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The Ohio Communication Journal publishes original scholarship bearing on the breadth of the field of communication studies. Within this broad purview, it welcomes diverse disciplinary, conceptual, and methodological perspectives, especially:

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Featured Publications

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Young Women's Political Discussion on Social Media in the 2016 Presidential Election

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Gender was particularly salient in the 2016 election with the first female presidential candidate from a major party running against a candidate accused of sexism and sexual assault. This provides a unique opportunity to study how gender salience influences women's political engagement and the gender gap in political engagement. Informed by role model theory, we explored gender differences in online political discussions during the 2016 election. Using survey data (N = 1020), we examined how often young men and women post about politics on Facebook and Twitter, the types of posts made, and how conflict is handled. Supporting the role model theory, we found women and men were equally engaged in political discussion online, an important finding considering women's engagement typically lags behind men.

Introduction

On January 21, 2017, half a million people crowded the streets of Washington D.C. to participate in the Women's March, and millions more took part in marches across the United States and worldwide. The march was a reaction to the sexism and misogyny on full display during Donald Trump's presidential campaign against the first woman major party nominee, Hillary Clinton. The campaign and Trump's ultimate victory left many women feeling powerless. Then, a woman in Hawaii shared on Facebook the idea of a pro-woman march and soon millions of women used the social networking site to organize the largest ever march on Washington D.C. (Stein, 2017).

Indeed, gender and social media were central themes in the 2016 presidential campaign, and the Women's March demonstrates the role they both played in the aftermath. This unique context begs the question, did the gendered nature of the 2016 campaign influence the participation of voters, and women in particular? Generally speaking, women's political engagement is significantly lower than men's (Verba et al., 1997; Winfrey, 2018). On the other hand, over two decades of research on the effect of political role models suggests visible and viable female candidates increases the political engagement of young women (Atkeson, 2003; Atkeson & Carillo, 2007; Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2017). That said, other studies have found female candidates having limited or no effect on engagement (Dolan, 2006; Lawless, 2004). Related to the idea of political role models, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), and specifically gender group identification, indicates that women, particularly feminist women, are more politically engaged when their gender identity is politicized (Rinehart, 1992; Winfrey, 2018). In this way, the salience of gender identity may increase participation.

The 2016 presidential election politicized gender like no election ever before. Hillary Clinton was the first woman presidential candidate from a major party, and Donald Trump had a record of making sexist verbal attacks on women, was accused of physically assaulting several women, and was recorded bragging about such attacks. Gender was front and center in 2016, and this campaign provides an excellent opportunity to examine gender and political engagement. In fact, Campbell & Wolbrecht (2020) found that adolescent Democratic women were more likely to feel a sense of disillusionment with the American political system after the 2016 election, but they were also more likely to anticipate engaging in political protest in the future. Our study examines the role model effect on political engagement before Election Day, when many still predicted a victory for Clinton. We focused on the gender dynamics of online political discussion because numerous studies have found political discussion on and offline increases knowledge,

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interest, and other forms of engagement (e.g., Conroy et al., 2012; Dimitrova et al., 2014; Eveland, 2004; Eveland & Hively, 2009; Lane et al., 2017; Mcleod et al., 1999; Tian, 2011).

In addition, we focused our analysis on young voters for two main reasons. First, young voters are still learning about politics and finding their political identity, so their behaviors are more open to change than older voters who have become more set in their political ways (Beck & Jennings, 1991; Stoker & Jennings, 2008). Second, young people are more likely than older voters to use social media for political information. A Pew study (Gottfried et al., 2016) found that 18-29-year-olds said social media was the most helpful source for learning about the 2016 election, while cable TV news was rated as most helpful by all other age groups. Furthermore, our focus on social media stems from its growing importance as a platform for news, (mis)information, and engagement (Duggan & Smith, 2016; Gottfried & Shearer, 2016).

Online political engagement also includes some important and interesting gender dynamics. In 2016 Facebook and Twitter were the social media platforms most commonly used for news, and women used both more often than men (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). For some, social media was not just for passively consuming news; about one-third of social media users were actively participating in political discussions online (Duggan & Smith, 2016). However, previous research suggests it is men who are more likely to participate in public behaviors like making political posts (Koc-Michalska et al., 2019; Van Duyn et al., 2019), and decades of research indicates women are less politically engaged than men (e.g., Verba et al., 1997; Winfrey, 2018). While previous research has found women to be less engaged offline and online, we also explore whether this holds during a campaign where sex and gender were central themes and the tone of political discussion was often heated.

Despite the increase in research on social media and politics in recent years, relatively little has examined the role gender plays in online political discussion. Furthermore, we are aware of no published studies that have examined these activities when a visible and viable woman is running for a high-level office. This study attempts to fill this void, and since women's political engagement offline tends to lag behind men's, this is an important area of research for understanding how and when women's engagement might match or exceed men. We start with an examination of previous research, then we report the results of our study and discuss how frequently and in what ways women and men used social media for political discussion in 2016, with a specific focus on how conflict was handled.

Literature Review

Gender and the Effect of Role Models

Campbell and Wolbrecht's (2006) role model theory suggests the presence of women candidates can positively influence women's political engagement. Their research found a high-profile woman candidate can increase political discussion in the homes of girls and increases girls anticipated political involvement when they are older. Atkeson (2003) also found that the presence of female candidates can increase political engagement among adult women. This is noteworthy because, despite voting in higher rates than men, women lag behind men in virtually every other type of political engagement. Verba et al. (1997) found women reported lower levels of political interest, political media use, and less political discussion. Winfrey's (2018) analysis of data from 2000-2012 found women reported significantly less interest in elections and public affairs, less political news consumption, less political discussion with friends and family, and were less likely to try to influence others' votes. Among young people, Wolbrecht and Campbell (2017) found less political discussion among women and Mariani et al. (2015) found young women reported lower levels of anticipated future political involvement than men.

The presence of women candidates can, in some cases, increase women's political engagement in a variety of ways. However, most studies indicate the candidates must be viable, meaning they have a chance of winning (Atkeson, 2003), and visible, meaning there is sufficient media coverage for women to be aware of their candidacy (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). The presence of viable, visible, women candidates can increase young women's anticipated political involvement including plans to vote, work on a campaign, donate money, and participate in political protests (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006, 2020;

Mariani et al., 2015). Wolbrecht and Campbell (2007) also found a similar effect on young women when there were more women serving in the legislature. Several studies have also found an increase in political engagement, interest, and knowledge among women when female candidates are present (Atkeson, 2003; Dolan, 2006; Sapiro & Conover, 1997; Verba et al., 1997), and other studies have found women are more efficacious when represented by women (Atkeson & Carrillo, 2007; Lawless, 2004).

