actively involving themselves in a community. In fact, researchers from the University of Michigan have found that emotion is a strong short-term motivator by studying how emotion links to voter participation (Valentino 157). If something bad happens, then people are much more likely to get out and vote because they are reminded about why it matters. These researchers also discovered that anger is the most powerful emotion for eliciting action (Valentino 168). This shows why fans were so active on *Twitter* during *Brooklyn Nine-Nine's* brief cancellation.

This anger thrust fans into a tweetstorm. After all, tweeting is much easier to do than voting, and therefore their anger acted as a propellant to fuel their public outrage. But *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is not the first show to be cancelled. All shows must come to an end at some point. Just two years ago, when ABC cancelled the popular Marvel show *Agent*

Carter, fans were devastated. They created a petition that gained 127,000 signatures urging Netflix to pick it up. This was not enough, and *Agent Carter* remained dead, unsaved by the plight of its fans (Heritage). The Netflix original *Sense8* had a very large and dedicated fanbase when it was cancelled, but still nothing happened (Heritage). This just goes to show that large television corporations do not really listen to their fans; they just look at their ratings. No matter how sad fans get at a show's cancellation, the only thing that really matters is whether or not companies can turn a profit from the show.

As people are feeling more and more hopeless in today's political climate, this "win" felt like a breath of fresh air. People are desperate to have their stories told in an era of "fake news," and individual involvement has been on the rise through grassroots movements.

This is why *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* felt so empowering. It may seem like just a silly television show to some, but it really turned into something that was so much more than that. It turned into a movement. The steps that the fans took that led to a false success mirrored larger grassroots movements across the country, and therefore felt like a grassroots movement itself.

A grassroots movement is one that works from the bottom-up, engaging ordinary people to make a difference in a larger corporation. It uses a type of lobbying that political scientists have coined "outsider tactics." This is when an interest group, in this case the fans of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, cannot get in contact with the entity that is in charge (TV corporations). Instead, they contact ordinary people to make a difference. They put pressure on the large organizations through getting media attention and through threatening to withdraw support (Jacobson et al. 544).

An example of a successful grassroots movement is the movement to reduce plastic waste through reducing the use of plastic straws. After a viral Facebook video of a

straw being removed from a turtle's nose, people fought from the ground up to reduce straw use. Their movement gained traction, and more and more people began to go without a straw in their drink. Then, naturally, companies began to notice. Large brand names such as Starbucks and American Airlines have pledged to phase out plastic straws by replacing them with environmentally friendly alternatives, and even the city of Seattle has banned plastic straws throughout the city (Gibbens). This gained them positive media coverage and also people who were boycotting straws began to visit their stores again, increasing their funding. This is an example of an ideal grassroots movement. People see a problem, and they work to fix it, and groups like these have grown exponentially more popular in the recent year. Movements such as Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement have gained enormous cultural significance, and have been shaping the world that we live in.

Individual participation has been especially evident in the political world. This November was a record-breaking month in more ways than one. 49% of eligible voters participated in this past election, which is up from 34% in 2014, the lowest voter turnout in American history. The political world in the United States has flipped on its axis, and 113 million people demanded to be heard this year (Segers). This uptick from record lows to record highs of voters obviously shows how desperate people are to be heard right now. They have felt so unseen as of late, and the record low in voter turnout in 2014 goes to show how disenfranchised people have become with the impact that they have in their community. This hope that we have as a country in 2018, that we can actually make a difference, is so new and fragile that it can easily be broken.

Everyone has been buzzing about the results of the election in 2018, and how we are the ones who are setting the course of history by speaking out. But what happens when corporations start to notice our new fervor? The entire notion of a grassroots

movement is that large companies are not involved in the inception, so how can they take advantage of and profit from this trend?

The answer is to do exactly what NBC did. Through a carefully formulated plan, NBC created an artificial grassroots movement. They could have offered to buy *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* the second its cancellation was announced, but instead they waited for other potential buyers such as Hulu to drop out (Goor). This gave them the perfect opportunity to come in and act as a savior, listening to the pleas of the public. By not only overtly saving *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* but attributing their actions to the show's fans, they created their own pseudo-grassroots movement, which made people feel artificially involved.

The example of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* highlights this issue on a small scale, but it just goes to show how vulnerable we are to manipulation. Corporations have taken note of what we like, and what people want right now is democratic change. These companies have literally taken advantage of the basis of American society, the fact that individuals deserve to be heard. They have taken that ideal and twisted it until it is fully unrecognizable.

This presents a danger to the faith that Americans put in their products and in every good story that they have heard. If we continue to hear about companies pulling the wool over our eyes, then that means that we can no longer trust the democratic foundation on which we have based our society. If we as citizens stop believing that our voices matter, then we stop participating: just look at 2014 for an example. The more people that see how corporations are taking advantage of us, the more jaded citizens exist, and the less people take a stand for what they believe in.

There is a concept in political science known as the calculus of rational voting. It states that it is not worth the effort it takes to vote if your vote is not the decisive vote (Jacobson et al. 444). Since our votes as citizens are almost never decisive, it makes no

logical sense to vote; there is no use expending the energy to make our voices heard. The more citizens that find out about how their votes matter, the more people will agree with this concept. Through *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, FOX toyed with viewers' emotions and ultimately showed them why their opinions were irrelevant.

When NBC created an artificial grassroots movement by "saving" *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* due to fan support, they demonstrated the way that corporations take advantage of and manipulate people's wills, serving as an example to the crumbling foundation of democracy. The only reason the fans were able to make a difference in the case of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is because NBC decided that it would be beneficial. Grassroots participation has been on the rise in society as a whole through different political and environmental movements. Through these movements, ordinary people become involved in shaping the policy of larger organization through local involvement (Kolawole 121).

Although the consequences are limited in this situation, NBC's actions do not bode well for the future. When I found out about their deception, I felt violated in a way that is almost indescribable. They technically did not do anything wrong or illegal, and I was not involved in the movement to save the show, but I was lied to. The story that I felt so elated believing in was only a fairytale told in hopes of a few more dollars.

If other companies take note of what NBC has done, the possibilities are endless. Companies have already been piggybacking off of grassroots movements to gain support (think Starbucks and the plastic straws), but what if a multitude of companies skipped the first step of letting a grassroots movement grow organically and just created one instead?

This could be a marker for a new era of advertisement and corporate manipulation. I am not claiming that companies are going to follow the example of

Brooklyn Nine-Nine explicitly. But if a large company like NBC is already employing these tactics, then I am positive that other companies are as well.

I am not sure if this will change any of my actions looking forward. I am still going to watch *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*; you must be crazy if you think that I am going to just *not* find out what happens to Jake and Amy following their wedding.

I will watch, but something will not feel the same. There will be a little voice in the back of my head, telling me that I am supporting the falsehood that NBC is perpetuating. And I think that this little voice will not go away when I turn off the television. It will follow me as I go holiday shopping, and as I grab a bite to eat. How many of my decisions are orchestrated? I am not sure I'll ever know.

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X & Why: Mental Health and Masculinity Among Fans of XXXTentacion

Dashiell Nusbaum

XXXTentacion is dead. The artist died June 18th, 2018, after being shot in Deerfield Beach, Florida. Also of note: XXXTentacion was abusive. He allegedly beat, tortured, and imprisoned his pregnant ex-girlfriend (MacAdams). Yet when I took a step into his fandom, I forgot all that. Here was a pseudo-utopian paradise, where XXXTentacion (real name Jahseh Dwayne Onfroy) could do no wrong. I was ashamed by my mental lapse, but also curious: Why did I forget? Why did his fans choose to? The answer lies in the texts.

XXXTentacion and his fans have always been surrounded by controversy—it's what initially drew me to study this fandom. However, it's XXXTentacion's fans' position in the world that kept me interested. XXXTentacion fans feel pain in a very real way, pain which they blame not on themselves but on the rest of the world. Outsiders, on the other hand, see these fans not as victims but as perpetrators, inflicting pain through their misogyny and aggression. These contrasting viewpoints lead XXXTentacion fans to interact with each other and the world in unconventional ways. This project is an attempt to navigate the XXXTentacion fandom by studying these interactions through texts they create (e.g., fan art, analysis, memes, comments). Through these texts, I hope to learn more about the how and the why of X's fandom, and the possible ramifications of these findings on the fields of mental health and masculinity.

Fans of XXXTenatacion are dynamic in their ability to be vulnerable, supportive, informal, and agreeable within their community, yet masculine and hostile to those outside it. They avoid the hierarchical structure present in many fandoms, instead encouraging each other to share their struggles--which are often mental-health related--

in an equal and informal environment. Yet they have a masculine outlook on the world, transforming their mental-health battle into a battle with the outside world (and, frequently, women).

There is a purposeful absence of hierarchy in the XXXTentacion fan community, which encourages an equal playing field where fans are confidants, not authority figures. This equality manifests in the texts they choose to create. They differ from many fan communities in that they avoid using the same medium as their object. Fans of XXXTentacion don't make their own music to share in the community because doing so could contribute to hierarchy. If someone were to make music and attempt to promote it in the fandom, they could gain authority. They aren't compelled to do so because their fandom doesn't value showing off or gaining clout. Instead, they value finding equals.

XXXTentacion's fans use memes to communicate both informality and a common belief system. Memes are commonplace in X fan forums and social media. Take the post "When you get up to eat breakfast but someone finished the Cocaine" (/u/HERO1NFATHER). It's a low-res image of XXXTentacion looking confused. The post isn't formal or detailed, but that's the point. It's obscure, lowbrow humor, meant to be enjoyed by "common" people. It works to show that sophistication (which could give someone authority) doesn't belong in the community. But memes aren't only unifying in status. Memes are meant for an ideologically homogeneous audience. In order to "get" certain jokes, you have to hold a specific set of beliefs. In order to fit in, you have to find the jokes funny, and to do that, you must agree with them. Through memes, fans create beliefs and conform to them.

These fans then maintain friendly informality through comments on forums--the vast majority of which are a few sentences or less. A top post in XXXTentacion's subreddit notes that while X spent so much of his life wanting to die, his life was taken when he was

beginning to get better (/u/thisty). While the content of that thought might lend itself to a lengthy discussion, the post is only a sentence long. Most comments, too, are short--such as "rip" or "i wanna cry so bad"--and often include expletives (/u/thotdestroyer1; /u/aczialucsia). This brevity reinforces the community's casual tone. The absence of long, detailed analysis isn't what you'd find in many fandoms. XXXTentacion fandom, however, functions almost like a group chat. Fans express themselves without providing deep analysis because doing so might make them seem like they're trying to place themselves above others. Comments like "i wanna cry so bad" humanize fans. After negotiating this power structure, fans must learn they can trust each other in order to discuss more personal topics.

Avoiding arguments is a key component to building trust in XXXTentacion's fan community. For such a controversial artist, it's surprising to find so few controversial posts. Yet one of those rare posts surfaced on February 7th, 2019, posted by user /u/Bryakevpip. It was a screenshot of a tweet where X talked about slavery (and the "bullshit" conversation around it) and argued people should just be grateful it's no longer around ("Great Message From X"). The title of the post, "Great Message From X," indicates that the user doesn't expect the post to be contentious. That would seem to be a bold assumption given its content, but XXXTentacion fans are so argument-averse that the expectation is fairly reasonable. The post did lead to fairly hostile debate, but no more than one might expect for such a post. Additionally, many commenters attempted to avoid debate. The most upvoted comment is "When did X have a moon profile picture? spotlight uh, moonlight uh," a reference to a popular meme within the fandom (/u/almostyelloww). The comment is meant to de-escalate and distract from the post. There are also comments where fans apologize for hostility towards each other, a rarity in online communication.

The intolerance of debate and hostility in this community enables fans to make themselves vulnerable. They know that unlike the outside world, fans won't attack them for what they share. Torii MacAdams, a journalist for *The Guardian*, felt that this lack of controversy turned the community into a positive feedback loop: "these relationships have metastasized into feedback loops which provide either positive emotional reinforcement or the negative motivations needed to stalk an abused teenager" (MacAdams). (MacAdams is referring to X's former girlfriend, who accused him of abuse.) This cycle further burrows fans into their fandom, learning that they can only find solace in talking to each other.

By rejecting power and embracing intimacy, fans of XXXTentacion take on the role of both sharer and supporter. Fans are encouraged to disclose their personal struggles, as XXXTentacion did through music. There are entire posts dedicated to this. One asks fellow fans to use the comments of a post as their "journal" to "write down their feelings without being judged" (/u/Dannyjohnston_17). There were responses to almost every single comment, talking, attempting to help them, and making them feel visible and valid. In doing so, /u/Dannyjohnston_17 and others give fellow fans a place to share and feel unconditionally supported. The kindness fans show, however, isn't shown to the outside world.

XXXTentacion fans embrace a culture of toxic masculinity, informing and transforming their struggles with mental health. They are like X in this way. Ultra-aggressive themes defined XXXTentacion's music, and fans were drawn to X's ability to make them both want to cry and headbutt a wall (/u/Bryakevpip , "The Best"). They gravitate to X not only because of their mental health struggles but because they value masculinity, which encourages both aggression and the appearance of strength. These values are apparent in the comments on the journal post. Instead of saying "I'm not good

enough” and blaming themselves for their problems, fans blame others (/u/Dannyjohnston_17). (This is in no way meant to suggest what someone should or shouldn’t do when struggling with their mental health. It’s simply a noteworthy distinction.) By blaming others, they appear both strong and combative, key facets of masculinity--but not necessarily of depression or other mental-health struggles. Fans’ sadness, then, is often transformed into anger and hostility. In both X’s music and his fans’ interactions, there was a common target of this blame and hostility: women (another trait of toxic masculinity). Three out of four top journal entries mention women as a source of their pain (u/Dannyjohnston_17). Blame of women is rampant throughout the fandom, extending even to memes. Take a meme from /u/ThatTriHardGuy, which blames XXXTentacion’s mother for releasing music against X’s wishes. The post argues that she released music because she wanted money and that she didn’t really care about X. They believe a tenet of toxic masculinity: women exist to tear down men. This masculinity and aggressiveness towards those outside the fandom is then exacerbated by social media.

As a more public forum, social media offers a window into how XXXTentacion fans perform to the outside world. Fans on social media, unlike fans on forums, are frequently argumentative—but not with each other. Instagram and Twitter are more open to outsiders who have less than favorable opinions of XXXTentacion. Because of these opinions, anti-fans invade the comments. They provoke fans, challenging their support of the abusive artist. The community and XXXTentacion make fans’ battles with mental health safe and real. Therefore, attacks on X or the community feel like an invalidating assault on their mental health. Because of their masculine identity, they choose to challenge these anti-fans in the comments, arguing and attacking them.

XXXTentacion fans stick by their community because it’s the only place they feel safe to be vulnerable. In the U.S., there is overwhelming inadequacy in both conversations

around and treatment of mental health. For fans of XXXTentacion to protect their safe space, they project a stereotypically masculine image. They then receive validation for being both vulnerable and abusive. X was the same way. Yet fans saw Jahseh Dwayne Onfroy as someone who shouldn't be defined by his past mistakes. I think this is misguided; ignoring his past mistakes ignores deep-seated sexism that allows the continued abuse and subjugation of women. But for the world to ignore the impact he had, and why, perpetuates a societal failure to deal with mental health and give people with mental health problems an outlet to express their feelings. By departing from this all-or-nothing approach, we can give people safety without perpetuating a culture of sexism.

Suggestions for future research

- Where does the masculinity of this fandom originate? How does this community change traditional ideas of masculinity?
- Is it possible to get away from this all-or-nothing approach to artists? How do fans depart from this approach, especially with such great devotion to their fan object? (Possibly take a look at sports fandom, where fans can disagree with teams or players. What's the difference?)
- How does XXXTentacion's death affect the community dynamics? Is their support more defensive? Do they bond differently?
- How do they grapple with XXXTentacion being an abuser? How can the cycle be broken and keep this program as sharing without toxicity or blame? Is that even possible with X as the fan object?

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Deploying Persuasive Moves

To deploy persuasive moves, writers do not need to "prove" that they are "right"; rather, writers persuade readers that what they are saying is worth considering. In this section, these writers make the important moves of acknowledging other ways of looking at their ideas, even going so far as to entertaining objections. As a result, they engage their readers in the ongoing conversation and enable them to see something in a new light.

Popping Up on Your Feed: What We are Learning from the Spread of Dermatological Information through Social Media

Alexandra M. Gootman

Dr. Sandra Lee (also known as Dr. Pimple Popper) has built a social media empire that has expanded to a product line and a television series related to video clips from her dermatology practice. This article aims to investigate how the satisfaction people get from her video works to translate into a mistaken sense of authority from the limited decontextualized information from her social media posts. The context of Dr. Pimple Popper's videos is explored by defining and classifying misinformation, fake news, and decontextualized information. Information literacy is also defined and is debated related to the responsibility consumers and producers have within it. The psychological phenomenons and reasoning behind the mistaken sense of authority people surmise from her videos is researched. Hours of video content from her various social media standing and hundreds of comments from those posts were viewed. The biological-psychological reasoning behind the satisfaction and addictive qualities of her posts are further investigated within this article. The social media platforms utilized by Lee are analyzed and critiqued as educational tools while the way health education is taught through generations is examined. Lastly, future research and potential outcomes are discussed.

Introduction:

Pictures of a canvas cloth covering everything but a bump protruding from the skin move across the screen. Next, a picture of skin care products is broadcasted on the screen and the modulated voice of Sandra Lee, MD instructs us to “check out my full acne system at: [www.slmdskincare.com/.](http://www.slmdskincare.com/)” As the video begins, two hands covered by latex gloves hold a

medical knife and cut into the skin where a sharpie line is drawn on top of the bump as a silvery voice teaches viewers that “it’s a cyst that’s a little deceiving” because “it’s an iceberg cyst.” The polished voice continues to explain that the name comes from the fact that “it’s under there but it doesn’t look as big as it does from just the look of it.” After the incision is made the hands proceed to squeeze the cyst and greenish brown liquid puss with white flecks shoots out and hits the squeezer in the abdomen as the camera quickly zooms out to see Dr. Pimple Popper’s puss covered scrubs. The video quickly cuts back and does two slow motion replays of the puss being projected out of the skin, through the air, and onto her scrubs. This video has a little less than 1.4 million views (Dr. Sandra Lee (aka Dr. Pimple Popper), n.d.). The video contains the same salesman-like persuasion and self-promotion as a commercial; the same informative nature as a college lecture course; and the engrossing, shocking, and captivating essence of an action movie. Here, on the social media platforms of Dr. Pimple Popper, dermatology is a field of study, a business, and entertainment, and Sandra Lee is an educator, a businesswoman, and an entertainer.

Likewise, health education has completely transformed over the past half century as health education has changed; this is in part due to health practices and information advancement. Health education has gone from the sole responsibility of the family to shifting to the responsibility to school educators (McDermott & Mayer, 2011, p. 3). However, when the internet became mainstream, the name of the game changed again and a multitude of information about health was available. The advent of social media has affected how people learn and are informed about personal health (Fielding, 2013, p. 516). Some, if not most, of the digital information is incorrect or can easily be misinterpreted and in turn, misused. Further, there have been few studies conducted to determine how social media has changed the way people learn about dermatology.

Dermatology demonstrated by Dr. Pimple Popper reflects an important unconscious possible result of watching these videos. Besides the satisfactory feeling viewers seek out, de-contextualized and misleading perceptions of the field of dermatology are created. People learn from everything, from what is heard from our surroundings to what is seen on television and everything in between (Brown, 2000, p. 14). People blindly consume information in the age of social media as most assume that the photo or video provided is all the evidence they need to determine if the verbal and written assertions are true. There is plenty of misinformation spread throughout social media, and fake news is more readily spread than real information (Sommariva et al., 2018, p. 2). This demonstrates the need for information literacy, especially within the complex and overbearing field of health studies. Information about health is more than abundant online, yet there are very few people who have the proper training to confirm or deny the information online. Consumers are now responsible for the extremely important task of seeking out their own contextual information to verify the facts provided and assign meaning to the post. In an age where everyone is rushing and zipping around because no one has enough time, taking the time to properly analyze information has become a secondary concern ("Project Information Literacy," n.d.).

Dr. Pimple Popper is one of the top influencers on social media and is the leading account that publicizes on the 'satisfaction' of watching dermatological videos on social media (The Shorty Awards., 2018). Throughout all of her platforms, she has a substantial following but on her largest ones she has 2.9 million followers on her Instagram page (Lee, n.d.-a), her Facebook account has 2.2 million follower (Lee, n.d.-b), she has over 4.5 million subscribers on her YouTube channel (Lee, 2018b), and her new television show has been doing extremely well according to TLC and their decision to start filming a second season. Although her audience spans the entire globe it is more concentrated

within the United States. Through Dr. Lee's growing popularity, she has launched an entire line of skin products, from pimple popping kits to lotions (Lee, 2018a), to a children's toy (TTPM Toy Reviews, n.d.), and she has even published a book titled "Put Your Best Face Forward" ("@drpimplepopper," n.d.).

In this article, I examine the relationship between health education and social media, describe and analyze Dr. Pimple Popper's posts and how they educate viewers. I explore how viewers consume health information and the resulting mistaken sense of authority people get from the limited and misinformation online. The role of information literacy for consumers and producers is also examined in this article. My investigation is directed by the questions that follow: What is the purpose of Dr. Pimple Popper's Videos: ASMR, educational, or promotional? Are viewers able to learn from these videos and what exactly are they learning? Who is responsible for providing/seeking out context? What role does information literacy play today and is it being taught? These questions are important as we work to further challenge the way we learn health education and the quality of the information we seek out online as well as through social media.

