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ELON
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School of Communications

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The Elon Journal focuses on undergraduate research in journalism, media and communications.

The School of Communications at Elon University is the creator and publisher of the online journal. The first issue was published in spring 2010 under the editorship of Dr. Byung Lee, associate professor in the School of Communications. Dr. Harlen Makemson, professor in the School of Communications, has overseen the publication since fall 2018.

The three purposes of the journal are:

- To publish the best undergraduate research in Elon's School of Communications each term,
- To serve as a repository for quality work to benefit future students seeking models for how to do undergraduate research well, and
- To advance the university's priority to emphasize undergraduate student research.

The Elon Journal is published twice a year, with spring and fall issues.

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A Celebration of Student Research

I am so proud that Elon University is home to one of the nation's only undergraduate research journals in communications.

This twice-a-year publication provides opportunities for our students to extend themselves beyond the classroom and investigate new areas of interest tied to their fields of study. Through research, our students further develop critical thinking skills, creativity, problem-solving abilities and intellectual independence.

This journal reflects what we enjoy seeing most in our students – continued intellectual maturation.

These articles make us aware of the solitary hours that students spend in research, as well as the untold hours in which students and teacher-mentors work together to revise a paper for public consumption. These relationships and experiences often transform a student's future career path, making these projects truly life-changing.

This journal is a celebration of undergraduate research, as well as a celebration of learning, critical thinking and exploration.

Dr. Rochelle Ford, APR
Dean, School of Communications

Editorial Board

More than 20 faculty members in Elon's School of Communications helped to select six undergraduate research papers for the spring 2022 issue. The papers, written in senior-level courses, are nominated for consideration by faculty mentors, then undergo a double-blind peer review process by the Editorial Board.

Professors who served on the Editorial Board for this issue were Bill Anderson, Israel Balderas, David Bockino, Lee Bush, Naeemah Clark, Vic Costello, Brooks Fuller, Kelly Furnas, Shaina Dabbs, Dan Haygood, Denise Hill, Alex Luchsinger, Jenny Jiang, Laura Lacy, Byung Lee, Karen Lindsey, Derek Lackaff, Julie Lellis, Barbara Miller, Phillip Motley, Tom Nelson, Jane O'Boyle, Glenn Scott, Kathleen Stansberry, and Qian Xu.

Thanks also go to Tommy Kopetskie, who proofread articles, designed the online publication, and updated the publication's website.

Editor's Note

Nearly 20 years ago, writer Dan Gillmor coined the term "former audience" to describe the bloggers and citizen journalists who were shaping public discourse and upending the old media order. In the era of social media, the phenomenon of users creating meaning has only mushroomed, as the spring 2022 edition of the *Elon Journal* demonstrates.

For example, Olivia Archer's study examines how Instagram facilitates parasocial relationships between fans and professional athletes, with sometimes distressing outcomes. Similarly, Madeline Distenfeld's article probes how TikTok users shape debates around fast fashion and sustainable fashion. In a slightly different manner, Jeremy Palladino uses focus-group methodology to explore how audiences perceive portrayals of the communication disorder aphasia in film and television.

Legacy media's portrayals of constituent groups in society is also of concern in this issue. Matisse Gilmore's article uses quantitative methodology to explore the appearance of marginalized identities in television sitcoms, Emily Holland discovers the ways in which women's appearances in Super Bowl commercials have changed in recent years, and Michaela VanDerVelden examines whether news reports of black and white mass shooters changed after the 2020 emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The articles in this edition are a testament to the strength of undergraduate research produced in the School of Communications. Please enjoy the fine work by these students.

Harlen Makemson
Professor
Editor, *Elon Journal*

**Elon Journal of
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Toxicity and Parasocial Relationships Between Athletes and Fans on Instagram

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in
an undergraduate senior capstone course in communications

Abstract

Athletes of this generation have a job beyond their sport—the upkeep of their image. With the increased reliance and usage of social media, athletes became entities in themselves and were encouraged to engage in brand-building activities. Fans now can interact with athletes on a much more personal level. This research examines the social media platform Instagram and its potential role enabling toxic, parasocial relationships between athletes and fans. A quantitative analysis of Instagram comments was performed to learn how fans of professional tennis players Naomi Osaka and Eugenie Bouchard engaged with online content. This study is important to understand how social media opens society to a more direct and personal form of communication. Social media shifted boundaries and changed perceptions of what is accepted and appropriate between fans and athletes.

I. Introduction

Athletes are humans, and humans aren't always okay. Professional tennis player Naomi Osaka echoed these ideas after receiving a \$15,000 fine for skipping a press conference after her first-round win at the French Open in May of 2021 (Futterman, 2021). Osaka, who had a relatively positive relationship with the media, continued to miss these meetings and was warned she risked higher penalties and potential default from the tournament. Osaka sparked a long-overdue conversation about the responsibilities of athletes and their perception in the media. Fans and critics took to social media to express their opinions in any way they could.

Within days, many news outlets released pieces framing Osaka as selfish and privileged. Osaka's situation is readily applicable to other athletes of the era. When athletes transgress, social media keeps users up to date while providing them a platform to directly communicate and engage with athletes (Pegoraro, 2019). These platforms offer the ability to grow connections between athletes and fans but are fueled by toxicity and hatred (Kavanaugh, 2019).

Professional Canadian tennis player Eugenie Bouchard also varied from the traditional athlete path and chose to broaden her portfolio through modeling and broadcasting after struggles in tennis. Bouchard took her fame and used it to grow her brand, receive endorsements and cultivate an active social media presence. Unfortunately, like Osaka, her willingness to share with the public contributed to the growth of

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parasocial relationships, with both redeeming and toxic qualities. Social media forced two women from extremely different lives, cultures, and backgrounds to share a similar experience.

This research examines how the social media platform Instagram enables the existence of toxicity between athletes and fans. Through primary and secondary research, this study attempts to discover a correlation between Instagram and toxic, parasocial relationships. One-thousand Instagram comments were coded from Bouchard and Osaka's accounts to learn more about their following and how their fans engage with their online content.

Background

Eugenie Bouchard rose to fame after reaching the semifinals of three Grand Slams in 2014 (Roberts, 2021). While Bouchard's tennis success is noteworthy, her looks also earned her widespread popularity, and she was offered numerous endorsement and modeling offers. Even though her recent results aren't as competitive, she remains extremely marketable in her matches and has millions of followers on Instagram and Twitter (Roberts, 2021). Since her career peak was in 2014, fans scrutinize her for lack of ability and reliance on her physical appearance (MacPherson, 2021).

Naomi Osaka is a Japanese tennis player who gained a following after winning the 2018 U.S. Open and the 2019 Australian Open. Osaka is the highest-paid female athlete and former world No. 1 player but encountered pushback when she announced she would not participate in any after-match news conferences during the French Open (Futterman, 2021). The officials of the tournament fined her \$15,000 and threatened to suspend her. Osaka withdrew from the tournament. Osaka took to social media to share her ongoing battle with depression since 2018 and was met with a range of responses from fans (Strauss, 2021). While some fans applauded her bravery, others responded with outrage.

Osaka and Bouchard were selected for this study because of their engagement with Instagram and their large following. Additionally, both professional athletes faced controversy and received backlash from fans. This makes them appropriate for a case study to analyze toxic parasocial relationships between athletes and fans.

II. Literature Review

Athletes and Brand Building

Athletes have become entities in themselves and are encouraged to engage in brand-building activities. Their personal lives are public, and they face scrutiny and praise over social media platforms (Su, 2020). Athletes who didn't adapt with this advancement of technology missed opportunities to strengthen their brand through endorsements and sponsorships. Athletes with a strong brand identity developed the ability to influence consumers' behaviors and establish a stronger connection to their following (Kunkel, 2019). Individual athletes, like Tiger Woods and Roger Federer, achieved celebrity status through their accomplishments in their respective sports and sponsorships with well-known brands.

While not every athlete has a well-established brand, research indicates athletes with strong brand identities are of extreme value to their teams and potential partnerships (Su, 2020). This practice of branding athletes through mass-mediated channels emerged in the 1920s, with stars like Bobby Jones (golf), Bill Tilden (tennis), and Babe Ruth (baseball). These stars engaged with radio personalities and journalists to promote themselves to the public through a range of marketing tools (Sanderson, 2014).

The presence of social media emphasizes the need for athletes to have both a distinguished professional image and mainstream media persona (Parmentier, 2012). Developing a strong professional image requires athletes to both excel in their sport and properly engage with fans through the creation of an authentic persona (Sanderson, 2014). Without talent and athletic ability, the athlete is not equipped with the tools for success. Even with the athletic talent, athletes sometimes fail to develop strong professional images. David Beckham and Ryan Giggs are both recognized as phenomenal soccer players. However, Giggs' visibility was limited without a recognizable persona, whereas Beckham's brand flourished (Sanderson, 2014). The stark contrast in their brands is attributed to public, visible persona cues that created opportunities for enhanced consumer awareness (Parmentier, 2012).

Athletes and fans are not the only groups that recognize the possibility and power of social media. Sports organizations strategically use social media to launch their own campaigns to create buzz around certain events (Breves, 2021). Wimbledon tennis organizers produce content on Instagram and Snapchat as a cost-effective tool to attract sports consumers. Social media adds tremendous business value to organizations, acting as an important promotional tool that provides publicity and an interactive forum (Filo, 2015). Corporations also capitalize on social media as they build relationships and affiliations with athletes. From a business perspective, sports brands acknowledge the popularity of social media and want to partake in developing their brand to remain current and newsworthy. They devote significant resources and time to encourage athlete and fan relationships, hoping for substantial positive feedback and engagement. The Super Bowl, World Cup, and Olympics all invest notable resources to heavily integrate social media into their marketing (Filo, 2015). Using social media and building partnerships with athletes allows brands to leverage opportunities with consumers.

Growth and Repair of an Athlete's Brand

As the value of an athlete's brand grows, social media proves to be the ideal channel for creating these strong images and further developing fan, sponsorship, and endorsement relationships. Without social media, athletes lose an important ability to create, manage, and send messages directly to their target audience which allows for deeper brand association and awareness (Su, 2020). Professional athletes typically rely on three primary social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram (Frederick, 2019). These platforms are strategically used to share authentic personal content and offer their personalities to fans (Sanderson, 2014). Athletes' popularity can be measured through social media metrics, like followers and the amount of interaction with posts. Brazilian soccer player Neymar constantly interacts in an online discussion on his Twitter with his 67 million followers and frequently posts on his Instagram account (Hwang, 2017).

Athletes recognize the efficiency and ability of social media as a brand-building tool and use it for brand extension (Su, 2020). Greater media exposure is linked to accumulating a larger fan base, showing athletes how exposure and new connections can benefit their careers (Kunkel, 2019). Some athletes consider this and specifically join high-profile teams or capitalize on their breakout performances in major tournaments (Parmentier, 2012). Social media facilitates successful brand-building strategies and allows athletes to maximize their value in and out of their sport.

Collegiate athletes may take these metrics into consideration when deciding where to pursue their careers. For example, University of Mississippi football had 82,000 followers on Instagram in 2020, whereas Louisiana State football – a primary rival for recruiting high-quality athletes – had 408,000 followers (Su, 2020). Athletes are often aware of these differences and cognizant of the potential benefits down the road, especially with the NCAA's recent approval of the Name, Image, and Likeness clause. This allows college athletes to profit from their brand through endorsements, appearances, and business ventures.

It is never too early to manage social media followers and grow a fan base as an athlete. Having a greater number of followers before joining a new team is associated with gaining a larger number of followers after joining (Parmentier, 2012). Brand-building activities should therefore be at the forefront of new athletes' priorities. On Instagram, verified account status proves to yield a greater following and allows for more brand growth (Cipolletta, 2020). Sponsor brands consider metrics and view them as a tool to try to guarantee a higher return on investment (Kunkel, 2019). Athletes who join high market share teams are likely to see a greater impact and development of their brands while also receiving outside benefits and favorability amongst fans (Su, 2020).

Social media's popularity also allows athletes to occupy a greater role in pop culture, being heavily viewed as entertainers and icons (Sanderson, 2014). Not only is performance on the field important, but character and actions matter as well. Therefore, when athletes transgress, regardless of where or when, they face severe backlash (Pegoraro, 2019). These problems create reputational issues, damaging their brand and any sponsorship or partnerships. Since an athlete's brand became a valuable commodity, athletes look to social media to engage in communicative processes of repair to stop further damage to their public image.

Women athletes notably receive more mass media coverage for their transgressions compared to their athletic accomplishments (Toffoletti, 2018). In March 2016, Maria Sharapova tested positive for meldonium, a banned substance by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) in January 2016 (MacPherson, 2021). March 11, Sharapova turned to Facebook to release a statement claiming full responsibility while also defending herself (Pegoraro, 2019). This transparency and use of social media allowed her to directly communicate with a large group of people and protect her career.

Athlete and fan relationships

As athletes become more active on social media, they are subject to more attention from fans. As fans have more access to information, some develop parasocial relationships with specific athletes. The term “parasocial relationship” was first coined in the 1950s, as mass media such as television created the illusion of face-to-face relationships between performers and spectators. Interactions within these relationships are typically one-sided, incapable of mutual growth, and controlled by the performer (Horton, 1956).

Sports celebrities are a prime example of people in parasocial interactions (PSI). PSIs can be defined as, “A media user’s reaction to a media performer such that the media user perceives the performer as an intimate conversational partner” (Klimmt, 2006, p. 292). These relationships impact a fan’s thoughts, feelings, and emotions towards themselves and the athlete. For example, fans who supported and identified with Magic Johnson were more concerned about the risk of contracting AIDS. Fans who supported and identified with O.J. Simpson were more likely to believe he was innocent of murder charges (Perse, 1989). In more recent times, these bonds are strengthened by the access and availability of information on social media platforms that allow fans to see more private moments of athletes.

Athletes realize the communication potential of these platforms and willingly provide more private information in hope of developing a stronger presence and accumulating a larger following. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram have subsequently become a permanent fixture in the athletics industry (Sanderson, 2014). Fans rely on these forms of communication since they are quick and dynamic, allowing them to readily insert themselves in discussions with the desired group (Kunkel, 2019).

With this development of media, fan and athlete interactions accelerated and shifted in a way never seen before (Kunkel, 2019). This new media affords fans opportunities to engage with athletes. However, these new outlets and abilities of communication do not guarantee the civility of fans. Growing research indicates a large amount of cruel, hypermasculine, and negative commentary about athletes or fans (Toffoletti, 2018). While new media provides athletes opportunities of self-presentation and self-defense, it also allows fans the ability to give advice and provide critique or unwarranted comments. This shift in mindset from seeking advice to giving advice demonstrates how increased access to sports figures caused fans to become more brazen and direct in their interactions (Sanderson, 2014). These relationships might be marked by hateful language or any form of condemnation.

It is also important to consider the role of gender in media depictions of sport. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses reveal women’s athletics attract less coverage than male sports (Wynn, 2021). This under-representation instills ideas of female athletic inferiority and reinforces the idea that female athlete accomplishments and endeavors are of less interest than men (Toffoletti, 2018). Additionally, women’s sports media is typically focused on appearance, including sexual and aesthetic elements of the athlete, whereas men receive more focus on their more masculine qualities (Wynn, 2021). Female athletes often face unrealistic expectations to look and act in certain ways. They are expected to embrace more widely accepted views of femininity and heterosexuality to garner more attention, media coverage, and deals.

Also, when women are broadcasted, they are shown in more provocative and sexualized ways (Kavanaugh, 2019). It is not uncommon for female athletes to face severe objectification and sexualization by media and fans (MacPherson, 2021). Social media, therefore, perpetuates decade-long ideas of sexualizing female athletes. In 2016, Paige Spiranac, a golfer and sports commentator, shared her experiences in a live interview about the patterns of abuse she faced through social media sites (Kavanaugh, 2019). The hostility and abuse contributed to her depression and thoughts of taking her own life. Heather Watson, a British tennis player, shared a similar experience of death threats through social media (MacPherson, 2021).

In summary, past scholarship has established that social media can augment an individual’s brand and strengthen fan relationships. Research indicates audiences are more impacted when athletes share a deeper connection and a greater sense of duty to their fans. Consequently, athletes are held to unrealistic standards, creating constant turbulence and a greater likelihood of being shamed over minor violations.

Additionally, in previous instances of athlete transgressions, athletes engaged in communicative work to repair their images and protect their livelihoods. When an athlete’s actions do not follow social norms, athletes face severe reputational damage and fall victim to public scrutiny, especially public shaming through social platforms. These acts of public shaming involve contentious, threatening, discriminating, or vulgar comments. The current study will build upon past scholarship to examine how Instagram users use the platform to create toxic, parasocial relationships with athletes.

III. Methods

Data collection began by identifying the 10 most-recent Instagram posts by Eugenie Bouchard (2.1 million followers) and by Naomi Osaka (2.8 million followers) published between August and October of 2021. Notably during this period, Osaka faced backlash for her withdrawal from a Grand Slam event due to mental health reasons. Bouchard faced criticism because of a perceived overreliance on her beauty and lack of hard work. Then, 50 user comments were chosen for analysis from each of the 20 total posts (1,000 total comments).

This quantitative content analysis intended to observe the phenomenon of parasocial relationships without directly engaging with fans or athletes. Content analysis acts as a systematic and objective procedure in describing communication. Specifically, conceptual analysis was used to examine, quantify, and tally the presence of specific ideas. The research aimed to measure the perceptions, feelings, and emotions of fans engaging in communication via Instagram.

To analyze and interpret the collected data, a spreadsheet separated and divided five categories of comments. When coding the data, the research was quantified based on frequency. Each comment collected was thematically coded in one or more categories. Tennis Positive comments mention tennis performance or tennis-related accomplishments and behavior in a positive manner. Tennis Negative comments offer unwarranted and critical advice towards tennis performance or tennis-related behavior. Personal comments mention behavior and occurrences outside of tennis. These comments involve family, intimate issues, relationships, and possible transgressions. Vulgar comments are specifically sexual comments, mentioning and objectifying bodies. These comments are solely oriented around the physical aspects of the athlete's bodies, regardless of whether they are positive or negative. Lastly, Threats are comments meant to communicate some intent of harm, whether it is physical, emotional, or psychological.

To guarantee manageable and accurate analysis, the text was reduced into words or sets of words and phrases. Comments including emoticons were disregarded because their meanings were up for interpretation and vary cross-culturally.

IV. Findings

The research method for the study was a quantitative content analysis completed on Instagram comments from professional tennis players' accounts. There was a total collection of 1,000 comments, 500 from Bouchard's page and 500 from Osaka's. Overall results of the analysis are in Table 1.

Table 1

	% of Tennis Positive	% of Tennis Negative	% of Vulgar	% of Personal	% of Threats
Osaka	7.6%	7.6%	1%	82%	.2%
Bouchard	2.8%	14.8%	5.8%	83.2%	.8%

Osaka results

An overwhelming portion of the comments on Osaka's page (82 percent) fell into the Personal category. Many of these comments for Osaka related to a tennis-neutral topic, mental health, unsolicited advice, or her appearance. Personal comments typically indicated the commenter felt a connection or more interconnected relationship with Osaka than naturally presumed. These comments included commentary not relating to her career, and instead fixated on other aspects of her life. One comment on a post read, "My baby in Rome" while another read, "I am so grateful for your existence."

The next most common category was a tie for both Tennis Positive and Tennis Negative comments at 7.6%. Tennis Positive comments explicitly mentioned tennis performance or tennis-related actions in an uplifting and supportive manner. Some examples include, "Naomi lost a match but won hearts" and "True legend for women in sports." Tennis Negative comments typically referred to her momentary departure from tennis and how she was falling behind. A few examples include, "This is what happens when you take your

eye off the ball, you lose,” and “I thought you should have been a champion, instead you play for money, not fun or honor, its [sic] time to go home.”

Only 1% of the comments of the 500 comments were coded as Vulgar and .2% of that same sample coded as Threat. Vulgar comments objectified or sexualized Osaka’s body. It is important to note these comments were coded differently from basic and generalized comments like “Beautiful” or “Stunning.” Vulgar comments include language like, “U are sexy as fuck” and “Never wanted to be a cushion so bad,” in reference to a cushion she was sitting on.

Since Osaka was recently the center of controversy regarding tennis and mental health, a cross-evaluation between the Tennis Negative category and Threat category was also performed. Only one comment (.2%) coded as both Tennis Negative and Threat reading, “Stop throwing tantrums, stop saying poor me, and grow up. Don’t let the fans down or else.” Therefore, 7.8% of comments fell into the Tennis Negative and Threats when combined. In general, 3.2% of Osaka’s comments included Tennis Negative comments that overlapped into another category. For example, one user commented, “Focus on the game, not the glamour.” These comments generally offered unsolicited advice about an unrelated aspect of her life as well as tennis.