Furthermore, the presence of female candidates may politicize gender in such a way that it signals to women that their participation in politics in appropriate and desirable (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Mansbridge, 1999). From a young age, girls are socialized out of politics. Boys are exposed to more political talk in the home and are more likely to be encouraged to run for office when they are older, and the gender difference in exposure to politics continues into young adulthood where college women are exposed to less politics in classes and social groups (Fox & Lawless, 2014). Burns (2008) also argues the unequal division of labor in the home makes it more difficult for women to find time to engage in political behaviors because, even in the 21st century, women still spend more time than male partners on childcare and household tasks. Supporting this, Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) found time was an important factor in the engagement gender gap, with variables like having children affecting women's engagement more than men. This is capped off by the fact women often feel less confident in their knowledge of politics, leading to decreased political discussion and overall engagement (Winfrey, 2018).

However, women's feeling of connectedness to their gender group may spur political engagement when that gender identity is politicized (Conover & Feldman, 1984; Miller et al., 1981). Informed by Tajfel's (1978) social identity theory, Winfrey (2018) found that women are more politically engaged if they feel connected to their gender group because policies and vote choices affect the group as a whole. The presence of a visible and viable female candidate politicizes gender in several ways, possibly explaining why women's engagement increases. Women candidates make the political system seem more legitimate because it is more representative, and it may demonstrate that political activity is appropriate for women (Mansbridge, 1999). Women candidates may spur greater interest, knowledge, and engagement if they talk more about issues of concern to women (Dolan, 2008). The uniqueness of a female candidate, particularly in an office historically held by men, may also make the race more interesting and consequential for women voters.

The 2016 election checks all the boxes for examining the effects of role models and gender group salience. Hillary Clinton was the first woman to ever run as a major party presidential candidate, making her candidacy novel. There was ample media coverage, and most polls predicted her victory- indicating she was both visible and viable. Furthermore, gender was also made salient by Donald Trump's sexist attacks, such as criticizing Clinton's appearance and stamina, and attempting to discredit Megyn Kelly by referencing her menstrual cycle. Trump was also accused of sexual assault by numerous women, bragged about sexually assaulting women in the infamous Access Hollywood tape, and supported numerous anti-feminist policy positions. All of these factors made gender a central theme in the 2016 campaign. Furthermore, there was no shortage of topics to talk about, and debate about, in 2016. Next, we turn our focus to a specific and important form of political engagement- political discussion.

Political Discussion

Political discussion, or informal political talk, is an important form of political engagement, and we choose to focus on political discussion because of its unique relationship to the other types of engagement. Taking part in political conversation increases one's depth and breadth of knowledge (Eveland, 2004; Eveland & Hively, 2009) and subsequent participation in activities like attending meetings, circulating petitions, and contacting officials (Mcleod et al., 1999; Tian, 2011). In short, political discussion contributes to nearly all other components of political engagement. Furthermore, political discussion is an easy form of engagement that requires few resources. Anyone can talk about politics, but not everyone has the money to donate to a campaign or the time to volunteer or attend rallies.

A close examination of the literature indicates women discuss politics less frequently than men, which is likely related to women's overall lower level of political engagement (other than voting). Verba et al.'s (1997) study found women were significantly less likely to report daily discussions of national or local politics and were less likely to report enjoying political discussion. Since 1984 the American National Election Study has asked how many times per week respondents discuss politics with friends and family, and Winfrey's (2018) analysis found gender differences were less pronounced in recent elections. Specifically, women discussed politics less frequently than men in election years until 2000 (including midterms), but the gender differences were not statistically significant in 2004, 2008, and 2012. This trend suggests the gender gap in political discussion frequency may be dissipating.

One explanation for the gender gap in political talk is the perceived political knowledge of women. Mendez and Osborn (2010) found male discussion partners were perceived to know more than they actually did by both men and women, and women were perceived to know less than they actually did by both sexes. Since women are also less confident in their own knowledge (Banwart, 2007), these perceptional difference in political knowledge might partially explain why women are less likely to participate in political discussions and may influence how women are responded to by others. However, the presence of female candidates can change this dynamic, increasing women's interest and knowledge (Sapiro & Conover, 1997; Verba et al., 1997). Furthermore, several studies have found women's political discussion increases when there is a viable female candidate running. For example, Atkeson (2003) found women in states that had viable female candidates for statewide office were more likely to discuss politics, do so frequently, and comment on political parties than women in states without such candidates. This effect may be strongest when there is party congruence between the female candidate and female citizen and when the candidate is not an incumbent. Wolbrecht and Campbell (2017) found that Democratic young women (18-29 years) discussed politics more frequency when there was a Democratic woman running for an office not already held by a woman. To extend this research our study tests the role model effect on online communication by young men and women in the 2016 election. We expect that the gender gap in political discussion will be insignificant given the gendered nature of the 2016 election and pose the following hypothesis:

> **H1:** The frequency of women and men's political discussion on social media will be statistically similar.

A limited amount of research suggests political partisanship may be a factor in the effect of female role models. Since this research is limited and no study has examined role models at the presidential level, we also pose the following research question:

> **RQ1:** Are there gender differences in social media communication-enabled behaviors based on whether the respondent was a Trump or Clinton supporter?

Another possible reason women are less likely to engage in political discussions is the potential for conflict. Coffé and Bolzendahl (2017) found women were more conflict avoidant, less likely to engage with people who disagree, and less likely to try to justify their own political beliefs to someone who disagrees with them. While much research on political conversation suggests individuals are most likely to talk politics with those who have similar political opinions (Klofstad et al., 2009; Morey et al., 2012; Wyatt et al., 2000), the potential for conflict exists, especially when political opinions are unknown, and the desire to avoid conflict and protect relationships is a common reason people chose not to share political opinions (Peacock, 2019). Engaging in such cross-cutting political conversations can increase awareness of opposing views, increase political tolerance (Mutz & Mondak, 2006), and lead to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between political issues (Eveland & Hively, 2009). Participating in political discussion can be risky, especially for women, but discussion is an important form of political engagement.

While little research exists on the influence women candidates may have on women citizens' willingness to engage in conflict or disagreement, there is some evidence that it may change behaviors. Hansen (1997) found that women were more likely to engage in political persuasion in races with female candidates for U.S. Senate, U.S. House, and governorships. Furthermore, the gender gap in political proselytizing nearly disappeared when there were two or more women on the ballot. Such an increase in political persuasion have been confirmed by several later studies (e.g., Atkeson, 2003; Dolan, 2006;

Reingold & Harrell, 2010; Stokes-Brown & Dolan, 2010; Stokes-Brown & Neal, 2008). Attempting to persuade someone to vote for a candidate comes with a risk for conflict. While these existing studies did not specifically measure conflict, a logical extension of this research is to examine whether and how this may translate into conflict engagement. Therefore, we pose the following research question:

RQ2: Do men and women engage in arguments about the election in similar frequency?