I argue that Dr. Pimple Popper's videos demonstrate only small aspects of the field of dermatology and de-contextualize dermatological realities. This is in part due to the constricting nature of the social media platforms utilized by Dr. Pimple Popper that prevent her from going in depth and truly educating her viewers. It is impossible to fully learn any topic of interest, let alone field of study, from a fifteen second clip with a five word commentary. This means that when consumers view Dr. Sandra Lee's posts, they not only have a misconception of the limited information provided, they also obtain a mistaken sense of authority within the field of dermatology; the satisfaction most viewers get from watching her videos disguises our need for contextual information and causes

viewers to speculate their own big picture ideas and draw their own conclusions on what different aspects of dermatology are.

Context Is Everything

Fake News, Misinformation, and De-Contextualized Information

There is plenty of false information about health care spread through the internet, and especially so through social media. Wu and McCormick address the growing problem of false health information on the internet. They claim that the problem in our society today is the “pervasive availability and consumption of false health information, which can cause individual and social harm by nurturing false beliefs about medicine, disease, and prevention” (Wu et al., 2018). Their point is further proven by the fact that “top links related to common diseases in 40% cases contained misinformation.” If that isn’t shocking enough, these same articles were shared 451,272 times within the last five years. Topics of these articles cover the entire medical spectrum of diagnoses: from vaccines to cardiovascular diseases (Przemyslaw et al., 2018).

However, there are many different types of false information within the realm of oversharing. When false information has malicious intent, designed to create hysteria, it is defined as fake news (Sommariva et al., 2018, p.5). The term ‘fake news’ has been thrown around a great deal throughout the media. However, most fail to understand what the term actually means; the developing definition of fake news is misinformation that has the intent to trick readers and spread false information. It doesn’t matter if the information has intent or is malicious, because it is still damaging. This is an extremely dangerous phenomenon because of the disturbing fact that fake information is shared more on social media than verified stories. Fake news is just one type of misinformation; disinformation is defined as false or inaccurate information. Although this is less severe

and malicious than fake news, it is still alarming. Misinformation has the potential to do a lot of harm, from simply teaching people the wrong thing to hindering disease prevention efforts (Sommariva et al., 2018, p. 9). There is plenty of false information about health care spread through the internet, and especially so through social media (Wu et al., 2018).

For this reason, Dr. Pimple Popper videos can't be classified as misinformation. The videos she posts and the subsequent commentary in the video are not technically false, thus she is not technically spreading false information. Instead, I would say that the information Dr. Sandra Lee is spreading across her social media platforms is de-contextualized information; it's defined as information removed from context. Lee does this by showing only short clips of the dermatological process of blemish removal and in the process cuts out important contextual information that is essential to understanding the content presented in the video.

Information Literacy Is Whose Job?

For the past twenty years the Association of College & Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association, has defined information literacy. When they first defined information literacy they set out a platform on how to teach information literacy: how to find and identify information. The original framework highlighted the tools and skill set that comes with conducting quality research. However, two years ago the association released a revision of the definition of information literacy - defining information literacy as a way of thinking - as well as a skill set. This new framework allows for the understanding of bigger concepts of lifelong learning. Within this framework lies multiple sub sections, one of which being "authority is constructed and contextual." "Information resources reflect their creators' expertise and credibility, and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information

will be used. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required." This meaning that nobody has the ultimate authority to say and do everything; only certain people have the authority to speak to certain topics (Association of College & Research Libraries).

When no contextual information is given, it falls on the reader to be responsible for finding their own context. However, how can readers know how to find the right contextual information and know which information is accurate? With misinformation as prevalent as it is, it is important to have information literacy. Information literacy is the ability to know when there is a need for information, to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information for the issue or problem at hand according to the United States National Forum on Information Literacy. As Shyam Sundar put it, "today's consumer is not just active, but proactive," (Project Information Literacy, n.d.). However, as technologically savvy as young people are, their ability to reason about the information on the Internet is horrid. Despite their ability to navigate through social media platforms and communicate online with ease, when it comes to evaluation of information that comes from social media platforms, they are easily duped. In all age groups, people have trouble discerning verified and unverified sources, trustworthy and untrustworthy, as well as reliable and unreliable sources. It is only recently that schools and organizations have started taking the initiative to teach information literacy to students ("Evaluating Information Online" n.d, p. 3). Nevertheless, people simply don't look up the contextual information a large majority of the time. They see something and simply accept it as fact, not caring enough to research if it's correct or not. And when there is too little information presented, inferences are made by viewers that lead them to draw

unfounded conclusions. Information literacy is when readers ask good questions about the source and doubt the reliability and authority of a source (Mconahan, 2018).

Wu and McCormick pose the subsequent question is: should the proliferation of health-related information on the internet be regulated? If so, by whom? (Wu et al., 2018).

Drawing Conclusions from Thin Air

When information is presented in such a way that provides little to no context (just as it is in Dr. Pimple Popper's social media accounts), it is left to the mind of the consumer to infer certain information in order for the facts presented to make sense. Thus, after some people see a lot of social media posts about a certain topic, they start to assume they are an expert in the field. The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) states that "learners who are developing their information literate abilities" need to "develop awareness of the importance of assessing content with a skeptical stance and with a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview" (2019). In other words, viewers need to know and understand the limitations of the source, but also their own limitation. Take this Instagram comment for example. The user posted a question and received 103 varying responses. One account answered "they're not more common in any particular race. Perhaps it's just the main one's going for treatment on television are white, but it's common in all races" (roch.elle.22, 2018). This user has no medical degree, yet is giving medical information. Another answered "exactly the reptilian cyst is something blacks and Hispanics don't have," (richicons, 2018). This user is a self-proclaimed audio engineer and has no medical training; in fact, there is no such thing as a reptilian cyst. This one user, without a medical degree, attempted to give himself and his answer

credibility by stating, “I have been watching videos of cyst drainages for over 15 years now” (jojo_8607, 2018).

Professor Mejias from SUNY Oswego Communication Studies Department researched this phenomenon and came to the conclusion that people “consume and distribute false information by interacting with old and new media, contributing to a social order where lies acquire increasing authority” (Mejias, 2017). This leads to the phenomenon proved in a study conducted by Cornell University and Tulane University titled Over Claiming. This phenomenon is defined as how “people overestimate their knowledge, at times claiming knowledge of concepts, events and people that do not exist and cannot be known” (Atir, 2015, p. 1295). Richicons comment on Dr. Pimple Popper’s post is an example of over claiming because she made up a fake type of cyst, reptilian cyst, and thus claimed knowledge of something that does not exist.

This mistaken sense of authority viewers get from false or misleading information is extremely similar to people believing they have personal relationships and know everything about celebrities through their social media posts. It is a dangerous psychological disorder with varying degrees of severity (Massey, n.d.). One example of this is John Hinckley Jr.’s case of celebrity worship syndrome for Jodie Foster. Hinckley went as far to move to New Haven, Connecticut, to follow the actress to college in an attempt to establish a relationship with her. When that failed, he attempted to gain her attention and admiration through his attempt to assassinate President Ronald Reagan; in the process “he wounded President Reagan, a police officer, a Secret Service agent, and the Press Secretary” (Gerber, 2017).

Although the sense of authority viewers get from social media posts isn’t a disorder like celebrity worship syndrome, it is extremely dangerous, especially so for health information. Viewers of Lee’s videos may believe they have the ability to diagnose

and medically treat people based on the information they attained from watching her videos while, in reality, they can very seriously injure themselves or others as well as create panic with misdiagnosis. Take Colorado man Christopher Yocom, 28, who removed an epidermoid cyst located closely below his right nostril himself with rusty old pliers. The stomach-churning video went viral on Instagram with his demented response and gaping hole in his face (Stephen, 2018). There are also those who have become addicted to popping their own pimples due to Lee's videos and cause scars on their skin as a result of online influence (Nast, 2017). This is the danger behind Dr. Pimple Popper's videos, encouraging DIY attempts at dermatology and giving her "popaholics" (the name Lee gave her fans) a false sense of authority not only in the information they are presented, but by giving them confidence to remove their own dermatological blemishes from their skin.

There are extreme cases like Yocom that are severe for a smaller group of people who conduct these DIY dermatological removals, but there is also a larger scale danger that can arise from the misinformation and resulting false sense of authority. Homeland security has done a study on countering false information on social media in disaster and emergencies. In this study, one main aspects addressed is the spreading and differences between incorrect information, insufficient information, opportunistic disinformation and outdated information as it pertains to health information ("SMWG Homeland Security" n.d., p. 3). The wrong health information can inadvertently cause a negative human response, from something as simple as taking the wrong preventative measures to causing mass hysteria. Health risk information engagement and amplification on social media can be measured and analyzed, but generally it is dependent on the specific case (Strekalova, 2017, p. 333). Their point is further supported by the findings of Bannor and Asare who found that social media is an effective mode of spreading health messages in Ghana, and point out the concerns in traditional sources of how the communication of

health information is losing its effectiveness (Bannor, Asare, & Bawole, 2017, p. 346). This shows the power social media has in the spread of health information to populations that are almost solely reliant on free digital information. The effectiveness of the experiment demonstrates that any information, true or false, can be easily and readily spread across nations with little effort.

Method

In my research I examined both Lee's television show and social media accounts; however, I focused more on her social media accounts and how specifically these short clips have impacted health education as well as the potential of Lee's influence over consumer health information. I watched over sixty of her Instagram videos, read around forty of her Facebook posts, viewed thirty of her YouTube videos; I also watched an episode and a few clips from her television show. All in all this totaled several hours of video content. While there is more educational promise to her television show, it is far too dramatized and focuses too heavily on being captivating as well as having a good storyline for each patient. It does not focus or demonstrate enough factual and contextual information to be educational. The bulk of my research was on her social media standings; I dove into her Instagram page, scavenged through her Facebook timeline, scrolled through her twitter feed, and watched her endless YouTube videos. When watching these dermatological videos, I looked for and analyze certain aspects of these videos. I looked at the video effects that are chosen to highlight certain aspects of the video: if there were slow motion replays, if certain aspects of the video are sped up or slowed down. I listened to the commentary that was given by Dr. Sandra Lee in the video and analyzed them for educational components. I looked at what small clips were chosen

to show in fifteen seconds in an Instagram post, which were highlighted in her longer clips, and what was dramatized on her television show.

Lee utilizes several platforms to broadcast her dermatology videos. Each of these platforms unknowingly works to educate viewers in different ways due to the contrasting constrictions of each social media platform. She has an Instagram page, a Snapchat account, a Twitter account, and even a Tumblr. These social media platforms have quick thirty second, or shorter, clips of the goriest aspects of the dermatological removal process or pictures of the most grotesque cases. Where Dr. Pimple Popper got her start and her main and largest platform is her YouTube channel. These videos range from ten to forty minutes long and demonstrate a larger portion of the dermatological removal process. Dr. Sandra Lee narrates the process as she conducts the procedure and we hear the commentary with patients. It is also made clear in her two second legal disclaimer that it is “only for medical education purposes” and that these videos are “allowing viewers to see a ‘window into a dermatologist’s world”” (Lee, 2018b). These same disclaimers are not shown within the video clips on social media platforms. Dr. Pimple Popper also recently began airing a show on TLC and a similar disclaimer is shown at the beginning of each episode. In the television show, the focus is on the patients and how having these borderline debilitating skin conditions removed, reshapes and improves their lives. It not only focuses on the dermatological removal process, it also illustrated all of the other steps involved in diagnosing and the impact on patients’ lives (Decker, 2018).

Popping, Puss, and Pimples: Oh So Satisfying

Viewers post their reactions and feelings for each new post Lee adds to her account. Comments posted on her Instagram post from her December 3rd, 2018, head cyst

removal video include: “It’s nasty but soo damn satisfying,” (iamlovekills1, 2018), “Sooooo satisfying!!!!” followed by four heart face emoji’s (noeliazp86, 2018), “ love this page lol xx,” (danielleeb_, 2018). After just one day, this post has nearly a thousand comments, most have the same general message of the comments above with the few exceptions of viewers being grossed out.

Popping pimples is a part of a new social media trend called ASMR, autonomous sensory meridian response; the majority of people who watch Lee’s videos are seeking out a feeling of satisfaction (Sin, 2018). One main theme among the majority of sources was providing scientific reasoning, particularly a psycho-biological explanation, for the satisfactory response people receive from watching Dr. Pimple Popper’s videos. British evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar proposed that there is a “special neural pathway between our skin and our brain,” that was created as a result of social touching from thousands of years ago. Hence, we equate positive response to seeing and feeling our skin being touched and perfected by popping pimples (Cummins, 2017). Neuroscientist Heather Berlin also describes that it is “normal behavior” to feel the need to get rid of the bumps from one skin because those bumps could be unhealthy and thus evolutionary disadvantageous. Humankind has evolved to find pleasure in behavior of removing blemishes according to this hypothesis. Berlin goes a step further by demonstrating the physiological reasoning of this satisfactory response by explaining that the nucleus accumbens, the reward center of the brain, receives the neurotransmitter dopamine, which gives the sensation of pleasure, each time someone removes a blemish, or for some, when one watches someone else pop a pimple (Bever, 2018).

While I understand why people find these videos satisfactory, why are some people so utterly obsessed with them? How do people become addicted to these videos and become dependent on them to fall asleep and calm down (Lee, 2016)? Jo Hemmings,

behavioral psychologist explains the jump from enjoyment to addiction: people experience a rush of adrenaline when they watch pimple popping videos. This resulting sense of euphoria is experienced in a controlled environment which allows people to further explore the “fear fascination” and “human curiosity” associated with dermatology videos. People become addicted due to the fact they can experience that ‘rush’ without any consequence and without any limitations (Evans, 2018). Nina Strohming, assistant professor and author, contributes to Hemmings hypothesis by asserting the claim that “negative sensations” have a positive appeal to viewers because they allow one to see and, in a sense, experience something thrilling while never leaving the couch. This is why people not only enjoy watching dermatological videos but provides a reason to the addiction some viewers have to Lee’s videos.

The Social Media Blackhead

Constricting Social Media

Health education is adapting with the times and traditional health information sources are self-advertising or spreading some of their information through social media. However, social media constricts how much information can be shared just based on the constructs of the media (Amir et al., 2014, p. 4). Each social media platform has time restraints on video time length and number of characters one can post. Thus, it is hard to share large amounts of information in a fifteen second video and with fifty words or less. The attention span of viewers can be easily lost as the duration of the video becomes longer; the purpose of the video greatly changes with variation of video lengths (Geriet al., 2017). Dr. Pimple Popper’s information varies depending on which platform she is posting from. On Instagram and Snapchat accounts she has only short thirty second clips of the videos and pictures of the goriest of cases. While on her Facebook and YouTube

pages the videos are around eight to twenty minutes in length and show more of the dermatological process with Dr. Sandra Lee's narration/commentary as well as a longer description of the video. Lastly, on her television show she has forty five minutes per episode to show multiple cases, and better demonstrates the entire dermatological removal process. With each platform she has her strengths and weaknesses and targets subsections of her fan group. The shorter clips are targeted for those who find it satisfying, the ones who watch the longer videos are intended for medical care professionals and those training to be in the field but also are beloved by hard core fans who enjoy the videos that are compilations of her goriest cases. Lastly, the television show caters to her fan group that has more of a taste for the dramatics and enjoy a feel good story along with their dermatological popping.

With the shorter videos, it is harder for viewers to learn anything from them, especially anything of substance. On top of the lack of contextual information, short term memory and learning from these videos are miniscule. When visual information is presented for memory, in order to substantially obtain and sustain the information, people must watch a video multiple times (Gagliano, 1988, p. 243). Memory is required for learning and retention. Thus, people watching Dr. Pimple Popper's videos, especially the popaholics following her Instagram and snapchat accounts, will be picking up little to no information. The ACRL highlights on the notion that those developing their information literacy mindsets need to be 'conscious' as they are critically analyzing sources. People can hardly be 'conscious' during a short video where their intentions are most likely not to learn anything (Association of College & Research Libraries).

Social Media: The New Online School?

Health education was traditionally taught at home by parents, and with this responsibility they were able to choose how and what they educated their children about. However,

within the last century the responsibility has shifted partly to the schools to teach health education. Furthermore, the way in which health education is taught has changed again due to technological advancements and mass communication through the internet (McDermott & Mayer, 2011, p.7). Health educators must and have been adapting to incorporate technology as a new tool for learning within their classrooms and are learning to deal with the difficulties of utilizing the benefits of technology (Hanson et al., 2011, p. 3). However, health educators are now tasked with adding a new aspect to the curriculum: information literacy for health education. The next generation needs to be mentored in health information literacy in order to successfully be informed on health information and live healthy lives (R. R. Evans & Forbes, 2012, p. 7). Although, this isn't to say other forms of health education should be abandoned; in fact, parents and school education on health still play a major role in a young people's health education today; rather it is important to take into consideration how this new factor (social media) has been affecting health education on the next generation (Lariscy, Reber, & Paek, 2011, p. 6). A study from the International Electronic Journal of Health Education published in 2014 draws the conclusions that health educators should take social media into consideration as a viable means of spreading information as it continues to gain influence on adolescents. Yet, it should not replace traditional sources. The ACRL talks to this notion of discriminating against sources by media type: stating that information literate people should "recognize that authoritative content may be packaged formally or informally and may include sources of all media types" (Association of College & Research Libraries). Adolescents want information about health behavior and they want credible sources for their information. However, they cannot determine the validity of sources without education in discriminating between trustworthy sources and others that are not (Pálsdóttir, 2014).

Online education for health is reaching new markets of students most wouldn't traditionally think of. One example is outpatients; professionals are using online resources to help teach patients about their conditions (Zhong GuiShu, Du Yu, & Xiong Xia, 2011). Videos, like Dr. Pimple Popper's, are being used to teach techniques to extremely advanced students, such as medical students.

Conclusion

I argue that Dr. Pimple Popper's videos demonstrate only small aspects of the field of dermatology and de-contextualize dermatological realities. This is in part due to the social media platforms she utilizes which constrict her ability to go in depth and truly educate her viewers. It is impossible to fully learn any topic of interest or field of study from a fifteen second clip with a five word comment. This means that when consumers view Dr. Sandra Lee's posts, they not only have a misconception of the limited information provided, they also obtain a mistaken sense of authority within the field of dermatology; the satisfaction most viewers get from watching her videos disguises our need for contextual information and causes viewers to speculate their own conclusions and big picture ideas on the different aspects of dermatology issues.

Information literacy has become an essential tool for the next generation. As the immediate contact and spreading of information becomes an ever more integral part of daily life, so will information literacy. As educators, it is understood that teachers and professors are not students' only source for information. That they will need to be able to navigate the realm of academic research and be able to be self-sufficient in finding and understanding various information that comes from different sources. Students will need to be able to tell what is real and what is fake. To determine and question the credibility of the information they find. In today's day and age of social media, determining the real

from the fake information has become a mine field. Thus, it is extremely important that information literacy is taught within school and added to the current curriculum for elementary to middle school aged students. I started off questioning the effects of Dr. Pimple Popper's videos on the health education of the general public; seeing the more negative than positive impact it has had on consumers, a solution must be posed for dangerous problems discovered through my research: information literacy education. This matters because entire populations can and are being easily swayed, tricked and misinformed about essential life information that has the potential to cause extreme harm. Without preventative measures put into action, one person's post can cause hundreds of thousands to be seriously affected in a negative way.

We learned that the videos from Dr. Pimple Popper do not well educate the general population. That there is little to know educational value in her videos and the information that is provided is decontextualized and thus the little people are learning is wrong because the information is out of context. However, her following has created a sub community where people post comments with reactions and other information. People are tagging each other in her posts, writing their responses to these videos, posing questions and answering each other's questions (Lee, 2018b). How do the dynamics of the community of 'popaholics' enhances or detracts from the learning of these videos as well as information literacy are the critical question and topic. I think it could be fruitful to further research the group dynamics of people who constantly comment on Lee's posts. What are people learning from each other compared to what they are learning from Lee? Another aspect that can be further researched are the generational comparison between health educations. Is the latest generation at an educational advantage or disadvantage due to the advent of the internet and social media? It could also be beneficial to further research how people talk about information, especially as mass media continues to grow

and change. Information is continually being shared in shorter, informal and more instantaneous modes; how is this effecting the way people critically analyze sources?