Bouchard results

More than 8 of 10 comments about Bouchard were Personal. These comments were similar to the contents of Osaka’s, but also included references to her newfound blossoming career in either modeling or broadcasting, her life choices, or her intelligence. A range of examples includes, “Dumb girl,” “How do brands keep hiring you” or on the other end of the spectrum, “Wonderful commentator, wonderful woman.” Tennis Negative comments were subsequently coded as next popular with 14.8% of the results. Tennis Negative comments included aggressive and direct insults about her lack of ability. Examples include, “The face you make when you can’t win any matches” and “Glad you’re away from tennis, good riddance.”

Just under 6 percent of the comments were coded as Vulgar. These comments typically made inappropriate and sexual comments about the shape, size, and position of Bouchard’s body. Some comments involved fat-shaming like, “Your figure is so fat don’t eat chocolate” while others made inappropriate references to porn like, “I guess tennis didn’t work, now you are trying to cash something. Go on OnlyFans to make good money.” Only 2.8% of comments were Tennis Positive. Outside of Threats, Tennis Positive comments were the least frequent on her page. Threats accounted for .8% of comments.

Overall, it seems both players received a similar number of comments coded as Personal (within <2%) and an extremely low percentage of comments coded Threats. Bouchard experienced a higher number of Tennis Negative comments while Osaka received an equal amount of Tennis Positive and Tennis Negative comments. Additionally, Bouchard was exposed to overall more Vulgar comments.

V. Discussion

An extremely notable finding was the high percentage of comments coded as Personal on both Bouchard and Osaka’s accounts. Osaka’s comments were more uplifting, whereas Bouchard’s typically had more negative leanings. Both athletes had over 80% of their comments fall into this category. While the Personal category varied slightly for each athlete, the results give insight into the relationships between fans and athletes. Personal comments were those that mentioned something beyond tennis. Since Osaka and Bouchard are known for their professional tennis, any comments that deviated from this main topic demonstrate fans taking interest in their personal lives. These interests and acts of engagement manifested themselves in the fan’s viewpoint of the athlete and contributed to an unrealistic feeling of familiarity.

Therefore, this study demonstrates that Instagram supports parasocial relationships. The results indicate use of Instagram heavily contributes to the creation and further development of parasocial relationships between athletes and fans. This is supported by the number of comments in the Personal category, showing how comfortable and at ease fans felt when addressing athletes’ personal lives. Fans constantly offered their input on athletes’ lives, as if they had the athletes’ best interest at heart.

The data also shows that while Vulgar, Tennis Negative, and Threat comments existed, the coded results comprised such a small percentage of the overall comments that it would be inaccurate to characterize the general trend as toxic. An argument could be made more for toxicity with Bouchard, being that a sizable

chunk of 20.6% of comments fell into the Tennis Negative category and Vulgar.

While the data does not indicate a high percentage of Vulgar or threatening comments, Personal comments contained constant attacks on both athletes' self-worth and ability. Osaka, for example, was constantly attacked for her "weak" mental state and told she needed to focus on tennis and less on money. Several comments noted how apparently willing she was to participate in ads but couldn't be bothered to play a tennis match. The tone of comments was condescending and judgmental, like, "See dear, you will never major in the future, cause [sic] you are too focused on ads now." Bouchard was also constantly ostracized from the tennis community, being labeled a fraud and a quitter.

Additionally, many people were quick to make assumptions and label the athletes. Most people in the comments talked to both athletes in a familiar tone. The comments mirrored those to be expected of close family and friends. Typically, the Personal category included comments on physical appearance, questions about life, unsolicited pieces of advice, or some form of a proclamation of love. Bouchard was not only labeled "talentless" but also had her personality attacked in multiple situations. She was called a "bimbo," "dumb," and "uneducated." Bouchard faced many more objectifying comments about her physical appearance and body than Osaka. Regardless of the content of the post, she was victimized by a stream of name-calling and sexual harassment. Some references include her being called a "porn star" and "cow with breasts." Other comments were extremely dismissive of her tennis talent and said her body was her main attraction, calling her an "attention whore" and "retarded lesbian." These comments were very direct and severe, indicating an obvious comfort level the fan feels to the athlete.

An argument could be made that the online and anonymous nature of the comments allowed fans to feel more distant and less connected with the athlete. However, regardless of the medium of communication, fans still felt comfortable enough to attack and tear down strangers, as if they were owed an explanation or deserved to be a part of their previous successes.

Osaka's comments exemplified these explored ideas of fans sounding entitled. Overall, it seemed as if Osaka's fans were very entitled about her recent break from tennis and felt as if she owed them more. Comments coded as Personal called her authentic, brave, and strong or would diminish her issues and call her weak and lazy. These comments would also refer to how unhappy and tired she looked as if fans knew Osaka personally, beyond the tennis courts. Comments exuded disappointment and a desire to get back the old version of Osaka, whom they loved and supported.

For both athletes, it is extremely important to note that the image and caption of the Instagram post impacted the type of coded comments received. Bouchard's posts about tennis had a high number of Negative Tennis, while her pictures of sponsorships and exploration of a career in broadcasting were met with much more enthusiasm. Similarly, Osaka's pictures of vacation were met with waves of encouragement, gushing about how much she deserved a break from tennis. Her pictures featuring old tennis images, however, were met with immediate pushback and judgment.

Evidence that Instagram provides an accessible platform for parasocial relationships was found in the high number of comments that fell into the Personal category. It is abundantly clear that the intimate sharing and documentation of the athletes' lives prove to act as the perfect medium for fans to engage and comment on their thoughts. Social media allows a high volume of fans to have access to more intimate details of their life, creating an illusion of closeness and friendship that would have never been possible without a similar platform. Instagram allows for these feelings of closeness to develop such strong bonds that fans comment like they have a vested interest in the athlete's life.

While Instagram has the power to enhance an athlete's brand and build stronger relationships, it also gives fans more freedom of expression. Athletes are encouraged to put their lives in the public sphere to engage fans, hoping for supportive and majority positive feedback. While the data does not support the existence of majority toxic comments, these hurtful opinions are still a prevalent issue. Despite the thousands of wide-ranging daily comments athletes receive, they potentially see and are impacted by the waves of negative comments. Beyond the toxicity, the danger of developing parasocial relationships is extremely apparent and likely leads to creating a disillusioned state of comfort for the fan and their presumed relationship with the athlete. This imagined feeling of comfort and closeness likely propels and provides them the confidence to post negative comments.

Limitations

There are a few existing limitations on this study. Most notably, only 1,000 comments were coded. While this is a seemingly large sample of comments, the results may have varied if more data were collected. These potentially varying comments could have discovered different underlying trends and therefore led to different conclusions, regarding the toxicity of parasocial relationships between athletes and fans.

In addition, since Instagram is a platform available internationally, comments written in another language were disregarded to avoid translation errors. These comments might have fit in a different category and therefore influenced the overall percentage of comments within different categories.

Finally, the content of the original post has a clear impact on the comment section. For example, Osaka included a post mentioning her birthday, and the first 50 comments were variations of "Happy Birthday." These comments, therefore, were all coded within the Personal category. The Birthday post was omitted for one calculation to confirm that its inclusion in the data had an insignificant impact on the overall results – the difference was less than one percent. Instead, the post acts as a model of how the original content directly influences user comments. Similar trends also appeared within Bouchard's posts. Posts revolving around tennis typically had higher percentages of comments coded as Vulgar and Tennis Negative. Posts about Bouchard's blossoming broadcasting career or endorsements received a much more positive response. Therefore, it is fair to presume a different sample of posts from these athletes could bring much different results in the comment analysis.

VI. Conclusion

The development of social media and accumulation of users create a strong community and push towards celebrities having a distinguished and continual online presence. This study specifically looked at Instagram as an interactive platform, offering a relevant example of one social media outcome. This study does not allow for generalizations about other platforms but is important to gain an understanding of the growing social media universe. While Instagram offers athletes brand-building opportunities that generate financial benefits, it also allows fans to take a more vested interest in the personal lives of athletes. This access to information leads to a feeling of familiarity and ease that encourages a versatile range of comments directed towards individual athletes. These feelings of familiarity can quickly escalate to an overwhelming consensus of entitlement that manifests itself in hate-fueled comments.

This research looked how toxic, parasocial relationships can develop on Instagram. While these findings did not indicate high levels of toxicity, it is important to acknowledge its presence. The level of comfort that enabled even one person to post egregious commentary revolving around physical appearance, performance, or ability is notable. Social media gives people the courage to attack athletes personally. Everyone who views these types of comments can counter the intrusion and blatant act of disrespect or add to it. Athletes give people entertainment, role models, dreams, and more. The least they can receive is respect on their platforms.

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A Content Analysis of How TikTok Creates Conversations Around Sustainable and Fast Fashion

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Abstract

Social media has provided a unique opportunity for individuals to share information and opinions, and TikTok's rise in popularity among Generation Z has been astronomical in connecting youth and communities around the world. Users have taken to TikTok to discuss pressing matters, specifically fast and sustainable fashion. This quantitative study examines TikTok hashtags to determine the conversations being discussed on this matter. The findings of this study suggest that TikTok users are creating content to produce meaningful conversations surrounding sustainable and fast fashion.

I. Introduction

Technology and the rise of social media have shaped the way generations think, build communities, and quickly became a core part of existence for many individuals. TikTok's rise to fame has made it the most popular app among adolescents, connecting communities around the world.¹ This platform has provided a unique opportunity for members of the Generation Z population to connect and create conversations on problems that plague modern-day society. The idea that Gen Z has an ability to shape global culture and politics is prominent in mainstream media ecosystems.² TikTok is a hub in creating culture and awareness around pressing matters; one of these being the discrepancies behind sustainable and fast fashion.³

Fast Fashion can be defined as "an approach to the design, creation, and marketing of clothing fashions that emphasizes making fashion trends quickly and cheaply available to consumers."⁴ The fashion market is constantly changing to keep up with the trend cycle, resulting in inexpensive clothes with a high environmental price tag. Fast fashion accounts for more than 10% of carbon emissions globally each

1 Brooke Auxier and Monica Anderson, "Social Media Use in 2021," *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech* (blog), April 7, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>.

2 Tobias Hess, "'Gen Z Will Save Us': Applauded and Dismissed as a Gen Z Climate Activist (Perspective from the Field)," *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk* 12, no. 1 (August 3, 2021).

3 "From TikTok to Black Lives Matter, How Gen Z Is Revolutionizing Activism - CBS News," accessed November 14, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/from-tiktok-to-black-lives-matter-how-gen-z-is-revolutionizing-activism/>.

4 "Definition of FAST FASHION," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fast+fashion>.

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year, making it the world's second-largest producer of carbon.⁵ In the past year, users of TikTok have used their platforms to speak about fast and sustainable fashion, some even coining it "the sustainable fashion revolution."⁶ Sustainable fashion, also known as ethical fashion, is an approach to fashion that refers to producing garments in an ecological and socially responsible way. This study examines the conversations that TikTok creates among adolescents concerning sustainable and fast fashion.

II. Literature Review

Gen Z is the first generation to grow up with internet technology at their fingertips, and they have been exposed to an incredible quantity of technology throughout their lives.⁷ These individuals born between the years of 1995-2012 tend to prefer communicating online more than other generations.⁸ The integration of technology into the lives of Gen Z has been almost seamless as the lives of offline and online worlds meld into one. Material shared online is consistently taken offline into a face-to-face context in conversation to fill silences, to connect with others, and perhaps most importantly, to shape communities and create the next generation of change.⁹ This literature review will cover social media's rise in popularity among Gen Z and the influence it has in creating conversations, fast fashion in relation to social media and consumption, and broadly sustainable and fast fashion conversations among young consumers.

TikTok's Rise of Popularity Among Generation Z

TikTok has been downloaded over 1.5 billion times worldwide, making it one of the most popular apps ever.¹⁰ In the United States alone 62% of TikTok users are between the ages of 10 and 29.¹¹ Everyone on the app has an opportunity to be a content creator giving any user the chance to go viral and land on the "For You Page."

The short videos make it easy to keep swiping, thus capturing the attention of youth whose attention span is so short.¹² The power that these small videos hold in creating conversations and connecting communities is immense. These videos gain millions of views and hundreds of thousands of likes sharing information and opinions. These videos harness the power to create real change on real social issues. Gen Z has used TikTok as a platform to create change on political matters, health, and more.¹³ One of Generation Z's distinguishing qualities is the expression of personal truth.¹⁴ Members of this age value individual identities, oppose stereotypes, and practice identity expressions with pragmatism, regardless of social background.¹⁵ They are more adaptable to change and fluidity, as well as willing to collaborate with people from other backgrounds on common causes and interests. TikTok has created a space where Generation Z can come together for a common cause to create a lasting impact for generations to come.¹⁶ Sustainable fashion is

5 "Style That's Sustainable: A New Fast-Fashion Formula | McKinsey," <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/sustainability/our-insights/style-thats-sustainable-a-new-fast-fashion-formula>.

6 "Gen Z's Used Clothing Hacks Won't Save the Earth," May 22, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-05-22/gen-z-balances-sustainable-thrift-haul-and-fast-fashion-sheinhaul-on-tiktok>.

7 Claire Madden, *Hello Gen Z: Engaging the Generation of Post-Millennials (Revised Edition)*, Hello Clarity, 2019.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Statista, "TikTok Quarterly First-Time Downloads 2021," Accessed October 10, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1116267/tiktok-worldwide-downloads-quarterly/>.

11 Statista, "U.S. TikTok Users by Age 2021," Accessed October 10, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1095186/tiktok-us-users-age/>.

12 Kevser Zeynep Meral, "Social Media Short Video-Sharing TikTok Application and Ethics: Data Privacy and Addiction Issues," chapter in *Multidisciplinary Approaches to Ethics in the Digital Era*, IGI Global, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-4117-3.ch010>.

13 "From TikTok to Black Lives Matter, How Gen Z Is Revolutionizing Activism - CBS News," accessed November 14, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/from-tiktok-to-black-lives-matter-how-gen-z-is-revolutionizing-activism/>.

14 Madden, *Hello Gen Z*.

15 "Generation Z Characteristics and Its Implications for Companies | McKinsey," Accessed October 10, 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-gen-generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies>.

16 "From TikTok to Black Lives Matter, How Gen Z Is Revolutionizing Activism."

one area where TikTok users have been speaking out and creating conversations on its significance. Before exploring these conversations further, it is important to look at the impact social media has on the fashion industry.

The Impact of Social Media on the Fashion Industry

The use of social media (and the capacity for individuals to choose their own media sources) has altered how fashion is displayed, covered, and consumed; more intriguingly, social media has altered the foundations of the fashion industry itself.¹⁷ The rise of social media has reshaped the digital media landscape by altering how information is received and transmitted in a networked context.¹⁸ The fashion industry benefits from technological advancements since it encourages users to interact with brands. For fashion companies and brands, social media has ushered in a new era, enabling them to forge new relationships with customers and create new opportunities to reach consumers.¹⁹

Understanding the functions of brand credibility and brand image in the creation of brand purchase intention is important for fashion brand practitioners when using these technologies.²⁰ Social media networks help brands connect with a larger audience and establish relationships and credibility with consumers.²¹ It is worth noting that despite the growing acknowledgment of the importance of brand credibility and brand image as brand signals, few studies have looked at how brand credibility and brand image influence customer behavior, particularly in the fashion industry.²² It's not just brands talking about fashion on social media, it is the consumers as well. So how far does credibility and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) really go?

Although communicators' and recipients' motives in eWOM communication may not be strictly commercial, these activities frequently include names of brands/items/venues, and so are likely to influence how commercial entities or their products are perceived.²³ Word of mouth has been regarded as more trustworthy and having a bigger impact on customers' purchase decisions than other communication channels since it is considered a 'natural, authentic, and honest process.'²⁴ The representation of fashion on social media has allowed for one's style and expression to become a critical component of the internet, and has opened up new channels in engaging with fashion brands and ideals. Because the flow of new fashion or styling options is never-ending, and the kaleidoscope of items and trends (whether new or recycled) is continually changing, user-generated fashion messages can always be surprising.²⁵ When a trend is adopted successfully by several individuals, it impacts the perceived value of the "product" for another consumer, whether that be positively or negatively. The influence of users on social media can change perceptions and form ideas, especially pertaining to the fashion industry.

Influencer Marketing on Fashion Consumption

Influencer marketing is the process of discovering and engaging individuals with a certain target demographic in order for them to participate in a brand's online campaign to improve reach, sales, or engagement.²⁶ Influencers are individuals who have obtained fame outside of the social media platform

17 Shih-Hui Hsiao, Yen-Yao Wang, Tawei Wang, and Ta-Wei Kao, "How Social Media Shapes the Fashion Industry: The Spillover Effects between Private Labels and National Brands," *Industrial Marketing Management* 86 (April 1, 2020): 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2019.02.022>.

18 David Martín-Consuegra, Monica Faraoni, Estrella Díaz, and Silvia Ranfagni, "Exploring Relationships among Brand Credibility, Purchase Intention and Social Media for Fashion Brands: A Conditional Mediation Model," *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing* 9, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 237–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20932685.2018.1461020>.

19 Laura Rienda, Lorena Ruiz-Fernández, and Lindsey Carey, "Analysing Trademark and Social Media in the Fashion Industry: Tools That Impact Performance and Internationalization for SMEs," *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal* 25, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 117–32. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-03-2020-0035>.

20 Martín-Consuegra et al., "Exploring Relationships."

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Rienda et al., "Analysing Trademark and Social Media in the Fashion Industry."

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Sudha M. and Sheena K., "Impact of Influencers in Consumer Decision Process: The Fashion Industry," *SCMS Journal of Indian Management* 14, no. 3 (September 2017): 14–30.

(e.g., athletes, actors, singers) or individuals who became famous in the platform itself, usually because they produce outstanding content.²⁷ Through TikTok, any creator has the chance to go viral and can rise to fame quickly. TikTok has the youngest user base and therefore attracts customer segments who are most receptive to this form of marketing communication.²⁸ When addressing influencer marketing in the fashion industry, it is worth noting that the influencer's ability to affect consumption behavior has skyrocketed over the past few years.²⁹ In fact, the global fashion influencer marketing market size was valued at \$1.5 billion in 2019 and it is expected to "expand at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 35.7% from 2020 to 2027."³⁰ This can be attributed to the fact that consumers are becoming more in tune with trends in relation to fashion consumption, and influencers are considered to be on the cutting edge of fashion trend development. It has been found that in fashion social media, the popularity of the content creator has a favorable impact on the popularity of the post, implying that private label owners employ prominent content creators to promote their brands and products.³¹ Brands like Gucci and H&M use influencer marketing to reach the audiences of consumers worldwide.

Influencers who once started as passionate content creators sometimes risk losing sight of what is authentic when money is on the line. A common issue is that once they become famous, some influencers start to partner with multiple or even disreputable brands—sometimes out of mere excitement of being noticed.³² The problem with this is that influencers have increasingly become an important part of consumers' decision-making process in regards to the consumption of goods as well as affecting the purchasing behavior and attitude towards brands.³³ Fast fashion labels target the audiences where influencers reign and engaging people on social media is key to selling these products.³⁴ The influencers are the best tool for increases in revenue. This can lead to the promotion and consumption of fast fashion, creating a lasting negative impact.

The High Cost of "High" Fashion

The fashion market today is highly competitive with a need to fulfill consumers' desire for instant gratification, leading to a move by many manufacturers to constantly refresh products to keep up. This need for constant fulfillment and instant gratification leads to the unethical production of clothing and rapid consumption of fast fashion. "Bi Wenfen defines fashion consumption as: an individual's consumption behavior by pursuing fashion in dressing, electronics, diet, behavior, culture and ideas, to obtain a sense of group ownership or self-personalization."³⁵ Consumers are growing more demanding and fashion-savvy, driving fashion retailers to provide the right product at the right time in the market – in other words, provide quick (fast) fashion.³⁶ Although these changing dynamics of the fashion industry have resulted in the transition to what is sometimes heralded as the "democratization" of fashion, meaning the latest styles are available to all classes of consumers, the human and environmental health risks associated with inexpensive clothing are hidden throughout the lifecycle of each garment.³⁷ From the release of untreated dyes into local

27 Michael Haenlein, Ertan Anadol, Tyler Farnsworth, Harry Hugo, Jess Hunichen, and Diana Welte, "Navigating the New Era of Influencer Marketing: How to Be Successful on Instagram, TikTok, & Co.," *California Management Review* 63, no. 1 (November 1, 2020): 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0008125620958166>.

28 Ibid.

29 Julia Lidgren and Mikaela Major, "Social Media Influencers' Impact on Consumers' Sustainable Fashion Consumption: A Qualitative Study on Post-Millennial Consumers," Master's thesis (Gothenberg University, 2021). <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/69053>.