Political Discussion Online

From 2008 through the 2016 general election, social media, and in particular, Facebook, have been touted as a useful tool for engaging potential voters in the political process (e.g., Fernandes et al., 2010; Pennington & Winfrey, 2020). Given the growing importance of social media in politics, we turn our focus to online political engagement, and political discussion in particular. Some, but not all, studies have found a relationship between online and offline political engagement. For example, Dimitrova et al. (2014) found different types of digital media have different effects, and social media use was a strong predictor of political participation but did not contribute to political knowledge. Studies also indicate that engaging in cross-cutting political talk online is related to offline political participation (Lane et al., 2017), and participation in online political groups are related to offline political engagement (Conroy et al., 2012). These studies demonstrate the importance of studying social media use in electoral contexts- talking politics on social media relates to real-world political activity.

The focus of this study is to examine how young people engage in political talk online and potential gender differences in 2016. Recent research has considered how individuals use social media for political engagement, considering topics such as whether users opt to post and share about political topics (Bode, 2017; Pennington & Winfrey, 2020; Wang & Mark, 2017), with current work also highlighting how individuals communicate about political issues with friends, family, and strangers through social media (Mascheroni & Murru, 2017; Vraga et al., 2015). These studies highlight how individuals seek to balance their political engagement with the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, painting a complex picture wherein political talk online can become active disagreement (Bode, 2016), stymie political engagement both online and offline (Hampton et al., 2017**;** Vraga et al., 2015), and damage interpersonal relationships (Fox & Moreland, 2015; Pennington, 2020).

While the body of research concerning social media use and politics is growing, there is still very little examining gender differences in how men and women use social media for political talk and what they encounter in online discussions. This study is a step in filling that void. To provide context, we can look to research about online activity generally, which has found men use social media more often than women for career networking, dating, making friends, and playing games, but women participate in more relationship maintenance activities like sending friend requests and private messages, in addition to posting photos (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012). Given the difference in online activity generally, and women's political engagement offline, it is not surprising several studies have found sex differences. Men more often post political opinions than women on both Facebook and Twitter (Koc-Michalska et al., 2019), and men are more likely to comment on online political news stories (Van Duyn et al., 2019). This does not appear to be a phenomenon unique to the US. Heger and Hoffmann's (2019) study examined internet users in Germany and found women were less politically engaged online than men, and feminist women were more engaged than non-feminist women.

Despite some differences in activity, Bode (2017) found men and women have similar political motivations for using social media; the motivations she examined were using social media for political news, discussing issues, finding others who share views, and recruiting people to get involved. She also found men and women are similar in less visible behaviors such as liking a comment or posting a positive comment in response to someone's post. Conversely, men were more likely to engage in visible behaviors like posting original content. One possible explanation for these differences is women may be more likely to prioritize relationships and avoid posting content that might upset someone. However, when women see content they disagree with, they are more likely than men to unfriend or unfollow someone, though this not a common response. There were no gender differences found in how likely men and women are to respond to disagreeable content by ignoring or replying, and there was no difference in how often men and women change their attitudes in response to content they encounter (Bode, 2017). Kenski et al. (2017) also found gender differences in responses to incivility in online news comments. This study examined five types of incivility- name-calling, vulgarity, accusations of lying, pejorative speech, and aspersion- and found name-calling and vulgarity were rated as the most uncivil. They also found women show a greater sensitivity to uncivil comments, rating each test comment (except aspersion) as more uncivil than men did. This sets up the following research question:

RQ3: Do men and women witness comments on social media they deem rude or cruel in similar frequency?

Another explanation for these gender differences is social media can be a hostile environment for women voicing their opinions. Koc-Michalska et al. (2019) found women were more likely to report having political issues explained to them in a condescending way, or to have something "mansplained", particularly on Twitter. In a study of the US and the UK, about half of women reported being mansplained to, and they were more likely to be young, educated, white, and liberal. Interestingly, only a third of men in the US and one fifth in UK reported being accused of mansplaining, and conservative men were accused more often. Vochocová's (2018) interviews with influential Czech women revealed social media are a gendered environment where women often face attacks and are rejected as arrogant feminists for sharing opinions. Knowing this, the following research questions were posed:

RQ4a: Are men and women equally likely to receive rude or cruel comments in response to a political post on social media?

RQ4b: Of those receiving rude or cruel comments on social media, did men and women respond in similar ways?

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited by a multi-university research team, and some were offered class credit for participation. This analysis focuses on young voters, so any participant aged 30 or above was removed. A total of 999 respondents aged 18-29 (M = 19.84, SD = 1.85) completed the survey items reported here. The sample was 68.9% female (n = 688) and 31.1% male (n = 311). The majority of the sample identified as White/Caucasian (72%, n = 719) followed by Latinx (9.6%, n = 96), Black/African American (5.6%, n = 56), Asian American (6.8%, n = 68), Bi/multiracial (2.4%, n = 24). A small percentage opted to not answer (2.9%, n = 29), and less than 1% identified as Native American and Pacific Islander. The sample was 42.5% Democrat (n = 425), 28% Republican (n = 280), and 29% Independent/Other (n = 290).

Procedures

Data were collected through an online Qualtrics survey between September 12 and November 8, 2016. The survey was part of a national election study with 11 participating universities across the country; students were recruited through classes and most were offered course credit. The survey included measures of political discussion frequency, content, and conflict; choice of candidate and demographic information were also collected. This project was part of a larger survey on political behavior and opinions; only the measures relevant to this project are discussed.

Measures

Frequency of Political Talk on Social Media

To examine how voters engaged in political discussions on social media, respondents answered a series of questions regarding the frequency in which they used Facebook and Twitter for several behaviors during the 2016 election cycle. Participants gave responses ranging from never (1) to very frequently (6) for the following items: *made posts related to the presidential candidates on Facebook/Twitter, posted something positive about the candidate you support, posted something negative about the candidate you didn't support, posted something about the election that was neither positive or negative.* These items were developed by the authors and informed by previous research (e.g. Bode, 2017; Vraga et al., 2015). We chose to analyze these items individually because they capture different types of online behaviors that may also yield different kinds of responses from one's network. For example, only making positive or neutral posts about the election may demonstrate a desire to avoid conflict while making negative posts may be an invitation to engage in debate. Previous research suggests there may be gender differences in the type of content individuals post (e.g., Bode 2017), and this study sought to examine those differences.