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Research Reflection

Alexandra M. Gootman

When you hear the term 'academic research' one's mind turns to an old corner of the library with dully colored bound books, publication dates that precede your time, filled with seemingly undecipherable information. However, in reality, it is so much more. It encompasses a plethora of multimedia sources, both traditional and non-traditional. There seems to be a limitless number of sources. I learned that academic research is an opportunity to explore a complex problem through the lens of another field of study. Research is different than what I expected because of all of the different types of sources that compose a great academic research paper, from Instagram two-word comments to fifty-page studies published by prestigious academic journals. I utilized primary sources, unusual print sources, conference proceedings, episodes from a television show, social media posts across multiple platforms and more. I was surprised at how specific one can get with their searches and still find a good amount of sources. I learned to think of research as having multiple levels, from the generic google search to the subject specific database with advanced search tools. I also learned, from the great librarian who worked with our class, Rachel Borchardt, how to think and speak like a database, using Boolean operators, truncation, quotation marks, and parenthetical phrasing. I used these tools in order to enhance my research. I used a lot of the tools from American University's Library webpage. The page filled with subject specific databases was my favorite tool which I mostly utilized. Databases have advanced search engines that allow you to choose publication dates, source type, authors, and many other specific aspects of a source that make researching that much easier. My approach on how to use a research resource depended on what type it was. For general databases I would use the different search bar

short-hands I learned as well as the useful advanced search setting, however I would only have access to more general information. However, for subject specific databases I had to take on the mindset of that subject area and create specific searches, knowing that anything that came up would already be under the umbrella of that specific subject. If I was using google or another generic search engine, my mindset would completely have to change, and I would have to use what feels like another language to get the results I was looking for.

Within my own research process, I developed it based on the specific 'lenses' or interdisciplinary field I was looking at my subject through. I was looking at Dr. Pimple Popper (social media and the psychological phenomenon that explains her popularity) through the lens of education (specifically health education). The tools that I used to organize my research were reflective of my subject matter. I did generic database research about Dr. Pimple Popper. I used psychology as well as communication specific databases to find explanations to her popularity. After, I used education specific databases and searched for different things related to social media. The types of databases I used worked to organize my research. Within my entire research process, I kept coming back to the theme of information literacy. Through this I realized and repeatedly highlighted the growing importance of information literacy. Which was ironic as the concept I had just learned about in our class kept popping up in my own research, no matter what avenue I took. I think information literacy is a key aspect of conducting academic research because it challenges sources to be held at a higher standard and makes readers determine the validity of a source. It helped to define the way I think about, collect and utilize information. Part of what I learned from both Ms. Borchardt and Professor Thomas was that information literacy is not just an approach to research, it is an approach to information science. The ACRL became an integral aspect of my research

and paper. The power to know and be able to determine the credibility of a source as well as truly understand the context and value of it is essential to not only people in the world of academia, but for anyone living within the twenty first century.

Minorities of a Minority: The Greater Oppression of Asian Subgroups

Rosalie Filippone

Abstract

Asians in the West, particularly in the United States, have been dehumanized, stereotyped, fetishized, and ignored throughout modern history, from being labelled as disgusting, greedy enemies to being held to objectifying and ultimately harmful standards by society. In recent years, the Asian community has taken action towards and experienced strides in challenging stereotypes, gaining visibility, and seeing proper representation in the media. This has ranged to criticisms of the “model minority” myth to the recent success of the movie *Crazy Rich Asians*. However, despite any advances, Asian subgroups are continuing to suffer prejudice and injustices without any societal attention to the extremely present issues they face. In this paper, I will examine the discrimination and marginalization of brown-skinned Southeast Asians, and of multiracial Asians relative to their monoracial East Asian counterparts. Through discussion of scholarship and a personal interview with a dark-skinned Southeast Asian woman, I will explain and elaborate upon the elements of this problem, including East Asians being the default “Asian,” the lack of representation and voice given to Southeast Asians, colorism as it relates to the Asian community around the world, microaggressions and biases experienced by multiracial Asians, and feelings of isolation and inadequacy for multiracial Asians. The fact that all of these problems exist while no one is talking about them in society, media, and scholarship is abhorrent and demonstrates how current Asian activism and advancement is not enough for the whole community.

Introduction

"You don't experience real racism."

"But you're not the right kind of Asian."

"What? You have no representation? Have you watched Crazy Rich Asians?"

"Poor, dirty jungle people."

"You're the Asian one, right?"

"You're so white. Do you even care about your heritage?"

"You're so lucky, you've got both. White and Asian, you're more privileged than anyone else!"

While not all spoken verbatim or even directly to me, I have heard or read all of the above sentiments in relation to at least part of my identity—most multiple times, in fact.

I am a multiracial Filipina American. I was born in the United States and grew up here with my Italian American father and my Filipina mother, who immigrated here from her home country in the 1990s. I was raised by both of them, more so my mother once they divorced when I was twelve. As such, I've been exposed to the cultures of both my white and my Asian sides, have met non-American relatives from both, have eaten both Italian and Filipino food, know a few words in both the languages (mostly colorful curses or insults related to pigs and cabbage, admittedly), and know the basic histories of both the countries which my ancestors are from.

I've recently become aware of a myriad of new details connected to my ethnic background that I had only subconsciously perceived or had noticed and simply brushed off in the past. These details bore endless questions that have plagued me since I started college, increasingly pushing to the forefront of my attention. Why are there only Chinese, Japanese, and Korean people where Asians are included in the shows and movies we

watch? Why don't we ever talk about Southeast Asian peoples when we talk about Asian-targeted racism? Why is there such a large culture of prizing light skin in Asians to the point where some go out of their way to lighten their complexion and stay out of the sun? Why did I simultaneously hate being Asian and want to be fully *anything*, even if it were Asian, up until high school? Why have I, as a multiracial person, never felt like I belonged with anyone racially at all?

Why do people seem to think that current Asian activism and advancement in America is enough for the *whole* Asian community?

These issues, to me, seem substantially major, and yet no one is even talking about them. The problems that the Western Asian community face have historically been forgotten or overlooked as a whole, though there have been strides today in representation in the media and challenging stereotypes that will undoubtedly continue. However, what no one realizes is that there are entire subgroups within this population still being marginalized and discriminated against with no sight of improvement parallel to their counterparts. More specifically, darker-skinned Southeast Asians and multiracial Asians are still being further oppressed, ignored, and stereotyped by people within and outside of the Asian community itself. These people are suffering from overlooked injustices, disadvantages, and biases every day and throughout their lives, yet activism and research continue to ignore them substantially.

"You don't experience real racism."

Before I delve into the deeper injustices felt by Asian subgroups, it would be helpful to briefly discuss the real, present discrimination the whole Asian community experiences.

Many people, white individuals and non-Asian people of color alike, tend to think that Asians don't feel discrimination because they're the minority the dominant white people like, the good minority, the *model minority*. To name some examples, white people I've interacted with, adults and youth, have made countless remarks about Asians not "causing any problems," Asians being good at everything, and the age-old stereotype that all Asians are good at math and science. Similarly, a friend of mine, an immensely intelligent African American woman who graduated valedictorian of our class in high school and who herself is, of course, extremely aware of the suffering of minorities in this country, often gave off the sentiment directly to me that no one could possibly be racist towards Asians, while at the same time commenting on my eyes, math skills, and resemblance to every single slightly-Asian-looking girl she saw. Regardless of race, it is quite evident that non-Asians like to believe that we aren't really hurt by any sort of real prejudice. In fact, any stereotypes that exist would seem to boost us, presumably. It shouldn't hurt our community to have everyone think we're polite, peaceful, skilled, and smart, logically. Right?

Unfortunately, this is not the case, and even if it were, it does not negate other prejudices that cannot be explained away so easily. On university campuses in the United States alone, for instance, Asian students endure microaggressions and racism so frequently and consistently that the types of prejudices they encounter can be divided into clear, detailed categories. These include, but may not be limited to: "racial hostility," "vicarious racism," "racial isolation and marginalization," "pressure to racially segregate," "pressure to racially assimilate," "racial silencing," "the forever foreigner myth," "the model minority myth," and "the inferior minority myth" (Museus and Park). Automatic assumptions of being a foreigner, simultaneously feeling like I must find other people who look like me and also like I have to figure out how to "fit in" with monoracial white

people, and unfairly being held to a higher standard simply because Asians are supposedly naturally intelligent are all specifics of these categories I and my friends have tolerated throughout our lives, especially during high school and perhaps even more now at a strikingly white university. Likewise, the 46 students interviewed in the study that outlines nine categories of racism describe at length their experiences on college campuses. Perhaps the most startling example is one that few people, including other Asian Americans, think about in connection with Asians in America:

Me and three other guys were pulled over because the officer said there was a car behind us. And, evidently, there was no car behind us. She just pulled us over ... [f]or jaywalking. I mean everyone does it, not just us. [...]
Another time, there was a gun pointed at us because someone reported that some guy was walking around who started a fire. [...] And I felt like I was violated ... as a human being. (Museus and Park 557)

While this is presumably one of the more uncommon examples (though perhaps not considering this person earlier notes that they have been pulled over by white police for no reason multiple times), it demonstrates the magnitude of racism Asians can face in the West, particularly in the United States. This is incredibly far from the presumed immunity to prejudice for Asians much of our society tends to believe. With this in mind, it is important to reiterate that the above discussion applies to the Asian community in white-dominated countries as a whole; when we discuss the subgroups of brown Southeast Asians and multiracial Asians, we notice additional and/or worsened biases, discriminatory beliefs, and more.

“But you’re not the right kind of Asian.”

Evidently, East Asians seem to be propped up as the known picture of the entire Asian community. During my first semester of college, I joined our Asian American Student Union in an attempt to find a group I could identify with and feel welcome in. The first meeting was for giving a general overview of what the months ahead will look like, eating food and drinking milk tea, and, most importantly, making friends. While introducing myself to various people, I noticed that the room was overwhelmingly East Asian. I only met two other Southeast Asians that night, and one was only half, with his other half being Chinese, and I met no other multiracial people like myself. I brushed the odd feeling off, thinking that maybe our Asian population is just very East Asian. However, the feeling returned when I was asked “So are you mainland China? Taiwan?” to which I had to reply, “No, I, uh... I’m Filipina. Half.” It was then that I remembered a dilemma I had during the day leading up to this first meeting. Should I go at all? Will I, someone whose Asian heritage isn’t based in China, Japan, or Korea, and isn’t even pure, fit in? There was a club just for Filipinos a year ago, and another separate one for South Asians, so does that mean this one will be predominantly East Asian despite its general title of “Asian American Student Union”? It turned out that subsequent meetings I attended didn’t help with my issue. I increasingly felt more and more out-of-place as a Filipina and as a multiracial Asian with people of my own race, and further within my now ex-friend group I had made during that first meeting.

Not many people realize this as it’s so ingrained into society’s so carefully, lovingly, *sensically* crafted ideas of racial categories, but when people think of what it means to be or look “Asian,” the picture that comes to mind generally will be the likeness of an East Asian person, someone with monolids, soft light skin, silky black hair, and perhaps dainty or delicate features. Rarely is the first thing they think of a Southeast Asian person,

someone with tan or brown skin, hair that could be frizzy or wavy, and a wider nose or even bigger lips; and hardly ever is the picture of an Asian one who may also be half black, half white, or of some other multiracial identity. There is an underlying ideal Western society and even the Asian community itself tends to hold the picture of an Asian person that ultimately speaks to the fetishization of Asians and the value placed on their appearance and/or cultural aesthetic above all else.

As research on this particular issue, like many to be discussed in this paper, is extremely scarce to nonexistent, most support for this notion comes from my own experience, the experiences of those I've interacted with, and logical implications of my research. In terms of my own experience, aside from the opening anecdote to this section, I have no shortage of accounts of people viewing Southeast Asians and multiracial as "not real Asians." One such experience that actually conveys both sentiments occurred in a class about privilege and inequality, of all things, where on a particular day we were discussing undocumented immigrants using the example of a Filipino man named Jose Antonio Vargas. A peer of mine, a non-Asian, mentioned how Filipinos are "basically Hispanic" and "look more Mexican than Asian," therefore they're not truly Asian. A few other students in the class agreed with her. Whatever their idea of "Asian" was, somehow both a Filipino man and myself (they pointed out that I look "more Mexican than Asian" as well) did not fit that picture. When I objected, I was told something along the lines of "You aren't even full Filipino, you shouldn't speak for everyone like you're a real Asian," something I've been told on numerous separate occasions.

Even with members of the Asian community, Southeast Asians and multiracial Asians are routinely seen as "not Asian" and "wrong" or "fake." In a personal interview, a brown-skinned Filipina woman recounted to me one of several similar encounters she's had in school: "I have personally been told that I'm not a 'real Asian.' This was told to me

by a Korean peer, and I merely joked along because it's easier to go with it than debate. [...] [O]ftentimes that is a subject of questioning—if I'm really "Asian." My skin color has been compared more to that of Hispanic/Latinx people" (Castro). It is important to note that the problem here is not being compared to those of another race or ethnic group for the reason of the other group somehow being lesser. Rather, the concern lies in the fact that darker-skinned Southeast Asians' and, in other similar cases, multiracial Asians' identities, their Asianness, is questioned and delegitimized solely based on their appearance and how it deviates from some perceived norm. This is an incredibly significant issue, not only because it harms the social and emotional health of those impacted, but also because it leads to disadvantages in innumerable other aspects of life.

"Have you watched Crazy Rich Asians?"

As the image of the apparently-ideal Asian person does tend to be someone of East Asian descent, most Asian representation in Western media—if you can find it in its non-whitewashed, non-horribly-stereotypical form—corresponds to people of East Asian descent. The television show *Fresh Off the Boat* is a major example that comes to mind, and... Quite frankly, there aren't many others. Still, what *exists* largely caters to those with East Asian heritage. I've complained about the lack of Asian representation in entertainment before, and more recently what I've gotten in response is something akin to "Sure, but have you watched *Crazy Rich Asians*? It's a breakthrough in Asian representation!" I want to scream when I hear this. This movie is intensely frustrating. One group of Asian friends I have on campus loved the movie and want more like it, because it made them feel seen and valid. Here were characters on the big screen whose culture they could relate to, whose problems they felt, and whose personas they could project themselves upon, even despite the fact that most of the characters were wealthy.

Yes, I've seen *Crazy Rich Asians*. And, yes, I can genuinely say that I fully enjoyed it, laughed, cried, and am now anticipating the sequel. Regardless, it does nothing for anyone who isn't East Asian. In a *Huffington Post* piece about this movie, Rachel Ramirez puts into words exactly what poses a major problem in Asian representation:

While I spotted a few brown Asians in the film, they unfortunately play service roles such as guards and maids for the affluent family that accounts for most of the main characters. The movie leaves out the marginalized Asians in Singapore such as Malays and Indians and migrant workers from the Philippines and Bangladesh and thus feeds into the dominant yet misguided view that East Asians account for the entire continent, disregarding that brown Asians are a substantial part of the Asian population.

This movie that society is praising as progressive still places disproportionate value on the lighter-skinned people of Asia, while not only leaving out any significant portrayals of darker Southeast Asians, but also actively placing the ones who do exist in the movie in "service roles." This shows that the writers, producers, and casting directors at the very least indeed acknowledge the existence of brown Asians, but feel that it is only necessary to include them to serve the wealthy light-skinned family in the movie. This is nothing but harmful, working to portray Asia as a continent of rich light-skinned East Asians and their darker-skinned workers who don't matter enough to take even one significant role in a movie attempting to break barriers in representation.

"But what about that one actress? The one who played the princess?" It is true that there was a *Chinese-Filipina* actress who played a princess during the wedding scene. However, this description alone should elicit an understanding of, again, how this movie works against darker-skinned Southeast Asians. The actress, Kris Aquino, is very light-

skinned for a Filipina woman (even lighter than the Chinese main character, Rachel), likely in part due to her Chinese background. When I watched the movie the first time, I didn't even register her as not fully Chinese. This is nowhere near actual representation if the identity meant to be represented is almost unrecognizable. "Okay, what about that other guy? He was very clearly not Chinese." Nico Santos, a Filipino actor, played Oliver, a cousin of the male lead, Nick. Against all of the lighter-skinned actors, he is the only striking representation for darker-skinned Asian people. His inclusion to many is enough, especially considering the central family is otherwise light-skinned. However, the representation he offers is not substantive at all. Aside from being the only brown-skinned family member of the lighter Young family, a *token* brown person, Oliver's value as a supporting character is all in the help he offers to Rachel, and his comic relief. The one potentially-promising piece of representation for dark Southeast Asians is someone who, like the others, serves a main character, and whose only other value is in his comic relief. None of this is true representation that respects the identity of the marginalized group in this situation.

If *Crazy Rich Asians*, a movie that, as mentioned, has been lauded for its Asian representation and the doors it opens for more media like it, then there is a tremendous problem. There may be some other representation for brown Asians, though it clearly is given little attention and/or may be equally insufficient; I personally can only think of the Water Tribe peoples in the cartoon *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and other Southeast Asian individuals I've personally spoken to can only additionally come up with a minor character in the cartoon *Steven Universe* and a comedic relief character in the movie *The Internship* (Filippone; Castro). Where Asian representation exists, it largely ignores any Asian who is not light-skinned and of East Asian descent, and when the media does bother to include those overlooked groups, the representation is incredibly unsubstantial or

simply serves to create or further stereotypes. What needs to happen is true, genuine, humanized portrayals of marginalized peoples, and the inclusion of these groups in conversations about discrimination and lack of visibility.

“Poor, dirty jungle people.”

The roots of discrimination and marginalization of brown Southeast Asian peoples are deep and long-standing, not only connecting to white supremacy but also to classism in Asia itself, which both feed into the concept of colorism globally within the Asian community. Due to this institutionalized origin, racial/ethnic injustices faced by Southeast Asians still run strong. I don't remember where or why, but when I was younger, I remember someone, a white man, calling Filipinos “monkey people.” Being very young, I only knew it was bad because my mother was upset by it, but in my mind at the time, there was nothing wrong. Monkeys were cool and lived in the jungle, which was also cool. Maybe Filipinos were called that because there are lots of jungles in the Philippines. Flawless logic, I know. Of course, as I got older, I understood that this was not the case; people call us that because we supposedly all live in the middle of the jungle, tend to be small and brown, and apparently have facial features that resemble monkeys to many mindless and racist people. Southeast Asians tend to be viewed as somehow subordinate and less important than their East Asian counterparts; they're poorer, dirtier, less civilized, and live in the jungle. It should go without saying that this is incredibly problematic and harmful to the people it targets, both on a personal level and on a systematic level, with these negative stereotypes impacting them emotionally, socially, and financially.

Perceived differences and the biases that accompany them surround the idea of colorism, discrimination due to skin color that may occur within a racial category. This

concept is most widely known in relation to the black community on an international scale, as there is very little research, scholarship, and general conversation regarding its application to Asians. The technicalities and implications of colorism as tied to the more familiar black community are demonstrated in a study conducted by Robert L. Reece, which examines the perception of attractiveness based on whether or not a black person possesses “white traits” in terms of skin, hair, and eye color. Reece found in his analysis of data that “the mixed [race] variable was positive and significant, suggesting that black people who identify as multiracial [white and black] are perceived as more attractive...” He further finds that his model “not only confirms that lighter skin tone among blacks leads to higher perceived attractiveness but also that mixed race and skin tone, though related, are independent factors in determining perceived attractiveness.” These findings show that the “white” traits, especially light skin tone, alone affect how attractive a person of color is perceived to be. This idea of lighter skin being more attractive translates to the Asian community, where the ideal similarly comes from the desirability of appearing more white resulting from European imperialist influence, but also from institutional values within Asian culture independent of the West. To avoid being placed into the “poor, dirty jungle person” category, amongst other harmful biases, having light skin (and, to a slightly lesser yet nonetheless significant extent, other “East Asian” or “white” features) as an Asian has been historically and is in the modern age advantageous.

While standards for fair skin amongst Asian populations do indeed predate colonialism and Western conquest, European impacts still do exist. Naturally, with white dominance and power, “light skin shades are privileged as a result of the legacy of colonialism, when white skin and associated features [historically] were accorded high status and dominance” (Phoenix 101). This is especially true in countries like Vietnam and the Philippines who were colonized by white-majority Western countries, like France

and Spain and the United States respectively for those specific examples. The established pretense that white, European-descended individuals are superior in essentially every regard that has been injected into societies around the world by the very people such a contention benefits is a considerable reason why people of color find it more socially and financially convenient to change their appearance to be whiter. As a result of colonialism, those with lighter skin and whiter traits have been favored both by white people and people of color (Canotal 15-16). However, again, white dominance is not the only nor even the originating cause for the idea those with lighter skin are superior.

In Asia, particularly East Asia, light skin has been valued culturally throughout history. Viewing lighter skin as more “beautiful” stems from the centuries-old sentiment that “lighter skin implie[s] freedom from outdoor agricultural labor and thus increased a woman’s wealth and social status, whereas tanned skin was associated with the lower classes: manual laborers, farmers, and peasants” (Hsin-Yu et al. 256), which was believed everywhere in Asia from India to China to Japan to Korea (Canotal 16). The idea that one is more advanced and sophisticated if they have paler skin is, then, something that has been drilled into Asian society by dominant social institutions in historically powerful and domineering countries like China, which then spread or solidified cultural values across the continent and even across oceans.