30 "Fashion Influencer Marketing Market Size Report, 2020-2027," <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/fashion-influencer-marketing-market>.

31 Hsiao et al., "How Social Media Shapes the Fashion Industry."

32 Haenlein et al., "Navigating the New Era of Influencer Marketing."

33 Lidgren and Major, "Social Media Influencers' Impact on Consumers' Sustainable Fashion Consumption."

34 HuffPost, "How Instagram Influencers Are Fueling One Of Our Most Destructive Addictions," February 7, 2019, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/fast-fashion-influencers-instagram-fashion-nova-waste-climate-change_n_5c5ae8ffe4b0871047598750.

35 Yi-Jing Song and Yu-Ling Bai, "Analysis of Symbolic Meaning and Behavior Characteristics of Fashion Consumption," *Proceedings of the International Academic Conference on Frontiers in Social Sciences and Management Innovation (IAFSM 2019)*, 195–200, Atlantis Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.200207.032>.

36 Vertica Bhardwaj and Ann Fairhurst, "Fast Fashion: Response to Changes in the Fashion Industry," *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research* 20, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 165–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09593960903498300>.

37 Rachel Bick, Erika Halsey, and Christine C. Ekenga, "The Global Environmental Injustice of Fast Fashion," *Environmental Health* 17, no. 1 (December 27, 2018): 92. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-018-0433-7>.

water sources, to workers' low wages and poor working conditions, to the over production and consumption, to the mass waste, the environmental and social costs involved in textile manufacturing are widespread.³⁸ As one example, the EPA estimates that textile waste in 2018 was over 17 million tons.³⁹ Young consumers, who are easily influenced by the media, are more susceptible to buy into fast fashion because of the low cost without recognizing the high environmental price tag associated with it. How does fast fashion consumption differ from sustainable consumption among adolescent consumers?

Sustainable & Fast Fashion Conversations Among Young Consumers

Consumption across many product categories is influenced by the human desire to express meanings about oneself and to create an identity. This is perhaps the case with clothing, which is constantly on display.⁴⁰ When it comes to sustainably produced fashion, there is a potential to provide a means to alleviate the current strain on social and environmental well-being resulting from fast fashion. "In this way, sustainably produced clothing offers an ethical purchasing choice for fashion-conscious consumers, while simultaneously meeting the needs that fashion, in the traditional sense, satisfies; the construction of identity through consumption."

⁴¹ Although the obvious benefits of sustainable fashion outweigh the detrimental impact of fast fashion, fast fashion consumption may look more appealing to younger consumers because of the low cost. Through TikTok, Gen Z has helped drive the growth of second-hand shopping and clothing resale platforms such as Depop and Poshmark.⁴² An analysis of TikTok content on sustainable and fast fashion through hashtags can help determine the conversations this platform is creating. The purpose of this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What conversations is TikTok creating around sustainable and fast fashion?

RQ2: Are sustainable clothing videos or fast fashion clothing videos more popular?

RQ3: Is fast fashion portrayed positively or negatively in videos within that hashtag?

RQ4: What are common themes are expressed across the videos analyzed?

III. Methods

This study consists of quantitative content analysis of 100 videos to better understand the conversations that TikTok is creating around sustainable and fast fashion. "Content analysis, more specifically a quantitative analysis, has been defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding."⁴³ Content analysis is a research method that analyzes written, verbal, or visual communication. Using content analysis as a research method requires coding occurrences that the researcher can then sort into data into distinct categories. The researcher developed a codebook based on existing content analysis studies of TikTok.⁴⁴ This study will code video content for type, theme, sentiment, and gender to analyze major topics and themes encompassing these videos.

38 Ibid.

39 US EPA, OLEM, "Textiles: Material-Specific Data," Collections and Lists, September 12, 2017, <https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/textiles-material-specific-data>.

40 Lisa McNeill and Rebecca Moore, "Sustainable Fashion Consumption and the Fast Fashion Conundrum: Fashionable Consumers and Attitudes to Sustainability in Clothing Choice," *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 39, no. 3 (2015): 212–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12169>.

41 Ibid.

42 Bloomberg.com, "Gen Z's Used Clothing Hacks Won't Save the Earth," May 22, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-05-22/gen-z-balances-sustainable-thrift-haul-and-fast-fashion-shein-haul-on-tiktok>.

43 McNeill and Moore, "Sustainable Fashion Consumption."

44 "Communicating COVID-19 Information on TikTok: A Content Analysis of TikTok Videos from Official Accounts Featured in the COVID-19 Information Hub | Health Education Research | Oxford Academic," <https://academic.oup.com/her/article/36/3/261/6154696>.

To select the sample of videos to be analyzed, the researcher searched the TikTok app for the hashtags “#fastfashion” and “#sustainablefashion”. These two hashtags were selected on the basis that they would provide the most robust results within this study. Based on search results, the researcher was presented with the top 50 liked videos under each hashtag. Each video was then watched from start to finish and coded using instruments developed from existing studies.

A Microsoft Excel sheet was created to store all of the data extracted from TikTok videos. The final codebook focused on user engagement, quantified impact, video format, and video content. All 17 coding categories are outlined in Appendix 1.

IV. Findings & Discussion

All links to videos were collected on November 3, 2021 for the two hashtags and placed into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. TikTok arranges hashtag videos by likes and therefore, the top 50 most liked videos were collected and analyzed for each hashtag.

TikTok provides verified badges to help users make informed choices about the accounts they choose to follow and the credibility they hold. A verified badge indicates that TikTok has confirmed that the account belongs to the user it represents. Of the 100 TikTok accounts that were analyzed, 12 videos under #sustainablefashion and 6 videos under #fastfashion contained blue check marks and were therefore verified. It is worth noting that these verified accounts included the likes of CBS News, sustainability & zero waste influencers, and sustainable clothing brands.

The quantified impact dimension provided findings regarding these TikTok accounts’ influence and engagement levels. The top 50 most-liked videos under each hashtag were analyzed, with #fastfashion videos having over 68 million views (Table 1), and #sustainablefashion videos having over 371 million views (Table 2). The total number of likes of all videos analyzed under #fastfashion was more than 10 million, compared to more than 49 million for #sustainablefashion. On average #fastfashion received 1 million views while #sustainablefashion received about 7 million.

The maximum number of comments for #fastfashion was 21,000 and for #sustainablefashion 38,800, with the minimum number of hashtags for these both being zero. The large number of comments suggests that users are highly engaged within these topics of interest. The minimum of zero can be noted due to TikTok users disabling the comment section on their videos. The total number of shares for videos under #fastfashion was over 248,000 and over 851,000 for #sustainablefashion. Evidently, many of the videos using these two hashtags are being vastly shared by users creating significant number of engagements and interactions. The results of this study show that these two hashtags create many conversations among the users on TikTok.

Table 1 - #FastFashion

	Number of followers	Number of Views	Number of Share	Number of Likes	Number of Comments
Minimum	1,078	277,300	51	91,600	0
Maximum	2,000,000	5,100,000	31,800	964,400	21,300
Median	58,600	1,150,000	2,652	169,500	1,731
Average	204885.5714	1,364,062	4,968	225,448	2,615
Sum	10,039,393	68,203,100	248,419	10,821,500	130,735

Table 2 - #SustainableFashion

	Number of followers	Number of Views	Number of Share	Number of Likes	Number of Comments
Minimum	2,701	1,100,000	713	328,200	0
Maximum	11,600,000	43,500,000	292,900	4,700,000	38,800
Median	228,200	4,700,000	6,220	769,400	2,321
Average	1,146,560	7,589,796	17,022	994,414	3,701
Sum	57,328,001	371,900,000	851,087	49,720,700	185,059

A one-way ANOVA analysis was preformed to determine if the difference was significant between the mean number of views between the videos under the hashtags #fastfashion and #sustainablefashion (Table 3). The results of this study indicate a statistically significant difference between the groups ($F(1, 282)=15.7966$, $p=0.0001$). These results indicate it is unlikely due to chance that the views of sustainable fashion videos are much higher than fast fashion videos.

Table 3 - One-Way ANOVA For Views Between #fastfashion & #sustainablefashion (Group 1=Sustainable Fashion, Group 2=Fast Fashion)

Data Summary					
Groups	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	
Group 1	153	124.549	233.7131	18.8946	
Group 2	131	251.2672	302.9093	26.4653	
ANOVA Summary					
Source	Degrees of Freedom (DF)	Sum of Squares (SS)	Mean Square (MS)	F-Stat	P-Value
Between Groups	1	1133241.2564	1133241.2564	15.7966	0.0001
Within Groups	282	20230541.3164	71739.5082		
Total:	283	21363782.5728			

The Video Content analysis examined the types of videos being posted under the hashtags of fast and sustainable fashion, the common themes among these videos, and the specific characters and sentiment of these videos (Table 4).

Table 4 – Video Content

Video Content	Fast Fashion	Sustainable Fashion
Video Type	37 self-recording, 1 news report, 1 documentary, 8 other	All 50 self-recording
Video Theme	39 fast fashion, 8 ethical consumption, 2 not relevant	37 Sustainable fashion, 6 sustainability, 5 thrifting
Sentiment	41 negative, 5 positive, 4 neutral	All 50 positive
Gender	41 female, 7 male	34 female, 10 male, 6 none

#FastFashion

In terms of video type, self-recording took the lead (37 of 50) for #FastFashion. Other video types included an excerpt from a documentary, a news excerpt from CBS, and other montages of TikTok videos. The most common video theme under #fastfashion was unsurprisingly, fast fashion (39 out of 50). Videos within this category featured the negative effects of fast fashion such as unethical manufacturing and sweatshops, thrift shopping and ethical consumption, access to clothing and fast fashion, and negative reviews of fast fashion conglomerates. For example, a fashion influencer with the username @urfashionistafriend posted a video exposing the fast fashion brand Shein on its unethical practices when it comes to clothing production on sweatshops and child labor. Another example, from user @zeroinqi, includes a montage of Shein clothing hauls, followed by photos highlighting the negative effects of fast fashion, urging their users to “please take care of the planet, our climate is in bad shape and fast fashion is really bad.”⁴⁵ The results of this study suggest that TikTok cultivates conversations around fast fashion in a negative light, in regard to environmental pollution and ethical conditions.

Of the 50 videos under #fastfashion, the sentiment towards fast fashion in general was negative for 41 of them. The rest encompassed five with a positive attitude towards fast fashion, and the other four were neutral. Of these four neutral videos, conversations focused on socioeconomic status and access. Two of these videos specifically raised concerns with the economic cost of shopping sustainability. Those living in poverty or lower socio-economic status, have greater access and desire to shop at fast fashion outlets due to its affordability rates.

The second most common theme was ethical consumption (8 of 50). One conversation in particular under this video category gained over 800,000 likes and more than 12,000 shares, and focused on whether can there be ethical consumption under capitalism. The results suggest there is a genuine concern among Generation Z TikTok users when it comes to fast fashion consumption. One TikTok sound from the user @curli_fries clearly addresses this issue.

So what I've learned on TikTok is that I can't shop at thrift stores since I contribute to the gentrification of thrift prices, but I also shouldn't shop fast fashion places like Forever 21 because they use child labor sweatshops, but I also shouldn't shop at Goodwill because they treat disabled employees horribly, but I also shouldn't shop on Amazon because Jeff Bezos, but I also can't afford to get all my clothes at high end fashion stores, but I also don't want to take all the cute clothes from my local thrift stores in low income areas... did I get that right?⁴⁶

Conversations under this category also focused on those living below the poverty level and their access to shopping for clothing. These videos explored and explained conversations on how it is a privilege to shop ethically and that it is a privilege to be able to buy new clothes. Shopping sustainably is a luxury and excludes a large part of the population due to its lack of affordable prices, forcing those with lower incomes to be pushed to shop at fast fashion stores. Often, these fast fashion brands offer trendy and affordable clothing giving low-income individuals a sense of societal inclusion and approval. Another driver of conversation under this category was access to plus-sized fashion. Some thrift stores may be more expensive than fast fashion and finding trendy comfortable clothing is increasingly difficult. Fast fashion conglomerates offer trendy and sometimes better suited options when it comes to plus-sized fashion. This study indicates that privilege and access are a large part of the conversations around fast and sustainable fashion on TikTok.

Under #fastfashion, eight of the 50 videos (18%) were in Spanish, one in Polish, one in French, and three indicated that they were based in the United Kingdom. This study speaks to the global nature of the conversations that TikTok is creating when it comes to fast and sustainable fashion. In terms of gender, 41 of the videos were created by women and seven were created by men. Notably, of the seven videos created by men, three held a positive attitude towards fast fashion; only two videos by women expressed similar positive opinions toward fast fashion.

⁴⁵ @zeroinqi. *Please Take Care of Our Planet, Our Climate Is in Bad Shape and Fast Fashion Is Really Bad* #dc #fyp #foryoupage #fastfashion.

⁴⁶ @curli_fries. *So.. There's No Ethical Consumption under Capitalism?*

#SustainableFashion

In terms of video type, all 50 of the videos analyzed under #SustainableFashion were self-recordings. Self-recording is the most prominent video type for both hashtags. This speaks to the relatable nature of TikTok and content creators wanting to personalize their videos. The most common video theme under #sustainablefashion was sustainable fashion (32 of 50). Videos within this category featured sustainable fashion brands and small businesses, sustainable clothing, and upcycling videos. Upcycling videos accounted for 23 of the 37 sustainable fashion videos in this category. For example, the user @vintagestockreserve spoke to the benefits of upcycling as an alternative option to discourage enabling fast fashion in a video that received over 1.4 million likes and 11,000 shares. Other videos in this category included DIY clothing and sewing how-to videos instead of buying from the likes of Forever 21. This present study highlights that TikTok users are making videos promoting upcycling and sustainable clothing instead of shopping fast fashion. Another common theme was thrifting, which accounted for 12 of the 50 videos. This study indicates that Generation Z TikTok users are promoting the act of second-hand shopping and thrift shopping in order to help save the environment and save money.

The most common theme under #sustainablefashion was sustainability (6 of 50), featuring videos highlighting living a zero-waste lifestyle, ecofriendly products, and the benefits of sustainability. Users posting within this theme would show examples of living a zero-waste lifestyle and the reasons behind why it matters so much. Under this hashtag, the sentiment towards sustainable fashion was all positive. The results of this study suggest that TikTok users feel more positive towards sustainable fashion than they do towards fast fashion. In terms of gender, 34 of the videos under #sustainablefashion were produced by female users, and 10 of the videos were produced by males. The other six videos had no gender association. The sustainable fashion hashtag had twice as many men creating content than the fast fashion hashtag. Eight of the videos were in Hindi, once again speaking to the global conversations that are being held on sustainable fashion.

The video form analysis examined the format in which these 100 videos were presented. Generation Z are drawn to trending TikTok challenges, which usually involve a popular song or hashtags, so many videos incorporate current trends. Sixty-two of the videos included no talking; five of those videos included lip-synching. Messages are frequently generated in short videos with little or no talking and sometimes have lip-synching. In terms of hashtags, all 100 videos included other hashtags besides the two being analyzed. The most common hashtags used beside the hashtag #fastfashion were #shein, #thrifting, #fyp, and #stopfastfashion. The most common hashtags used beside the hashtag #sustainablefashion were #ethicalfashion, #slowfashion, #zerowaste, and #upcycle. As described previously, TikTok is a social media platform that uses algorithmic observation and inference. Hashtags play a role in this algorithm, that chooses customized content for unique users, and content creators on this app use it to their advantage.⁴⁷

V. Conclusion

This study suggests that TikTok users are creating content to produce meaningful conversations surrounding sustainable and fast fashion. The results show that users across the world are connecting on significant topics and themes such as the detrimental impacts of fast fashion, access to ethical fashion and socioeconomic status, ethical consumption, and shopping second-hand. It is clear that videos under the hashtag #sustainablefashion gain more views and engagement than those under the #fastfashion. However, the results show that both hashtags have over millions of views, likes, and engagements meaning they both are large creators of conversation among users. The results also show that viral fast fashion videos generally have a negative connotation, and that videos pertaining to sustainable and ethical fashion have a more positive connotation. Overall, the results of this study prove that users on TikTok engage heavily in conversations pertaining to fast and sustainable fashion.

This study has certain limitations. First, this investigation lacks intercoder reliability. “Intercoder reliability, more specifically termed intercoder agreement, is a measure of the extent to which independent judges make the same coding decisions in evaluating the characteristics of messages, and is at the heart of

47 “How to Grow Your Audience | TikTok Help Center,” accessed December 1, 2021, <https://support.tiktok.com/en/using-tiktok/growing-your-audience/how-to-grow-your-audience>.

this method.”⁴⁸ Given time constraints, this study only had one coder and therefore lacks intercoder reliability. Second, the number of likes, comments, shares, and followers may not sufficiently be measured in only one session, as they change daily. Additional studies should include further coding sessions to reflect the dynamics of this new social media platform. Third, although a content analysis is a commonly used method in video analysis, it may still have limitations when coding the unique aspects of videos of short duration. Specific coding schemes for videos produced on TikTok are scarce. These limitations give opportunities to expand upon further research. While 100 TikTok accounts is a significant number for a qualitative research study, widening the analysis of quantitative content with a larger sample could add more depth to the results collected in this investigation.

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Appendix 1: Coding Categories

Account Information	
Username	Refers to the username of the TikTok account who posted the video
Official Verified Account	Refers to whether or not the TikTok account is verified, represented by a blue check mark (verified badge)
Quantified Impact	
Number of Followers	Total number of Account Followers
Number of Likes	Total number of Likes the video received Total
Number of Comments	Total number of comments left on the video
Number of Shares	Total number times the video was shared
Number of Views	Total number of views the video obtained
Video Content	
Video Type	Refers to the content of the video in categories of documentary, self-recording, news report, excerpt from TV, & demonstration, other
Video Theme	Refers to the major topic involved in the video, encompassing sustainability, fast fashion, sustainable fashion, ethical consumption, thrifting, and not relevant
Sentiment	Refers to the sentiment involved in categories of positive, negative, or neutral
Gender	Refers to the gender of the character(s) in the video
Video Form	
Background Music	Refers to the background music used, including no music, music selected from the TikTok music library, and original music
Talking/No Talking/Lip Synching	Refers to whether the character(s) in the video were talking, not talking, or lip synching
Subtitles/Text	Refers to whether there is subtitles
Subtitle Colors	Refers to whether or not the subtitles were presented with color or black and white
Hashtags	Refers to the hashtags used by the uploader in the video's caption

Living in The Background: Analyzing the Representation of Marginalized Identities in Predominantly White TV Shows

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Abstract

In recent years, television producers and companies have strived to engage and promote content that is more inclusive and diverse, specifically focusing on promoting shows that feature a racially diverse lead cast. This study analyzed the representation of marginalized identities in predominately Caucasian TV shows during primetime. Through a quantitative content analysis, this study found that there was some growth in the number of racial minorities that were represented on sitcoms during primetime television. Although there has been a significant change in diversity in Hollywood, TV executives must make sure that their work is respectable and properly representative of these identities.

I. Introduction

Representation has always been a problem in Hollywood. Major companies have historically been led by white men who rarely sought the perspective of other identities. As America slowly began to appreciate and accept its diverse population, more people have become vocal about the lack of representation that they saw in movies and television. As Hollywood began to include black and brown faces on the silver screen, audiences were met with jarring misrepresentations and stereotypical characters that negatively reflected the identity of millions. Today, more communities are looking to be represented in media to better tell the story of America and the people who make the country so diverse.

Through visual media, our society can be shaped to believe certain narratives about communities, especially when those communities do not have the power to tell their own stories. Through media like television and movies, our world and culture has been influenced by the visions and creations of other people. Our cultural development has been highly dependent and reflective of these media forms to build our societal consciousness. Unfortunately, these art forms can contribute to misinformed opinions about certain identities. Has television responded to these critiques by properly and positively representing these identities during primetime viewership?

This study answered this question by replicating previous studies by Mastro and Greenberg (2000) as well as a study by Monk-Turner et al. (2010). This study particularly focused on the representation of racial minorities on sitcoms that aired during primetime on NBC, ABC and CBS. This study analyzed how some minority characters are depicted and if they were depicted with stereotypical characteristics.

Keywords: television, sitcoms, diversity, identity, framing, representation
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This study used a method of quantitative content analysis, following the method of Monk-Turner et al.'s (2010) study to find if there were any changes in how many minorities were depicted on television. This study analyzed three series from the 1996-1997 season and three series from the 2016-2017 season: two of each from NBC, ABC and CBS. Two random episodes were chosen from each of the show's respective seasons – one episode from the earlier part of the season and the other from the later part of the season. It is hypothesized that the overall representation of marginalized identities has increased however, there are still some remnants of stereotypical depictions that occur for the sake of comedy.