Conflict on Social Media

In an effort to understand how often voters encountered conflict and how they responded to conflict related to the election on social media, respondents were asked on a scale of 1 (never) to 6 (very frequently) how often they: *witnessed mean or cruel behavior in discussions of the presidential election, gotten into a minor argument about the election,* and *gotten into a major argument about the election.* Respondents were also asked: *has someone ever responded to one of your political social media posts with a comment you felt was rude or cruel*? Those answering *yes* to this item (16.1%, $n = 164$) were then asked to think of times when they had witnessed rude or cruel behavior on Facebook and Twitter and responded to the following item on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (often): *telling the person to stop; defending yourself or your post; just ignoring it; making rude or attacking comments back;* and *unfriending, stop following, or blocking the person.* These items were also developed by the authors and partially informed by previous research (e.g., Bode, 2016; Pennington, 2020), and analyzed individually because they represent distinct behaviors related to conflict and relationships.

Candidate Choice

Respondents were asked which candidate they "most wanted to be president" *Hillary Clinton* (53.9%, $n = 550$)*, Donald Trump* (24.8%, $n = 253$)*, Gary Johnson* (14.7%, $n = 150$)*, Jill Stein* (4.4%, $n = 45$).

Results

H1 predicted a statistically similar frequency of political discussion on social media by women and men. Independent sample t-tests revealed no significant difference in the frequency of Facebook, $t(991) = .64$, $p = .52$; Twitter, $t(991) = .22$, $p = .82$; positive, $t(990) = .21$, $p = .83$; negative, $t(987) = -.29$, $p = .78$; and neutral posts, $t(986) = .75$, $p = .46$. Therefore, H1 is confirmed. Means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of social media activity by respondent gender

	Men *M* (*SD*)	Women *M* (*SD*)
Facebook Posts	2.18 (1.53)	2.11 (1.45)
Twitter Posts	2.12 (1.48)	2.10 (1.49)

Positive Posts	2.24 (1.57)	2.22 (1.55)
Negative Posts	2.29 (1.61)	2.32 (1.62)
Neutral Posts	2.24 (1.53)	2.16 (1.53)
Minor Argument	2.61 (1.60)	2.65 (1.63)
Major Argument	2.12 (1.47)	2.06 (1.46)

RQ1 asked whether there would be differences in communication behaviors based on gender and candidate support. Due to sample size, only Clinton supporters (women n = 383, men n = 154) and Trump supporters (women n = 165, men n = 85) were included in the analysis. Means and standard deviations for all communication behaviors by each gender/candidate group are reported in Table 2. Through ANOVAs, a significant candidate/sex effect was discovered for use of Twitter, $F(3,778) = 3.01$, $p = .03$, making a negative post, $F(3,775) = 3.51$, $p = .02$, and witnessing mean behavior, $F(3,773) = 2.68$, $p = .05$. Means and standard deviations are reported in Table 3. Post-hoc analyses using Fisher's LSD revealed women and men Clinton supporters made significantly more Twitter posts and negative posts than women Trump supporters, and women Clinton supporters witnessed rude or cruel behavior significantly more often than men Clinton and men Trump supporters.

Table 3. Frequency of social media activity by gender and candidate support

	Women Clinton Supporters *M*(*SD*)	Men Clinton Supporters *M*(*SD*)	Women Trump Supporters *M*(*SD*)	Men Trump Supporters *M*(*SD*)
Made Facebook Posts	2.14 (1.48)	2.26 (1.61)	2.04 (1.38)	2.14 (1.39)
Made Twitter Posts	2.24_{a} (1.59)	2.18_{a} (1.55)	1.82_{b} (1.26)	2.16_{ab} (1.37)
Positive Post	2.34 (1.62)	2.25 (1.56)	2.13 (1.50)	2.45 (1.66)
Negative Post	2.48_{a} (1.68)	2.40_{a} (1.70)	2.01_{b} (1.50)	2.20_{ab} (1.46)
Neutral Post	2.18 (1.49)	2.37 (1.62)	2.13 (1.44)	2.06 (1.38)
Witnessed Mean Behavior	4.44_{a} (1.59)	4.08_{b} (1.73)	4.39_{ab} (1.62)	4.05_{b} (1.49)

Minor Argument	2.78 (1.67)	2.56 (1.59)	2.50 (1.57)	2.88 (1.62)
Major Argument	2.12 (1.51)	2.12 (1.47)	1.93 (1.37)	2.27 (1.44)

Note. *Means in the same row with different subscripts are significant at p < .05.*

RQ2 asked whether men and women differed in how often they engaged in arguments on social media about the election; independent samples t-tests revealed no significant difference in how often men and women engaged in minor, $t(985) = -.43$, $p = .67$; or major arguments, $t(985) = .59$, $p = .55$. Means and standard deviations for RQ2 are reported in Table 1.

Answering RQ3, independent sample t-tests revealed women ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.60$) were more likely than men ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.64$) to report witnessing rude or cruel behavior, $t(985) = -3.19$, $p = .001$. Answering RQ4, crosstabulation revealed there was no significant difference in the number of men (17.4%) and women (15.3%) reporting someone had responded to their post rudely. Those reporting they had been the target of rude posts were examined in response to RQ4a. See Table 2 for means and standard deviations. Independent samples t-tests revealed women, compared to men, were significantly more likely to report ignoring, $t(153) = -2.41$, $p = .02$, and unfriending or unfollowing, $t(151) = -2.73$, $p = .01$.

Table 2. Gender difference in response to rude comments

	Men *M* (*SD*)	Women *M* (*SD*)
Tell person to stop	2.49 (1.73)	2.58 (1.56)
Defend yourself or post	4.31 (1.32)	3.90 (1.70)
Just ignoring it	3.88^{*} (1.69)	4.52 (1.49)
Make rude comment back	2.39 (1.50)	2.40 (1.61)
Unfried/unfollow	2.64^{**} (1.66)	3.48 (1.83)

Note. $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$.

Discussion

Our findings provide support for the role model theory (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006), and suggest the unique gendered nature of the 2016 presidential election positively influenced women's political discussion online. The presence of the first woman at the top of a major political party's presidential ticket was a meaningful event, and role model theory suggests such a highly visible and viable candidate would have a positive influence on women's political engagement (e.g., Atkeson, 2003; Mariani et al., 2015; Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2017. In addition to Clinton's candidacy, gender was prominent in the 2016 campaign because Trump often played the hyper-masculine, anti-feminist who made sexist remarks repeatedly and was accused of sexual assault by multiple women. This environment likely politicized women's gender identity, increasing women's engagement (Rinehart, 1992; Winfrey 2018), and motivating potential voters to discuss politics more (Wells et al., 2017).