The ideals emphasized by systems of authority and control have grown and persisted through history across Asia and the West. Skin-whitening and taking measures to keep skin light are still prevalent today. In a study on the leisure behaviors of Asian women, Euro-American women, and Asian American women, it was found that “People’s attitudes toward skin color manifest themselves in daily behaviors, such as sun-seeking, sun-avoidance, and sun-protection behaviors” (Hsin-Yu et al. 257). For women from Asia or more closely-tied to traditional Asian culture, the latter two behaviors are most

prevalent. The researchers here note that “[D]uring an interview, a Chinese girl talked about the idea [of having light skin] repeatedly. She said, ‘My ideal is, of course, to have even, white [fair], luminous and smooth silk, like the egg white of a boiled egg’” (256). This line of thinking has led to the marketing of skin-lightening products, the use of umbrellas when walking outside in order to prevent tanning, and more. Light skin is not only an ideal in East Asia, furthermore, as from my own experience I’ve noticed that most actors in Filipino television shows or movies are lighter, and often multiethnic with Chinese heritage. In Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines, the light-skinned dominance reaches and influences many aspects of daily life, including everyday television advertisements (Castro). For the West, in the United Kingdom, demand for illegal and dangerous skin-lightening products is so great that authorities have trouble containing their market. In fact, on a wider scale, this market continues to grow by the billions over the span of only a few years globally (Phoenix 100). Additionally to chemical and even surgical changes to appear lighter and whiter, less permanent actions to make darker individuals appear lighter are perhaps even more apparent, especially in the West. Magazines and other popular media are major culprits namely in digitally editing the skin color of people who appear in their publications; *Vanity Fair* has been noted to do this with Kenyan-Mexican actress Lupita Nyong’o, as well as *X Factor* with contestants of color in promotional content (Phoenix 99). The reasoning behind choices like all of the above is an unfortunate reality. People are more likely to be perceived as capable and/or attractive, and magazines, television shows, and other media are more likely to be consumed by a broader audience if those in question are as pale as possible. While not all of these examples are particularized to the Asian community, the trends here can easily be extrapolated to this group considering the overall theme of white supremacy, and further, this supremacy extends past just trends and media.

Darker Southeast Asians experience many disadvantages not seen by their lighter Asian counterparts. While these are extensive enough to be covered alone in an entirely separate essay, one of the most striking aspects of life in which prejudice is observed that I will examine here is education. In the earlier-referenced study of Asian American students and their encounters with racism on college campuses, many of the Southeast Asian American students interviewed reported some unique experiences compared to the East Asian American students. For instance, there are feelings of isolation and being alone even with a decently-sized Asian student population, being negatively stereotyped and as “poor” and “ghetto,” assumptions that they don’t care about education or that they’re less intelligent, and the experience of being held both to “model minority” standards at the same time as “inferior minority” standards (Museus and Park 557, 564). Being outcast and singled out in these ways understandably would impede on the social lives and the self-esteem of Southeast Asian individuals with brown skin. Lighter-skinned East Asians do not experience the problems noted above, at least not nearly to the extent as those darker than them, thus demonstrating the issue of heightened discrimination of a subgroup of Asians. In addition to social and emotional impacts, Southeast Asians often find disadvantages in their levels of education entirely. A detailed study on the educational attainment of East Asian American versus Southeast Asian American students shows that, overall, light-skinned Asians are more likely to obtain greater education, specifically a college degree, than darker-skinned Asians (Ryabov). These findings are not due to some inherent inferiority, careless attitudes towards education, or the like, but rather deeply-ingrained institutional biases and injustices. As Ryabov puts it, “The most feasible explanation of the main finding that skin tone exerts a powerful effect on educational attainment of Asian Americans seem to be related to the direct and indirect effects of the pervasive institutional discrimination based on skin color” (321).

In other words, people of color with darker skin, Southeast Asians here, have throughout history been systematically pushed down and marginalized, leading to disadvantages in attaining the same opportunities as those more privileged than them, East Asians here. This can be observed in many other respects, ultimately demonstrating that, in the simplest terms, the combined colorism effects of attractiveness standards, stereotypes, and perceived inferiority leave brown Asians with more difficulties than lighter Asians.

“You’re the Asian one, right?” but also “Do you even care about your heritage?”

Similarly to darker Asians, multiracial Asians face further prejudice compared to the rest of the Asian community, often with negative experiences unique to their multiracial identity. Throughout my life I’ve noticed two trends. Non-Asian people, particularly white people, only see me for my Asian-ness, branding me as the Asian token who represents all Asians in a setting otherwise devoid of Asian people. I still distinctly remember one day in elementary school when a group of classmates and I were pretending to be characters from the cartoon *Codename: Kids Next Door*, and I was told I had to be the character Number 3 simply because I was “the only Asian” there. They, of course, didn’t listen to my protests that she was one of my least favorites and is Japanese while I’m Filipina. I was *the Asian one*, so of course I just *had* to be the Asian character despite no other attention being paid to keeping physical appearance consistent when deciding who would be the other varying white characters and even the black character. Concurrently, other Asian people see my whiteness and immediately assume I’m “too white,” which entails filling all the “basic white girl” stereotypes (though, sure, I do love a nice Starbucks iced Passion Tango™ tea every now and then), liking bland food, and being ignorant to all non-white cultures, apparently including my own. Because of this idea, my Filipino friend group frequently outcasts me and typically leaves me and my sister out of

gatherings, parties, and vacations. No matter who I'm with, bias shows itself everywhere, and I simply am not seen as enough.

Multiracial individuals have experienced prejudice and microaggressions based on their identity. According to the Pew Research Center, more than half of all multiracial adults in the United States are subject to racial slurs or jokes. For white-Asian Americans specifically, 60% have been subject to slurs or jokes, and 25% have received poor service in businesses like restaurants (Parker et al.). These statistics for non-white multiracial Asian Americans logically would be even higher due to the colorism and white supremacy discussed earlier in this paper. While these experiences are primarily based on interactions with non-Asians, particularly white individuals, there are further prejudices that come from both non-Asians and Asians. Like the broader racism towards the Asian community as a whole noted towards the beginning of this paper, there are several themes in microaggressions seen by multiracial individuals: "exclusion and isolation" where one is outcast from one or both/all of their identities, "exoticification and objectification" where one is dehumanized and recurrently asked *what* they are, "assumptions of monoracial identity" where one is perceived as only one race based on how they may look and thus are subject to biases from people who they would otherwise partly identify with, "denial of multiraciality" where one is designated by others to be part of only one race ("You're not Asian enough" or "You're just Asian," for example), and "pathologizing of identity and experiences" where one is seen as "different" and "abnormal" or even "wrong" (Miller 29-30). While Asian groups in the West are already so isolated in mostly-non-Asian environments like most, if not all, college campuses in the United States, multiracial Asians, like dark Southeast Asians, experience this to an even greater degree as they are not only negatively set apart from and discriminated against by non-Asians, but also by the greater Asian community itself. There's a universal

underlying attitude that multiracial Asians can't actively engage with their monoracial peers, don't fit in with any of their individual racial groups, and can't keep up with more than one identity at once. Such discriminations and prejudices leave multiracial individuals alone and often insecure in an in-between racial limbo.

"You're so lucky, you've got both."

Alongside and typically as a result of biases and microaggressions, multiracial Asians experience feelings of isolation, not being "enough" for any of their identities, being fake, and being out-of-place. I've both read and have been told about how lucky I am to be multiracial. I've got the best of both worlds, so to say, being white and Asian. While I do acknowledge that I certainly benefit from some white privilege, I never quite enjoyed being multiracial up until mid-high school. I felt wrong, like I didn't belong anywhere. Even this past Christmas I convinced my father to take my sister and I home from the party we were at with our Italian cousins because the both of us felt so uncomfortable not being like everyone else there. As a child, I constantly wished to be monoracial, flipping back and forth from wanting to be just white and wanting to be just Asian. I'd go from one extreme of trying to keep my skin light and wanting to dye my hair a lighter brown, to trying to learn my mother's native dialect and trying to force myself to eat Filipino foods that never appealed to me before. I never felt like a white person, and never felt like I ever should've been with the Filipino friend group I once was close with. I wasn't anywhere. I was in between, alone. I still am, and surely the feeling is even greater for those who don't benefit from some form of white privilege like I can.

Contrary to my experiences, Pew Research Center statistics assert that being multiracial is viewed as beneficial and positive more than not by multiracial individuals: 60% are proud of their background, 59% feel more open to other cultures, a majority feel

a bond with other multiracial individuals, and they tend to view their identity as more of an advantage than a disadvantage (though a majority view it to make no difference in either direction) (Parker et al.). These statistics are certainly true overall; I, my sister, and many other multiracial people I have come into contact with are quite proud of their mixed background, have been exposed to multiple cultures rather than one, find commonality and solidarity with other people like us, and may gain some advantages or be treated no differently in some settings. However, these statistics seem to portray that there are no major downsides to being multiracial, that it does more good than anything. The study very briefly in one figure acknowledges that many multiracial individuals, white-Asian Americans included, experience racism and negative biases, although it largely fails to examine the detailed extent or the effects of disadvantages.

The most notable impact of frequently-ignored microaggressions and marginalization on multiracial peoples across the board and multiracial Asians specifically is a phenomenon called “racial impostor syndrome.” This term refers to an emotionally- and mentally-corrosive sensation, felt by multiracial people, that they are “fake” and don’t belong in one or more parts of their racial background (Donnella). This is a feeling discussed at length by NPR *Code Switch* listeners who wrote in with their experiences of feeling out-of-place in their own different identities as multiracial individuals: “[L]istener Kristina Ogilvie wrote in to tell [NPR] that ‘living at the intersection of different identities and cultures’ was like ‘stumbling around in a forest in the dark.’” Other listeners go on to explain to the NPR podcast that other more “pure” members of one or more of their racial identities feel they have a more valid claim to the identity than someone who is multiracial, believe they can tell mixed people that they are not enough to belong in certain groups, or have the need to question multiracial identities either out of ignorance or perceived superiority (Donnella). Having multiple racial

identities makes one feel disoriented and overwhelmed when attempting to validate themselves on all of their identities to others—they may doubt themselves and feel wrong, allowing the discriminating beliefs of others to harm their sense of security and self-esteem.

The resulting decline in self-confidence, self-worth, and overall happiness often leads to worse consequences than general low self-esteem and loneliness. Substance abuse is one of these major after-effects. In a study on ethnic identity and its relation to self-esteem and substance abuse, it was found that “the higher the ethnic identity, the less substances adolescents reported using. [...] [E]thnic identity is an important part of development that is related to positive health outcomes among adolescents” (Fisher et al.). In other words, if an individual feels strong, secure ties to their identity or identities, they are likely to have higher self-esteem, and in turn are less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol. Unfortunately, it’s rather evident that multiracial individuals commonly and regularly do not feel secure in their different identities, and therefore, consistent with this study’s findings, they are much more likely to abuse substances than monoracial people. While spoken broadly, this phenomenon obviously extends to multiracial Asians for the purpose of this essay’s analysis. Of course, it is entirely possible for people like me or the *Code Switch* listeners discussed above to grow more comfortable in multiple identities, thus leveling or even reversing the effects of low self-esteem on serious issues like substance abuse; however, as the matter currently stands, multiracial people are still at an incredible disadvantage.

Conclusion

In such a progressive era of marches, rallies, moving voices, and greater representation, it is common to assume that the Asian community as a whole is

experiencing societal advancement as many other oppressed groups are. However, this does not paint a full picture, for the only members of this community who benefit from movements are monoracial, light-skinned Asians. Subgroups, most notably brown-skinned Southeast Asians and multiracial Asians, are still suffering from negative biases and injustices around the world in both the Asian content itself and, perhaps more glaringly, in the West. These peoples endure invalidation, isolation, underrepresentation, and social and mental/emotional harm while the world ignores them. These groups and their plight are so incredibly sidelined that even the research and scholarship realms lack substantial publications on the issue; in gathering information for this paper, I had immense difficulty finding sources that specifically centralize themselves on Asian experiences, which is the biggest reason why I've had to rely so heavily on my own and others' personal, less coldly factual accounts and perspectives. The fact that great groups of people are suffering in their daily lives like this and are yet being overlooked to the point where extensive research can hardly yield a significant list of substantive sources is completely unacceptable. Society cannot simply support the more privileged and "favorable" or "ideal" members of a minority group and call that progressive advancement while countless others are persistently stepped on. For oppressed communities, Asian and otherwise, to truly be propped up and receive the justice they deserve, the *whole* bodies of those groups must be given proper attention. Otherwise, these subgroups will continue to be the minorities of a minority—the oppressed of the oppressed.

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From Afterthought to Elected: How Approval of Bitches Has Increased the Complexity of Roles for Women in TV

Megan Troke

The truth is a lot easier to swallow when it's hidden in the laughter of a well-crafted joke. I'm grateful to be living in an era where comedy is the leader of social commentary, rather than the fiction of Charles Dickens or the brutal reality of Upton Sinclair's work. Even more so I'm grateful to be experiencing commentary led by funny women such as Julia Louis-Dreyfus. So when I was told that the writers for *Veep* have found inspiration in real rumors from the staff of one of the women running for president, it made the jaw-dropping, side-splitting insults delivered each episode even better. As D.C. legend goes, Amy Klobuchar once had a staffer shave her legs for her, a bit that the writing team slipped in for Selina Meyer's chief of staff to passively mention, which is as good as satire gets. Whether or not the much-denied rumors of Meyer's like antics in Klobuchar's own office are true isn't necessarily important but it certainly brings the politics of *Veep* to life in my imagination. As bitchiness has become a more acceptable trait in the past thirty years, Julia Louis-Dreyfus has gone from portraying Elaine Benes, the original independent woman, to the President of the United States. To begin explaining this shift I will summarize the two characters and take a moment to highlight Louis-Dreyfus's active role in the advancement of comedy. I will then analyze the evolution of feminist characteristics between Elaine and Selina, followed by the importance of language in and surrounding *Veep* and conclude my analysis by dissecting the ways female sexual liberation are addressed in the 1990s compared to today. From these three

pieces of evidence I have concluded that Elaine Benes and Selina Meyer are deeply feminist roles, despite the anti-hero characteristics they display.

When Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David started working with NBC to bring *Seinfeld* to primetime television, only three men had been written into the featured cast. Worried about ratings, the network required a woman to be brought on and Elaine Benes was born. It seems appropriate for the fickle, feisty and self-centered character to have been an accident, although it stunted its development into a role worthy of its groundbreaking status. The reluctance to have the presence of a woman was evident in the writers' room, according to Molly Ball's feature of Julia Louis-Dreyfus in *Time Magazine*. She interviewed a writer who said that David and Seinfeld gave the room instructions to write Elaine just like a man. Ball responds to this revelation saying "on a show considered one of history's finest, the only way the writers knew how to fully realize the character was to imagine she was male." Feeling that Elaine's character had untapped potential and was underwritten, Louis-Dreyfus advocated for richer storylines. This tireless fight to push the boundaries of a woman's role in comedy did not stop after *Seinfeld*; her role as the vulgar, vain and sometimes vicious politician Selina Meyer on *Veep* is the product of decades of work. Calling attention to the discrepancy between her trademark characters and Louis-Dreyfus's own personality, Ball demonstrates just how masterful the actress truly is. All lovely qualities aside, Ball writes: "in the noxious politician, Louis-Dreyfus finds a pressure valve for the anger and frustration many women bottle up in public." "One has to power through it," [Louis-Dreyfus] adds. "And frankly, I've made a career of playing unlikable people. I don't cotton to likability" (Louis-Dreyfus qtd in Ball). It's true that these women are hard to love but despite Louis-Dreyfus's worst efforts, viewers find themselves rooting for their success.

The men in *Seinfeld* all have a specific role within the group: Jerry Seinfeld the ringleader, George Costanza the sidekick and Cosmo Kramer the comic relief, in addition to all of the qualities they share. Elaine, through no real fault of writing or characterization is simply the woman. As Ball discussed in her article, when *Seinfeld* was brought to NBC it had no featured female role and it was the network that required the presence of a woman before it was to air. In her essay “Elaine Benes: Feminist Icon or One of the Boys?”, Sarah E. Worth discusses the value of Elaine’s character and whether she is worthy of the “feminist” label. She runs through examples like *Friends* that have equal gender representation but whose women fall under tired stereotypes; Elaine may be outnumbered but she breaks the mold of female characters. But is she a feminist icon? Of overused feminine stereotypes, Worth points out that “she is not emotionally dependent on a man to keep her happy all the time, but she and her friends seem to keep each other going. Importantly, I think, she is not financially dependent on anyone” (53). Elaine is clearly independent without being a shrew-like character—she has close friends and is often in relationships. Where Worth probably began to pause in considering Elaine a feminist is that the conversation around feminism is focused on upward trends: lifting women up to the same societal privileges that men are allowed, improving and growing as a society on the whole to support women as equals, bringing other women up with you if you are on the rise. Rather than elevate herself, Elaine challenges this standard by stooping down in order to be equal with her male counterparts. Although she represents many qualities that make her more of a “role model” than other sitcom women in the 90s, she displays clear anti-hero characteristics. Like the men she shares the screen with “she lies and cheats; she can be rude, vain, inconsiderate, and unreasonable” (Worth 56). Worth concludes that although Elaine may be a product of feminism, she isn’t “strong” enough to be deemed a feminist herself and could be doing more to counter the misogyny

of the male *Seinfeld* characters. While I would consider Worth's concerns to be valid, looking at Elaine almost 30 years later, her unapologetic existence in a space dominated by men is enough for me to call her a feminist. It is clear to me that she was an important stepping stone towards complex representation in comedy and breaking down the stereotypes women were often boxed into.

The groundwork laid by Elaine in the 90s, leads us to Selina Meyer today. In *Veep* we see Julia Louis Dreyfus begin as Vice President who eventually takes over as Commander in Chief when her former superior resigns. Whether she's in office or running after being ousted after less than a year as President, Selina is an unforgiving, cutthroat political operative doing everything she can to get what she wants. Both fictional and real political worlds are unforgiving, and especially so for women. Selina has no problem taking down fellow women if it means she can get ahead. In the aftermath of a historical tie in the presidential election, Selina and her running mate Tom James are convincing members of congress to vote for them in the episode "Congressional Ball." It opens on Air Force One as Selina is trading souvenirs and a promise to manufacture boats that the Navy has deemed useless with Rep. Penny Nickerson for her vote. After events which I will be revisiting later on, she finds out that Nickerson has been convinced to abstain from voting while in attendance at the ball put on for the sole purpose of lobbying congress members for their votes. Selina takes her aside to say "If I do win, I will have my administration come to your shitty little district and shake it to death like a Guatemalan nanny. And then I'm gonna have the IRS crawl so far up your husband's colon he's going to wish the only thing they find is more cancer. So, can I count on your vote, or do I need to shove a box of White House M&Ms up your stretched-out, six-baby vag?" (*Veep*). I might not be able to convey the scathingly calm deliverance of these lines on paper but these unforgiving words showcase Selina in her element.

Here is the clear evolution from Elaine, who merely had no close female relationships and hung around the boys, to Selina who is more than willing to destroy any woman who stands in her path and is playing politics the dirty way, just like the men. From a feminist standpoint, this treatment of other women is a point of contention. Caitlin Moran expresses her disdain for the “sisterhood” in her piece, “I Am a Feminist!”. “If someone’s an arsehole, someone’s an arsehole-regardless of whether we’re both standing in the longer bathroom queue at concerts or not” (Moran 81). She argues that if men were making comments about other men they would not be reprimanded or accused of “letting our side down” (Moran 81). This brand of feminism is certainly on display in *Veep* where Selina plays it like the boys and only plays the “woman card” or appeals directly as a feminist when it advances her own agenda. In a satirical context I believe it’s more than permissible to play this role but in order to truly be feminist, helping other women as you succeed should be a priority. According to Sylvia Ann Hewlett, an economist who has studied the influence of gender bias in the workplace, it’s harder to succeed at the top if you’re the only woman up there. In her portion of the article “Women Mentoring Women: Tapping the Wisdom in Networks to Navigate Career Obstacles and Opportunities” she highlights research that displays the effects of representation on gender bias in performance reviews. Women receive more negative reviews when only 1-10% of executives are female compared to 10-20%, however the largest shift in perception only occurs when women make up 50% of the executives (Hewlett 51). Women becoming more dominant in the corporate executive landscape can only occur when women support each other. As one person lifts another person up, the likeliness for bias to make an impact goes down and it makes it easier for each woman who follows. Selina isn’t an anti-feminist but she certainly isn’t the perfect vessel for female advancement. The games

she plays and the jaded outlook she has towards other women trying to climb the same ladder are more so a product of the environment that she suffered through to this point.

Regardless of field, whether it's male dominated or not, women are primed to face consequences and criticism based on gender stereotypes. As Sylvia Ann Hewlett discusses the effects of women executive on performance reviews, she also shares research from the same study to show just how impossible it is for women to win. "Acting "masculine" provokes antagonism, but cultivating "feminine" traits also won't get them anywhere because femininity-with the associated characteristics of nurturance and empathy-is associated with weakness and incompetence" (Hewlett 52). The gendered connotation of language is clearly present in the performance reviews being studied, and the language is unlikely to stop as your career grows, as shown by Selina Meyer. She faces this head on as she orders her Chief of Staff Amy Brookheimer to investigate the staff to see which of them called Selina a cunt, a story which had been leaked to the press, amidst the fallout from a stock market meltdown. The episode "C**tgate" puts the issue that Laura K. Brunner focuses the chapter "#BitchBoss/BossBitch: Love Hate Relationships With Unruly Women" of her dissertation on working women in current popular media, into the most extreme scenario. Brunner looks at the way Selina Meyer and Leslie Knope, both bosses in their respective shows, were addressed and found that "women characters were called "bitchy," "emotional," or "crazy," when not meeting others expectations (Brunner 128). By looking at Twitter, Facebook and IMBd discussions of shows she found that fans of the shows also used this language to describe these characters but with a positive connotation. When fans used language that typically carries a negative connotation, Brunner argues that "the use of the term bitch was a way of creating a personal relationship with an inaccessibly powerful woman" (153). Interestingly, many of the other female leads that she features throughout her dissertation were also

described as a bitch by viewers but in an unfavorable tone. In Selina's case "embracing bitchiness also gave women strength and resolve" and they "expressed admiration and awe" (Brunner 154). Perhaps it has to do with the role itself and as President, Selina wields more power to be a bitch than a random CEO of a publishing firm. The words that we use to describe people carry a lot of weight and in the age of political correctness it has never been more imperative to analyze whether you should be using words with polarizing power.