II. Literature Review

Framing theory, introduced by communications and media scholar Robert Entman, has been used by communication scholars to examine the way media portrays misrepresented identities. Within television studies, researchers have found correlations between television representation of minorities and stereotypes (Park, Zhang & Holody, 2012). Scholars have also used the Agenda Setting theory to explain the negative impact of the media portrayals of marginalized groups.

Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) write, "It [framing] is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). Scheufele (1999) references the writings of McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (1997) who propose that framing is not simply its own theory but that "framing is, in fact, an extension of agenda setting" (Scheufele, 1999, p. 103). Scheufele also explains some factors that influence the way media sources frame certain issues or people: "social norms and values, organizational pressures and constraints, [...] and orientations of journalists" (Scheufele, 1999, p. 109). Although these indicators mainly focus on journalistic influences, the factors of "social norms and values" can relate to any type of media framing.

Ardèvol-Abreu (2015) writes that "the diversity of approaches to framing, [...] is possibly the only way to properly understand a phenomenon as complex as the effects of the media" (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015, p. 425). By looking at framing theory in relation to fiction television, it allows for researchers to find trends in the way predominately white television shows portray marginalized identities, more specifically racial minorities.

House (2017) references sociologist Joe Feagin's book *The White Racial Frame* and defines this term as "an overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, [...] as well as... inclinations to discriminate" (House, 2017, p. 170). Media tropes like the "White Savior Complex" and "The Magical Negro" still permeate modern television. Modern television can still often operate from the perspective of white identities versus "others" House (2017) challenges this notion by wondering if society can be reframed from the white perspective to be more racially diverse and inclusive.

There has been an extensive amount of research on media portrayals of racial minorities on television. There has been a growing amount of television shows that feature racial minorities in the main cast, however, many of their character depictions are often one dimensional with little character development or depth. Punyanunt-Carter's research focused on African American portrayals on television and how negative portrayals can influence stereotypical opinions about African Americans in real life. African Americans typically in were occupational roles and not expected to be high achieving (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). This research found that these negative depictions of African Americans on television caused for viewers to believe that these instances were true for African Americans in real life.

Mastro has conducted multiple studies analyzing the way racial minorities are portrayed on television. Mastro and Greenberg (2000) analyzed primetime television during 1996, coding for racial minorities and their characteristics. They found that television portrayed Latinos in a negative light: "They were least articulate, had the heaviest accent, and were least spontaneous in their conversational interactions" (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000, p. 700). The same study found that African Americans were portrayed negatively as well: "They were judged as the laziest and the least respected; their dress was the most provocative and most disheveled" (p. 700).

Mastro and Greenberg's research was replicated a decade later by Monk-Turner et al. (2010), who found that overall representation of racial minorities had not changed drastically, with 74% of the characters being White. The study found that Latinos were more likely to be ridiculed, and that Latino and African American characters were likely to be depicted as immoral. While African Americans were on screen three

times more often than Latinos, they were most often portrayed in minor roles (Monk-Turner et al., 2010).

One example of this phenomenon is *Friends*, which is notable for its lack of representation for characters that did not identify as straight, white, and skinny. Cobb (2018) references the show as a representation of “whiteness” by writing, “*Friends* keeps the ‘other’ at the edges by reinforcing the image of the six friends” (2018, p. 713). The series introduced Charlie in season 9 as a frequent character. Charlie is a high-achieving black woman, who in the end is not good enough for Ross, one of the main characters. Charlie is introduced in a predominately white space, and the writers are unable to give her the proper time to develop as a significant character in the show.

Alsultany (2013) explored the negative representation of Middle Eastern individuals, specifically after the events of 9/11. Hate crimes against the Middle Eastern community dramatically increased after these events, further instilling the entire community as the “presumed enemy” of the United States (Alsultany, 2013, p. 161-62). There are also tropes used to negatively depict Middle Easterners or those who appear Muslim. Similarly, other scholarship has examined Asian American and Pacific Islanders within American media. Often, these characters perpetuate “the model minority trope that typecasts AAPIs as highly educated, wealthy, and nerdy over-achievers [...] such as doctors and lawyers” (DuCros et al. 2018, p. 16). These types of depictions can be extremely damaging.

Research Questions

This research will add to the scholarship on minority representation. The study will focus on three main questions in relation to representation in the entertainment industry:

RQ1: How did the portrayal of marginalized identities change during the 2016-2017 television season in comparison to the 1996-1997 season?

RQ2: What identities are portrayed most on mainstream television? What identities are portrayed least on mainstream television?

RQ3: What are some of the negative stereotypes that are still being used to portray marginalized identities?

This research is important because it provides a look into the entertainment industry and its relationship with racial equality. In today’s world, more people are seeing the advantages of positive portrayals in media concerning positive self-identity. Americans have seen many shows emerge that focus on marginalized communities and their stories in a positive light. However, when it comes to predominately white shows, it can still be difficult to find characters whose story arcs are not predominately focused on their race or “otherness” within the show. Studies have found that when people see themselves represented in media, they have a better outlook on their position in life. This is especially true for children who benefit from seeing their identities depicted on television, in movies, and in books. This research will hopefully uncover if the entertainment industry has moved forward in a positive direction.

III. Methods

This research used quantitative content analysis to examine the changes in television representation of marginalized identities. The content analysis mirrored studies by Mastro and Greenberg (2000) and Monk-Turner et al. (2010) by analyzing the portrayal of racial minorities on primetime television. This research compared six shows, three from the 1996-1997 primetime season and three from the 2016-2017 primetime season.

The three series from the 1996-1997 season were *The Nanny*, *Roseanne*, and *Friends*. One episode from each series was chosen from the earlier part of the season, and a second episode from the later part of the season. These three series are still popular, especially *Friends*, which is hailed to be one of the most highly rated comedy shows ever. The episodes from *The Nanny* were “The Taxman Cometh” and “Kissing Cousins”; episodes from *Roseanne* were “Pampered To A Pulp” and “Roseanne-Feld”; and episodes from *Friends* were “The One With the Race Car Bed” and “The One with Ross’s Thing.”

For the 2016-2017 season, the series *Two Broke Girls*, *Modern Family*, and *Superstore* were chosen.

These shows also have a large following, especially *Modern Family* which ran for 11 seasons, ending in 2020. The same process was used for this group by choosing one episode from the earlier part of the season and a second from the later part of the season. The episodes from *Two Broke Girl\$* were “And the Sophie Doll” and “And the Dad Day Afternoon”; episodes from *Modern Family* were “The Alliance” and “Pig Moon Rising”; and episodes from *Superstore* were “Black Friday” and “Spring Cleaning.”

The variables from Monk-Turner’s study were simplified for this research. This research recorded each character’s race from all 12 episodes. If race was undeterminable then that specific character would be counted as “unknown.” The study also coded for age, gender, and income level, which was determined based on the nature of the character’s job or from context clues in certain episodes. Children and teenagers were not included in this metric because they typically are not shown to have steady incomes or jobs. Also, this research recorded the character’s role prominence within the show. The three categories were Major Characters, who normally appeared in every episode and had a prominent role; Minor Characters, who were guest characters or characters that were not a part of the main cast but often had important roles in the show; and Background Characters, who were featured only for a scene of the show, had minor interaction with main characters, or were merely present in a scene.

IV. Findings

Overall, 169 characters were recorded from all the shows that aired in 1996 and in 2016. Caucasian characters amounted for 74% (125) of all the characters (169) that were analyzed for this study. Asian characters accounted for 9% (16), African Americans accounted for 8% (14), Latinos accounted for 6% (11), and Middle Easterners accounted for 2% (3) of all characters coded. As Figure 1 indicates, there was an increase in the amount of non-Caucasian characters that were featured in the three series that aired in 2016, however, Caucasian identified characters are still the majority.

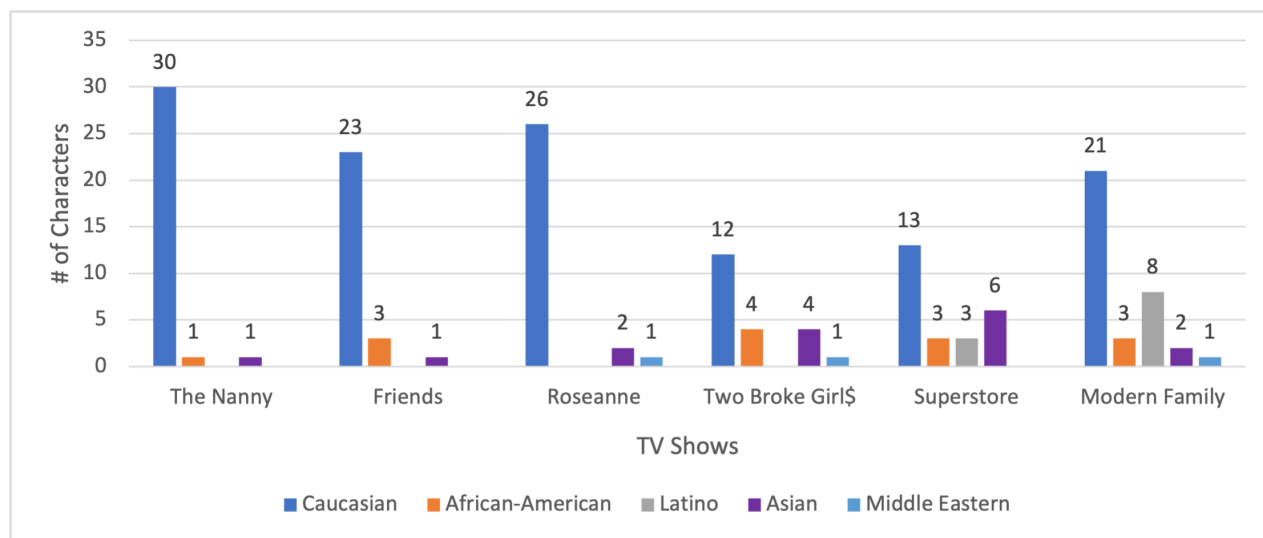


Figure 1: Chart of characters recorded

This study analyzed non-Caucasian characters representation within various age ranges. By analyzing these age ranges, this study looked to see if there were any trends in the way marginalized identities were portrayed on television and if age was a prominent factor. Caucasian characters were the most prominent for both shows that aired in 1996 and 2016, however there were many age ranges represented from all six shows. The most prominent relationship between age and race was Caucasians in their 30s, which amounted to 44% of all Caucasians recorded in 1996 and 40% of all characters (Figure 2). In 2016, Caucasians in their 40s were 17% of the sample, while Caucasians in their 30s amounted to 14%. The most common age for African American characters were those in their 30s, amounting to 6% of all the characters analyzed in 2016 (Figure 3). Latino characters within the age ranges of 10-20 and the 40s each amounted to 4%.

		1996-1997				
		Caucasian	African American	Latino	Asian	Middle Eastern
Ages	Less than 10	2	-	-	1	-
	10-20	6	-	-	-	-
	20s	5	1	-	2	-
	30s	35	1	-	-	1
	40s	12	1	-	1	-
	50+	19	1	-	-	-
Total		79	4	-	4	1

Figure 2: Table of 1996 characters' ages

		2016-2017				
		Caucasian	African American	Latino	Asian	Middle Eastern
Ages	Less than 10	1	1	2	-	-
	10-20	6	-	3	3	-
	20s	6	1	-	1	-
	30s	11	5	2	6	1
	40s	14	1	3	2	1
	50+	8	2	1	-	-
Total		46	10	11	12	2

Figure 3: Table of 2016 characters' ages

Economically, the most common relationship from the 1996 television shows was Caucasian middle-income characters (44), amounting to 60% of the sample. Only two Caucasian characters were coded to have a low-income level, amounting to 3% of the characters in 1996. Shows that aired in 2016 provided more diversity in what incomes were represented and which identities represented those incomes. The most common relationship were Caucasian middle-income characters (17), amounting to 31% of all 2016 characters. Asian American characters that were categorized as middle-income were the next most common relationship (11), amounting to 20%. In comparison to high-income Caucasian characters that amounted to 17% of the sample, African American and Latin American characters each amounted to 4% of 2016 characters.

In terms of gender and race for 1996, 49% were Caucasian men and 45% were Caucasian women (Table 4). There were no African American women represented in any of the shows that aired in 1996. There were four Asian characters that were depicted, with two being men and two being women. Middle Eastern characters only made up 1% of the total, with one character being identified as male.

		1996-1997				
		Caucasian	African American	Latino	Asian	Middle Eastern
Gender	Male	43	4	-	2	1
	Female	36	-	-	2	-
Total		79	4	-	4	1

Figure 4: Table of 1996 characters' gender identity

In 2016, Caucasian men accounted for 33% of all the characters, with Caucasian women accounting for 23% (Figure 5). African American men amounted for 11% of characters, in comparison with African American women who only were 1%. Latino men amounted to 7% of characters and Latin women amounted to 6%. Asian men and women had equal representation, each amounting to 7%.

		2016-2017				
		Caucasian	African American	Latino	Asian	Middle Eastern
Gender	Male	27	9	6	6	1
	Female	19	1	5	6	1
Total		46	10	11	12	2

Figure 5: Table of 2016 characters' gender identity

Figure 6 illustrates this study's findings for the role prominence of marginalized identities in shows that aired in 1996. Caucasian Major characters made up 38% of all characters recorded. Caucasian characters were the only racial identity that were categorized as major characters for shows that aired that season. Caucasian minor characters made up 39% of the sample, with African American minor characters amounting for 3% and Middle Eastern characters making up 1%.

		1996-1997				
		Caucasian	African American	Latino	Asian	Middle Eastern
Role Prominence	Major	33	-	-	-	-
	Minor	34	3	-	-	1
	Background	12	1	-	4	-
Total		79	4	-	4	1

Figure 6: Table of 1996 characters' role prominence

Figure 7 illustrates this study's findings for the role prominence of marginalized identities in shows that aired in 2016. More marginalized identities were represented in all three levels of role prominence, especially as major characters. Caucasian major characters amounted to 36% of all characters. Latin American major characters amounted to 10%, and Asian American major characters amounted to 9%, and African American major characters amounted to 5%. Caucasian background characters were 12% of the total, more than African American and Latino background characters combined.

		2016-2017				
		Caucasian	African American	Latino	Asian	Middle Eastern
Role Prominence	Major	29	4	8	7	-
	Minor	7	-	-	2	1
	Background	10	6	3	3	1
Total		46	10	11	12	2

Figure 7: Table of 2016 characters' role prominence

V. Discussion

Overall, this study found that there are clear distinctions between the way marginalized identities were portrayed on television in 1996 in comparison to the way they were portrayed in 2016. This 20-year difference indicates how much society has changed in relation to racial minority representation and the actions made to include non-White characters. Although there was growth in the number of marginalized identities and demographics that were represented, there were still problematic instances of misrepresentation in reference to certain marginalized identities.

Of 88 characters analyzed from the 1996 content analysis, 79 were Caucasian. However, only 56% of the characters from the 2016 content analysis were Caucasian. This decrease of Caucasian representation showed that representation during primetime is becoming more diverse. This study shows a clear change in the number of marginalized identities that are represented on primetime television. This study also uncovered the lack of diversity that was present among three of the highest rated shows from 1996. It is unclear the degree to which this lack of diversity negatively impacted the way the international and domestic audiences view minorities. Although the 2016 content analysis showed that there was considerable growth in the number of non-Caucasian characters, America's past considering the lack of basic diversity must be addressed.

Overall, Caucasian characters in their 30s and 40s dominated the screen, amounting to most of the characters that were recorded. Although the shows that were analyzed did not include people from all different age ranges, there was still some diversity in a few of the shows selected for the content analysis. These shows all had different audience demographics that the show was catering to. For example, the show *Friends* was catered to a young adult audience which could explain why there were so few characters that were 40 and above. Conversely, *Modern Family* is a show that appeals to individuals of all ages.

African American women were only featured once in all six of the shows. The lack of representation of African American women is alarming since they are a major demographic in the United States. In shows that aired in 1996, there were no Latin Americans featured at all. The 2016 content analysis revealed more Latin American men and women on the screen, possibly addressing America's changing demographic. This study also found that Asian men and women were represented in more recent shows and a higher rate than before. Unfortunately, there were instances that these characters were depicted in ways that could be considered stereotypical.

The Role Prominence variable revealed important findings. In 1996, there were marginalized identities that were featured, however they were not in the forefront. For example, in the *Friends* episode "The One with the Race Car Bed," the main characters had a delivery and two African American men arrived to move the furniture into the apartment. To have African American characters portray service-level jobs – and no appearances in any other field during the episode – is damaging to the way that the audience could view minorities. Similarly, in the *Roseanne* episode "Pampered To A Pulp," two Asian women were depicted in a stereotypical way, overacting for comedic relief. In that same episode, a Middle Eastern man was depicted as a snake-charmer-like individual that made comedic faces while muttering a secret spell. These types of depictions can be exceptionally harmful to the communities that are being negatively depicted for the sake of a joke.

These misrepresentations were not only featured in the shows that aired in 1996. *Two Broke Girls* features an Asian man in the main cast that is also depicted in a stereotypical way. From his mannerisms to the extensive use of a stereotypical accent, this character's racial background was also used for comedic

relief. This was especially interesting, as today's culture has shifted away from the use of identity in a way that is offensive or that would be seen as the punchline of an unfunny joke. Although this Asian character was a part of the main cast, something that was not seen in the shows from 1996 that were analyzed, this character was still depicted stereotypically. This research found that there were still times when media will get representation wrong. The misuse of other races for comedic relief has its roots in racism. Even if marginalized identities are being brought the forefront of television casts, their identities and characters must be used in a way that is respectful.

VI. Conclusion

This study focused on the representation of racial minorities on sitcoms that aired on primetime television. This study showed the changes in the number of marginalized identities that are represented, and which demographics are represented the most. There are still marginalized identities that are represented less often, and some that are still depicted through stereotypical and racist characterization. Although there has been a significant change in diversity in Hollywood, TV executives must make sure that their work is respectful and properly representative of these identities.

Some limitations to this study were that it looked at only a small sample of television episodes. There could possibly be other episodes that had more representation of marginalized identities within a particular season. Additionally, because this research did not code children for the income level variable, some of the totals did not match the overall total of all characters coded. Future research might build on this study by adding more shows and combining a qualitative content analysis with a quantitative analysis.

This type of research is important because it keeps an eye on the way America's media is portraying identities and communities. Television has a large amount of power, allowing thoughts, feelings, and views to be conveyed to millions of people worldwide. It is important that all identities and communities have proper representation on TV. Identity is a crucial part of personal self-actualization and developing one's own self-respect. This research was able to understand the demographics that are still not being highlighted on primetime television. As America continues to learn to embrace its diversity, it is time for television to do the same.

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Portrayals of Women in Super Bowl Advertising, 2016–2021

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Abstract

The portrayal of women in Super Bowl advertisements, particularly in recent years, has been a topic of significant discourse and discussion. Few studies have analyzed women's portrayals in ads from the largest annual television broadcast in the United States, and none have look specifically at the Super Bowls within the four-to-six years prior to the writing of this article. To study these portrayals, a content analysis was performed on all the consumer-targeted ads from Super Bowls L through LV using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The general framework for the qualitative part of the analysis included the advertising trend of gender role stereotypes, the "sex sells" paradigm, and the emergence of "femvertising" (ads focused specifically on women's empowerment). Findings suggest the need for more nuanced evaluations of these portrayals, due to the importance of women's inclusion and characterization.

I. Introduction

In 2015, Carl's Jr. bought a 52-second spot during the West Coast broadcast of Super Bowl XLIX in order to air their new "Au Naturel" advertisement. While the ad promoted the fast-food chain's All-Natural Burger, the product does not appear on-screen until the last 20 seconds of the spot. Instead, most of the ad shows model Charlotte McKinney walking through a farmer's market naked. Male sellers and passersby ogle her, and strategically shaped fruits and vegetables cover the portions of her body that are not allowed to be shown on primetime television. At the end of the ad, McKinney, now wearing a string bikini, takes a bite out of a large burger while a male voice-over provides information about the product (Carl's Jr., 2015). Before Super Bowl XLIX, Carl's Jr. was already known for taking advantage of the "sex sells" paradigm in advertising by featuring scantily clad models such as Kate Upton and Paris Hilton, which caused critics to popularize the hashtag #WomenAreMoreThanMeat on social media. A company representative told ABC News that "[the ads] don't cross the line, but they like to get right up to it" (Davis, 2015). However, "Au Naturel" received even more backlash than previous Carl's Jr. ads, potentially due to the brand's ignoring the overall trends of advertising in society at the time.