Unlike most studies of women's political engagement, we found few gender differences in how men and women engaged in politics on social media during the 2016 election cycle. This lack of significant differences is itself significant and supports the role model theory because most previous research has found women's political engagement, and discussion specifically, to lag behind men's in offline and online environments (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Hoffmann, 2019; Koc-Michalska et al., 2019; Van Duyn et al., 2019; Verba et al., 1997), though the difference in offline discussion was less apparent in recent presidential elections (Winfrey, 2018). Importantly, previous research on role model theory indicates the presence of a viable and visible female candidate can serve as a role model for women's political participation and increase interest, engagement, likelihood to talk politics, and confidence in their political knowledge (Atkeson, 2003; Atkeson & Carrillo, 2007; Dolan, 2006; Hansen, 1997; Lawless, 2004; Sapiro & Conover, 1997; Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2007). Our study suggests the first female major party presidential candidate served as a role model for young women, with young women just as likely as young men to participate in online political discussion by making posts that were both positive and negative and engaging in arguments.

The similarities between men and women in the frequency of online political communication is also important because other studies have found a significant relationship between online and offline engagement (e.g. Dimitrova et al., 2014; Jennings et al., 2020). The public nature of engagement on social media is also noteworthy. As Bode (2017) found, women have traditionally been less likely to engage in highly visible political talk online, possibly to protect relationships and avoid conflict. This sort of political talk may have positive effects on women's political engagement and confidence. As Cho et al. (2016) found, political expression on social media can strengthen opinions, which can in-turn increase confidence and lead to more political involvement. We also found there were no gender differences in the tone of the posts made; men and women were similar in how frequently they made positive, negative, and neutral posts. Furthermore, we found no gender differences in how often women and men engaged in political arguments on social media. This is also noteworthy because if women were more conflict avoidant, as Coffé and Bolzendahl (2017) found, or were prioritizing relationships more than men, we would expect to see women making fewer negative posts and avoiding arguments. Instead, we find evidence that the context of 2016 empowered women to engage online as much as men, including by participating in behaviors that may produce disagreement.

Also supporting the idea that a gendered election affected support, we found Clinton supporters were more active on Twitter. It is logical that Clinton would serve as a role model more for women that support her than those that do not and is in line with research finding party congruence to be a factor in the role model effect (Reingold & Harrell, 2010; Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2017) Also noteworthy is the finding that Clinton supporters reported making more negative posts about Trump than Trump supporters reported making about Clinton. Given the outrage about Trump's alleged and evidenced treatment of women, it would not be surprising if Clinton supporters were making negative posts on these topics, among others, and perhaps motivated by fear and the politicized identity of women, using Twitter as a primary outlet to voice their concerns. While we do not know the content of the negative posts made by any respondents, given what we know about the candidates, it is reasonable to assume that Clinton supporters were more likely to support feminist ideas, and previous research has found greater engagement among feminists (Heger & Hoffman, 2019).

The age of our sample may be another factor in the relative similarity of men's and women's political posting. The overall mean scores for engagement across the sample were low (see Table 1), suggesting lower overall political engagement, so while young women and men posted about politics in similar frequency, neither was doing so often. This could be related to the less firm political beliefs of young people (Beck & Jennings, 1991; Stroker & Jennings, 2008). More likely, this speaks to the nature of posting on social media. Bode (2017) reported that participants rarely posted about politics. This was a representative sample of Americans with an average age of 46 years old, suggesting age many not be the issue, but that posting about politics is low. Indeed, Hall (2018) found in assessing time spent on Facebook that over 50% of time was spent passively consuming content and scrolling through one's news feed and the more time someone spent online, the more time was devoted to browsing. Passive consumption of content online, particularly as it relates to time spent online, likely accounts for a generally low frequency of political posting and the similarities found between women and men.

Unfortunately, but not surprising, we found women encountered more negative or hostile behavior than men did on social media. Women were significantly more likely than men, particularly women Clinton supporters, to say they had witnessed rude or cruel behavior in political posts or discussions, but there were not significant differences in whether they had personally been attacked online for political posts. The hostile nature of social media for women engaging in political discussion is well documented (Koc-Michalska et al., 2019; Vochocová, 2018). Our findings suggest that while women encountered negativity, they were no more likely than men to be the target of negativity. Given research has shown women are more likely to go online then men (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012), this could account for the *seeing* but not the *posting* of political content. As previously noted, more often than not users passively consume content on social media rather than post (Hall, 2018). Similarly, Bode's (2017) study supported the idea participants may be more likely to view their friends as posting more about politics than the participant themselves did. Future work that accounted for these and other social media behaviors may provide additional insight into these results. Another possible explanation for this difference is women in our sample may have a different bar for what they consider rude or uncivil, as Kenski et al. (2017) found. Future research should further examine the content men and women are encountering, specifically whether men and women have similar criteria for what constitutes negativity online.

Men and women were statistically similar in how often the posted negative information or engaged in arguments, but a notable gender difference was in how women and men responded to negative or rude comments made in response to something they posted. While most of our sample reported they did not encounter this behavior, among those that did, women were more likely than men to report conflict avoidant behaviors (i.e., ignoring the comment or unfriending/unfollowing the commenter). This supports Coffé and Bolzendahl's (2017) study that found women to be more conflict avoidant and less likely to engage with disagreeable content. Bode (2017) also found women were more likely to unfriend someone over politics, but her findings differ from ours in whether there is a gender difference in choosing to ignore or reply. Our findings support the idea women may be more likely to avoid conflict when directly confronted, even when they are participating in discussions in an equal frequency to men, as was seen in this study.

Limitations and Future Research

Overall, our sample did not frequently engage in political posting on social media; the means for frequency of posting on Facebook and Twitter ranged between rarely and very rarely. The same was true of how often positive, negative, and neutral posts were made. However, we know most online activity is passive- reading and scrolling through news feeds, rather than posting original content or sharing (Hall, 2018). The low number of political posts might also indicate the young people in our study simply are not very engaged in politics, as is generally true of the youngest generation of voters (Lyons & Alexander, 2000). It is also possible their ratings of frequency of political posts may be in contrast to the frequency they make non-political posts. Young people are the most active on social media and use these sites several times a day (Smith & Anderson, 2018; "Social media fact sheet," 2019), so posting "rarely" about politics may still amount to several political posts a week. Our findings are also limited by the one-item measures used, however past research on similar topics has successfully used single items for analysis. Future studies may benefit from measuring frequency differently to account for individual perceptions of what constitute frequent posting.

The age of our sample may also limit our ability to generalize our findings. As has been mentioned, young people are more active online than older generations, so it is unclear if our findings would hold for the online political activity of voters more generally. On the other hand, studies have found online activity reflects offline activity (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013), suggesting the possibility for greater online political engagement among older groups. Future research should further explore gender differences among non-college aged populations. We are also limited by the racial and ethnic diversity of our sample, which was predominantly white. In examining the role of identity and group membership it is important to note that identities are intersectional, and our study does not allow us to draw conclusions that address the intersections of race and gender. Race was certainly an important factor in 2016 with Trump winning 62% of white men voters and 47% of white women, but only 14% of Black men, less than 1% of Black women, and 28% of Hispanic men and women ("An examination," 2018).