Veep runs rampant with the use of foul language, often insulting people to their face or in mocking the policies they should be supporting. When it comes to words that typically would be censored on TV many of them have been deemed inappropriate because of the connotations they carry. On this particular show, choice words typically revolve around women and their body parts, words that when used even by women, many might pause to contemplate if it's acceptable. The process of reclaiming words is not an easy task and not the same for every word or every person. Robin Brontsema closes out "A Queer Revolution: Reconceptualizing the Debate Over Linguistic Reclamation" with an all-encompassing testimony to its value: "Linguistic reclamation is a courageous self-emancipation that boldly moves from a tragic, painful past into a future full of uncertainty, full of doubt-and full of possibility" (16). This particular article focuses on words that have impacted the LGBTQ community and concludes that it is difficult to definitively measure the success of reclamation as each process has a different intention in mind. Brontsema uses the word "dyke" to demonstrate that though it may still be used negatively "because of its very pejoration, *dyke* claims a political fierceness and anti-assimilationism" (Brontsema 14). This concept can be applied to a plethora of words like those being reclaimed by women.

Bitch Media, a feminist media organization, often is questioned about their name, a choice they explain rather simply. “When it’s being used as an insult, “bitch” is an epithet hurled at women who speak their minds, who have opinions and don’t shy away from expressing them, and who don’t sit by and smile uncomfortably if they’re bothered or offended. If being an outspoken woman means being a bitch, we’ll take that as a compliment” (Bitch Media). Selina is the epitome of the outspoken woman so it only makes sense that she tosses out “that’s Washington, D.C. for you-District of Cunts” without batting an eyelash (*Veep*). When Amy and Selina talk like that, I personally don’t take any offense to it. As women they are allowed to shout the B and C words and sprinkle in all the abortion jokes they want, and even some men have no hesitation in following suit. For users of reclaimed words who aren’t a part of the target group, it is difficult to universalize how others feel about each word and it can become a slippery slope to offending people. In the political environment on display in *Veep*, it seems like this language has lost its sexist undertones and is used to just be plain mean, rather than offensive. That isn’t to say that negatively gendered language doesn’t make its way into the conversation of *Veep*. A portion of Lauren DeCarvalho’s dissertation *The Work of Prime-Time Post-Recessionary Sexism: Gender and Television Sitcoms in the Post-Recession Era of the 2010s* looks at the language of nine workplace sitcoms featuring women. She concludes that a gender bias exists, which she calls “The Critical Double Standard”. “When critics or reviewers of any text, regardless of media, offer misogynistic remarks in lieu of gender-neutral criticism” and “can range from the blatant usage of offensive language to the more subtle sexism through the lack of ‘reversibility’” (DeCarvalho 169). This means that critics will resort to generalizations when reviewing texts and media that focus on women and often find more fault in the characters based on misogynistic stereotypes rather than actual character and plot flaws. DeCarvalho discovered that there were three

main categories when it came to reviewing *Veep*; people who just like Julia Louis-Dreyfus, people who thought Selina Meyer was a good politician and people who thought Selina Meyer was a bad politician. Regardless of how they felt, almost every critic used some kind of gendered language like Curt Wagner of *RedEye* used when describing Selina: “she’s not a complete idiot, but she is a bit ditzy, a lot self-involved and completely image-obsessed” (Wagner qtd. in DeCarvalho 201). DeCarvalho points to “ditzy” as a word that would never be used to describe a man and is reinforcing clear gender bias when it comes to reviewing female characters. I would go further to say that it’s unlikely that a critic would call out a fictional male politician’s narcissistic qualities as it’s common in political satires to portray them as such.

Because she is a prominent public official, Selina has a lot more to worry about when it comes to how actions are perceived; and she often has real consequences that come from just about everything she does. On the contrary, Elaine may not have much power but she certainly has a lot more freedom to do as she pleases, a luxury that she takes full advantage of. As a result she and the other characters of *Seinfeld* fall into a pattern of “humorous incivility” which Laura K. Hahn explores in her dissertation “A Generic Analysis of the Rhetoric of Humorous Incivility in Popular Culture”. Hahn argues that the characters on *Seinfeld* remain in a naive childlike state as the show isn’t centered around their careers and they are often shown ignoring their responsibilities, which provides imagery that their environment reinforces. “The high presence of the home and the surrogate presence of the dining table (at Monk’s) on *Seinfeld* remind the audience of children playing at home rather than being out in the world of adults” (Hahn 90). Childlike behavior also suggests the idea that a character needs protection and is often portrayed as a feminine quality, something that Elaine clearly does not need or want. One interpretation of Elaine’s involvement is that she is turning this trope on its head and

plays by her own rules. I would argue that more so, Elaine defies Hahn's assessment. Jerry's career is unconventional and not portrayed as demanding, George is without a job for a large span of the show and only finds employment after moving in with his parents and Kramer has never had a job and earns money through mysterious or unknown methods. While it is not the focus of the show, Elaine is the only character who has a steady job and is seen throughout the show advancing in her career. She is acting in opposition to her environment, a testament to her strength and feminist qualities. "Humorous incivility" also manifests in the show centering itself around "self-focused" topics like sex.

Many of *Seinfeld's* most memorable moments stem from the seemingly meaningless relationships that the group goes through, rarely lasting more than one episode. In a typical sitcom, serial dating is an activity for men and having temporary partners is shameful if you are a woman. Enter: Elaine Benes. She sleeps with who she pleases and for the most part, the men around her don't see a problem with Elaine's sexual liberation. Still, the conversations the men are having about sex focus on their needs and often display blissful ignorance to how women think about sex. In "The Sponge" we see these two ideas coming to a head, as news breaks that Elaine's contraceptive method has been taken off the market. George asks why she can't just use a different method and she responds "women are very loyal to their birth control!" (*Seinfeld*). Despite the fact that George has a fiancée, who we later find out also uses "the sponge", he is clearly not invested or concerned with the sexual needs of his partner. After a comical montage of Elaine running from pharmacy to pharmacy, she finally finds one that has a whole case of sponges left. At first, she cautiously asks for three sponges and each time the pharmacist asks to confirm the amount Elaine asks for more and eventually settles on buying the whole case, which causes the pharmacist to omit a look of surprise

in judgement of her decision. This situation displays a woman who is comfortable in her sexuality, committed to having safe sex and certainly isn't going to let a little discontinuation stop her from doing what she wants. Besides it being an undeniably feminist move, representation of contraceptives in popular media is extremely important according to "The Media Project", a subset of Kaiser Family Foundation, charged with promoting positive discussions around sexuality in popular TV shows that teenagers are likely to watch. After an episode of *Felicity* with a "condom demonstration" scene, a survey of 103 girls ages 12 to 21 found that 58 percent thought it was informative, 35 percent said it was the first time they had seen a condom demonstration and 86 percent got useful information regarding sexuality from TV (Folb). Television plays a huge role in shaping adolescents, and although they might not be *Seinfeld's* target demographic, I can attest to the fact that there are many younger viewers. It's impressive that the show carried a message that has the potential of being informative (although outdated), as any of the character's relationships with other people don't always set the best example. Whether its Elaine getting back with Jerry to prove that women fake orgasms, or losing the group contest to abstain from masturbation, vulgar moments like these are huge moments as a woman on a primetime sitcom being so open with these topics.

Seinfeld and *Veep* are on opposite ends of the continuum when it comes to defining clean comedies. Here lies a juxtaposition: despite it being less acceptable for a woman of Selina's political stature to be sexually liberated she just loves to express it way more than Elaine, who has virtually nothing to lose. In the middle of *Veep's* first season Selina's casual relationship results in a pregnancy scare that ends quickly after a miscarriage. Throughout the series the interactions between Selina and her ex-husband are filled with sexual tension. As she ran for election while acting president, without her knowledge the staff hired a "sex slave" disguised as a personal trainer (whom she frequently slept with)

to keep her away from her ex-husband and put her in a better mood. Behind closed doors Selina has no trouble relaying the most vulgar thoughts a boss could pass down to their subordinates. The public eye and opposite party would not see her as a modern woman taking control of her sexuality, but probably a slut unfit for office. In the aforementioned episode “Congressional Ball” we see Selina at her most cut throat as she tears Congresswoman Nickerson to shreds. What puts her in this eerie fit of rage is the revelation that her running mate Tom convincing people to abstain, as a tie vote would open the door for him to become president instead. In the article “Thank God for Selina Meyer’s Unapologetic 50-Something Sex Drive” Heather Havrilesky describes the interaction between the two characters. “Selina yells at her running mate, VP-almost-elect Tom James, for fucking her (undermining her election efforts) while obviously wanting to fuck her. Apparently this is Meyer’s version of verbal foreplay, because in the next scene, we discover Selina straddling Tom in her very presidential blue dress” (Havrilesky). Of all the times throughout the show where you think you’ve heard the most explicit of Selina’s quips, suddenly it’s on screen for all to see: women in their 50s have sex too! Havrilesky stereotype as women who “focus all of their pent-up passion on kvetching over their teenage daughter’s short skirts and trying to get their tubby husbands to lay off the potato chips” (Havrilesky). Selina’s brand of empowerment may be twisted and rooted in serving herself, but she is getting it done. Sexual liberation needs to not only be portrayed as the young thirtysomething dating her way through New York City but by women who are likely reaching menopause too.

Despite their anti-hero characteristics Elaine and Selina’s existence in male dominated spaces as outspoken, sexually liberated women is fundamentally feminist. Although Julia Louis-Dreyfus’s two most recognizable characters exist in different times,

places, positions and parts of their lives they are linked in the way they have unconventionally pushed forward feminism and a woman's place in comedy.

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Applying a Conceptual Framework

Academic inquiry rarely happens in a vacuum, as scholars and other writers not only build on others' ideas, but borrow their approaches. Often, writers will develop their arguments using the theoretical and methodological tools of a given field. In fact, the thoughtful application of such a frame can lead to quite ambitious claims, as the writers in this section demonstrate.

Straight as an Aro: Aromantic Asexual Representation in *Riverdale*

Franscesca Ark

Introduction: The Name of Our Town is *Riverdale*

“You just don’t get it ‘cause you’re asexual,” said Archie to Jughead Jones in the 2015 comic *Jughead*. This comic issue, written by Chip Zdarsky, confirmed what many people had been hoping for after decades of characterization and hinting: Jughead Jones is asexual (commonly referred to as “ace”), meaning he feels little to no sexual attraction to people. After years of comments about not being interested in girls or relationships, and being physically attracted to anyone, the comics finally solidified his identity. In addition to his asexuality, Jughead has been written as seemingly aromantic (commonly referred to as “aro”), meaning he feels little to no romantic attraction to people, and it’s something Zdarsky confirmed on Twitter in 2017 (qtd. in forsthyelovesfood). Zdarsky explained, “Something like asexuality is underrepresented, and since we have a character who was asexual before people had the word for it, I’m continuing to write him that way” (qtd. in Melrose). I was excited to hear that Jughead was asexual even before people knew what asexuality really was, and I thought that it was a show of good faith to confirm something important to many readers. Zdarsky also said, “People have asked me if there is going to be a romance if I’m writing Jughead...and the answer is no, because there is enough of that in Archie” (qtd. in Melrose). This confirms his words on Twitter, though the tweet was recently deleted (which I realize means we should probably not take the tweet too seriously). Jughead’s asexuality and aromanticism were defining

characteristics in the comics next to his cynical wit, his love for food, and his role as Archie's best friend.

In 2017, the CW Television Network released *Riverdale*, a TV adaptation of the *Archie* comics. The show takes many liberties and greatly deviates from the source material; however, I noticed that one thing stands out: Jughead is not aromantic or asexual. In season one, episode five, Jughead and longtime friend Betty Cooper check each other out, kiss in episode six, and are referred to as dating by episode eight. Their relationship continues throughout season one, which ends by exchanging "I love you"s, survives a few break-ups in season two, in which they also become sexually active, and prevails throughout the events of season three, which is currently ongoing. Cole Sprouse, the actor who plays Jughead, commented that *Riverdale* is a new universe (ColeMSprouse), and Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, the creator of the show, implied that the events in the show will affect how Jughead identifies (qtd. in Alexander). While they aren't wrong, there is something to be said about the nature of changing a character's LGBTQ+ identity to non-LGBTQ+. I see this as blatant queer erasure, and for one of the few unquestionably aromantic asexual characters to not have that identity is confusing and, quite frankly, insulting.

I look to explore how *Riverdale's* depiction of Jughead's queer identity reflects society's current attitude toward aromantic asexuals and the potential issues due to the disparity between the source comics and the adaptation. I plan to compare the conversation surrounding *Riverdale's* Jughead and LGBTQ+ identity with the existing scholarly conversation on the well-known LGBT identities. First, I will establish the importance of representation and look at how the queer community has been represented historically. I will then look at asexuality and aromanticism and the unique experiences they face. Finally, I will address how Aguirre-Sacasa and Sprouse have been

discussing Jughead's identity in the show in relation to the scholarly conversation surrounding aromantic and asexual identities. I argue that the aromantic and asexual identities, and largely the non-lesbian or gay LGBTQ+ identities, must first achieve acknowledgement in entertainment before they can be depicted in a more complex and realistic way.

Understanding LGBTQ+ Representation: We're Here, We're Queer

I'll start by explaining why representation in media is important, and specifically why LGBTQ+ representation is important. Thomas Crisp looked at award-winning children's nonfiction books for their influence on how young people understand the world; unfortunately, he found a severe lack of LGBTQ+ representation, as he noted erasure and implicit coding of queer characters. Nonfiction books are especially important because they hold the connotation of being objective and truthful. Children's books frame the way children understand the world as they are growing up, and the lack of representation only sends the message that certain groups of people don't exist in the real world. Michaela Meyer, a professor of media and cultural studies at Christopher Newport University, similarly expressed the importance of internet and pop culture as a factor of framing identity, and she stated that an inaccurate portrayal of queer identities in these media can be harmful. Today, the prominence of pop culture and technology make everything more accessible, and I can see how that ease of access makes everything more impactful simply because of the increased exposure. TV and film are becoming the new media that shape how kids understand the world. There is a psychology theory concerning how people form their identity: social identity theory. It states that "the portrayal or social perception of a group's behavior or attitudes can affect the individual sense of identity"; media, specifically, affects an individual's perception of norms and ultimately defines the status and standing of different groups (McKinley et al 1050-1). So,

in addition to affecting identity formation, media and pop culture also create social norms and can ultimately validate an identity in the eyes of society. The application of social identity theory to media representation is evident in a study by Bond and Compton, experts in media psychology and communication studies, who saw a positive relationship between gay representation in entertainment and support of gay rights (728-730). The mere representation of LGBTQ+ identities in entertainment helps to solidify and establish the legitimacy of queer identities to those not of the LGBTQ+ community.

Suzanna Danuta Walters, the director of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality studies at Northeastern University, claimed that gay and lesbian representation has come in three stages: the first was absence, coded, or stereotypes; the second brought queer people into a public spectacle; and the third (the current state of representation) gave us normalization, assimilation, and LGBTQ+ identity being cast aside or made insignificant (918). The first stage is evident in films with gay-coded villains because of the general lack of the "gay" or "lesbian" confirmations and also the use of gay stereotypes to signify villainous characters. For example, villains like Jafar (from *Aladdin*, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker) and Hades (from *Hercules*, also directed by Ron Clements and John Musker) dress ambiguously, are generally more flamboyant, and overall have "feminine" aspects such as slender hands or makeup, which match with stereotypes about gay men. The second stage is seemingly better because gay and lesbians are given roles; however, they were correlated with disease, specifically HIV and AIDS. Walters also stated that the last stage (normalization, assimilation, and being cast aside) is evident in shows like *Modern Family*, where gay parenting is structured identically as heterosexual parenting. Despite the issues with the third stage of representation, it is a step toward better representation in comparison to the absence of queer representation.

Due to *Riverdale's* status as a popular television show, social identity theory can be applied to argue that *Riverdale* creates social norms that disregard aromanticism and asexuality. These social norms ultimately define the status of those identities, and by not mentioning them at all, the show indicates that in the eyes of society, aromanticism and asexuality are not legitimate identities. The absence of aromantic and asexual characters in *Riverdale* indicates that the aro-ace community is experiencing the first stage of absent and coded representation.

Asexuality and Aromanticism: Hiding an Aro-Ace Up Your Sleeve

Identities not as prominent as lesbian and gay are often left out of the discussion, even though they face unique obstacles because of that identity. For example, bisexuality is frequently avoided in the debate for LGBTQ+ equality, is negatively depicted in entertainment, and sometimes, the word "bisexual" can't even be used (Corey 201-203). This exclusion could be due to the idea of monosexuality (attraction to a single gender), which is the widely accepted form of attraction in society (Corey 201-203). I believe this exclusion can also be applied to asexuality, as both identities exist outside the boundaries of monosexuality and therefore face exclusion and erasure often.

Asexuality and aromanticism are also negatively-defined identities (NDI), meaning the identity revolves around the lack of something (Scott et al. 273). Asexuality's status as an NDI could also explain why there is so little existing scholarly research surrounding asexuality, and by extension, aromanticism. The existing research seems to focus mostly on how prominent the identity is, but it does not seem to discuss how ace and aro people experience a different sort of discrimination than lesbian and gay individuals do. I can see how it might be harder to research people who are characterized by a lack of attraction, but there are unique sets of experiences that those groups still face. For example, aromanticism is really only discussed in relation to asexuality, but it's

important for me to clarify that being aro and being ace aren't inherently related to each other. Asexual individuals don't have to identify as aro, and aromantic people don't have to identify as ace. As NDIs, aromanticism and asexuality become non-issues to certain people, meaning there is little public discourse around that identity and coming out is "disregard[ed]...as an irrelevance" (Scott et al 278). This makes sense because it's easier to ignore an identity that doesn't violently oppose the societal norm of heterosexuality, but that actually adds to the evidence that aromanticism and asexuality are invisible identities. Arguably, aros and aces are stuck in Walter's first stage of representation because of their status as an NDI, as it's easier to gloss over a lack of attraction.

Although aromanticism and asexuality are invisible identities, they still live in a world with societal norms that deny their identity. In two of his studies, CJ DeLuzio Chasin, an expert in psychology, said that asexual individuals live in a sexualnormative society ("Making" 170). Phrases such as "You haven't found the right person" and "You're not old enough" exemplify how society expects everyone to have sex, and asexuality also has a history of being diagnosed as a disorder (Gupta 996). Sexualnormativity is especially seen in entertainment because media commonly normalizes sex, reinforcing its status as a societal norm. One of the participants of an asexuality study, Mark, said, "sex sells on television, commercials, television shows...It's just—I feel like it's everywhere" (qtd. in Gupta 998). These lived experiences make it harder for LGBTQ+ individuals to understand their identity, and the lack of representation in media doesn't help.

Similar to sexualnormativity, aromantic individuals encounter amatonormativity, which is the existence of compulsory romance in society (Chasin, "Making sense"). Amatonormativity means that people who identify as aromantic often encounter phrases such as "You haven't found the right person to date," or "you're not ready to commit to a

relationship.” Additionally, living in society where the norm is to date, marry, and have children sends the message to aromantics that they don’t belong. I even see amatonormativity in scholarly research. For example, a common point of discussion in asexuality research is that people who identify as asexual can still form meaningful relationships because sex is not a requirement to form a healthy relationship (Chasin, “Making” 176); however, this concept is harmful to aros because it implies that romantic relationships are more valuable than non-romantic relationships.

Aros and aces live in a society that places emphasis on things that they don’t necessarily experience, which makes it easier for their identity to be forgotten, and aros and aces will likely find no representation in media. In a way, this is different than the experiences a lesbian or gay person might experience due to the nature of their identity. When asexuality is represented, it is often done in a way that’s harmful to aromantic individuals because a large part of the discussion “prominently asserts the significance of relationships in asexual people's lives” (Chasin, “Making” 176). Essentially, asexuality is often defined as “okay” because amatonormative tendencies are still present, which invalidates individuals who also identify as aromantic. Aro-ace individuals face a specific set of obstacles in a world that is both sexualnormative and amatonormative.

Returning to *Riverdale*: Origin Stories

Returning to *Riverdale*, I hope it is now clear why Jughead’s aromantic asexual identity in the comics is a big deal. Representation greatly affects an individual’s sense of identity, and to many people, Jughead is one of the only well-known characters that can be reliably confirmed as aromantic and asexual (Wheeler). For one of the writers of the comic to confirm that Jughead was asexual meant a lot to people, especially given the difficulty society has with using an LGBTQ+ person’s chosen label. *Riverdale*’s denial of

Jughead's unquestionable aroace identity puts aromantic and asexual representation into Walter's first stage instead of the third stage with the lesbian and gay community.