When television first became ubiquitous in the 1950s, advertisements frequently showed both men and women in stereotypical gender roles—the husband was the family breadwinner, and the wife stayed home to cook and clean. This trend coincided with the end of the first wave of feminism, which primarily pushed for women's suffrage (Johnson, 2017). Once the second wave of feminism began in the 1960s, media aimed at women generally began to follow the societal movement toward women's liberation (Johnson,

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2017). However, television ads intended for a male or general audience depicted women as sex objects more frequently. The third and fourth waves of feminism saw the rise of digital and social media in promoting intersectionality and justice in the push for women's empowerment (Johnson, 2017). Advertisers followed these waves by creating a trend known as "femvertising" in the mid-2010s, which markets products to women—or even to a general audience—by using images of women's empowerment. As one journalist put it, "The advertising industry, once bent on selling us sex, is now selling us its disgust with sexism" (Iqbal, 2015). One of the most praised examples of "femvertising" on television was Always' "#LikeAGirl" ad, which first aired during Super Bowl XLIX—the same event that featured Carl's Jr. controversial "Au Naturel" spot (Iqbal, 2015; Always, 2015).

Two years after the Super Bowl XLIX ad backlash, Carl's Jr. premiered a new spot during the NCAA championship broadcast titled "Dad Is Back." In the ad, an actor portraying Carl Hardee Sr. tells his son Carl Jr. to take down company billboards of naked models and replace them with photos that only feature Carl's Jr. products. The creators of the spot stated that the sexualized ads of the past had made the Carl's Jr. brand "infamous" (Bhattarai, 2017), arguably demonstrating a change in societal attitudes toward the "sex sells" paradigm.

Drawing on these attitudinal changes, this paper aims to examine women's portrayals in Super Bowl advertising, starting in 2016—the year after the "Au Naturel" and "#LikeAGirl" ads premiered—and ending with the most recent Super Bowl before the writing of this article in 2021. This content analysis can be viewed in the contexts of the history of gender stereotyping in advertising, the "sex sells" paradigm, and the recent emergence of "femvertising." But first, a review of the existing literature will contextualize the examination of ads from Super Bowls L through LV.

II. Literature Review

To lay the foundation for this study, the literature review focused on women's representation in television advertising more generally, the cultural and business significance of Super Bowl advertising, and the analyses that have previously been done of Super Bowl ads, most of which aired before 2016.

Women's Representation in TV Advertising

Women's portrayals in television advertising have been a topic of interest in both contemporary and historical scholarship. In the 1950s and 1960s, when many households across the United States first purchased televisions, advertisements became pervasive as each channel had to support its programs and used advertising sales as the main way to earn the money to do so. Many of these ads promoted household products such as kitchen appliances and cleaning supplies, and they depicted young, demure women using the products in their homes while their husbands left for or came home from their jobs (Johnson, 2017). These early ads led to the development of three of the four gender-stereotype dimensions that scholars have used for over half a century to describe women's portrayal in advertising. First, a woman's place is in the home; second, women should not make important decisions; third, women are dependent on men (Huhmann & Limbu, 2016).

The fourth dimension of gender stereotyping in advertising is women being depicted primarily as sex objects. This trend escalated in the 1980s and has continued into the 21st century. Portraying women in highly sexualized ways became popular because of the shock factor associated with sexual imagery that causes viewers to pay attention to the ad, creating the "sex sells" paradigm (Marczyk, 2017). At first, most young, educated women who identified as feminists criticized the sexual objectification of women in advertising. However, a 2008 study of female college students noted that while the subjects noticed sexualization in advertising, they did not think it as offensive or unethical as their counterparts in the 1980s had (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). The change in opinions may be explained with the shift from second-wave feminism to third- and fourth-wave feminism. More third- and fourth-wave feminists have embraced the idea of finding their "girl power" in their sexuality than second-wave feminists, and therefore they are often willing to express themselves through their bodies—if this expression happens by their own choice and for their own benefit, not because of pressure from men (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). The women may have seen the object of analysis in the above study as a tasteful, autonomous portrayal of female sexuality and therefore did not criticize the advertisement they watched or the brand that created it.

While some uses of women as sex objects in television advertising are considered tasteful, others harm the perceptions that both women and men have of themselves. A 1999 study showed a correlation between exposure to ads in which women were sexualized and distorted views of one's own body image. Female subjects exposed to sexualized ads generally preferred a slim figure and viewed themselves as proportionally larger than the women who did not watch the ads. By contrast, male subjects who viewed the sexualized ads tended to prefer a larger, more muscular figure and saw their bodies as proportionally smaller than the men in the control groups (Lavine et al., 1999). Additionally, all four dimensions of gender stereotyping have excluded older women from advertising. When a woman's role is seen as domestic, decorative, and/or sexual, her societal value decreases with age, while a man's societal value in the occupational roles with which he is often associated increases with age (Baumann & de Laat, 2012).

Despite the previously mentioned development of "femvertising" and changing attitudes toward women's sexualization, gender stereotyping in advertising still exists worldwide. On an international level, studies show that women are more likely to be portrayed in domestic or decorative roles in countries whose culture emphasizes masculinity, such as China and Japan, than in "low-masculinity" countries, such as Sweden (Grau & Zotos, 2016, p. 763). The United States appears to fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, with examples of "femvertising" running alongside ads that portray women in domestic roles or as sex objects. Scholars in various fields have debated for many years whether advertising simply reflects society's values or actively shapes them, and women's portrayals in television ads seems to lie somewhere in between (Grau & Zotos, 2016).

Cultural and Business Significance of Super Bowl Advertisements

The Super Bowl has brought the top teams from each division of the National Football League together to compete for financial rewards, physical trophies, and athletic pride since 1967. Watching the broadcast of the game has become a tradition for many American households. As of 2017, four of the five most-watched telecasts in history were Super Bowls; the 2012 broadcast alone garnered the viewership of 54 percent of U.S. households (Hartmann & Klapper, 2017). Many companies place high importance on advertising during the Super Bowl broadcast, despite the cost. During Super Bowl I in 1967, a 30-second advertising spot cost somewhere between \$37,500 and \$42,500; for Super Bowl LV in 2021, a company would pay an average of \$5.6 million for the same amount of screen time ("Cost of Super Bowl advertising," 2021). These figures do not include development and production costs.

When analyzing the costs and benefits of Super Bowl advertising, most companies see more positive than negative returns on their investments. Insufficient evidence exists to suggest that Super Bowl ads are an effective complement to the products typically consumed during the game—i.e., brands of soda, beer, potato chips, and other foods and beverages associated with sporting events do not see an increase in sales just before Super Bowl Sunday based on whether they have planned to advertise during the game. However, sales revenue of products that advertise during the Super Bowl generally grows not only in the three to four weeks following the game but also in the week prior to each of the next major U.S. sporting event broadcasts—the National Collegiate Athletic Association men's basketball tournament, the National Basketball Association playoffs, and the first games of the Major League Baseball season (Hartmann & Klapper, 2017). In addition, over a selected three-year period, films promoted during the Super Bowl grossed 40 percent more on average at the box office than movies that did not have Super Bowl advertising spots and were released on the same days (Yelkur et al., 2004).

However, viewers' perceptions of brands that advertise during the Super Bowl and their opinions of the ads themselves can also figure into the effectiveness of a spot. If audience members already associate a brand with low-quality products, poor value for money, or customer dissatisfaction, the brand will need to produce a Super Bowl ad that promotes more positive associations for the spot to be worth the cost (Rathiel et al., 2016). In addition, as social media has become increasingly popular, audiences will often discuss Super Bowl ads online for days after the game ends—although some ads receive praise from the public and from critics and others receive backlash, as was the case with the Carl's Jr. spots from Super Bowl XLIX. Depending on the response to the messaging in each Super Bowl spot, this digital word-of-mouth phenomenon can just as easily hurt a brand as help it.

Past Portrayals of Women in Super Bowl Ads

Some studies do exist on the portrayal of women in Super Bowl advertisements of the past. A comparative study of ads from the 1990s and 2000s demonstrated that women were depicted in several “non-traditional” roles, such as career-minded high-achievers or athletes, especially in the later years of analysis. The shift in women’s roles could be attributed to brands’ perceptions of changes in their audiences, because companies in product categories typically associated with men (such as cars or beer) saw an increase in female consumers during those two decades (Hatzithomas et al., 2016). However, a later study suggested that while the number of women in Super Bowl ads increased in the late 2000s and early to mid 2010s, and some were shown with more agency, they were not featured as “main characters” or celebrity endorsers as often as men. Women were also frequently treated as sex objects as late as 2017 (Taylor et al., 2019). These scholars’ contradicting perspectives arguably encompass the conflicting advertising paradigms that feature prominently today: “sex sells” and “femvertising.” In addition, while some progress occurred in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in combatting the gender-stereotype dimensions of advertising, Super Bowl spots still had room to make progress in allowing for equal representation of women as of four years prior to the writing of this article.

Despite the existence of these studies, little research has been done specifically on the portrayal of women in Super Bowl ads, and academic studies have not yet investigated the ads from Super Bowls LII through LV. Therefore, this article will fill the research gap by analyzing the content of the ads that were aired from 2016 to 2021.

III. Methods

Research Questions

The content analysis discussed in this paper sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1a: How often are women featured in the television advertisements that first aired during Super Bowls L–LV?

RQ1b: How does women’s inclusion (or omission) contribute to the storyline and/or message of each ad?

The first half of this two-part question establishes a quantitative foundation for the qualitative content analysis that is the focus of this study. The portrayal of women in an advertisement can only be evaluated if the ad features women at all. The second half of the question opens the discussion surrounding the audience’s perceptions of the women who are featured in the ads.

RQ2: In what ways do these ads portray women considering historical and contemporary trends in gender role stereotypes, the “sex sells” paradigm, and the rise of “femvertising”?

This question builds on the framework established in the literature review of the three common ways in which women are portrayed in advertising—in a traditional role for their gender, as a sex object, or in an empowered manner. The “historical and contemporary trends” aspect takes the history of advertising in account while accounting for the societal changes that affect ad content, as advertising both reflects and shapes society.

RQ3: Does the portrayal of women in these ads evolve or change over time, and if so, how?

Sample Selection

The ads analyzed in this study were chosen from the full archived lists of Super Bowl commercials on AdAge for each year from 2016–2021. Each Super Bowl broadcast typically features 40–60 unique, original commercials. The sample consisted of nearly all the ads from each year; the only spots that were excluded were those that fell into one of two categories: 1) ads sponsored by a political candidate, because the study

focused on consumer advertising; and 2) trailers for specific movies, television shows, or video games, because the portrayal of women in these ads would be entirely based on their portrayal in the media source and would blur the line between analysis of advertising and analysis of entertainment media. In total, the sample comprised 311 ads, averaging approximately 52 ads per year.

Analysis of Portrayals

This content analysis used a mixed-methods approach. After selecting the sample, the researcher watched each ad once to identify all human/humanoid female characters and/or celebrities pictured on screen in each (voiceovers were sometimes noted as female but were not counted as portrayals if a person was not shown on screen). All spots that did not depict any women were marked with the code “no women featured,” counted, and set aside in the quantitative analysis portion of the study. For each ad that did show one or more women, the researcher performed a qualitative analysis of the role(s) of the women in the spot. Identifying factors included the perceived proportionality of women to men depicted; each woman’s position as a main character (the focus of the ad), supporting character (in a role affecting the ad’s storyline but not the focus), or extra (simply appearing in the background); and if/how each woman fit into the portrayal framework of gender stereotyping, sexualization, and “femvertising”/empowerment based on her words, actions, and/or expressions of emotion.

Some common notations made in the coding process for perceived proportionality included the ratio of men to women being “approximately equal,” “more men than women,” “more women than men,” or “all women” (ads with all men were coded as “no women depicted”—see above). For the woman’s position, the woman could be a “main character,” “supporting character,” or “extra,” and the number of lines she had as compared to male characters in the ad was also noted. The portrayal framework notations included “stereotyped/not stereotyped,” “sexualized/not sexualized,” “empowered,” or “just there” (i.e., not fitting into any category).

IV. Findings & Discussion

After the 311 ads were watched, the spots were analyzed quantitatively to see how many did and did not depict women. Once the appearances of women were counted, the qualitative analysis looked at the ideas of perceived gender proportionality, characterization of women, trends in portrayals, and women as part of the bigger advertising picture.

Appearances of Women

In the analysis of the 311 total ads, the code “no women featured” appeared 58 times, meaning that 253—or 81.4%—of the ads did include one or more women and the remaining 58—or 18.6%—did not. When looking at the change in these numbers over time, Table 1 shows the number of ads broadcast in each year that did not depict any women:

Table 1: Number of Ads Per Year That Depicted No Women

Year	# of Ads Featuring No Women	Total Ads Examined	Percentage
2016	13	55	23.6%
2017	14	57	24.6%
2018	11	50	22.0%
2019	9	51	17.6%
2020	5	47	10.6%
2021	6	51	11.8%
Total	58	311	18.6%

In general, the percentage of ads that depicted no women decreased over the six years in question, with the second-most recent Super Bowl (2020) being the one that had the smallest percentage of spots with no women. One theory to explain the slight uptick in 2021 could be casting and production constraints due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but a 1.2% difference is relatively insignificant in the long term.

Perceived Gender Proportionality

In addition to the quantified decrease in the number of ads not featuring women at all between Super Bowls L and LV, the perceived gender proportionality – i.e., the number of women compared to men shown in ads featuring characters of both sexes – seemed to even out over time. Particularly in later years (2019–2021), the ads tended to feature an approximately equal number of women and men, especially among ads that compiled many short video clips with a backing voiceover rather than having a storyline with characters and dialogue. A few major brands that produced compilation/voiceover spots with perceived gender equality include Coca-Cola in 2017 with “Love Story,” in which both male and female friends and couples prepare meals and enjoy time together; and M&Ms in 2021 with “Come Together,” in which approximately equal numbers of men and women apologize for their mistakes by gifting candy to those they have wronged (Coca-Cola, 2017; M&Ms, 2021).

Despite this, each year still featured several compilation/voiceover ads which featured slightly more men than women. WeatherTech’s ads frequently fell into this category—both their 2016 ad “Resources” and their 2021 spot “We Never Left” compiled shorter clips and seemed to show fewer women than men (WeatherTech, 2016; WeatherTech, 2021). Another notable example of this phenomenon was the 2021 ad from Guaranteed Rate titled “Believe You Will.” This spot depicted athletes and other celebrities who overcame tough odds or came back from difficult situations in their lives. However, the ad not only featured more male celebrities than female ones, but the voiceover also provided more details about the men’s life stories than the women’s, adding a layer to the gender disproportionality on-screen (Guaranteed Rate, 2021).

By contrast, some later ads did feature a cast that was mostly or completely female. Most of these ads focused specifically on themes of women’s empowerment. For example, Olay’s 2021 spot “#MakeSpaceforWomen” promoted their corporate social responsibility initiative to support women in STEM careers, and Bumble’s 2019 ad “The Ball Is in Her Court” showed that Bumble is a female-focused dating app where the women make the decisions and initiate conversations, as they can and should in other areas of their lives (Olay, 2021; Bumble, 2019). An exception to this trend is Squarespace’s 2021 ad “5 to 9 with Dolly Parton,” which focused on the company’s ability to help anyone start their own business but showed more women than men taking advantage of this opportunity (Squarespace, 2021).

Characterization of Women

The concept of perceived gender proportionality applies less to ads in which there is a distinct storyline with characters and dialogue because ads with storylines can have more variation in the position that each character holds. Even as late as 2021, women were more often put into the role of a supporting character or extra in Super Bowl ads than they were featured as a main character. In addition, when women and men were featured as supporting characters together, the man generally had several lines, while the woman was given few to none. A notable ad exemplifying this trend was Bud Light’s 2019 spot “Joust,” in which a king and queen are both supporting characters watching the main character, the Bud Knight, joust (Bud Light, 2019). However, the queen makes only two short statements, and the king delivers much longer

monologues in response. Colgate's ad from the same year, "Close Talker," repeated the trend by putting a man and a woman supporting character together in several situations and always giving all the lines to the man (Colgate, 2019). However, notable exceptions were when a female celebrity delivered the main message of the ad directly (as actress Helen Mirren did in Budweiser's 2016 ad "Simply Put") or indirectly (as was the case with Paralympic swimmer Jessica Long in Toyota's 2021 spot "Upstream")—in these situations, women spoke all the lines in the ads (Budweiser, 2016; Toyota, 2021).

Trends in Portrayals

When looking at how the portrayal framework of gender stereotyping, sexualization, and "femvertising"/empowerment applies to Super Bowl advertising, the process quickly becomes more complicated than placing each of the female characters into one of the three listed categories. Surprisingly, the concept of gender stereotyping has changed over time in that female characters are not often forced into domestic roles in advertisements—either they have careers, seem to have agency over their positions in the home (i.e., they are content in their roles and are not juxtaposed with a career-focused man), or have a level of ambiguity around what they do besides using the featured product or service in the moment.

One gender stereotype that appeared several times in the earlier years analyzed was the portrayal of women being easily distracted by and fawning over men. This stereotype showed up most notably in ads for car companies, including Hyundai's "Ryanville" ad from 2016 and Honda's 2017 ad "Yearbooks," which could be explained by these companies catering primarily to a male audience at the time and later realizing that women viewers would also be interested in their products (Hyundai, 2016; Honda, 2017). Furthermore, some ads did not show women in domestic roles specifically, but they still showed women doing other activities associated with their gender in contrast to men. An example of this phenomenon appears in Alfa Romeo's 2017 ad "Riding Dragons," in which all the women shown are either ballet dancers or helping the men in the ad as the men build and drive cars (Alfa Romeo, 2017). Kia's "Give It Everything" ad from 2019 also exemplifies this subtle stereotyping, as it shows male students at a local school playing sports while the female students are depicted attending a school dance in fancy dresses (Kia, 2019).

Despite these early examples of stereotyping, female empowerment featured more prominently in ads over time, even if the ad catered to a more general audience instead of specifically targeting women. This tonal shift even happened within some of the same brands based on their ads in successive years, with a primary example being Audi. The company's 2016 ad "The Commander" had only one female supporting character who was arguably not empowered (she appeared on-screen briefly and served as an aide to the main character, a male retired astronaut); however, the 2017 spot "Daughter" and the 2020 spot "Let It Go" both placed the focus on women and showed them as empowered through Audi's initiatives to support equal pay and environmental sustainability, respectively (Audi, 2016; Audi, 2017; Audi, 2020).

Additionally, several women in Super Bowl L through LV advertisements fit into more than one of the three categories or could not be categorized at all. In several ads, including T-Mobile's 2017 spot "#Punished" and Amazon's 2021 ad "Alexa's Body," the same female character is both sexualized and stereotyped as less intelligent and deferential to men (T-Mobile, 2017; Amazon, 2021). Also, in the vein of the third- and fourth-wave feminist idea of women finding empowerment in choosing to embrace their sexuality, some women in the later Super Bowl ads (such as those in Pepsi's 2020 spot "Zero Sugar. Done Right.") could be categorized as sexualized and/or empowered (Pepsi, 2020). Furthermore, a large group of female supporting characters were featured in Super Bowl ads during this time but simply did not fit any of the categories of stereotyping, sexualization, or empowerment, which could occur for several reasons. For example, Heinz's 2016 ad "Wiener Stampede" focused more on the dachshunds dressed as hot dogs in the ad than the humans (including two women) who all stood waiting for the dogs and were dressed as condiments (Heinz, 2016). A slightly different situation occurred with Pop-Tarts' 2020 ad "Pretzel JVN-fomercial," which showed a woman in the background trying the product but focused primarily on the celebrity endorsement from Queer Eye star Jonathan Van Ness (Pop-Tarts, 2020).

Women Within the Bigger Advertising Picture

Noticeable shifts occurred in the overall collections of advertisements for the years 2017 and 2020, seemingly based on the political climate of the United States. Super Bowl LI took place just two weeks after the presidential inauguration of Donald Trump, and many brands responded to Trump's controversial policies through their ads. The previously mentioned "Daughter" spot by Audi was one of these response ads as it

promoted equal pay initiatives, and others included 84 Lumber's immigration-focused spot "The Journey Begins" and Airbnb's "We Accept" ad, which responded to the administration's proposed ban on travelers to the U.S. from several Muslim-majority nations (Audi, 2017; 84 Lumber, 2017; Airbnb, 2017). Whether these ads focused directly, indirectly, or not at all on women's rights, female characters were featured prominently in all of them and were depicted as strong and/or valuable as human beings. In early 2020, when Super Bowl LIV was broadcast, the nation was preparing for another presidential election and a new decade. Sociopolitical issues—including women's rights—became more noticeable in advertising once again. Ads in this category included Audi's previously mentioned, environmentally focused "Let It Go" spot and the NFL's own ad about racial justice titled "Inspire Change" (Audi, 2020; National Football League, 2020).