Last, but certainly not least, the 2016 election was unlike any previous election. Social media played an important role in spreading information in what was one of the most negative and divisive elections in American history. It also marked the first time a woman ran as a major party candidate for the presidency, and, suffice to say, Trump was a candidate unlike any before. The relatively similar frequency in which young men and women made political posts may be a product of this election or may indicate a shift in women's participation to be more equal to men. Future research should explore how men and women of various age groups use social media to engage in political discussion in future elections, particularly with women candidates.

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"It Was Like I Had Murdered a Baby": Hollywood Filmmakers' *Apologia* Following "Bad" Films

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This study uses Benoit's (2015) Image Repair Theory to examine the way Hollywood directors, producers, and actors defend or apologize for films universally panned by audiences or containing controversial elements. The sample included movies such as Batman & Robin, Catwoman, The Fantastic Four, Battlefield Earth, Suicide Squad, Wild Wild West, Dragon Ball Evolution, The Last Sect, Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, Showgirls, The Joker, and Cats. The analysis revealed that filmmakers utilize a wide variety of apologia strategies; however, they most often engage in mortification, defeasibility, shifting blame, and attacking the accuser. The paper provides explanations for these discursive choices and why audiences elevate artistic failures to the same level as socially deviant behaviors, such as domestic abuse, sexual infidelity, and racism.

Introduction

Movies are big business. In 2019, the global film industry generated $103 billion in total revenue (IBIS World, 2019) and in the U.S. alone, box office ticket sales have remained a multi-billion-dollar juggernaut since 1995 (The Numbers, 2019). In addition to the financial impact of film, movies have dominated the pop culture landscape in a plethora of ways including book adaptations, TV spin-offs, product marketing campaigns, and fan conventions.[1] There is no question that people love movies, as they open up their wallets and support the industry in a variety of ways.

On an individual level, movies satisfy a variety of human needs. For instance, liberating us from the duty of our routines (Kael, 2001), satisfying significant social/relational needs (Chancellor, 2016), and even taking "us to places we've never been and inside the skin of people quite different from ourselves" (McCracken, 2010, para. 2). But what happens when the film is bad? The deep emotional connection that people have for films creates an impetus for people to react negatively when films fail to meet their expectations. This paper wrestles with this question by examining the filmmakers' (e.g., directors, producers, actors) specific strategies for films deemed bad or disappointing by audiences. Not only can a bad movie create a negative experience for audiences, but it can also derail entire careers. For example, famed director John McTiernan (*Die Hard, Predator, Hunt for Red October)* essentially torpedoed his career with a single bad film, *Rollerball* (Thiebaut, 2015, para. 44). Director David Fincher (*Se7en, Fight Club)* reinforces the old Hollywood adage, "You're only as good as your last film" (Knapp, 2014, p. 43). Thus, audiences have the expectation that every film will satisfy their diverse needs.

It is perhaps no surprise then, that the disappointment is heightened when the film is created by filmmakers who are expected to produce consistent quality. One of the most highly esteemed film directors

[1] For example, the San Diego Comic-Con, which hosts studios campaigning for most Hollywood tentpole films, welcomed approximately 135,000 people from more than 80 countries. Moreover, the 2020 San Diego Comic-Con sold out just one hour after tickets were first made available (Fox 5 San Diego, 2019).

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in history, Steven Spielberg (*Jaws, E.T., Schindler's List*), was torn apart by fans following the release of *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. One person Tweeted: "It's so bad the makers of *Suicide Squad* have something to look down on." Another wrote, "Anger leads to hate and hate leads to suffering. That movie caused much suffering!" The YouTube channel *Screen Junkies* succumbed to constant fan pressure to create an "honest" remixed trailer. The parodic voice-over narration argued, "Steven Spielberg and George Lucas take a giant steaming dump on their own legacy…" (*Screen Junkies*, 2013). In short, fans often react with great hostility when their favorite film actors, producers, or directors let them down. How then should these filmmakers respond?

As Benoit (2015) argued, "When faced with a threat to our image, we rarely ignore it, because our face, image, or reputation is a valuable commodity" (p. ix). People from all walks of life desire a positive image as their reputations are integrally tied to their ability to profit from that reputation. Scathing reviews and negative fan responses to their work compel filmmakers to offer *apologia* in response to the torrent of persuasive attacks. Often, the threats to image emerge from people engaging in deviant acts, such as sexual infidelity, racism, drugs, and domestic violence. Ironically, threats to a filmmaker's image can develop simply from creating a piece of art that violates audience expectations. This violation alone makes these types of texts unique and worthy of study as part of the broader landscape of public apology research.

Previous Research on *Apologia* and Celebrity

There is a substantial body of literature in *apologia* linking theoretical observations to various case study analyses. Scott and Lyman (1968) discussed *apologia* as a series of excuses and justifications for wrongful behavior. Burke (1970) offered several *apologia* strategies as part of his theory of dramatism and the guilt-redemption cycle (victimage, scapegoating, mortification, transcendence). Ware and Linkugel (1973) argued for a variety of subgenres of image repair including denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Benoit (1995) integrated these previous image repair approaches into a more comprehensive framework. Many scholars, including Benoit himself, have used this conceptualization to explore image repair in a variety of contexts. In fact, the last several decades have been replete with studies analyzing the image repair strategies of politicians (Benoit, 1982), organizations (Benoit & Brinson, 1994), athletes (Stein, Barton, & Turman, 2014) and international leaders (Drumheller & Benoit, 2004).

There are a fair number of studies examining celebrity *apologia*, such as: Hugh Grant's misdeeds with a prostitute (Benoit, 1997), Ricky Gervais' mean-spirited jokes at the Golden Globes (Kauffman, 2012), Paula Dean's spouting of the "N-word" during a lawsuit deposition (Len-Ríos, Finneman, Han, Bhandari, & Perry, 2015), and Christian Bale's "F-word" infused tirade on the set of *Terminator Salvation* (Johnson, 2011). Surprisingly, there is very little research examining the image repair efforts of filmmakers in defense of their art form. Perhaps the most relevant literature is Benoit and Nill's (1998) analysis of Oliver Stone's defense of his controversial film *JFK*. The film examines the events leading to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963. The movie was controversial as many accused Stone of taking liberties with historical facts and even implying that Vice-President Lyndon Johnson may have had some role in Kennedy's death. Stone offered what the authors claim to be a "flurry" of self-defense, using image repair strategies of attacking his accusers (journalists and historians), bolstering his sources (Garrison's case), and denial (of inaccuracy). Although Stone was forced to defend the film, it was not a response to accusations of poor quality or questions about his skill as one of the best directors working in Hollywood at the time.