Riverdale doesn't even acknowledge Jughead's asexuality. It was only officially confirmed in 2015 by Zdarsky, but the writers of the comics have continued to portray him as ace and heavily code him as aro. For example, in *Jughead* issue #9, written by Ryan North, Jughead states, "I don't get crushes... it's a friendship crush, if anything." This is remarkably similar to how some people on the aromantic or asexual spectrum describe attraction: non-romantic crushes or relationships that aren't inherently romantic but still emotionally intimate. In comparison, *Riverdale's* Jughead initiated the relationship between him and Betty in season one, episode six. Within the same issue, Jughead fantasized about marrying a burger instead of a girl, and commented on being crazy for not wanting to kiss people (North). Again, this is representative of how aromantic and asexual people "[challenge] the idea that it is necessary to have a sexual or romantic partnership to enjoy a complete and fulfilling life" by valuing non-romantic relationships (Gupta 1005). I don't think that the aromantic coding is just that Jughead fantasizes about marrying a burger (and not a girl), but also that he explicitly doesn't want to kiss people. Not wanting to kiss people says more about his LGBTQ+ identity because it is characteristic of a big portion of the aromantic community. Perhaps the most telling piece of evidence is that in *Jughead* issue #11, Jughead says, "I don't go on dates, Sabrina. I don't like people that way, you know?" (North). To me, this sounds like Jughead is very obviously stating that he doesn't feel romantic attraction.

Despite the recency of Jughead's asexuality confirmation and aromantic coding, it has been going on for ages. There have been plenty of instances in which he was shown to be averse to women, dating, and love, often comically substituting food for a love-interest in comic panels. For example, 1950s comic artist Samm Schwartz often featured

Jughead, who fantasized about food, and Archie, who fantasized about dates with girls on the covers of *Archie's Pal Jughead Annual* issues. Jughead's placement next to Archie, who is always thinking about girls and dating, emphasizes Jughead's lack of attraction. Jughead got his own spinoff comics titled *Jughead* in 1949, but even as early as that, he was not interested in dating. Issue #4 of *Jughead* (Frese), published in 1954, depicts him as focused only on food, brushing off his companion, who comments on the romantic setting. It is evident in other comic covers from as early as 1949 that Jughead has always been averse to kissing (Archie Comics), and the fact that Jughead has always been written this way reinforces the claim that he is aromantic.

After establishing that Jughead is unquestionably aromantic and asexual in the comic, I can't help but question why his LGBTQ+ identity was erased in the TV adaptation. As I mentioned earlier, Cole Sprouse in a verified Reddit Ask Me Anything stated that *Riverdale* is a different universe than the comics; many people, including *Riverdale* creator Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, seem to use the same reasoning as an excuse to take liberties with a character's queer identity. Although this isn't necessarily a banned action, their intentions become gray given that Sprouse also said, "there's also quite a large community of avid 'Archie' fans that want Betty and Jughead to be together, too. I think these are things we need to juggle when considering what Jughead is in [*Riverdale*]" (qtd. in Damore). He implies that changing Jughead's queer identity to be seen as straight is justified to boost viewership, which is concerning. To individuals who have read the *Archie* comic and identify with Jughead as aro-ace, sacrificing an LGBTQ+ character to make him straight for the sake of viewership in an amatonormative society also sends the message that their identity isn't worth anything.

Aguirre-Sacasa and Sprouse have also made statements about *Riverdale* as an origin story, meaning that the first few seasons will act as an instigator of the main plot

and as motivation for the character's actions. Sprouse said to *Teen Vogue*, "because of the fluidity of sexuality and how oftentimes a person discovers who they are after a series of events – like those told in our origin stories – this is an ongoing conversation" (qtd. in Elizabeth). Sprouse isn't wrong, and he acknowledges that sexuality is fluid, though he also stated that Jughead's asexuality is a choice (ColeMSprouse). The issue here is that the idea of an origin story has a certain connotation to it: something specific, usually tragic in nature and out of the character's control, must trigger the character's main motivations. When saying that the show starts as an origin story for someone's sexuality, it implies that a series of tragic events must take place for that character to realize or become their queer identity. That's not always how it works, but for *Riverdale* to represent it as such correlates LGBTQ+ identities to tragedy to fully become their identity. Chasin said that when asexuality was represented in media, it seemed to fall into two categories: "asexuals who have been without sexual desire and who are therefore happily free of sexual desire" and "non-asexual people who, for some reason, lose sexual desire and are therefore in distress" (Chasin, "Reconsidering" 409). *Riverdale* as an origin story falls into the second category and implies that asexuality is not something to be happy about but rather a consequence of a traumatizing event.

Aguirre-Sacasa also said, "the kids are discovering themselves, and a big part of that is discovering their sexuality...we're not going to start with Archie's band or Jughead's asexuality or any of the things that have become canon — those are all stops on the way to [catching] up to 75 years of Archie history" (qtd. in Alexander). I understand that this is how life works; sometimes people do have to experience things before choosing to label themselves as queer. I want to make the distinction here that the choice is in labeling themselves, not in choosing to be queer. Although building up to the canon aspects of *Archie* makes sense, I've shown that Jughead has been written as aromantic

and asexual for decades. There is no origin story for the show to tell because Jughead was simply never interested in relationships or girls.

To return to my claim that *Riverdale* indicates that aro-ace representation is in Walter's first stage, the absence of Jughead's aro-ace identity is evidence of that. The 2015 *Jughead* comics pushed this representation into the second stage, where queer representation is a public spectacle, but they never would have gotten there without first depicting his aro-ace identity as a non-issue in the earlier comics. I think it's interesting that being a non-issue is indicative of invisible identities, but in entertainment, making an LGBTQ+ identity a non-issue is a blessing. In fact, being a non-issue in entertainment has a completely new connotation. By portraying a character's aro-ace identity as a non-issue, there is simply nothing for viewers to be upset about. The character's queer identity doesn't have to be a source of tragic-backstory, an essential plot point, or a controversial source of character motivation, but rather it is something that is inherently there. By depicting the character as completely content with their identity, entertainment can reinforce the legitimacy and normalcy of aro-ace identities. There are, of course, potential issues that come with normalizing LGBTQ+ identities such as overusing problematic stereotypes, as Walters point out, but to reach those issues, aro-ace characters must first be portrayed as unapologetically aro-ace on TV.

The fact that *Riverdale* is now in its third season, and Jughead and Betty are still in a relationship (they recently sang about choosing to focus on their teen romance) makes me lose hope. *Riverdale* is catering to sexualnormative and amatonormative norms, and that portrayal is representative of how society treats non-lesbian or gay queer identities. The act of aro-ace erasure alone is troubling, but the conversation surrounding the justification of that action is what troubles me more. Identity erasure rooted in

sexualnormative and amatonormative tendencies is harmful to the LGBTQ+ community, especially when it's evident in a widespread show like *Riverdale*.

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Sunnyside Daycare: An Authoritarian Regime's Playdate with Destiny

Denton Cohen

Introduction

After its highly anticipated release, Disney Pixar's *Toy Story 3* (2010) was heralded by critics as a heartwarming, poignant film that tells a timeless story of abandonment, growing up, and unconditional friendship. Curiously, and surely secondarily in the eyes of the average moviegoer, *Toy Story 3* also tells a story of the dramatic fall of an oppressive authoritarian regime during a time of unprecedented social unrest. Although the beautiful way it celebrates love and friendship is what *Toy Story 3* will rightfully be remembered for, its political overtones deserve just as much attention.

Toy Story 3 conveys its political themes throughout the scenes that take place within the walls of the tragically misnomered Sunnyside Daycare. After escaping the garbage bag in which they were mistakenly placed, Andy's toys—a close-knit crew of clever, wise-cracking children's playthings led by America's favorite cowboy doll, Woody—take refuge in a box marked for donation and are delivered to Sunnyside Daycare. Though at first the toys are excited to start their new lives—they haven't been played with in years—things quickly go south when they discover that Lotso, the warm, hospitable, strawberry-scented bear in charge of Sunnyside's day-to-day toy operations, is actually a despotic tyrant who exploits new toys for their labor. Like any dictator, Lotso relies on a military to maintain order in his regime. To preserve his stranglehold on the daycare's affairs and keep the toys from escaping, Lotso employs a militaristic cadre of loyal, physically imposing toys whom he entirely subordinates to his will. Ultimately, Lotso's reign of terror only comes to an end when his military defects and ceases to

defend him. After the toys escape, the final scene reveals that Sunnyside Daycare has undergone a dramatic facelift; it now appears to be an open, democratic society in which former military members and formerly oppressed toys live in picture-perfect harmony with one another (Anderson & Arndt, 2010).

The manner in which Lotso's regime is organized, the way in which it falls, and the political transition that follows in its wake mean that it can be analyzed as any other case of regime change can be: in the comparative perspective. In what proved to be an uncanny coincidence, the film was released almost exactly six months before the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, the event which set off a series of uprisings and mass protests that we now refer to as the Arab Spring. And as this paper will illustrate, *Toy Story 3's* main conflict—that of Andy's toys against the authoritarian Sunnyside Daycare regime—is a case study that bears both a remarkable resemblance, as well as a stark contrast, to the real-life cases that unfolded during the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa.

Treating Sunnyside Daycare as a case study, I will first use a comparative political theoretical framework to analyze the “institutional interests” of Lotso's military, as well as the “coup-proofing” measures instituted by Lotso to prevent the military from defecting. Then, I will examine the moment in which the military turns against Lotso—what was the ultimate factor underpinning its decision to defect, and which “coup-proofing” measures failed? I will then proceed to compare Sunnyside Daycare to cases of attempted regime change during the Arab Spring. By treating the film as a case study, I will explore and contextualize *Toy Story 3's* political themes and messages, specifically regarding democratization.

Theoretical Framework

Before 2010, scholars studying authoritarian regime change often ignored, or at least glossed over, the role of the military (Bellin, 2012; Makara, 2013; Pion-Berlin, 2016). However, the Arab uprisings of the early 2010's dramatically altered this dynamic (Bellin, 2012; Lutterbeck, 2013; Makara, 2016). The Arab Spring consisted of a wave of protests across the Middle East and North Africa, all of which were organized in opposition to each country's authoritarian governments. In a few cases, this social unrest resulted in relatively peaceful regime change, but these cases proved to be aberrations—a majority of the Arab uprisings resulted in violent repression of the demonstrators, or worse, full-fledged civil war. While the Arab Spring precipitated a spectacular torrent of social unrest, it resulted in a decidedly unspectacular amount of regime change and an even lesser amount of democratization.

In analyzing these different cases, scholars noted a pattern: the fate of each Arab uprising seemed to lie squarely in the hands of the military. In Egypt and Tunisia, the military defected, and both regimes fell; in Syria and Libya, the military splintered, and both countries erupted in civil war; and in Bahrain and Jordan, the military stayed loyal to the regime, and the uprisings failed (Bou Nassif, 2014; Gause, 2011).

As a result of this trend, post-Arab Spring scholarship has centered around two main questions:

- 1) What factors underpin a military's decision whether or not to defect?
- 2) What "coup-proofing" measures are commonly deployed by regimes to prevent military defections, and which are effective?

Institutional and Individual Interests

Bellin (2012), one of the few comparativists studying militaries in the Middle East before the Arab Spring, sees a military's decision whether or not to defect as a binary. For

Bellin, if a given military deems defection to be in its “institutional interests,” then it will defect, either by taking up arms against the regime or “staying in the barracks” while the regime is overthrown. Likewise, if defection is not within its institutional interests, the military will stay loyal to the regime and put down the rebellion. Many comparativists have adopted Bellin’s theoretical framework and devoted research to classifying the institutional interests of militaries—or members of a military—that influence its decision whether or not to defect.

Some scholars theorize that a crucial factor in whether or not a military will repress social uprisings is the state of “civil-military relations”—that is, the relationship between the military and the people. Thus, if the military is sympathetic to the cause of the protesters, it will be in its institutional interests to make way for reform instead of obstructing it (Lutterbeck, 2013). Furthermore, if the leaders of an uprising have personal ties to the military elite, this can reassure the military that they would be well-served by defection (Morency-Laflamme, 2018).

Another line of thinking is that a military will defect when the regime is perceived to be weak or destined to fail (Bellin, 2012; Brooks, 2013; Makara, 2013; Pion-Berlin, 2016). If a military “bets on the wrong horse” and supports the losing side, its reputation, and even survival, as an institution will be gravely threatened (Pion-Berlin, 2016). The perceived strength of a regime is difficult to quantify, but highly important in accounting for military behavior.

Another comparative theory is that a military will act largely based on economic and material factors when deciding whether or not to defect (Bellin, 2012; Pion-Berlin, D., Esparza, D., & Grisham, K., 2014; Tofalvi, 2013). Under this line of thinking, if a military deems it to be more economically expedient to stay aligned with the regime—owing to

patronage, the stability of the economy, defense-related resources, or any variety of monetary reasons—it will do so.

The realm of material interests is a useful place to examine a major theoretical fault line among comparativists. Especially when considering economic factors, some scholars argue for a disaggregated comparative approach in which the military is treated not as a *singular entity* but as a group of *individual actors* (Albrecht & Ohl, 2016; Bou Nassif, 2014). Bou Nassif (2014) stresses that, while a military typically acts as a unified bloc, during times of social unrest, scholars should view the military as a collection of individuals, each with their own distinct interests. For example, many comparativists believe that the economic interests of *individuals* in the elite echelon of the military are a salient factor informing individual and factional choices whether or not to defect (McLauchlin, 2010; Tofalvi, 2013). In other words, individual military members weigh the defection question with a keen eye for their own economic well-being.

Beyond material interests, some theorize that “organizational factionalization”—internal disputes between the regime’s leaders and factions (or individual members) within the military—can cause individuals to disobey regime orders even as others within the military do not (Albrecht, H. & Eibl, F., 2018; Makara, 2016). In addition, individual members of militaries care deeply about their own well-being, meaning they may be unwilling to defect if they fear severe retribution for their disloyalty (Pion-Berlin, 2016).

Coup-Proofing

Having defined the general institutional and individual interests of the military, I will now shift gears and examine the ways in which regimes manipulate the military in order to assure its loyalty during times of social unrest. This practice is known as coup-proofing, and authoritarian regimes have used it throughout history (Quinlivan, 1999).

The theoretical framework in which scholars evaluate modern forms of coup-proofing has been shaped in large part by Quinlivan's 1999 article, "Coup-proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East." In this paper, Quinlivan defines several typical modes of coup-proofing, exploring what each tactic seeks to accomplish and in what scenarios each tactic might be effective.

"Counterbalancing"—the practice of creating parallel security structures that use force on behalf of the regime—is one common technique used to dissuade the military from defecting (Quinlivan, 1999). Counterbalancing hypothetically weakens the position of military by creating other powerful state apparatuses (police, militias, intelligence agencies, etc.). This practice seeks to keep the military in check by closely monitoring its actions and imposing harsh penalties for disloyalty. This not only disincentivizes a military from defecting, but also partially disarms them of the ability to do so (Albrecht, 2018; Bou-Nassif 2015). In a counterbalanced regime, military defection may not be enough to topple the regime, provided that other apparatuses remain loyal.

Another method of coup-proofing is organizing a military along patrimonial lines (Bellin, 2012; Morency-Laflamme, 2018; Tofalvi, 2013). A patrimonial military is one in which the elite echelon is made up of family or close friends of the regime's leader(s). During times of social unrest, a patrimonial military will hypothetically remain loyal to the regime because it consists of the regime's closest allies.

To ensure that a military does not defect for economic reasons, regimes often coup-proof by providing the military with ample material incentives to stay loyal (Quinlivan, 1999). By supplying the military with substantial access to rents (extracted resources) and arms, a regime aims to accomplish two things at once: improve relations with the military, and dissuade the military from defecting for fear of losing access to these resources (Pion-Berlin, 2016). Additionally, Makara (2013) and Lee (2015) both

note that regimes can coup-proof not just by providing the military *as a whole* with access to rents, but also individual members of the military elite.

Below, I apply this theoretical framework to the case study of Lotso's military.

Case Study of Lotso's Regime

Lotso's Command

Sunnyside Daycare is organized in the vein of a typical personalist regime: Lotso is its dictator, and he holds absolute power over his servants and subjects. Though Lotso is an elderly toy—he walks with a cane and talks in a slow, Southern drawl—he exudes strength and grit. Like any effective dictator, he maintains a stranglehold on Sunnyside's affairs in part through intimidation and toughness. However, his methods of control supersede those of simple displays of strength; he practices it too. Lotso is the commander of a powerful, fearful military that consists of various loyal toys who carry out his orders. The military's duties include arresting troublemaking toys, policing the daycare's halls, and patrolling the border that separates Sunnyside from the outside world. Nothing comes in or out without the military's knowledge.

As with any military, Lotso's military has a certain set of institutional and individual interests, as well as a certain set of coup-proofing measures put in place to assure its allegiance. Thanks to his coup-proofing measures, Lotso's military has a low level of institutional interest in protecting the toys living in Sunnyside. The military does not coexist with the other toys; they have separate living quarters, and there is no evidence of any intermingling between the two groups. In fact, at one point, a flashback shows several toys desperately attempting to escape Sunnyside Daycare, only to be swiftly and violently quelled by the military. This is proof of a strained, if not hostile, state

of civil-military relations. This is clearly by design—Lotso has coup-proofed by ensuring that the military has virtually no connection to the people.

Lotso's coup-proofing measures also manipulate the material interests of the military. He organizes the military on patrimonial lines and doles out patronage left and right. Lotso allows his military to live in the Butterfly Room, the section of the daycare in which the older kids play. This is an immense privilege; Butterfly Room residents are free from the horrors of what can only be described as a "toddler anarcho-hellscape" that unfolds every day during playtime in the Caterpillar Room. Lotso also gives the military access to rents in the form of searchlights, an advanced alarm system, and fast toy trucks. Additionally, Lotso allows members of the military to gamble in a special room in the top of a vending machine and accrue individual material wealth—luxuries the rest of the toys in Sunnyside Daycare are not afforded. By providing the military with access to rents and economic privileges, Lotso creates a class barrier between the military and the other toys. Lotso intentionally ties the military's material well-being and elevated class status to his own status as dictator—if another ruler or governing structure were to come to power, the military would fear losing its economic privileges. Consequently, if the military wants Lotso to keep providing these privileges, it's implied that they must unconditionally follow his every order.

Lotso also levies coup-proofing measures aimed at dissuading individual members from disloyalty. In a surprisingly dark torture scene, Lotso ties up Buzz Lightyear in a chair and forcibly sets him back to "demo mode" in front of the military, using him as an example of the dire consequences for those who dare to defy him. He also counterbalances the military's power by creating a parallel security structure. Sunnyside Daycare is kept under close watch by a toy monkey who spends every night fixated on the daycare's twelve security cameras. The monkey functions as an intelligence agency,

allowing Lotso to keep tabs on every corner of the daycare. Although the monkey's role is ostensibly to prevent toys from escaping, he also is an effective means by which to surveil the military and guarantee their complete loyalty to the regime.

Lotso's Downfall

The constitution of Lotso's regime seems to be rock solid. He has instituted coup-proofing measures to manipulate the military's institutional and individual interests to be in line with his own. His military has shown no signs of insubordination throughout the majority of the film. How, then, does the state of Sunnyside Daycare deteriorate to the point of the all-powerful Lotso being thrown into a dumpster by his most loyal military confidant? As with many authoritarian regimes, the catalyst for the downfall of Lotso's regime is social unrest.

After executing an elaborate escape plan that Andrew Dufresne would be proud of, Woody and the rest of Andy's toys reach the precipice of liberation, only to be stopped by Lotso and his military. Andy's toys were trying to escape Sunnyside through the trash chute, but now find themselves cornered by Lotso's henchmen, precariously close to the dumpster while a garbage truck quickly approaches. Lotso needs the toys to stay at Sunnyside so they can be exploited in the Caterpillar Room, and he offers to peacefully accept them back into the daycare so long as they don't attempt to escape again. Andy's toys remain unified and flatly reject his offer, saying they would rather die than endure further oppression at Sunnyside. To punctuate the toys' defiance, in a comedic, off-beat declaration, Barbie proclaims that "authority should derive from the consent of the governed, not from the threat of force!" This prompts Lotso to order one of his soldiers to push them into the dumpster, and the death of Andy's toys seems imminent.

However, Barbie's proclamation of democratic values leads to the first of a series of military defections. Ken, one of Lotso's closest allies, expresses his solidarity with the toys' cause, and momentarily stops Lotso from pushing Andy's toys to their death. Ken's insubordinate actions undoubtedly owe to his romantic relationship with Barbie—this is an example of the importance of civil-military relations on military behavior. When Lotso throws him to the edge of the trash chute to be with the other toys, Ken stands up and proudly echoes Barbie's democratic call to arms: "Sunnyside could be cool and groovy if we treated each other fair. It's Lotso! He's made us into a pyramid, and he put himself on top!" Lotso turns to his military and threateningly asks them if they agree with Ken. Unsurprisingly, they remain unmoved. With the exception of Ken, Lotso's coup-proofing has worked expertly up to this point. Whether because of the patronage Lotso has doled out, their lack of sympathy for Andy's toys, or because of fear of their own punishment, none of the other military members have shown even an inkling of disobedience.