While ads containing social messages like these generally make brands appear favorable in the eyes of consumers because of the rising importance of corporate social responsibility, they are one of the two situations in which women's characterization and portrayal often become secondary and therefore hard to judge. Whether an ad's social message affects women indirectly (as it does in Microsoft's 2019 spot "We All Win," promoting accessibility for children with disabilities regardless of gender) or not at all (as in Kia's 2020 ad "Tough Never Quits," advertising the company's initiative to support homeless youth while not depicting any women), if and how women are portrayed can easily become an afterthought because the ad is promoting a different cause (Microsoft, 2019; Kia, 2020). New York Life's 2020 spot "Agape" even features a woman who is obviously sexualized, but the ad's social message about the four different types of love that society should emphasize would arguably be incomplete without that character's association with romantic love (New York Life, 2020). The other case in which judging the representation of female characters becomes especially difficult is when the ad depicts a semi-realistic but obviously ridiculous/humorous situation, such as Mint Mobile's 2019 spot "Chunky Style Milk" or Bud Light's 2021 ad "Last Year's Lemons" (Mint Mobile, 2019; Bud Light, 2021). In these ads, the incorporation of a shocking element (like the existence of a disgusting dairy product or lemons falling from the sky) into a setting very much like the real world again takes the focus off the characters, female or not.

V. Conclusion

Overall, the portrayal of women in Super Bowl ads from 2016–2021 is much more complicated than the originally proposed framework of gender stereotyping, sexualization, or empowerment. Over time, the definitions and use of each of those terms has changed based on trends in society. Women are less often stereotyped in domestic roles and more often depicted doing other typically female activities (e.g., dancing, dress shopping) or interacting with men in flirtatious ways. Additionally, some women fit into more than one category (e.g., stereotyped in their deference to men as well as made into a sex object, or choosing to use their sexuality as a form of empowerment) or none at all. In addition, the incorporation of uplifting social messages or shock factors can easily remove focus from female characters in an ad. While women's portrayal is more difficult to categorize in either of these situations, both speak volumes about the similarly useful appeals of positive causes and an element of surprise in overall advertising trends.

While this study may help to provide some answers about where the representation of women in Super Bowl ads stands today and how it could improve, it also raises questions for further study about whether and how each of the trends above will continue. Analyzing women's portrayals in the ads that will be aired during future Super Bowls, or comparing Super Bowl ads across multiple decades (e.g., the 2000s to the 2010s to the 2020s), are two natural directions for these future studies. However, research opportunities also exist in comparing ads across media (e.g., comparing a company's Super Bowl spot to its Google and Facebook ads that year) or examining ads released during other sporting events with different audiences (e.g., March Madness, the World Series, or the Olympics).

This study has several limitations that need to be considered. First, the timing of the research and writing of the article was limited to a three-month semester of undergraduate study. Therefore, each of the ads could only be watched once, and re-watching the ads could provide further insight and clarify lingering questions. Additionally, only one researcher watched and analyzed the ads, again due to time constraints, and a second viewer could have provided a different perspective for comparison. The researcher also had previous knowledge of some, but not all the ads from having seen them on television in passing, amplifying the potential for personal bias. However, factoring in all these limitations, this study can still serve as a bridge

between past and future research about women's roles in advertising from a societal perspective.

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When Words Fail: A Study of Audience Perceptions of Aphasia as Portrayed in Film

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Abstract

While the topic of mental illness is becoming more prevalent in America and western pop culture, not all mental illnesses are represented frequently or accurately. This qualitative study investigates how fictional characters with symptoms of aphasia, a mental disorder causing difficulty with speech production or language comprehension, are portrayed in scripted film and television. The goal of this study is to analyze first impressions of aphasia gathered from film. A college-aged audience assessed three characters (Hodor from Game of Thrones, Timmy from South Park, and Michael Armstrong from Hot Fuzz) in semi-structured focus groups to discuss their initial reactions of characters displaying aphasia. The findings show that physical abnormalities and submissive personalities are common among characters exhibiting traits of aphasia. These findings also align with previous research about lower intelligence and maturity ratings and higher aggression ratings in characters with mental disorders. Participants stress that character complexity correlates to more likability and sympathy, illustrating how character depth is crucial for positive representation of the characters.

I. Introduction

The topic of mental illness is becoming increasingly accepted in American culture and included in western pop culture. However, not all mental illnesses are represented frequently or accurately. In fact, many mental disorders are unaddressed in popular media, which leads to a lack of awareness from audience members about mental illnesses. It may also cause unintentional reinforcement of opinions and attitudes towards those with less common conditions (Riles et al., 2021).

Aphasia is one of those conditions, and despite 180,000 new cases every year in the United States (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders [NIDCD], 2017), aphasia remains a rather unfamiliar disorder among the general population. Depictions of aphasia tend to be unnoticed during social and academic conversations about mental health in popular film and television shows.

Aphasia, an impairment to language centers in the brain, has severe impacts on social interactions for those with the condition. Language is an integral part of socialization, and the significance of language in everyday life is widely accepted in the field of communications. Lacking the ability to communicate leads to negative experiences in social settings, resulting in increased rates of depression and social isolation within this population (NIDCD, 2017). Portrayals of aphasia in media may further promote social isolation

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by reinforcing stereotypes about mental illness, including abnormal physical appearance, increased rates of aggression, and questionable levels of maturity and intelligence (Riles et al., 2021; Theriot, 2013).

To quote author and educator Rosemary Crossley (1997), “Not being able to speak is not the same as not having anything to say” (p. 8). Accurate cinematic depictions of individuals with mental disorders remains a relevant topic to audiences and content creators alike, and the disorder of aphasia belongs in this conversation. The purpose of this research study is to analyze how film and television characters with traits of aphasia are portrayed in narrative stories and are interpreted by a college-aged audience. Several focus groups assessed how characters with qualities of aphasia are depicted in popular films and television shows.

II. Literature Review

To analyze the link between aphasia and film, previous research much be addressed to clarify terminology about aphasia and assess the psychological impacts of film on an audience. Substantial research has been conducted on stigmatizations of mental illness in film, which may overlap with depictions of aphasia in popular media. These previous studies serve as a guideline for how mental health stereotypes are coded in films and what consequences stigmas may have by shaping audience opinion.

Description of Aphasia

Aphasia is a mental disorder causing difficulty with speech production or language comprehension due to impairment of the left hemisphere of the brain (Fridriksson et al., 2018). Roughly 1 million individuals in the United States currently live with aphasia, and it is strongly correlated with middle-aged and older populations who have suffered from a stroke (Fridriksson et al., 2018). Acute head trauma may also be responsible for the condition. Aphasia also can occur from the gradual loss of neural networks responsible for language processing and speech production during aging (Grossman & Irwin, 2018).

There are six subtypes of aphasia: Broca’s aphasia, Wernicke’s aphasia, conduction aphasia, and three variants of primary progressive aphasia (PPA). These subcategories exist to classify the onset of the condition and distinguish various effects (Grossman & Irwin, 2018). One cause of these differences in effects is the area of the brain that is damaged. Impairment to the frontal lobe (Broca’s area) results in a lack of speech production. On the other hand, damage to the temporal lobe (Wernicke’s area) causes a lack of speech comprehension (Fridriksson et al., 2018). The fictional characters represented in this study possess symptoms of Broca’s aphasia and non-fluent/agrammatic PPA by having non-fluent speech production with no observable difficulties in language comprehension.

Several academic case studies of aphasia describe the linguistic deficits experienced by individuals with the disorder. Psychologist Paul Broca documented some of the earliest observations of aphasia, specifically with non-fluent or motor deficits in speech. His first patient could only repeat the word “tan” after suffering from a stroke. Another patient had extreme grammatical errors after the onset of aphasia, resulting in labored speech with limited vocabulary (Dick et al., 2001). Case studies provide behavioral examples of aphasia and demonstrate how the condition exists beyond a biological state.

It must be acknowledged that it is rare for a media content creator to purposefully design a character with aphasia, and therefore the characters are not “diagnosed” by the writers themselves. This study matches observable behaviors of fictional characters with clinical examples of aphasia. The characters featured in this study align with the DSM-5 definition of non-fluent aphasia by having the ability to clearly understand language through their auditory systems, yet difficulties verbally expressing more than four words in a cohesive manner (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is also imperative to use the previously mentioned case studies as behavioral examples to match aphasia to fictional characters on the screen.

Psychological Impact of Film

Mental health stigmas provide evidence on how film and television have large roles in molding the psychological state of the audience (Aguiniga et al., 2016). Persson (2003) states how the construction of moving images alters audience perception by having a strong influence on judgement, emotions, and behavior. The representation of characters through the point of view of directors and screenwriters leads to emotional manipulation of the audience to shape their perception and attitudes (Persson, 2003).

Famous psychologist Albert Bandura also theorizes the concept of collective illusions, or how misconceptions about minority groups based on repeated televised exposure of stereotypes creates a false social reality for viewers (Bandura, 2001). Through these collective illusions, social learning is absorbed through observation, which has an extensive effect on behaviors of audience members. Therefore, mental health stigmas acquired from social learning through film and television can create negative behaviors in real world situations (Bandura, 2001). This may explain why film characters have a profound effect on audience perception of mental illness in reality (Aguiniga et al., 2016; Theriot, 2013).

Mental Illness Stigmas in Film

Over recent years, the topic of mental illness in film has received a surge of interest in academic literature. Several studies have explored how negative stereotypes towards mental illness are acquired by the audience through film and television programs. As demonstrated in previous *Elon Journal* articles, characters with schizophrenia (DeMare, 2016) and bipolar disorder (O'Hern, 2017) are overwhelmingly violent. While aiming to observe perceptions of aphasia through film, it is important to address preexisting stereotypes that may exist for the broader category of mental illnesses within this medium.

Scholars have examined popular films from 1990 to 2020 in efforts to determine the demographics of fictional film characters with mental illnesses. They discovered that a vast majority of characters with mental illnesses are portrayed as heterosexual white males, as well as tending to exhibit physical, verbal, or sexual aggression. They also appear to be of early-adult age or younger. Only 5% of characters in fictional worlds are represented with a mental disorder compared to the 25% of individuals who have a mental disorder in reality (Riles et al., 2021). This research addresses an apparent mismatch between the physical appearances and prominence of mental illness within the fictional worlds of film and within the reality.

Several studies have specifically targeted how college-aged individuals perceive mental illnesses through film. One study focused on how college students gathered information about mental illness. Students who primarily learned about mental illness through forms of media are more likely to believe that the media depicts mental illness in a realistic manner. They are also more likely to believe that they do not personally know individuals with mental illnesses due to the extremity of cases that are often portrayed in media (Aguiniga et al., 2016). This suggests why characters with aphasia in film are often depicted with extreme vocabulary limitations and why an audience may have difficulty comprehending the condition in real-world scenarios.

Another study aimed to define mental health stigmas perceived among a college-aged audience. Without prior knowledge of mental illnesses, students tended to perceive film characters with mental health issues as irresponsible, childish, and dangerous. These negative stigmas influenced their personal beliefs of mental disorders in reality as well. There is also an increased desire to segregate oneself from an individual with a mental disorder when negative stereotypes are perceived by an audience (Theriot, 2013). For college students who have never experienced a person with aphasia before, acquiring negative stereotypes about the condition from film or television may create a harmful social reputation for those with the condition in reality. This study intends to open the conversation of aphasia in academic and film communities while bridging the gap in research among aphasia, mental health stigmas, and film.

Research Questions

As previous research has indicated, negative stigmas of mental disorders being portrayed in film and television may have a significant impact on the social environment experienced by those affected by these disorders in reality. It is imperative to seek an understanding of how aphasia is represented in film, how it compares to other mental disorder representations, and how these representations reinforce behaviors for real-world situations. These three aspects are reflected in three research questions:

RQ1: What are common traits among film characters with symptoms of aphasia, as perceived by an audience?

RQ2: How do characters with aphasiac qualities compare to previously observed stereotypes of mental illness in film and television?

RQ3: To what extent do audience members find depictions of aphasia beneficial or damaging to those with the condition in reality?

Unlike previous studies, this study focuses on an audience's first exposure to a less-common mental disorder through the medium of film. This research aims to relate and analyze aphasia to popular film and television characters. A goal of this study is to inspire audiences to examine characters that have mental disorders with a critical eye. It may also influence future filmmakers to thoroughly consider how these characters are adapted to the screen. Following this research, future studies may continue to look at the social dynamics experienced by individuals with aphasia, as well examine other specific mental disorders that are featured but not commonly addressed in works of film or television.

III. Methods

To analyze audience reactions to the cinematic representation of aphasia, this study uses three semi-structured focus groups as its primary method of research. Through convenience sampling, 13 participants agreed to partake in small focus group sessions. Participants were given no prior knowledge about aphasia but were aware that they would be discussing the topic of mental health in relation to film characters.

The method of this research was inspired by Miller and Lundquist's (2019) study, involving a series of pre-screening questions about mental illness portrayals in film, a brief screening session, and a post-screening discussion of characteristics observed. Participants were asked to answer questions and complete thought-provoking tasks pertaining to the assessment of characters with qualities of aphasia. Participants were also provided a sheet of paper and a writing utensil to document personal thoughts throughout the viewings of the characters.

Participants

A total of 13 college-aged students participated in this study, with 69% being female compared to 31% male, 92% with a white racial identity and 8% identifying as black, and 85% upperclassmen (third or fourth-year students) and 15% underclassmen (first or second-year students). Film was the primary academic discipline of 54% of participants, while 46% studied other disciplines (no participants were psychology majors). All participants lacked prior knowledge of the condition of aphasia before engaging in the focus group. The design of this study was approved by the Institutional Research Board to ensure proper consent and safety of the participants.

Sample

Through personal recollection, online forums, and film databases (IMDB), a list of characters exhibiting symptoms of aphasia was assembled. Based on the DSM-5 definition of aphasia (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), characters were evaluated for selection with the following criteria:

Inclusion criteria:

- Characters that have a limited vocabulary by repeating five words/phrases or less.
- Characters with labored speech/visual and auditory difficulty pronouncing words.

Exclusion criteria:

- Characters that are a species other than human (animals, monsters, aliens, etc.).
- Characters with a limited vocabulary due to a language barrier.
- Characters with speech impediments (stuttering, stammer) not associated with reduced vocabulary.

After considering these criteria, a list of seven popular film/television characters was generated. Each character was documented on a spreadsheet and assigned a number. A digital random number generator was used to select three characters: Hodor from the live-action television show *Game of Thrones* (Benioff & Weiss, 2019), Timmy from the animated show *South Park* (Parker & Stone, 1997), and Michael "Lurch" Armstrong from the film *Hot Fuzz* (Wright, 2007). Participants were shown three video clips of each character lasting one minute or less. These clips displayed the subject character in various narrative contexts. Of the characters selected, it must be noted that two characters (Timmy and "Lurch") are represented in comedic narratives while only one character (Hodor) is represented in a dramatic story.

Procedure

At the beginning of the focus group, participants discussed previous experiences with film characters with mental illness and the participants' perceptions of mental illness through film. Afterwards, characters were shown individually as participants described each character based on their physical appearance, personality traits, and significance to the story. Then, a choice-order exercise was used to rank each character based on specific criteria, being perceptions of *intelligence*, *friendliness*, *aggression*, and *maturity*. A rating scale of 1-10 was used as a tool for analyzing individual perceptions and does not serve as a quantitative metric.

Following that exercise, participants noted similarities and differences among the three subject characters. After subject character comparisons, a brief explanation of aphasia was provided to the participants. Finally, a sentence-completion exercise focused on how participants perceived individuals with aphasia based on their film character counterparts, and how these opinions and attitudes may be reflected in real-world scenarios.

IV. Findings

The findings of this study are centered on identifying initial opinions and observations from audience members after their first exposure to aphasia represented through three film characters.

Initial Character Descriptions

After the initial viewings of characters, participants answered the first research question by expressing their observations of physical characteristics, personality traits, and their role and significance to other characters in their respective stories. Table 1 depicts the most common traits and descriptions for each character.

The most universal observation was the presence of a speech abnormality. The majority of described this as, "a lack of verbal abilities," "using simple phrases," and "simplistic speaking." Physical abnormalities were noted as well, including the "big and stupid" stereotype to describe Character A (Hodor) and Character C ("Lurch"), as well as an exaggerated head size and use of a wheelchair for Character B (Timmy). Participants stated that the physical traits of the sample characters were drastically different compared to neurotypical characters in their stories.

Also, Character A and Character C display submissive behaviors as they react to the commands of other characters. Participants described characters as "subordinate," "obedient," and "acts as a servant." The final observation is that regardless of the narrative genre, all three characters are used for comedic effects at some point throughout their respective storylines.

Table 1: Initial Character Descriptions

Character Name	Key Descriptors	Comments
Character A (Hodor)	Big, strong, dumb, simplistic, obedient, low verbal skills	Treated like a pet Not violent for his large size "Big and stupid" stereotype
Character B (Timmy)	Jittery, impulsive, small body/large head, minimal speech, source of comedy	Lack of character depth Constantly misdiagnosed Capable of having emotions
Character C (Michael "Lurch" Armstrong)	Large, strong, childish, violent, evil, uncontrolled emotions, limited communication	Easily distractible Not as advanced as other people/ lack of skills Over-exaggerated size/stupidity

Scaling/Ranking Exercise

Pertaining to the second research question, participants ranked each character on a scale from 1 to 10 based on criteria about typical stereotypes of characters with mental illness. These criteria categories include below average intelligence, friendliness, maturity, and above average physical or sexual aggression (Theriot, 2013; Riles et al., 2021). This scale is not an empirical measurement, but an instrument to consolidate opinions and visualize character comparisons. Figure 1 displayed the rankings of each character based on these categories.

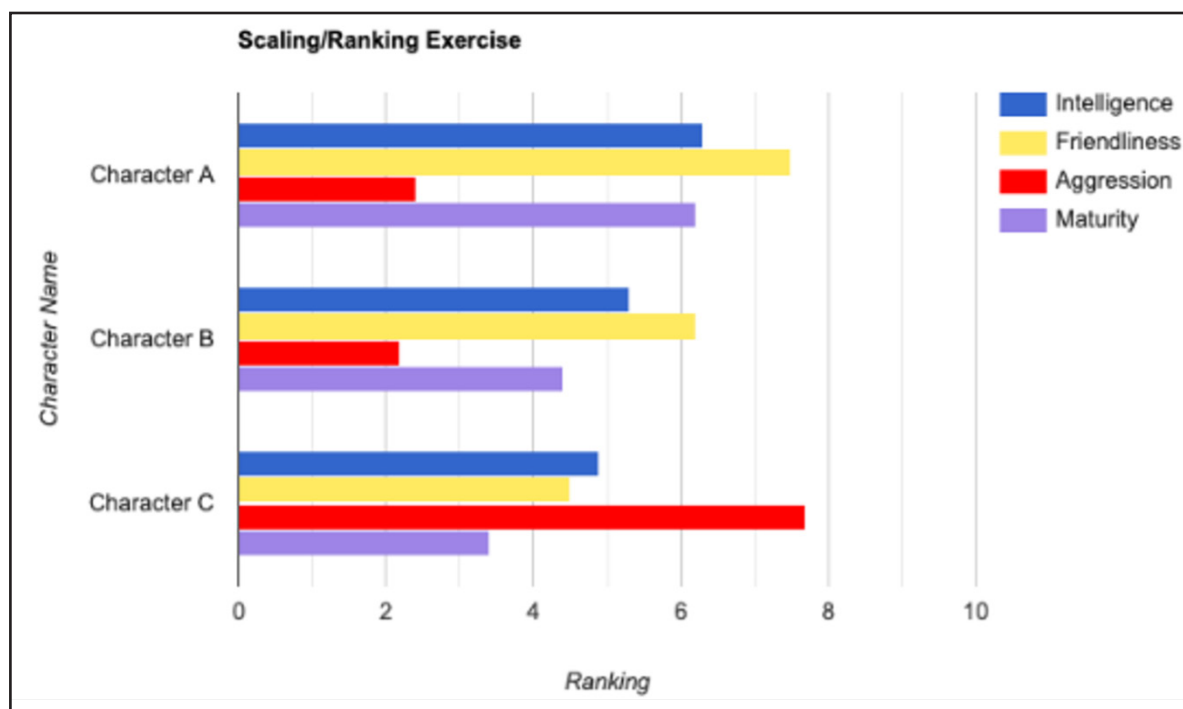


Figure 1: Scaling/Ranking Exercise of Characters

Character A (Hodor) exhibits the highest scores of intelligence, friendliness, and maturity and has a low score of aggression. Participants justified their ratings based on Character A's display of survival skills, compassion for children, and obedience to other characters. Some participants noted Character A's lack of emotional intelligence after being easily startled from a thunderstorm, which reduced intelligence and maturity compared to an average person.

In contrast, Character C ("Lurch") exhibits the lowest scores of intelligence, friendliness, and maturity, with the highest score of aggression. Participants explained these scores based on Character C's childish mannerisms, such as being easily distracted by a stuffed animal, his lack of communication skills, and constant use of physical violence while combating the main character. Many participants felt that Character C was being "taken advantage of" by characters outside of the shown clips, as well as possessing the ability to make independent decisions. Character C also appeared to remain loyal to his accomplices, which raised rankings of friendliness and maturity to some degree.