Lauzen (2016) analyzed Thierry Frémaux's (Cannes Film Festival Artistic Director) image repair tactics following public scrutiny over his choice of films showcased at the prestigious festival. When he was attacked by several feminist groups for having an underrepresentation of female directors, Frémaux shifted the blame and reduced offensiveness. "I select films because I think they deserve to be in [the] selection. It wouldn't be very nice to select a film because the film is not good, but it is directed by a woman" (p. 172). He also issued statements suggesting that he focuses on the quality of the film rather than the person who directed it to keep the festival at its highest quality. This latter strategy represents transcendence as Frémaux references a higher motivation for his choices.

Both the Stone and Frémaux cases are somewhat unique in that neither was offering *apologia* for deviant behavior. They were both defending choices with regard to the art form of film. Most cases of celebrity *apologia* in the literature deal with socially deviant and sometimes even criminal behavior. Celebrities are naturally scrutinized for their actions simply because they are in the limelight and there tends to be greater public interest in their activities. What is peculiar about the filmmaker context is that they have done nothing wrong by any traditional apology standard -- their offense is simply a failure to satisfy the entertainment hopes of a movie audience. The fact that they engage in *apologia* for actions that are not legally criminal and barely even socially inappropriate is a cultural paradox that leaves researchers asking why. Therefore, this study explores filmmakers' image repair strategies following poorly received movies. The analysis evaluates their effectiveness consistent with Scott and Brock's (1989) claims about rhetorical effects. They suggest, "rhetorical criticism requires that people make descriptive, interpretive judgments regarding the effectiveness of rhetoric" (p. 183). Consequently, we offer claims common in rhetorical criticism regarding the internal plausibility and consistency of the text(s).

Approach to Analyzing the Filmmakers' Statements

Benoit's (1995) typology of image repair strategies provided a structure to evaluate the strategies. Benoit's (1995) method is the most comprehensive because it includes all of the strategies addressed in the previous literature. This broad typology supplies critics with clear categories to more easily organize the discourse.

Image Repair Strategies

Benoit's (1995) theory operates on two premises. One is that communication is a goal-oriented activity. The other is that the maintenance of a favorable image is one of the principal objectives of the discourse. The typology contains five major categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Three of the previous categories have subcategories, making a total of fourteen image repair strategies. The denial category consists of simple denial and shifting responsibility. The evading responsibility category consists of provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. The reducing offensiveness category consists of bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation. Due to space constraints, these strategies are defined and illustrated in Table 1.

Texts Used in the Analysis

Because our analysis uses critical methods and is exploratory in nature, we make no effort to generalize our findings to all filmmakers who have or may defend their films. We simply gathered an appropriate sample for discerning important patterns in this type of discourse and drawing some general conclusions about the key image repair strategies. To collect the sample, we conducted Google searches using combinations of the following keywords: actor, actress, director, producer, filmmaker, film, movie, apology, defend(s), audience, reaction, bad, terrible. The search yielded transcripts of primary texts (interview transcripts) as well as secondary texts (quotes in newspapers).[2] Please note that directors will

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[2] The films, and those associated with their creation, that became a part of our sample were the following: *Mary Poppins* (1964), *The Day the Clown Cried* (1972), *Annie Hall* (1977), *Midnight Express* (1978), *Alien 3* (1992), *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), *Showgirls* (1995), *The Underneath* (1995), *Batman & Robin* (1997), *Chasing Amy* (1997), *Armageddon* (1998), *American History X* (1998), *Wild Wild West* (1999), *Battlefield Earth* (2000), *The Brown Bunny* (2003), *Catwoman* (2004), *Monster House* (2006), *The Last Sect* (2006), *Spiderman 3* (2007), *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), *Babylon A.D.* (2008), *Dragonball Evolution* (2009), *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), *Star Trek* (2009), *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Elysium* (2013), *Fantastic Four* (2015), *Aloha* (2015), *Jem and the Holograms* (2015), *Project Almanac* (2015),

sometimes defend a controversial part of the film rather than the totality of the film. For example, though people generally liked his film, they criticized director J.J. Abrams for his overuse of lens flare effects (721 of them) in *Star Trek*, whereas people criticized seemingly every part of the movie *Cats*. Our sample included *apologia* regarding many different elements of the filmmaking process.

Apologia of Hollywood Filmmakers

Hollywood filmmakers used a wide variety of strategies in accounting for their films. We provide illustrations that best represent the strategies employed. Most often, they defended themselves for movies deemed aesthetically terrible by audiences, whereas sometimes filmmakers would defend themselves for elements of the films argued to be culturally controversial or insensitive in some way. The strategies present in the discourse included: mortification, defeasibility, bolstering, shifting blame, attacking the accuser, good intentions, and corrective action.

Mortification

In traditional *apologia* scholarship, mortification implies that the rhetoric functions to take full responsibility for harmful behavior. However, Stein and Barton (2019) argued that "mortification is sometimes a strategy in which the accused accepts all responsibility and demonstrates genuine contrition, while in others the accused uses a general statement of regret to deflect, rather than accept, responsibility" (p. 256). Our analysis discovered examples of both types, which we classify here as mortification, even though some statements of responsibility are more evasive and ambiguous than others. For example, Ben Ramsey apologized for writing the film *Dragonball Evolution*: "I spent so many years trying to deflect the blame, but at the end of the day it all comes down to the written word on the page and I take full responsibility for what was such a disappointment to so many fans. I did the best I could, but at the end of the day, I dropped the dragon ball" (Padula, 2016, para. 9). J.D. Shapiro, writer of *Battlefield Earth*, also took responsibility for his role in the disastrous film: "Now, looking back at the movie with fresh eyes, I can't help but be strangely proud of it. Because out of all the sucky movies, mine is the *suckiest*" (Shapiro, 2010, para. 28, emphasis in original).

In addition to screenwriters, directors also took responsibility for bad films. For example, Steven Spielberg apologized for one of the most criticized scenes in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*: "What people *really* jumped at was Indy climbing into a refrigerator and getting blown into the sky by an atom-bomb blast. Blame me. Don't blame George [Lucas]. That was my silly idea. People stopped saying 'jump the shark.' They now say 'nuked the fridge.' I'm proud of that. I'm glad I was able to bring that into popular culture" (Franich, 2011, para. 5). While Spielberg was playful in his comments, others took a more serious tone. Steven Soderbergh said about his movie *The Underneath,* "it's the worst thing I've ever made" (Perez, 2014, para. 10) and Michael Bay reflected on his film *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* by suggesting, "The real fault with it is that it ran into a mystical world. When I look back at it, that was crap" (Yuan, 2011, para. 3).