This all changes, however, when Woody exposes a lie that undermines Lotso's relationship with Big Baby, an oversized baby doll who is Lotso's closest companion and most relied-upon strongman. Big Baby becomes visibly distraught and begins to cry, which in turn causes Lotso to taunt him, much to the dismay of the rest of his military. This conflict (which, in its purest form, is organizational factionalization) causes Big Baby to become the first and only member of Lotso's military to actively take up arms against him. In a dramatic turn of events, Big Baby hoists Lotso over his head, and, as Lotso cries for help, throws him into the open dumpster. The rest of the military defects by doing nothing to protect Lotso (i.e. "staying in the barracks"). Their defection presumably owes to the fact that the perceived strength of Lotso's regime has reached its nadir. In the end, the decaying of the relationship between the military elite and the regime, as well as the exposing of the regime's frailty, secure Lotso's downfall.

It's worth noting that, despite all logic pointing toward a military takeover of the regime and the persistence of authoritarian rule, Sunnyside defies these expectations. During the credits scene, the movie reveals that Sunnyside Daycare has undergone a miraculous transformation into a utopian democracy. All of Sunnyside's citizens—former military and civilian toys alike—jubilantly welcome new toys to the daycare, grinning from ear to ear. Ken and Barbie proudly brandish a banner that reads "Welcome to Sunnyside! Now Cool and Groovy!" Joyous music rings out and colorful, 60s-style hipster decor abounds as the toys play in perfect harmony and bask in the glory of their newfound equality. The entire scene is a dizzying display of open democracy in its ideal state—a complete contrast to the bleakness and terror of the epoch of Lotso.

Comparative Analysis of Sunnyside's Downfall

The demise of Lotso's regime fits remarkably well in the greater narrative of military defection in the Arab Spring. First, and most simply, like every case in the Arab Spring, the regime's fate was contingent upon the military's behavior. Similar to Egypt and Tunisia, when Lotso's military defected, it resulted in the overthrow of the current regime.

More specifically, our case study provides yet another example of the importance of a regime's perceived strength during times of social unrest; all of Lotso's coup-proofing measures worked perfectly until it appeared that he was destined to lose power. This bears a resemblance to the situations of both Tunisia and Egypt, where, similarly to Lotso, Presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak each made respective last-ditch attempts to save themselves after their reputations were tarnished by massive popular demonstrations. These efforts only worsened the situation, and both of their militaries stood aside while they were forced to either flee the country (Tunisia) or step down (Egypt). Although all

three leaders employed a robust set of coup-proofing measures, their efforts proved to be useless when their perceived strength endured irreparable damage (Pion-Berlin, 2016). In contrast to these cases, in Bahrain, Syria, Iran, Jordan, and virtually every other country that experienced an uprising during the Arab Spring, the regime never reached a point where it appeared exceedingly weak to the military and general public. Accordingly, none of these countries experienced complete military defection (Bellin, 2012; Pion-Berlin, 2016).

Despite these similarities, the aftermath of Lotso's downfall provides a stark contrast to the events of the Arab Spring. Unlike Sunnyside Daycare's sensational transformation into a utopian democracy, every Arab Spring uprising led to either a continuation of the status quo, bloody civil war, or a drawn-out transition to tenuous, quasi-democratic rule. Even in Tunisia, supposedly the most "successful" case of Arab Spring democratization, it was only after a long period of social unrest, political assassinations, and government purges of political parties that they achieved a marginal form of representative democracy (Macdonald & Waggoner, 2018). In terms of forging a pathway for widespread democracy in the Middle East, the Arab Spring is rightly considered to have been a resounding failure. Generally speaking, the fall of an authoritarian regime rarely, if ever, leads to a process of smooth, bloodless democratization. Sunnyside Daycare is certainly an anomaly in this sense.

Analysis of Sunnyside's Democratic Transition

Although Disney Pixar's *Toy Story 3* contains a case of regime change that is tailor-made for comparative analysis, its portrayal of a seamless transition from authoritarian rule to democracy is just as well-suited to cultural critique as it is to comparative critique. The over-the-top way that the directors present Sunnyside's new "cool and groovy"

democracy hints at a deeper meaning. Perhaps the directors included Barbie and Ken's vague, hollow calls for democratization—as well as the exaggerated portrayal of the democracy itself—as subtle commentary on our unrealistic American expectations for the spread and success of democracy. Or maybe they meant the Sunnyside dystopia to symbolize the egalitarian, post-racial, and post-discriminatory America that we should aspire to be, and are so painstakingly far from realizing. *Toy Story 3* was released in 2010; both of these political statements would make sense in the greater cultural context of its time. Criticisms of democratic idealism and American exceptionalism begin to make more sense in the context of a post-Iraq War America in the midst of its worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Or perhaps this is wrong—maybe the directors had no political intentions and merely included the credits scene and democratic allusions for comedic and cinematographic effect. That *Toy Story 3* is a movie whose primary target audience is very young certainly supports this conclusion. However, even if this were true, Sunnyside's abrupt democratic transition would still tell us something about how cinema pushes unrealistic narratives of American ideals. Regardless of directorial intentions, the image of Sunnyside Daycare as a shining beacon of hope after years of dictatorial darkness should stand out, not only as an outlier in the comparative political realm, but also as a way of coming to terms with the fact that Hollywood's idealistic expectations for democracy are anything but representative of the harsh realities of the physical world.

Closing Thoughts

This case study has several obvious limitations—namely, that Lotso's military is made up of only a handful of toys, which grants a disproportionate amount of power and sway to individual actors when compared with the military as a whole. In real life,

militaries are much larger, and one person's defection is far less likely to influence the behavior of entire military. Also, Lotso's regime has no foreign allies or foes, unlike every country in the Middle East and North Africa that was affected by the Arab Spring. Foreign pressures have significant ramifications for the actions of a military (Bellin 2012); this factor is not reflected at all in this case study. And most obviously, this case is a work of fiction; it cannot, and should not, carry as much weight as a real case of military behavior during a time of social unrest.

However, while *Toy Story 3* is a work of fiction, and while this fact does indeed undermine some of its credibility, it also endows it with some of its most compelling strengths. Works of fiction, such as *Toy Story 3*, grant its viewers omniscience; we get access to what happens behind the scenes and between influential individual actors in a way that real life simply doesn't allow for. We will never know the truth about interactions between the military elite and regime leaders in Egypt and Libya, nor will we know the full reasoning behind the military's choices in Tunisia and Bahrain, but *Toy Story 3* provides us with an unvarnished view of the private affairs of everyone involved. Works of fiction present third-party observers with the unique opportunity to know the full story and draw conclusions from firsthand viewership instead of unverified rumors and *a priori* reporting.

Thus, by examining *Toy Story 3* as a case study, I contributed a new case to the growing body of research on military behavior during times of social unrest. I also unearthed new meaning within *Toy Story 3* itself by examining and contextualizing its depiction of idealistic American attitudes toward democratization. These findings demonstrate the value of applying the comparative perspective to works of fiction. Future comparative research should use fictitious cases in literature and cinema as a valuable resource that contains both cultural significance and theoretical utility. This drastic

expansion of the comparative lens could reveal further intersection between normative theories in political science and pop culture, all while revolutionizing the way that comparativists think about their field as a whole.

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The American Ideal in the Age of Trump: An Analysis of Captain America

Mason Peeples

“Whatever happens tomorrow you must promise me one thing. That you will stay who you are. Not a perfect soldier, but a good man” - Abraham Erskine (*Captain America: The First Avenger*)

Introduction

On December 7, 1941, the United States suffered an unprecedented attack on its own soil. The government’s response was swift and decisive, and the United States was soon propelled into one of the worst conflicts the world has ever seen. Three months later, Marvel Comics (then known as Timely Comics), published the first issue of a brand-new comic series: *Captain America Comics*. The cover was vibrant and impactful, boasting forty-five thrilling pages. It depicted a man dressed in red, white, and blue punching Adolf Hitler in the face. The issue told the tale of Steve Rogers, a young patriot who undergoes an experimental procedure that transforms him into a super soldier. Rogers then dons the mantle of Captain America and is sent overseas to battle Axis forces. The comic was an instant success, and soon enough, Timely was publishing Captain America comics all across the country on a monthly basis. Cap battled his way through World War II and even beyond, making him one of the only pieces of wartime propaganda to survive beyond wartime.

On September 11, 2001, the United States suffered an unprecedented attack on its own soil. The government’s response was swift and decisive, and the United States soon initiated one of the worst conflicts the world has ever seen. All the pieces were in place for Captain America to triumphantly return as a national symbol of patriotism, strength, and honor, as well as militarism and intervention. And yet, despite this eerily similar

geopolitical landscape, Captain America appeared as something nearly unrecognizable from how he began. Pop culture analyst and comic book critic Cord Scott notes that instead of charging fearlessly into battle to fight terrorists abroad, Captain America was “[fighting] off skinheads who were threatening the life of an Arab-American merchant in New York, then [making] a point of noting that there has to be a distinction between those who look different, and those who think differently and wish to do the U.S. harm” (337). Noticing this dramatic shift in ethos, many critics and commentators have sought to explain how Captain America has adapted as a character to fit in with an ever-changing political and cultural landscape. There exists a wide breadth of literature analyzing Captain America’s evolution from his inception during World War II to his reaction to 9/11. From this literature come two dominant interpretations of Captain America’s character: the “Perfect Soldier” or the “Good Man.”

Proponents of the “Perfect Soldier” interpretation argue that Captain America is simply a tool of propaganda; his primary function is to serve as an allegory for whatever the interests of the United States government are. Under this interpretation, any change that Captain America undergoes is simply him adapting to the new “orders” that have been issued to him by the government.

The “Good Man” interpretation views Captain America not as a representation of what America is during any given period of history, but what America should strive to be. Captain America is a moral agent who will always do what is right, regardless of what the government may believe. This version of Captain America also holds America to a higher standard, and will actively dissent against it if he believes that it is no longer doing what is right.

Although there have been many experts who have argued for both of these interpretations, there exists a significant gap within the literature concerning Captain

America's role in the political era of Trump. How should Captain America behave in an age where Americans are more divided than perhaps ever before and issues of hate crimes and domestic terrorism are on the rise? This paper seeks to answer these questions by using the "Perfect Soldier" and "Good Man" theories as a guiding framework for analyzing the Captain America comics that have been published since Trump's election. This analysis reveals that Captain America's sustained cultural relevance can only be explained under the Good Man interpretation. Furthermore, this interpretation allows for a deeper understanding of Captain America's role as a symbol of World War II-era American values in conflict with a political order that no longer prioritizes them, although further research is required on this subject. Before analyzing where Captain America stands currently, however, it is first important to understand these two interpretations and the historical context that supports them.

The Perfect Soldier

It is difficult for Captain America, a character who represents American values, to remain consistent when those values have changed greatly since his inception. How does a character who was forged in the xenophobic, nationalist fires of World War II propaganda maintain cultural relevance? Writer and comic book analyst Charles Moss argues that Cap does so by adapting to the political climate. He writes that, "Captain America has always been a freedom fighter. But what kind of freedom he fights for depends on the era of modern American history" (Moss). Moss points specifically to the 1950s, when Captain America became the "commie smasher" and his comics prominently featured, "Asian communists, Soviets, and American commie spies." History provides strong evidence for Moss's argument, as the commie smashing adventures of Captain America were eventually retconned, "[reflecting] the changing political climate of post-

McCarthy America, in which McCarthyite Americanism was deemed to be false patriotism" (Dittmer 632). Moss's ultimate conclusion is that Captain America operates as a sort of "Perfect Soldier" for the American government; battling whoever the American government deems is a threat, and advocating for whatever geopolitical order the government currently supports. Even his character's origin is symbolic of this, as Captain America is a "super soldier" created by a government experiment. Advocates of the Perfect Soldier theory, such as Moss, believe that ultimately Captain America is nothing more than propaganda, and all he needs to remain relevant "[is] an enemy who'd placate the government" (Moss). When these real-world enemies change, so do the enemies that Captain America faces.

As the United States prepared to enter the conflict in Vietnam, Captain America approached an interesting crossroads. Captain America had historically been a symbol for American involvement in conflict, but this conflict was different. This time, there was no objectively evil force that was threatening America, no attack on American soil that interventionists could point to. This meant that Captain America's involvement in the Vietnam War would be critical for the future of the character. Pop culture analyst Mike Milford argues that because Captain America is "an 'anthropomorphic embodiment of the American nation,' each of his adventures is transformed into an enactment of American values"; so, if Captain America decided to enter into the Vietnam conflict, it would mean that that conflict was absolutely in line with American ideals (Milford 625). Additionally, up until this point Captain America had been the perfect soldier that some scholars describe him as, battling America's geopolitical enemies since World War II. Because of this, Captain America faced pressure from both sides of the ideological spectrum when it came to Vietnam, but "[a]s the war ground on, it became clear that the majority of the readership wanted Captain America to remain in the United States, and, for the most part,

he did" (Dittmer 632). While some may argue that Captain America abstaining from intervening in Vietnam serves as support for the Good Man theory, it is worth noting that Captain America did not take any sort of anti-war stance, which the Good Man theory dictates that he should have. While it may be true that Captain America did not involve himself in this conflict, he still did not dare to question the authority of the US government in any respect.

Supporters of the Perfect Soldier theory point to Captain America comics that followed 9/11 as further evidence that Captain America is merely a tool of American nationalism. Comic analyst Cord Scott believes 9/11 provided an opportunity for "the one character that was created for battle against America's enemies, Captain America," to "[return] for his 'original purpose'" (337). Scott posits that while Captain America had changed in the 60's and 70's, it was not because of a shift in the attitudes of Americans, but rather due to a simple lack of enemies for Captain America to fight. Scott argues that after 9/11, Captain America is essentially the same as he was in 1941. Scott believes 9/11 gives Captain America his new "marching orders," as he is presented a new enemy to fight in the form of "the terrorists that threatened the American way of life" (337). This dynamic directly mirrors the comics of the 1940s, in which "Captain America is seen exacting justice (in the form of beating fists) on Hitler, various storm troopers, or some other sort of military regime" (Scott 334). Captain America also underwent a visual change, as his costume was altered to make him look more like a soldier, which Scott believes "led the reader to assume that Captain America had a direct military connection to the unit around him" (337-338). Indeed, Captain America heavily reflected the ideals which the government sought to display: courage, strength, and most importantly, unwavering patriotism. Scott's argument is similar to Moss's, that being that Captain America serves the exclusive purpose of battling the enemies of America, whoever they

may be. Both Scott and Moss argue that even though there have been several changes to American culture since Captain America's creation, his role as an allegory for US interests is too deeply engrained within his character for him to truly change.

The Good Man

Those who contend with analysts such as Scott and Moss believe that there was one event in American history that permanently altered the fabric of Captain America's character: Watergate. In July of 1972, the American people were forced to confront the fact that their president had committed several crimes. Americans everywhere were shocked and appalled, and Captain America was no exception. Captain America was placed in an almost unwinnable position, how could a character who is "visually anthropomorphized' American ideology" and the "ultimate national icon" possibly survive if the ideology he represented was corrupt (Milford 614)? Steve Englehart, the writer of Captain America comics at the time, recognized this dilemma and created a solution that reflected American's attitudes at the time. He created a story that involved Captain America tracking down an evil organization known as the "Secret Empire." He eventually follows the leader to the White House, and the secret identity of the leader is revealed. Englehart heavily implies that the leader is actually the president through Cap's reaction to the leader's identity. After realizing this, Captain America, who once "[t]rusts in [his country's] basic framework, its stated goals, its long-term virtue," is now "crushed inside. Like millions of other Americans, each in his own way, he has seen his trust mocked" (Englehart 18). This betrayal ultimately led to Captain America abandoning his mantle and taking up the role of Nomad, the man without a country. The Nomad stories were used as a means of conveying that the traditional American values that Captain America had once represented were no longer present in American society. Sociologist

Mike Dubose contends that Captain America's transformation to Nomad also "[started] a trend of questioning 'the political underpinning for superhero actions,'" a trend that he believes continues into the modern age of comics (933). Captain America abandoning his role portrayed how many Americans felt, that the country America had become was no longer worth protecting.

Dubose argues that Captain America's eventual return represents the solution to the identity crisis that many Americans felt after Watergate. Dubose believes that Captain America returned because he decided "that America needed protecting even from those within America who tried to destroy the American Dream, and that was a task for Captain America" (927). Similarly, sociologist and comic analyst Jason Dittmer argues that this series of stories transformed Captain America and explicitly affirmed something that had been "implicit since the Captain's return in 1964: he was, despite his government origins, a rugged individualist" (633). He contends heavily with the Perfect Soldier theory, arguing that "[even] when [Captain America] pursued American foreign policy goals, he was not directly affiliated with the American government" (Dittmer 633). Unlike Moss, Dittmer and Dubose believe that the Watergate scandal forced a permanent transition in Captain America, and caused a "disconnection between what Captain America is meant to represent (the idealized American) and the source of the geopolitical narratives in which he has to operate" (Dittmer 642).

Dubose cites the more contemplative and postmodern nature of Captain America comics immediately following Watergate as further evidence that the character was no longer the same. These comics find Captain America reflecting that "the American Dream [he's] sworn to defend—is often light years removed from the American Reality" and that "people aren't so easily pigeonholed into good guys and bad guys" (Dubose 928). Proponents of the Good Man believe that ultimately, Watergate transformed Captain

America into an ideal for what America could, and should, become instead of what it is during any given era, and “[a]lthough Captain America started out as a government agent, he ended up transcending politics and authority . . . which is what truly made him a hero” (Dubose 931). The Good Man theory still interprets Captain America as a reflection of sorts, but instead of being a reflection of what the American government deems important, he is a reflection of the disconnect between what America should be and what it is in reality.

Mike Milford, siding with both Jason Dittmer and Mike Dubose, argues that while Captain America might be tasked with battling those who would seek to do America harm after 9/11, his focus is more on protecting innocent lives than it is on protecting Americans specifically. When describing what happened on September 11th, Captain America refers to it as the murder of “almost three thousand defenseless human beings” (Reiber 121). Captain America views the September 11th attacks as a tragedy not because of their relation to America, but because of the loss of human life that they caused. This is almost directly opposite to Captain America’s priorities at his inception, which were fighting “the vicious elements who seek to overthrow the US government,” as well as enemies who “threaten [Americans’] independence” (Simon and Kirby 8). Captain America’s severance from American politics is apparent here, as he is no longer just a hero for Americans, he is a hero for innocent people everywhere. Milford specifically articulates that Captain America also has a more dynamic view of the US government in the comics following September 11th. While the Captain America of the 1940s was an avid advocate of American involvement in conflict, the comics in 2001 “used Captain America to argue for a measured response to 9/11” (Milford 625). Proponents of the Good Man theory also point to the villains presented in post-9/11 comics as evidence of a permanent shift. Villains in the 1940s were often portrayed as exaggerated caricatures of

America's enemies that embodied "Nazi ideology in stark contrast to the American principles" (Milford 621). After September 11th, Captain America is confronted with villains who cause him to confront those very ideals. The issues of Captain America after September 11th follow Captain America tracking down a terrorist with a burned face that attacked a small American town. The terrorist offers to turn himself in if Captain America can guess where he's from, telling him;

[g]uerillas gunned my father down while he was working in the fields— with American bullets. American weapons. Where am I from? My father didn't know that the Cold War was at its height—remember? When the Soviets were your great enemy? The evil empire? My mother didn't know that our nation was in the throes of an undeclared civil war between your allies and the allies of evil when she ran to find her husband. My mother was interrogated and shot. Our home was burned. That fire gave me my face. But fire didn't make me a monster. You know your history, Captain America. Tell your monster where he's from. . . You can't answer me. . . You played that game in too many places... The sun never set on your political chessboard—your empire of blood. (qtd. in Dittmer 641)

For the first time, Captain America is confronted with a human being who has suffered at the hands of the country he stands for. These comics find Captain America reconsidering the values he fights for, wondering if Americans are "hated because [they're] free—free and prosperous and good? Or does the light [Americans] see cast shadows that [they] don't" (Reiber 127). These issues present both the reader and Captain America with a villain who has understandable intentions, and a real reason to hate America. Dubose notes this change by arguing that what is evil about these villains is "not necessarily their morals but their desire to inflict their morals on others" (929). This clearly contrasts with

the villains presented in earlier issues of Captain America comics, whose only reason for hating America was that they were evil, and therefore must hate what is good. Even if Captain America is once again battling the enemies of the American government, these enemies are so distinct from the ones presented at the time of his origin that they cannot be so easily compared.

Although the American public's initial response to the attacks on September 11th was very similar to the response after Pearl Harbor, analysts like Milford and Dubose contend that Captain America's response could not have been any more different. They argue that by 2001, Captain America has come to represent what America must strive to be. After September 11th, this means warning against hatred and fear. Captain America does this by informing Americans that, "[t]error's not a four-dollar knife. Or an envelope of powdered death. It's the hate, the blind hate, burning in a stranger's eyes" (Reiber 42). Americans can't sink to a blind hatred of their enemies, or those who look like them, like they had once done in 1941. It's clear that this is not the same Captain America that readers were introduced to during World War II, and those who defend the Good Man theory believe it is reductive to explain this change as nothing more than a soldier receiving new orders.