Character B (Timmy) shows similar rankings to Character A, with slight decreases in each category besides aggression. Participants explained their ratings were due to the age of Character B, a fourth-grade student. Despite his age, Character B also showed differences compared to other fourth-grade characters by throwing tantrums and by having his intellectual capabilities questioned by his teacher and counselor. Participants also noted the lack of character development with Character B, which made it difficult to understand his motives and sympathize with him.

Sentence Completion Exercise

To answer the third research question, a series of incomplete statements were given to participants with the goal of extrapolating their initial exposure to aphasia from dramatic representations to opinions about the disorder in reality. Table 2 displays each statement along with the most common responses by participants. Character A (Hodor) was noted as the most favorable character due to his complex development and compassion for others. Character C (“Lurch”) was perceived as the least likable character due to his threatening nature and overall exaggerated and negative portrayal. Character B (Timmy) was also noted as an unfavorable character due to his underdevelopment and being uncomfortable to watch.

Table 2: Sentence Completion Examples

Statement	Most Common Response
My favorite character is _____ because _____.	Character A, complexity, compassion
Statement	Most Common Response
My least favorite character is _____ because _____.	Character C, aggression
If one of these characters sat next to me in public, I would feel _____.	Indifferent, confused, uncomfortable
These characters are _____ than the average person.	More misunderstood, treated worse
Based on these characters, people with aphasia are/ have _____.	Are stereotyped, have difficulties communicating, are exploited

In terms of interacting with these characters in real-world situations, most participants described their feelings as indifferent towards a public encounter with any of these characters. A few female participants stated that they would feel uncomfortable due to the size and stature of Characters A (Hodor) and C (“Lurch”), explaining how they may feel threatened by a larger man if they encounter them in public. Also, some participants disclosed that they would be confused when attempting to communicate with these characters and may feel awkward or discomfited when doing so.

Many participants felt that these characters are more misunderstood than the average person. As observed by the participants, other characters in the story would often try to speak on the behalf of the subject characters. Difficulties with speech production resulted in issues expressing independent thought for the subject characters. According to the participants, this made the subject characters appear less intelligent than they are capable of. Participants also noticed how other characters mistreated the subject characters by “treating them as a pet” or believing they are “underdeveloped” and less mature than their age.

Finally, many participants describe the subject characters as “stereotyped,” meaning the characters appear to be less intelligent and less mature on a surface-level engagement. Based on what the participants perceived through film characters, they noted that people with aphasia must have barriers to communication and are “looked down upon” or “treated worse than the average individual.”

V. Discussion

The findings of this study provide insight about how aphasia is perceived by an audience unfamiliar with the disorder, how the dramatization of aphasia in film and television aligns with representations of other mental disorders, and how learning about disorders through film may translate into stigmatization in real world settings.

Based on the remarks of focus group participants, their observations coincide with previous research about mental illness stigmatization in film and television (Riles et al., 2021; Theriot, 2013). Physical abnormalities of characters with aphasia, most notable with Character C (“Lurch”), cause higher reports of

aggression. This leads to audience members feeling uncomfortable and may give them a sense of being threatened by these characters. There were no comments about the race, gender, and sexuality of these characters among participants, however comments about aggressing tended to be stronger in female participants based on gender differences between themselves and the characters.

Other significant insights include misrepresentations of intelligence and maturity levels among the characters. A few participants describe these characters as the “big and dumb” stereotype. Participants also related this towards characters that have unidentifiable mental disorders, or as phrased by the participants, “a blanket of mental illness.”

Several participants fixated on how difficulties with communication do not impact the intelligence of the characters, but the expression of their thoughts. When asked about how these characters influence public opinion about aphasia, they stated how those with aphasia are “perceived as less intelligent than they actually are.” One participant stated the following: “After learning about the disorder, I can see how they are having many more thoughts than they might be expressing and are smarter than we think.”

An interesting insight not referenced in previous literature is the submissive nature of characters with aspects of aphasia. Several participants describe these characters as “following orders” and being “treated like a pet.” One participant said, “these characters are only admired by other characters based on how submissive they are to them.” This may pertain to perceptions about maturity, based on how characters viewed as immature may be difficult to trust and are not expected to think for themselves. Besides maturity, the submissive behaviors of the subject characters may contribute to larger issues about social dynamics developed around mental illness.

The lack of agency possessed by the subject characters suggests social inequity towards individuals with aphasia. This is further supported by participants’ opinions about aphasia in reality, stating how people with aphasia are “misunderstood,” “looked down upon,” and “need direction to function.” Participants expressed that placing these characters in lower positions of social power suggests people with aphasia are unvalued, unappreciated, and misinterpreted. This may be connected to higher rates of depression and feelings of isolation among this population (NIDCD, 2017).

Many participants used sympathy and compassion as qualitative metrics about character likability. As evidenced in this study, participants tend to enjoy characters to which they can relate to or sympathize with. This is shown through the sentence completion tasks about the participants’ most favorite and least favorite characters. An overwhelming number of participants chose Hodor as their favorite character based on his being complex, compassionate, and caring. Hodor also had the highest scores of intelligence, friendliness, and maturity due to this complexity.

In contrast, Characters B (Timmy) and C (“Lurch”) had a low level of character depth and narrative development. Timmy was reported as “frustrating to watch” and “unsympathetic” due to the shallow character design and lack of clear motives. “Lurch” was described as “overexaggerated,” “uncomfortable to watch,” and “taken advantage of.” “Lurch” was the only character explicitly framed as an antagonist within the storyline, which may contribute to unlikability, but does not impact the overall development of the character. For both Timmy and “Lurch,” having stronger goals and justifications for their actions may increase their complexity, relatability, and likability from audience members. Character complexity is suggested to be beneficial as audience members may be more sympathetic to real-life cases of aphasia by relating the condition to a likable character.

While this study aims to have a critical lens towards depictions of mental illness in film, it must not neglect the positive aspects film representation may have on an audience. At the conclusion of the focus groups, participants were asked about their overall experience of the study pertaining to their first exposure to a mental illness. Numerous participants signified that this study was a substantial personal learning experience, and that awareness of aphasia may carry over into their personal lives going forward. One participant stated, “it is good to put a name to it [aphasia] rather than a basic assumption of general disorders.” Another participant stated, “knowing there is a name to the condition makes them more of a real character.” These sentiments speak to the potential influence of positive change film can provide for mental illnesses. As noted by participants, if the demand of decreased stigmatization of mental health grows from audiences, it should be reflected in new media being created.

Despite this, participants felt that these examples of characters still reinforce negative stereotypes of people with aphasia. Participants reasoned for this by stating, “there were no explanations of the disorder in

the movies,” “incorrect correlations with intelligence,” and “limited examples of characters with aphasia.” Many participants felt that these portrayals did not align with how the condition functions in reality. The responses given in the sentence completion tasks demonstrate how negative impressions about aphasia acquired through film have impacted their personal opinions about the disorder. As uncovered in previous research, college students who acquire stigmas towards mental health from film or television may hold harmful social standards to those with mental health in the outside world (Theriot, 2013).

VI. Conclusion

There are several limitations that may have impacted the findings of this study. First, only 13 participants contributed to this study, which may limit the scope of interpretations of these characters. There were also issues with diversity that must be acknowledged within the participation group. A majority of participants were female, white, and belonged to a private college institution. This allows for socioeconomic factors that may have influenced findings, particularly for rankings of aggression and intelligence. Also, two characters featured in the study are represented in a comedic genre, which may be disproportionately prone to stereotypes and farcical gestures when compared to other film genres. Finally, the use of focus groups incorporates a level of bias from other group members. There were several instances where participants agreed with previous statements of other members instead of providing personal insight, which may have limited the depth of discussion in this study.

This study investigates how a college-aged audience interprets the mental disorder of aphasia through film without any prior exposure to the condition. The findings show how perceptions of film characters with traits of aphasia are correlated with previously identified stereotypes towards mental illness (low intelligence, low maturity, high aggression). These findings translate into inaccurate audience perceptions of the disorder. To counteract these stigmas, content creators should aim to add depth and complexity to characters with aphasia or other mental disorders. Participants advocate for character complexity as it correlates with likable characters, reinforcing sympathy and equality for individuals with mental illnesses. Awareness of mental illness in film and television is viewed by participants as valuable tool for learning if done accurately.

Future research should continue to analyze the influence of mental illness depictions in film and television on a general audience. More studies can incorporate the focus group method to assess public opinion of mental illness in film with an increased richness in responses compared to surveys. Future studies may also choose to take a quantitative approach to measure behavioral changes from exposure to film. Also, it is imperative that researchers of mental illness and film widen their scope of disorders included in their studies. Aphasia is simply one example of a mental disorder lacking attention in the public eye that are still featured in dramatic stories. Aphasia in its entirety was not fully assessed in this study, as only the subcategory of Broca’s aphasia was analyzed. Consequently, other forms of aphasia could be incorporated as well. It is worth examining if other disorders that are not specifically addressed are coded in popular characters and the impact this has on perceptions about mental illness.

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It's Not All Black and White: Portrayals of Mass Shooters Before and After the 2020 Black Lives Matter Movement

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Abstract

Mental health and mass shootings are two topics that are increasingly prevalent in the media. This study analyzes the framing of online news coverage of Black and White mass shooters and whether the portrayal of these perpetrators changed after the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Qualitative content analysis of 36 articles and 12 perpetrators showed that perpetrators are grouped and framed based on personality and background. The data suggests that articles about Black perpetrators were less likely to include mental health discussions and more likely to include behavioral details about the shooter that were irrelevant to the crime. Results showed that the 2020 movement sparked an increase in mental health conversations among articles about Black perpetrators only in cases that could be deemed more newsworthy. This data suggests that there are implicit biases disseminated in these reports, as articles are framed differently depending on the perpetrators background, personality, or race.

I. Introduction

In 2020, there were more mass shootings in the United States than there were days in the year. According to the Gun Violence Archive, 2020 was a record high for America with the number of mass shootings reaching 611 (2020). This has led to frequent discourse about the connection between mass shootings and mental illness. However, studies show that “notions of mental illness that emerge in relation to mass shootings frequently reflect larger cultural stereotypes and anxieties about matters such as race, ethnicity, social class, and politics” (Metzl & MacLeish, 2014, pp. 241-245). With the rise in racial tensions, mental health afflictions, and gun violence, our nation is becoming increasingly unstable. These “anxieties” that many Americans hold escalate as these issues continue to occur. Often, this feeling of fear turns into anger and many look for someone or something to blame.

When incomprehensible events like mass shootings occur, many turn to the media for answers. After all, media serves as gatekeepers who strategically select, filter, and distribute content to consumers. When news reports of mass shootings and crime are framed differently from perpetrator to perpetrator, media consumers’ perceptions may be tainted. Mass shootings, defined as an event where four or more are injured or killed, have become sensationalized in the media and the perpetrators of these violent acts have often taken the spotlight in many articles (Gun Violence Archive, 2021). While media narratives of White mass

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shooters historically have been attributed to mental illness, those describing perpetrators of an ethnic minority enforce the stereotype that these minorities are naturally more aggressive and dangerous (Frisby, 2017). This perpetuates harmful racial stereotypes, furthering the political and social polarization America has been facing.

The year 2020 was the start of a major global crisis that changed the way society navigates and discusses mental health. It was also the year of one of the largest movements in United States history with around 25 million participants (Carr Center, 2020). The Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 has been said to have changed the way the nation talks about race. This study seeks to understand whether this new way of navigating conversations about race and mental health can be seen through the implicit subjectivity of online news articles about Black and White perpetrators of mass violence. This research will examine the portrayal of mass shooters in online news media to determine if there are any differences in portrayal based on whether the perpetrator is Black or White. Additionally, this research will also analyze any changes in portrayal based on the influential 2020 Black Lives Matter movement. This will be accomplished by examining 36 total articles about 12 different mass shooters: three White mass shooters and three Black mass shooters who committed these violent acts before the 2020 movement, as well as three White and three Black mass shooters from after this pivotal movement.

II. Literature Review

Previous research has explored the link between mass shootings and mental illnesses, the role of media coverage in mass shootings, and Racial Formation Theory. When emotional and unfathomable events such as mass shootings occur, it leaves people looking for answers. This has led to research investigating the inaccurate conversations about the role mental health has in mass shootings as well as the inaccurate reporting of the shootings themselves. Scholars have also examined that, through Racial Formation Theory, race is an ever-changing construct that signifies current social beliefs and conflicts.

The Connection Between Mass Shootings and Mental Health

Two topics that have become increasingly prevalent in the media are mental health and mass shootings. Both are highly sensitive topics that, unfortunately, many United States citizens are far too familiar with. The United States accounts for under 5% of the global population, however, it is home to 31% of global mass shooters (Lankford, 2016). Additionally, according to the 2021 report from Mental Health America, mental health in the United States has been worsening for years (2021).

The link between mass shootings and mental health is a contested one in scholarship. In one recent study, it was found that in 28 of 35 mass shootings, the perpetrator had an untreated psychiatric illness (Cerfolio et. al, 2021). However, findings from the National Council for Behavioral Health found that only 4% of violent acts committed in the United States were committed by those with serious mental illness (2019). The inconsistent reports surrounding these topics make it challenging to develop an informed stance. However, health professionals are emphasizing that these cases should be looked at as isolated incidents due to this inconsistency.

It is also important to note that, “scholars who study violence prevention thus contend that mass shootings occur far too infrequently to allow for statistical modeling and predictability” (Metzl & MacLeish, 2014, p. 241). Although the frequency of mass shootings in the United States is a concerning matter, members of society must understand that mass shootings represent “statistical aberrations that reveal more about particularly horrible instances than they do about population-level events” (Metzl & MacLeish, 2014, p. 242).

Previous research has shown that those who are White have a higher chance of having their crimes attributed to mental illness than those who are Black. It also showed that White perpetrators are more likely to have discussions about them that frame them as sympathetic characters as opposed to Black perpetrators who were treated as “perpetually violent threats to the public” (Duxbury et al., 2018, p. 767). This is also consistent with findings that “the representations of mental illness and a ‘loner’ persona create an insanity defense to White perpetrators, sensationalizing hate-fueled narratives towards the individual and detaching their crimes from a collective racial community” (Grounds, 2020, p. 84).

It is crucial to understand that there are two factors that can impact the validity of a public health intervention study: “a small effect size [and] a rare outcome event” (Swanson, 2015, p. 1369). Mass shootings occur too infrequently to have predictable validity and instead represent “rare acts of violence” that have minimal indication of the correlation between mental health and acts of mass violence (Swanson, 2015). Because of this, assuming a connection between mass shootings and mental illness is not only inaccurate and irrelevant in the objective reporting of a crime. It can also perpetuate racial stereotypes about ethnic minorities and sets society a step back in its quest at destigmatizing mental health.

Media Coverage and Mass Shootings

Although mass shootings are heinous crimes that should be viewed and treated as such, each journalist has an ethical responsibility to “ground their work in a set of abstract moral principles, such as telling the truth [...] and trying to be accurate” (Ward, 2014, p. 464). However, due to the fast-paced nature of these incidents and the rush for journalists to provide timely coverage, they are faced with a dilemma, “do they get to the story first, or do they get there correctly” (Elsass & Schildkraut, 2016, p. 2). This rush to report paired with the sensationalized nature of mass shootings has led to skewed media coverage that emphasizes the more deadly attacks. This has also created a reporting pattern that places an emphasis on the perpetrator rather than the act itself (Schildkraut, 2019).

There has been an extensive history of the media inaccurately reporting mass shootings. In both the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting and the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting, the perpetrators were misidentified and circulated through media channels (Elsass & Schildkraut, 2016). In a 2007 Omaha, Nebraska mall shooting, the media “incorrectly reported the race of the shooter, leading the public to believe that a Black male was still on the loose when the shooter, [...] a White male, was dead in the department store” (Elsass & Schildkraut, 2016, p. 4).

Most mass shootings have been committed by White male perpetrators, including 90% of all mass shootings in the last decade (Mingus & Zopf, 2010; Frisby, 2017). Despite this statistical evidence, racial minorities are still over-represented in the media when it comes to violent crimes, which may extend racial stereotypes and make viewers more inclined to believe that minority groups are inherently more aggressive and dangerous (Frisby, 2017).

Media often places an alarming emphasis on the perpetrator as a character in the narrative (Mingus & Zopf, 2010). This has led to distinct differences between the reporting of shooters based on race – “without the benefits of White privilege, shooters who are not White are forever doomed to be the Blackguards of their race, a permanent shadow to those who bear a cultural or phenotypical similarity” (Mingus & Zopf, 2010, p. 73). As a result, it can be easier for those who are White to detach themselves from violent crimes committed by others who are White. Conversely, those with non-White identities can sometimes feel the need to apologize for the crimes of others with similar identities.

Media and Racial Formation Theory

Previous studies have shown the impact that race has in the media. Research about representations of mass shooters in the news confirms that “racial identities are disproportionately emphasized in reports of ethnic minority perpetrators by newspapers” (Grounds, 2020, p. 84). This emphasizes the role of race in media reporting and that depictions of minority perpetrators have been constructed by shared social prejudices that are held in majority White and English-speaking countries (Grounds, 2020). As a result, it is important to understand how views of race are created and how this can play a role in the depiction of various racial identities in the media.

Researchers Michael Omi and Howard Winant defined racial formation as the “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (2014, p. 55). Racial Formation Theory and the process of racial formation are centered around two aspects: “situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized,” as well as “the evolution of hegemony, the way in which society is organized and ruled” (Omi and Winant, 2014, pp. 55-56).

Under this theory, it is crucial to understand that “race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (Omi and Winant, 2014, p. 55). Race should be thought of as an “element of social structure” and a “dimension of human representation rather than an illusion” (Omi and Winant, 2014, p. 55). This places an emphasis on race being a fluid concept

that is ever-changing based on societal standards and representations.

Previous research has shown that a large portion of media consumers associate crime with the Black community (Oliver, 2006). In a study conducted to assess racial cues in the media, it was found that implicit racial biases were found in all of the studied newscasts. These racial cues were centered on themes of Black helplessness and criminality (Dolan et al., 2015). These are just two examples that indicate the presence of social structures leading to racial biases as well as the impact of these racial categories on differences in media framing depending on race.

This theory goes hand-in-hand with racial frames in the media because Racial Formation Theory views race as a social construct that also “encompasses the means by which racial meanings are systemically incorporated, circulated and appropriated by institutions” (McLlwain, 2015, p. 1075). By this definition, to assess the ever-changing concept of “race,” it is important to evaluate how different racial groups are framed in influential institutions such as the media. The media is a powerful source that can influence thoughts and beliefs on a topic. How the media presents information can impact the audience’s perception in a way that is still accurate in its actualities. Media framing can often occur in a way that upholds racial stereotypes and discriminatory depictions of minority races.

Previous research explores how race has played a role in dialogue surrounding the descriptions of mass shooters in the media. Research has also shown that it is not uncommon for media outlets to have implicit biases and subliminal messages of racism, have inaccurate reports of mass shooters, and inaccurately imply causation when discussing mental illness and mass shootings. However, previous research has not taken a deep dive into analyzing the impact of social and racial justice initiatives on media reports of mass shooters. As humankind and the media often are shaped by significant societal events, it is important to determine whether media reporting practices and the depiction of mass shooters change based on these impactful movements. This research intends to fill the research gap by identifying thematic components of the description of mass shooters in online news media and seeing how these portrayals compare or differ depending on whether the perpetrator is White or Black. As well as determining the impact the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement had on the portrayal of Black and White perpetrators.

Research Questions

This study will answer the following questions, for online news articles referencing the randomly selected mass shooters:

RQ1: How are mass shooters portrayed in online news media?

RQ2: How are Black mass shooters portrayed in online news media compared to the portrayal of White mass shooters?

RQ3: What are the differences between the portrayals of Black and White mass shooters before and after May of 2020 in online news media?

The coronavirus pandemic brought to light two major issues in our society: mental health and racial injustice. The 2020 Black Lives Matter movement is often referred to as a “tipping point” in our society (Murray, 2020, para. 1) and a movement that “changed the way the nation talks about race” (Adams, 2020, para. 1). Seeing how mass perpetrators are depicted before and after this period through the lens of mental health, background, and personality will allow for a comparison between the description of Black versus White mass shooters and whether there are any trends.

III. Methods

This research uses a qualitative content analysis to identify thematic components of messages as they appear in the media, more specifically, news sites. This was done by analyzing the descriptions the media uses to describe each mass shooting perpetrator. In this case, the goal was to gain a better understanding of the perceptions and attitudes associated with each perpetrator and how that is depicted in the media.