Captain vs. America

While not much literature analyzing Captain America comics published after Trump's election currently exists, the Perfect Soldier and Good Man theories established in existing literature provide a solid framework through which these comics may be analyzed. In doing so, it becomes clear that even if Captain America was at one point the American government's perfect soldier, he no longer is. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the first 6-issue story arc published after Trump's election entitled, "Winter in

America.” This arc, written by Lenil Francis Yu and Ta-Nehisi Coates, finds Captain America confused, betrayed, and isolated by the nation that he swore to protect, and ultimately has him questioning the very values he stands for, all of which does not sound like something the perfect soldier should be doing. These were the first Captain America comics to be published in the wake of Trump’s election, and serve as an effective means for determining what Captain America’s reactions to that event are. The arc follows Captain America trying to track down a group of former American soldiers turned terrorists while at the same time trying to regain the trust of the American people.

The first issue opens with Captain America battling a group of domestic terrorists on the National Mall, and it is immediately clear that this version of Captain America is entirely different from the one readers saw back in 1941. Firstly, Captain America is not seen here fighting some foreign body; he is fighting white, blonde haired, blue eyed American soldiers, people who look just like him. He then proceeds to describe himself as a “soldier at home or away. A man loyal to nothing...except the dream” (Coates and Yu 8-9). This language immediately invokes the Good Man theory. Captain America makes it clear that he is no longer a symbol for blind loyalty to any political order, rather he represents commitment to an ideal. He fights to maintain and uphold that ideal, regardless of whether or not that results in him fighting for the American government. While Captain America does refer to himself as a soldier, he does not do so with the burning nationalism he once had. Later, Captain America even admits that “[he is] a warrior who hates war” (Coates and Yu 10). If Captain America truly was a perfect soldier who only represents the interests of the government, what interests would these statements be reflective of? The values that the current American political order prioritizes are not subdued nationalism and pacifism. It is clear from these first issues

alone that while Captain America is still inherently a national symbol, he is isolated from the nation's government or politics.

As the arc continues, Captain America's symbolic role in modern American society becomes increasingly clear. Because the terrorists that he is fighting are the products of "super soldier" formulas, Captain America reflects that "every time [he sees] another of them... [he sees] another part of [himself]" (Coates and Yu 27-28). In many ways, this arc forces Captain America to battle himself and the values that he stands for. These terrorists are symbolic of the values that Captain America once stood for being appropriated for a violent and hateful cause. That dynamic mirrors what many of Americans have experienced since Trump's election. Many people find it difficult to identify with America and the values that it represents since those values have been associated with such a divisive election and president. Captain America goes on to explain that he is "upset and tired" of "having to prove that no part of them is part of [him]" (Coates and Yu 30). This feeling is a direct reflection of the shame that many felt after Trump was elected. Movements such as "#notmypresident" reflect the desire that many Americans felt to prove that the election was not a reflection of who they were as Americans or as people. That despite the fact that those who support Trump and those who hate him appear the same on the surface, just as Captain America appears the same as the terrorists he is fighting, there are fundamental differences in their ideologies that distinguish them. Captain America experiencing this feeling lends further credence to the Good Man theory. If Captain America still was the Perfect Soldier that many argue he was at his origin, it seems unlikely that he would find himself reflecting on the divide between himself and others who claim to embody those values that he fights for. If Captain America was still a tool of propaganda meant only to represent the government's interests, he would return to battling America's foreign enemies and forwarding the American way of life abroad,

instead of battling domestic terrorists while commenting on the political divide that is fracturing the American way of life.

The arc eventually ends on a cliffhanger, with Captain America's original Nazi Nemesis, the Red Skull, being resurrected. Even this ending is heavily draped in symbolism. One could easily draw a connection between the return of the Red Skull and the recent "resurrection" of neo-Nazi activity in the United States. And although the return of Captain America's original nemesis may make it seem like the character has not changed all that much since 1941, the juxtaposition of this "new" Captain America with a symbol of the "old" one, that being the Red Skull, brilliantly demonstrates all the ways that Captain America has changed since his inception. Sure, Captain America once again finds himself battling a cartoonish Nazi supervillain, but in 2019 he also finds himself battling his values, his history, and even his own government.

Conclusion

Captain America's value as a character extends beyond that of other superheroes. His origin and status as an inherently national icon gives him the unique ability to provide commentary on American politics and culture in a way that most other fictional characters cannot. On the other hand, this role has provided a challenge for the character and forced him to continuously adapt to a dynamic political landscape. It is clear that as a result of this, Captain America has been forced to diminish, and eventually sever, his connection to the American government. This severance is what has allowed Captain America to maintain cultural relevance well beyond any other piece of wartime propaganda. Although this paper has established two primary interpretations of the character as well as which interpretation the current iteration of Captain America more closely resembles, further research is required to determine whether or not these two

interpretations are the best metric for evaluating the character. This paper accepts these two interpretations as a valid framework for evaluating modern Captain America comics, but it does not compare them to other interpretations to determine whether or not they were best. And while that was never the goal of this paper, further research into that question could illuminate this topic further and implicate future evaluations of the character.

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Teamwork Makes the Dream Work

Skylar Smith

Introduction

Sometimes a pat on the back is all you need. Any time I am struggling with a task or activity, a simple “you got this!” can be the difference between giving up or not. Whether someone is cheering on the sidelines, helping with a homework problem, listening to a rant, or helping pick out an outfit for a date, small demonstrations of support enhance relationships. Consistent demonstrations of support, grand or not, create an understanding of appreciation and love in close relationships, which can help people accomplish feats of all kinds. Partners need support, especially in stressful situations. Stressful situations form the basis for *Fear Factor*. *Fear Factor* is a competition-style reality show that ran on MTV from 2001 to 2012. Individual contestants, siblings, best friends, couples, and more combinations compete and face commonly held fears to win prize money (“*Fear Factor*”). Scholars across multiple disciplines provide commentary on interpersonal communication in normal settings, but they lack commentary on interpersonal communication under the effect of more extreme emotions, including fear. Can *Fear Factor* be used to add knowledge to the field of interpersonal communication? I say, yes. Due to its fear-inducing qualities, *Fear Factor* reveals much about the contestants and their strength in communicating to each other. The show *Fear Factor* introduces emotionally charged, stress-inducing, and fearful situations to its contestants, and only those contestants who use consistent, efficient, and effective interpersonal communication succeed at the tasks.

I will first outline what interpersonal communication is and how it applies to *Fear Factor*. Then I will discuss what kind of communicative support enhances close relationships. I will also explain the basic tenets of fear and which specific type of fear *Fear Factor* tries to elicit from its contestants, and finally, I will use several episodes as case studies to specifically demonstrate what methods of interpersonal communication lead to success, as well as examples that lead to failure.

Interpersonal Communication

Before I define interpersonal communication, I must first describe the type of relationships we see in *Fear Factor*. The contestants fall into three groups: 1) romantic couples, which include dating couples, married couples, and sometimes couples who are on and off in their relationship or broken up completely; 2) friendship pairings; 3) and familial pairings. These relationships are interpersonal relationships, which *Reflect and Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication* defines as “the emotional, mental, and physical involvements that you forge with others through communication” (McCornack 36). These contestants know each other before coming on the show, and by engaging in interpersonal communication, the contestants further develop their relationships with each other. Also, McCornack states that “interpersonal communication changes the participants’ thoughts, emotions, behavior, and relationships” (21). Therefore, due to interpersonal communication’s ability to influence behavior, the communication the *Fear Factor* contestant pairings exchange throughout the tasks can either help or hurt their chances of success. Due to the time constraint of most of the tasks on *Fear Factor*, effective interpersonal communication skills are imperative to performing well under the pressure from the time and the fear the contestants might be experiencing. I argue if a partner supports their partner and communicates that

effectively, the chances of success are higher, compared to a situation in which someone uses ineffective communication, like berating.

Interpersonal relationships foster support between two people and contribute to how that support plays a role in winning *Fear Factor* tasks. In “Skilled Support Within Intimate Relationships,” Tracy A. Revenson states that “intimate dyadic relationships are the primary source of support and capitalization for most individuals, and support is very frequent within such relationships (qtd. in Rafaeli and Gleason 21). The intimacy in these dyadic, or paired, relationships enhances the ability of each partner to support the other. *Fear Factor* creates a high level of stress between the competing pair, which may cause normal communication methods to break down. Only those who can maintain consistent, supportive methods of communication will succeed.

There are different support types between partners, and Pamela Regan in *Close Relationships* describes six different support types—forms of interpersonal communication—that partners provide when in need. The two relevant to *Fear Factor* are emotional and appraisal support. Emotional support consists of warmth and concern. For example, “You’re important to me” (Regan 155). Though all support types are helpful, emotional support fosters an especially strong feeling of closeness, well-being, and positive outcomes between partners (Regan 157). More consistent with the communication in the show is appraisal support, otherwise known as esteem support. This support type builds self-worth and goes hand in hand with emotional support (Regan 155). Examples of appraisal support include, “I know you’ll figure it out” and “you’ll get through this” (Regan 156). Emotional support relies on the existing relationship between partners, while appraisal support focuses on elevating one partner’s esteem. These matter in *Fear Factor* because the contestants often engage in both of these support types when competing in the tasks. It is perfectly normal to hear

“You got this!” or “Go! Go! Go!” when watching the show. The tasks’ high energy level and time constraints contribute to the urgency in this support communication. I argue that consistent use of the mixture of emotional and appraisal support are necessary to contestants winning and beating other contestant pairings. Though non-verbal methods of support, like high-fives or hugs, are important, I will focus on verbal support communication.

To further bolster my argument, in “You Can’t Always Give What You Want: The Challenge of Providing Social Support to Low Self-Esteem Individuals,” the authors express that there are ways of supporting that are helpful, including “expressing care, concern, interest, and affection,” which adds to the definition of emotional support (Marigold et al. 57). However, certain kinds of support are deemed “almost always unhelpful,” including criticism of and putting blame on a partner (Marigold et al. 57). Scholars in many different fields, including psychology and communication, recognize similar definitions of emotional, appraisal, and social support that benefit and hurt close intimate relationships.

Nevertheless, problems arise when two people infer different messages from the same collection of words. For example, if a person yells at their partner, “Go! Go! Go,” the partner may take that as appraisal support: “My partner trusts me and is encouraging me to get through the task.” In contrast, the partner may also take that message as, “My partner does not believe in me and does not think I can pull my weight.” The difference between those two inferences is vast. Though some messages may be lost in inference, I still maintain my argument that in *Fear Factor*, consistent emotional and other support increases closeness between partners and success in tasks. Next, I will discuss how *Fear Factor* creates such a need for efficient and effective interpersonal communication.

Fear

Fear is the premise of *Fear Factor*. Threats of harm arouse fear in many different animals, including human beings (Ekman 152). Paul Ekman in *Emotions Revealed* discusses how fear can be present within all people, learned or unlearned. Sometimes fears can be developed for no rational reason, and other times, it can be a stimulus naturally within people (153). Consequently, "it requires a well-developed capacity for compassion to respect, feel sympathetic toward, and patiently reassure someone who is afraid of something of which we are not afraid" (Ekman 153). *Fear Factor* involves people with different fears already ingrained within them, whether they learned the fear throughout their life or naturally are afraid of it. Partners with differing fears affect the performance of the team in different tasks because one partner might feel no fear of, for example, heights, but the other partner suffers a debilitating fear of heights. Whether it be bugs, rats, small spaces, heights, or other stimuli, fear affects all people. *Fear Factor* uses this knowledge to create the most dreadful tasks for its contestants. Also, fearful situations may propel people into "hiding and fleeing," which could mean quitting a task in *Fear Factor* (Ekman 153). With *Fear Factor*, I surmise that the personal relationship contributes to the reduction of the freezing, hiding, or fleeing responses to fear, therefore creating a better chance of success at overcoming this fear.

Each task involved in each episode of the show elicits fear from the contestants by using commonly held phobias to make up the tasks. From watching multiple episodes from each season, I can attest that *Fear Factor* generally uses heights; certain animals, usually some type of bug or rodent; and water to elicit fear from the contestants. The potential psychological effects of these tasks trigger a need for the partner's support during the task. Paul L. Gower in the *Psychology of Fear* details different components, varieties, stimuli, and determinants that contribute to fear's

complexity. Gower then discusses phobias, which he lists under the category of “Fear Related Syndromes” and defines as “an irrational, wild fear that is capable to conceal the reasonable thoughts of a person” (32). Phobias are necessary to discuss when analyzing *Fear Factor* due to the purpose of the show, which is to elicit as much fear as possible in a short amount of time during a task. Contestant pairings must be aware of how their fear differs between them, so they can recognize when the other will be in most need of support.

Case Studies

In Season 6 Episode 16, “Flying High/Junkyard Canine Attack/Vertical Bus Drop,” Todd and Jeanette, friends and the winners, engage in both emotional and appraisal support as their primary means of interpersonal communication. In Todd and Jeanette’s first task, they have to search through a pit of mud for hidden containers. Throughout this physically arduous process, both contestants aim to support the other. Todd repeats “Keep trudging” and “Attagirl!” to his partner, showing, through appraisal support, that he believes in her ability to complete this task. Jeanette reacts by maintaining her focus, not letting the time ticking stress her out. Getting that consistent approval from Todd helps her push herself mentally to get through the task. Using positive language during these high-intensity tasks is imperative to the success of the pairing, and without his support, I do not believe that she would have worked as hard and as quickly to sift through the mud. He gave her the extra nudge to finish the job. They both engage in emotional and appraisal support throughout the rest of the tasks, which leads them to take home the money.

Season 4 Episode 25, “Tumbler Transfer/Grab and Grind/Tanker Truck Flag Build,” demonstrates another pairing with strong, consistent, interpersonal

communication. Siblings Erica Olivarez and Fredo Marquez compete against three other sibling pairings for the win. In the first task two large tubes with square holes scattered throughout are suspended high above the ocean. Erica and Fredo must run back and forth across these tubes, narrowly avoiding falling through the square holes, to pass each other flags. A stressful task for most, Erica struggled with getting to the edge of the tube due to her fear of heights. She could not confidently place her feet at the rim of the tube, but Fredo recognized this fear in his sister, and his communication demonstrates this awareness. Almost as a mantra, Fredo repeats, "You're good. You're good." Erica continues to run across the tube with this support. In the final task Fredo tells Erica, "The money's in your pocket. We just got to do this first." His communication techniques exude confidence, positivity, and comfort. Fredo's interpersonal communication skills help create a successful partnership with his sister, and the show's host, Joe Rogan, notices by saying, "He's really good at being supportive and encouraging." No other pair in this episode match Fredo and Erica's level of effective communication, and we learn a lot from Fredo in this episode. His support carried his partner to the end, and without it, it is not certain if they would have been the champions.

Continuing with a close analysis of *Fear Factor*, Season 5, Episode 10, "Dual Heli Disc/ Spider Head Game/Sinking Counter Balance," also demonstrates how providing strong emotional support leads certain contestants to finish a task. This episode poses three tasks. In the first task the sibling pairs stand handcuffed on a small disk, suspended from a helicopter, and they must pull up a rope from the bottom of the disks, unlock themselves, and jump in the water to stop the clock. In the second task, the siblings must put their heads in two conjoining square boxes that are filled with spiders. The siblings must transfer keys to each other, while the spiders are crawling all over them and biting them. The third task presents an underwater challenge, with both siblings swimming in

a pool to unclip weights from the bottom. The fastest time in all of these tasks wins, and the prize is fifty thousand dollars. I will focus on the second and third tasks with brother-sister pairs, Chip and Kelly Bromley and Mitchel and Jennifer Tannis. Mitch and Jennifer Tannis dominate the second task from an interpersonal communication standpoint. When *Fear Factor* host Joe Rogan removes the covering to the conjoined boxes filled with spiders of all sizes, Jennifer bursts into tears. The other contestants look fearful of the dreaded boxes, but Jennifer is visibly agitated. She expresses that spiders are “the one thing I’m terrified about.” Jennifer admits her phobia of spiders before she has to approach the boxes. The other contestants now have a hope that Jennifer will call it quits and not compete because of her fear. When the time comes for Jennifer and Mitch to put their heads into the boxes, Jennifer constantly repeats, “I can’t do it,” but Mitch draws on his relationship with Jennifer to encourage her to participate in the task. He softly but firmly repeats, “Look at me” over and over to persuade Jennifer to come out of her “I can’t do it” mantra. He then uses a more forceful tone to push Jennifer to put her head into the box fully so they can participate, saying, “Jen, push up here and look up here right now.” Though they did not win the money at the end, Jennifer and Mitch complete the task in the second-fastest time. Their effective interpersonal communication helped them complete the task Jennifer feared most. Jennifer and Mitch reveal their closeness during this difficult encounter. Relying on the trust she places in Mitch, Jennifer participates despite her almost debilitating phobia. Mitch’s consistent appraisal support helps Jennifer conquer her fear, and Mitch’s clear, verbal, affirmations provide efficient interpersonal communication to finish the task.

Participating in the same episode are Chip and Kelly, the winners. Throughout the entire episode, Chip and Kelly maintain a cool and collected demeanor. Unlike Jennifer, both Chip and Kelley do not experience any debilitating fear throughout this episode,

which helps them navigate the tasks. In task three they decide on a strategy before beginning the task, choosing to remove two weights at a time from the bottom of the pool, as well as dividing the number of weights they remove equally between them. Their clear and decisive communication throughout the task leads to Chip and Kelly taking the win and the fifty thousand dollars in prize money. Chip and Kelly do not engage in clear signs of emotional or appraisal support, but they discuss what they need from each other. They show effective interpersonal communication that works for them. Both Jennifer and Mitch and Chip and Kelly demonstrate how intimacy in their close, personal relationships creates a foundation of trust that enhances interpersonal communication during *Fear Factor* tasks.

Fear Factor also demonstrates partnerships that are not successful in completing the tasks in the time allotted. Sometimes contestants fail in tasks because of bad luck or a phobia that prevents them from being able to complete a task. Other times, the lack of communication and support between partners creates a rift that fosters negative attitudes. One example of this lack is also in Season 6 Episode 16, "Flying High/Junkyard Canine Attack/Vertical Bus Drop." Contestants Jacki and Matt, who are dating on and off, show signs of a lack of emotional support between them. Their aggressive and negative language towards each other ultimately leads to their demise in the last task. The first task, as I mentioned earlier, involves each contestant digging through a mud pit. When Matt is struggling in cutting the rope that will allow Jacki to search her mud pit, she repeatedly yells, "Come on! Harder!" Her language demonstrates she wants him to finish his part of the task faster, so she can go. There was no support in her language, only fear of losing the task. When Jacki starts her search for the box in her mud pit, she suddenly realizes that she cannot find it. She stressfully calls that she cannot find the box, and Matt berates her by saying, "You're killing me!" Wow, way to support your partner. In the final

task, one partner must make their way down a ladder suspended high above the ground. When the partners meet each other, they will run to a pile of sand and dig through it to find the pieces they need to stop the clock. The whole time Matt works on his rope to get down the ladder, Jacki practically screams at him, "Come on, baby!" Her loud and incessant communication only adds to the stressful nature of the task. She does not calm her partner, who is already frustrated with how he is performing the task. Jacki and Matt's poor skills in interpersonal communication, especially with how little emotional or appraisal support they exchange with each other, demonstrate how some types of support can be unhelpful and contribute to them losing.

Conclusion

Anne Spencer says it best: "Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee, and just as hard" ("Anne Spencer Quotes"). Having strong interpersonal communication skills leads to a greater understanding of the people close to you and of how to succeed in tasks involving people closest to you. Contestant pairings in *Fear Factor* have a strong personal connection before coming on the show, which helps with trusting in the communication they receive from each other. From personal experience in stressful situations, I know I would listen more attentively to someone who knows me well and cares about me. It is natural to be willing to respond to someone with whom you have a strong personal connection. Though intimacy between contestant pairings helps with the level of support and trust between the partners, effective interpersonal communication is the ultimate factor in succeeding in the *Fear Factor* tasks. When looking at *Fear Factor*, we learn that constant support in stressful or fearful connections is imperative to succeeding.

Why does this matter? Learning and being able to communicate effectively with other people, whether you have a relationship with them or not, can be valuable. People have to interact with others every day to get what they want, even if it's something as simple as ordering a coffee from a barista at their local coffee shop. Being proficient in interpersonal communication leads to a higher chance of success in your preferred outcome. There is much to learn from pop culture about interpersonal communication, but I focus on *Fear Factor* due to the stressful nature of the tasks assigned. I urge scholars and other researchers to focus on how different emotions affect interpersonal communication, including fear, anger, sadness, and more. *Fear Factor* provides solid, repetitive evidence that effective interpersonal communication can help partners succeed even in the most stressful situations. Scholars can help partners learn this skill and successfully make the transition from communicating effectively in calm situations to communicating effectively in stressful situations by studying partner pairs that show success under extreme conditions and delineating strategies that other partner pairs can learn and use in their own relationships. In all my research, I found a lot of information on fear, interpersonal communication, and support, but I did not find anything on how these topics influence each other. People may experience diverse emotions every day and understanding how to alter our communication to accommodate people's different, complex, emotions would be very valuable to all people. Basically, communication that works in a calm setting may not work in another, more stressful, setting.

Also, fear remains an emotion that affects all people. *Fear Factor*, while sometimes trivial, presents common fears and phobias in a manner that desensitizes people to these fears. People should push themselves to discover what scares them and do their best to overcome it, because fear can often be debilitating. *Fear Factor* sets up a platform for people to discover more about themselves and their relationships with people closest to

them, and I think that is powerful. Who knew that a reality competition show could teach you so much? Learn more about how you communicate and how you manage fear. Watch *Fear Factor*.

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