The researcher began by randomizing a list of White mass perpetrators who committed mass shootings between 2017 and May of 2020. In this study, a mass shooting consists of four or more people injured or killed, not including the shooter (Gun Violence Archive, 2021). Each White mass perpetrator during this period was given a number. The same process of listing and numbering was then done for Black mass shooters during the same time frame. This process was then repeated for Black and White mass shooters who committed acts after May of 2020. Three perpetrators of each race and time frame were randomly selected using a randomizer and selector tool. This resulted in a list of twelve randomly selected mass shooters: three White perpetrators before May 2020, three Black perpetrators before May 2020, three White perpetrators after May 2020, and three Black perpetrators after May 2020.

The list of perpetrators only included those who had at least two articles of news coverage on CNN.com, ABCNews.go.com, and a local online news source near the shooting. This was to ensure that both local and national perspectives were assessed. Additionally, the articles selected were the first news articles from both the local and CNN sites that featured the perpetrator's name to ensure that the stories selected included a description of the perpetrator. The researcher selected CNN because it was named the most popular online news outlet in 2021 (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021). With a total of 399.4 million monthly visits, CNN has become, generally, the most favored and wide-reaching online news platform in the United States (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021). The researcher selected ABCNews.go.com as a second national online media source because it was rated the most reliable and least biased of the online mainstream media outlets (Pryor, 2020). With this methodology, thematic components in articles about each perpetrator are comprehensively analyzed on the local level, the most wide-reaching national level, and on a national level from sources with high reliability and minimal bias.

There were three main categories that the researcher assessed when conducting a qualitative content analysis. These categories included descriptions about (1) mental health or illness, (2) background, and (3) personality. Descriptions of mental health may include phrases such as "he was going through a hard time," "he was on medications," or "he was recently diagnosed with ...". Descriptions of the perpetrator's background may include language such as, "he came from a troubled home," "he was bullied," or "he grew up going to church." Descriptions of the perpetrator's personality may include phrases such as "he was always angry," "people around him have always been afraid of him," "he kept to himself," among others.

After assessing these three main categories, the researcher then determined overarching themes or frames. These themes and frames were used to analyze the differences in portrayal by race while also assessing differences in descriptions of perpetrators before and after May of 2020. Themes are crucial in qualitative content analyses because they "make explicit the implicit meaning of dialogue, behavior, and events" and should not leave readers burdened with the task of interpreting the meaning of these themes (DeSantis & Ugarriza, p. 367). This study's methodology draws from a previous research study, which employed a mixed-methods approach to examine how news media portrays the causes of mass shootings for shooters of different races (Duxbury et al., 2018).

IV. Findings

The Portrayal of Mass Shooters in the Media

Research Question 1 seeks to answer how mass shooters are generally presented in the media. Many of the articles written about the studied perpetrators were minimal in their details regarding mental health, background, and personality. Although there were times when these categories were brought up, it was typically in incidents where the information would be relevant to the case. Essentially, these mass shooters were portrayed in myriad ways that typically depended on the details of the case. These portrayals could be grouped into four profile categories: the unhinged perpetrator, the chronically angry perpetrator, the nice perpetrator that just snapped, and the perpetrator who was going through a lot at the time.

The "unhinged and delusional" frame

The category of perpetrators who were framed as "crazy" and "unhinged" was the largest category out of the four frames. One article detailed the perpetrators' long battle with sexual addiction and that he had lived in a transition house for people leaving rehab (McLaughlin et al., 2020). Another perpetrator was

described as having visions from God and that “God told him to go help the victims of Hurricane Ida, so he began purchasing supplies for the trip, but one day, his behavior took a stranger turn” (Rodriguez, 2021, para. 11). Another article explained how one perpetrator “believed pop star Taylor Swift was stalking him, and he had made comments about killing himself” (News Channel 5 Nashville, 2018, para. 6). It continued by stating a plethora of other incidents that led people to describe him as “delusional” such as when he “breached a White House security barrier [with] a very specific request: [...] to meet with Donald Trump” and when he was convinced that people were “tapping into his computer and phone” (News Channel 5 Nashville, 2018, para. 2, 5, 10).

The “always angry” frame

The next common portrayal was those who were framed as “always angry.” This portrayal often focused on previous incidents of erratic behavior or those who knew the perpetrator and feared him. The articles emphasized that this was not a one-time incident where the perpetrator was overcome with rage. For instance, one article read, “the anger being expressed by this young man seems much more ambiguous; more of a general expression of rage” (Jermont, 2021, para. 15). Another perpetrator was described as “a big guy” who was “very aggressive” (Fox 5 DC, 2018, para. 9). The article went on to discuss his previous 42 arrests and that he “was fired for punching another employee in the face, and [...] returned to the business to yell and curse at the man who fired him” (Fox 5 DC, 2018, para. 8). An article about another mass shooter who fell into this category explained that “neighbors gave him the nickname ‘El Loco,’ the crazy one, and told the press he would shoot his guns at all hours of the night” (Hennes, 2019, slide 11). The article then detailed how he was on a “long spiral going down” and “he was living in a dirt-floor shack [...] that lacked electricity, plumbing, a floor, and furniture” (Hennes, 2019, slide 10).

The “seemingly nice guy who snapped” frame

The next portrayal that became evident was “the seemingly nice guy who snapped.” Although some articles did discuss previous incidents where the perpetrator may have been violent, the emphasis was placed on perceptions from the people that knew the shooter. For example, one neighbor described one perpetrator as “friendly” saying, “He said hi to a lot of people who came and went. [...] I am sad and shocked” (Almasy et al., 2019, para. 26). Another perpetrator was described as a “quiet, polite, nice guy, and a good listener” (Green et al., 2019, para. 12). He was said to be in “good standing at work and had no ongoing disciplinary issues” (Green et al., 2019, para. 15).

The perpetrator who was “going through a lot” frame

The last category involved perpetrators who were “going through a lot.” Articles describing perpetrators under this category often went into more detail about their personal background as well as some of the plights of their life. One news source discussed the offender’s history with bullying and the troubles he had growing up due to the fact that his father was murdered (Krause & Olivares, 2021). The source detailed his issues with bullying and how these issues made him “not even want to get out of bed” and inevitably led to his depression (Krause & Olivares, 2021, para. 15). Another article about this perpetrator explained how he had been bullied and robbed on two different occasions (ABC6, 2021).

The Portrayal of Black Mass Shooters Versus White Mass Shooters in the Media

Consistent with the findings related to Research Question 1, Black mass shooters were portrayed in a variety of ways depending on the circumstances of the event. However, there were two findings that remained consistent when assessing the difference in portrayals of White versus Black mass shooters – the absence of the discussion of mental health in articles about Black perpetrators, and the inclusion of information irrelevant to the case in articles about Black perpetrators.

The absence of the discussion of mental illness

One theme within the online reports of Black mass shooters between 2017 and 2020 was the absence of the discussion of mental illness in regard to the event. While all White mass shooters had an article written about them that referenced poor mental health as a possible trigger that may have led to the deadly event, these findings were the opposite for Black mass shooters. Six out of the six White mass shooters had mental health appear in the studied articles about the incident, however, only two of the six Black perpetrators had articles that referenced mental health or illness.

One article referencing a White perpetrator stated, “The victims of this shooting did not have to be

sacrificed to our lack of appropriate mental health care” (Grinberg, 2018, para. 43). Another article about a White perpetrator even included a separate section about the importance of detecting mental health struggles early to prevent mass shootings from occurring. This article quoted a writing by the mother of a separate mass shooter which reads, “If anyone close to [my son] had been able to grasp that he was experiencing a health crisis that impaired his judgment, compelled him to fixate on violence, mislead him to dehumanize others, and enable him to kill his schoolmates and a teacher before killing himself, we could have intervened and gotten him the help he needed to move beyond the period of crisis,” (Garbe, 2019, para. 12).

This emphasis on mental health does not translate to articles written about Black mass perpetrators. One article about a Black mass shooter read, “People should not be quick to blame mental illness alone [...] crimes like this are rarely linked solely to mental problems (Jermont, 2021, para. 16).

Inclusion of irrelevant information

Another theme present in the majority of news articles about Black perpetrators was the inclusion of information that is seemingly irrelevant to the criminal incident. For instance, an article about one Black perpetrator included that, “he had not been to the doctor in two years” (Green et al., 2019, para. 9). Another article about a different Black shooter mentioned that when police found the suspect he was “smoking a cigar” (Boyette et al., 2017, para. 6). The same perpetrator was labeled as someone who “often paid his rent late” immediately after a segment that included neighbors describing him as a friendly and quiet presence in the community (Fox 5 DC, 2018, para. 13). Another perpetrator was said to be “quiet and kept to himself but loved taking his Charger out to practice drifting, a popular maneuver in which drivers make cars spin sideways by intentionally oversteering” (Krause & Olivares, 2021, para. 26). Another example occurred when a neighbor who lived below him explained, “You heard him walking around; he would drop stuff at like 2 a.m., and me and my roommate would try to figure out what he was doing” (Devine et al., 2019, para. 32). It is arguable that none of these pieces of information about the perpetrator provide any value to the understanding of each case.

An article about a different Black mass shooter referenced a previous run-in with the law that occurred in 1995, around 24 years prior to the current shooting incident (Almasy et al., 2019). Although criminal background is often referenced in articles about criminal suspects to demonstrate their troubled past, a stark contrast can be seen with these references when it comes to Black perpetrators as opposed to White ones. A news article about a White mass shooter emphasized that investigators were “reluctant to interpret information from a decade ago as an indication of what happened on [the day of this current incident]” (Johnston et al., 2019, para. 30). In the case of the White perpetrator, criminal background was dismissed because it was from a decade ago, but the same rationale did not apply for the article written about the Black perpetrator even though his criminal records dated back almost two and a half decades ago.

Portrayals Before and After the 2020 Black Lives Matter Movement

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 sparked an increase in awareness of racial injustices as well as mental health issues. Regarding the portrayal of Black and White perpetrators before and after the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, there were two themes with relative consistency. The first theme was that articles discussing perpetrators after the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 were more likely to include only information about the mass shooter that was relevant to the case. The second finding was a slight increase in conversation about mental health in articles about Black perpetrators after the 2020 movement.

The inclusion of only pertinent information about the perpetrator

A common theme found throughout the articles about the studied mass shooters was that articles about incidents that occurred after May of 2020 had fewer details about the shooter himself. For instance, when referencing a perpetrator’s past background, many articles only included pieces of their past that were relevant in understanding his potentially hateful tendencies. This consisted of brief information of relevant previous arrests that displayed his past with gun violations and aggravated assault charges along with previous social media posts where the perpetrator says, “I’m going to blow up the whole community” (Tareen, 2021, para. 7). A CNN article about another mass shooter had a section titled “What do we know about the suspect,” which only included the perpetrator’s name and age along with details about the event itself (Caldwell et al., 2021, header 3). This consisted of information such as the charges and where the weapon was recovered while omitting information about the perpetrator’s background and personality.

Increase in conversations about mental health

Additionally, although every studied White perpetrator had mental health discussed in at least one article, the number of cases where mental health was addressed for Black perpetrators increased after Black Lives Matter. In the random selection of Black mass perpetrators who committed acts of violence after May 2020, two out of the three had articles written about the incident that discussed mental health. However, in the cases from 2017-2020, zero of the three studied shooters had mentions of mental health in the articles written about them. One perpetrator who committed his act of violence after May of 2020 was described as “depressed and some days did not even want to get out of bed” (Krause & Olivares, 2021, para. 16). An article about another perpetrator detailed his struggles with mental health explaining that “his mental health degraded fast and terribly bad” (Tully, 2021, para. 12).

V. Discussion

This study aimed to understand the way online news media sources portray mass shooters depending on their race and if the frame of the portrayals changed based on the recent 2020 Black Lives Matter movement. Overall, it was found that mass shooters are likely to be grouped into framing categories based on personality and behavior which remained consistent even after the movement in 2020. Additionally, White mass shooters were more likely to have their crimes discussed through the lens of mental health while articles about Black mass shooters were less likely to discuss mental health and more likely to include irrelevant behavioral details about the perpetrator. After the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, Black perpetrators had increased conversations about mental health in articles about them. However, these conversations only occurred in “newsworthy” shootings carried out by Black perpetrators such as a National Football League player and a young, bullied teen.

The grouping of perpetrators

In this study, the substantial emphasis the media places on the perpetrators themselves is consistent with previous research that shows that articles about mass shootings emphasize the shooter rather than the event itself (Frisby, 2017). Additionally, previous research also shows that grouping perpetrators by background and personality attributes “gives way to the idea that the ‘broken’ attributes in the shooters themselves are the same as the ‘broken’ attributes in society as a whole” (Hume, 2020, p. 25).

The groupings of perpetrators make it easier for the media to refer to the perpetrators as somewhat of a character in a narrative, which also aligns with previous research (Mingus & Zopf, 2010). Additionally, it is important to remember that mass shootings are “statistical aberrations that reveal more about particularly horrible instances than they do about population-level events” (Metzl & MacLeish, 2014, p. 242). By grouping these perpetrators by personality or background, media consumers may assume a correlation between the characteristics of the perpetrator that are portrayed in the media narrative to similar characteristics among the people around them. Previous research emphasizes that “it is important for media practitioners to consider not generalizing the flawed character traits of a perpetrator or perpetrators to all similar criminals in the country” (Hume, 2020, p. 25).

This commonality is substantial because it emphasizes a trend in the media where perpetrators of violence are generalized into categories based on previous behavioral patterns. This can have pernicious impacts on how society treats those with seemingly similar characteristics and behavioral patterns as these mass shooters. As previous research has stressed, assuming that these characteristics serve as warning signs to the greater public is fear inducing. Just because perpetrators are grouped by things such as anger or how much they are going through in life, does not mean that others falling under the categories of being “angry” or “going through a lot” are likely to execute this level of mass violence.

Differences in the portrayal of Black perpetrators

Regarding the media framing of Black perpetrators, there were two stark differences when compared to that of their White counterparts. First, Black mass shooters were less likely to have their crimes attributed to mental illness. Second, articles referencing the crimes of Black perpetrators were more likely to include information that was not relevant to the case. This study found that White perpetrators were more likely to

have their crimes attributed to mental health than perpetrators who are Black which directly aligns with the findings of previous research (Duxbury et al., 2018).

Only two of the six Black perpetrators had articles that referenced mental health or illness, while all the studied White perpetrators had discussions of mental health in articles about them. Not only was there a lack of mental health discussion when reporting on Black mass shooters, one of the articles about a Black perpetrator specifically told the readers to “not be quick to blame mental illness alone [...] crimes like this are rarely linked solely to mental problems (Jermont, 2021, para. 16). Narrowing in on the perpetrator’s mental health allows the blame to be placed on the individual perpetrator’s disorder rather than the behaviors of the shooter himself. Furthermore, the exclusion of Black perpetrators in this theme can lead the public to attributing the actions of the particular event to the racial group that the perpetrator belongs to. This coincides with previous research that emphasizes how it is easy it is for White people to detach themselves from violent crimes committed by other White people due to the benefits of White privilege while leading non-White identities to feel the need to apologize for the crimes of others with similar identities (Mingus & Zopf, 2010).

Additionally, articles discussing Black mass shooters often included information that had minimal relevance to the crime itself. This theme had two prominent subcategories; the first category consisted of information regarding criminal background. Although criminal background could arguably be relevant to the history of a mass shooter, the framing of these previous run-ins with the law are not consistent between White perpetrators to Black perpetrators. An article about a Black mass shooter discussed a previous offense that occurred 24 years prior to the shooting, while an article about a White perpetrator emphasized that information about his criminal past should not be interpreted as an indication of the current incident, since the previous incidents occurred a decade prior.

The second subcategory involved behavioral information about the perpetrator that had no relevance to the committed act of violence. Narratives about the studied Black perpetrators included information about a perpetrator smoking a cigar, not going to the doctor in two years, paying rent late, and disrupting a downstairs neighbor by walking around too loudly. This information is incorporated in a way that creates a connection between Black perpetrators and increased history of criminal and behavioral patterns. This can suggest that these Black mass shooters are congenitally more belligerent, while the exclusion of these details in articles about White perpetrators may create the assumption that their acts were unforeseen. Since race and the public’s perception of race is socially constructed, how people view minority identities is constantly impacted by what occurs in society (Center for Health, 2017). This means that differences in portrayals based on race in the media contributes to the marginalization of racial minorities and contributes to the already held stereotype that racial minority groups are inherently more aggressive and dangerous (Frisby, 2017).

The impact of “newsworthiness”

A theme that stood out was the difference in portrayal depending on the “newsworthiness” of the incident. Mass shooting incidents that were perceived as “unique” were often written in a more narrative-like manner and included more information about the background and personality of the shooter. This is consistent with previous research that discussed how the nature of sensationalized mass shootings leads to an increased emphasis on the perpetrator rather than the act itself (Frisby, 2017).

For instance, one article about a perpetrator was written in a more descriptive and “story-like” way. The writer included a variety of details such as “the skinny 18-year-old [that] could not escape the daily scourge of high school bullying, harassment, and attacks” who had been “humiliated and stripped of his dignity” (Krause & Olivares, 2021, para. 3, 16). The article also detailed how the perpetrator’s own father was brutally murdered previously and the impact that had on the perpetrator. This story was seemingly more “newsworthy” because it involved a teenager committing a school shooting. Another example of a “newsworthy” shooting appeared when a former NFL player committed a mass shooting. Articles about this former athlete went into great detail about aspects of his life that can be seen as unnecessary in terms of its relevance to his crime. This consisted of discussions about his football career, his sport-related injuries, the fact that he did not drink or do drugs, and even discussed the smoothie shop that the perpetrator once opened (Almasy et al., 2021; Kinnard & Liu, 2021; Tully, 2021).

The coronavirus pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 stimulated an overwhelming increase in discussions about racial injustice and mental health in the media. Overall, there was not an abundance of difference in how perpetrators were framed based on race before and after May

2020. However, one change that became evident was the increase in conversation of mental health in articles about Black perpetrators who committed acts after May 2020. While zero of the three Black mass shooters studied who perpetrated before 2020 had mental health brought up in articles about them, two of three Black mass shooters after 2020 had mental health discussed in online news media.

However, one critical factor that impacted the increase in mental health references was the “newsworthiness” of these cases. Past research has identified how the media has historically inflated “newsworthy” shootings because these articles catch the attention of the public at a higher rate than other crimes (Schildkraut, 2019). These mental health references occurred in two shootings by Black perpetrators in cases that were particularly “newsworthy.” One shooter was a professional athlete who likely had a large following and many fans, meaning articles about him would accumulate more attention from the public. Similarly, a heinous act of violence committed by a teenager may attract more attention as society is accustomed to viewing children as pure and innocent beings (O’Toole, 1999). Therefore, this finding suggests that media may be more inclined to address mental health in articles about Black perpetrators when those cases are most likely to attract a larger audience. This selective use of mental health as a discussion point can ultimately be a severe detriment, prioritizing profit over normalizing mental health conversations.

VI. Conclusion

This study sought to analyze the framing and themes in online news coverage of Black and White mass shooters and whether the portrayal of these perpetrators changed after the influential 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. A qualitative content analysis of 12 perpetrators and 36 online news articles showed that although the portrayal of mass shooters is mostly dependent on the circumstances of the crime, online news media sources often group perpetrators based on personality or behavior and frame the articles accordingly. Articles referencing Black mass shooters were less likely to include coverage about mental health and more likely to include personality or behavioral background about the perpetrator that was irrelevant to the case itself. However, all of the coverage of White perpetrators had articles relating their crimes to possible mental health challenges. This finding suggests the use of mental illness as a method of blame diversion among White perpetrators, while Black perpetrators are demonized by the narratives created in the media surrounding their background and behaviors.

Additionally, the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 did lead to increased reporting about mental health among Black perpetrators, but only in more “newsworthy” events. The analysis shows that the way online news reports frame coverage of mass shootings depends heavily on perpetrator attributes making them the focus of the report, rather than the crime. The findings of this study indicate that the media often includes and disseminates content riddled with implicit and racial biases that can be pernicious to society. This is evident in the grouping and framing of perpetrators depending on behavior and personality, as well as disparities in depictions of Black versus White perpetrators in terms of selective inclusion of mental health discussions and the framing of perpetrator background information.

It is important to note that this research comes with limitations. This study analyzed only 12 of the many mass shooters in American history. Additionally with the study of only 36 articles, the sample size of this research is relatively limited. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable. This research does lay a foundation for future studies to be conducted surrounding the portrayal of mass shooters depending on race and the impact influential social justice initiatives have on changing these portrayals. Future research could examine a greater number of cases to increase the sample size. Additionally, future research can also investigate the perceptions that media consumers hold when viewing reports of mass shootings. Future studies can also investigate the impact the pandemic had on mental health frames in articles about other acts of violence committed by racial majorities versus racial minorities.

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