Some filmmakers apologized for controversial casting choices. Writer/director Cameron Crowe apologized for accusations of whitewashing in his film *Aloha:* "I have heard your words and your disappointment, and I offer you a heart-felt apology to all who felt this was an odd or misguided casting choice" (Crowe, 2015, para. 2). Director Alex Proyas apologized for a similar accusation with his movie *Gods of Egypt:* "The process of casting a movie has many complicated variables, but it is clear that our casting choices should have been more diverse. I sincerely apologize to those who are offended by the decisions we made" (Medelson, 2015, para. 2). Both of these statements use the words "apology" or

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Suicide Squad (2016), *Gods of Egypt* (2016), *Doctor Strange* (2016), *Anything* (2017), *The Snowman* (2017), *Shanghai Forest* (2019), *Charlie's Angels* (2019), *Cats* (2019), and *The Joker* (2019).

"apologize," yet the rhetors detract from the apology by suggesting they only did something wrong in the eyes of the audience.

Although we do not use frequency data in this exploratory analysis, the most commonly used strategy was mortification. This result is surprising considering how bonded artists can be to the work they produce and how humiliating it must be to apologize for something created with (sometimes) years of hard work. Perhaps filmmakers find it even harder to defend a film as "very good" quality, like Paul Verhoeven's description of *Showgirls* as "elegantly made," when millions of people are telling them that it was dreadful. Making a film that has taken years to write, cast, shoot, and edit in post-production is created with the hope of the movie leaving a lasting, positive impact. These efforts are likely an investment into image *building* as opposed to simply image *repair*. Because film apologies are categorically different from deviant apologies, filmmakers are forced into a situation that runs counter to expectations for entertainment. That expectation likely involves building an artistic legacy rather than apologizing for a singular misstep. Thus, it is important for these artists to maintain a relationship with their audiences, and this connection can best be cultivated by accepting responsibility and pleading with fans to continue viewing their work.

Defeasibility

Other filmmakers used the strategy of defeasibility by claiming there was some type of external cause for their failures. For example, actor Will Smith blamed his sudden fame for his poor decision to make *Wild Wild West*: "I had so much success that I started to taste global blood, and my focus shifted from my artistry to winning...I found myself promoting something because I wanted to win, versus promoting something because I believed in it" (Nadkarni, 2016, para. 2). Smith claims to have lost focus on creating good films and focused merely on global box office success and his own personal star power. Others blamed an unrealistic timeline, such as David Robbeson (writer of *The Last Sect*): "I wrote it in six days for 15 grand. With a budget of about $2 million, the film was cast with a handful of hot-bodied unknowns and one idiosyncratic Hollywood legend" (Robbeson, 2008, para. 3). Tomas Alfredson, director of *The Snowman*, argued, "Our shoot time in Norway was way too short. We didn't get the whole story with us and when we started cutting, we discovered that a lot was missing" (Shamsian, 2017, para. 2). Shane Black, director of *Iron Man 3*, blamed his lack of awareness about the audience expectations for him ruining the Mandarin character: "We didn't know. We all thought they'd eat it up because it never occurred to us the Mandarin is as iconic to people as, say, the Joker in *Batman*" (Ryan, 2016, para. 9). In each of these examples, the filmmakers attribute the cause of their failures to something external, such as quick timetables or faulty thinking.

Defeasibility was likely effective in softening criticism by suggesting that there was no overt effort to give the audience a poor return on its money. We believe the use of this strategy in accounting for poorly released films is categorically different than saying you did not mean to hurt someone by engaging in infidelity and, therefore, this strategy is probably a more logical fit in the entertainment context.

Bolstering

In other instances, writers, actors, and directors would attempt to offset perceived damage to their reputations by emphasizing positive qualities associated with other elements of the filmmaking process. First, several filmmakers focused on the amount of work that was put into the film. For example, Joel Schumacher, who directed *Batman & Robin,* said, "The special effects, stunt people, and everybody that breaks their asses along with the cast [sic]. Everybody worked really hard under very long hours" (Ransome, 2017, para. 8).

Second, some emphasized the joy they experienced working on the films, such as Halle Berry discussing her role in *Catwoman*: "While I failed to most people, it wasn't a failure for me because I met so many interesting people that I wouldn't have met otherwise. I learned two forms of martial arts and I learned what not to do" (Penrose, 2018, para. 5). Similarly, Paul Verhoeven, the director of *Showgirls,* described the conditions on set: "There was never any question about nudity and we actually had a very pleasant shoot and everybody thought we were making an interesting movie" (Desborough & Patterson, 2015, para. 20). Comments like these are meant to preserve the reputation of the filmmakers by suggesting they could rise above the criticism and take something positive from the experience overall.

Third, filmmakers would tout their own technical skills or discuss the artistic merits of their films. For example, director Tony Kaye emphasized his filmmaking skills in response to criticism for *American History X*: "I've been playing with film for 15 or 16 years and to be honest with you, I consider myself the greatest craftsman/director/imagemaker on this planet and I defy anyone to try and create film like me when I'm allowed to work in a way that suits my style and my personality" (Maurer, 1998, para. 2). Though the film is widely admired by critics and audiences (83% critics score and 96% audience score on *Rotten Tomatoes*), Kaye vehemently defended himself for the final product. While he focused primarily on himself in the previous example, Tom Hooper discussed the advanced technology used by his team at Working Title in creating the movie *Cats*: "Bringing the story of a group of cats trying to determine who will be resurrected and reborn to a new life presented certain challenges. The Working Title team spent three years developing effects, dubbed 'digital fur technology,' that enable its stars to be covered in photo-realistic fur" (Variety Staff, 2019, para. 8).

In these examples, the filmmakers attempted to offset damage to their reputations by emphasizing their own positive attitudes as well as their work ethic in creating these films for audience members. While bolstering makes sense in other contexts, it does not work well with film *apologia*. For instance, hard work is typically admired and rewarded in a merit-based capitalist system, like three years mastering computer graphic work for *Cats*, or the efforts of stuntmen in *Batman & Robin*, so this strategy should work. However, audiences do not consume a film in categories (e.g cinematography, poor casting, or special effects alone) rather they view the totality of the film. Thus, one positive element cannot compensate for other deficiencies, no matter how good that element may be. Moreover, audiences have a present mindset, disregarding the filmmaker's entire resume in favor of what is "now playing." In short, they have already spent their money on the "old film" -- they want current value. Consequently, audiences are also not interested in what an actor or director learned via their mistakes; they want a quality finished product.

Shifting Blame

Another common strategy was shifting blame, wherein filmmakers would blame anyone but themselves for their movies' failure. Actor Shia LaBeouf blamed Steven Spielberg for *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*: "He's done so much great work that there's no need for him to feel vulnerable about one film. But when you drop the ball, you drop the ball" (Franich, 2010, para. 2). Steven Spielberg then blamed story creator George Lucas: "I am loyal to my best friend. When he writes a story he believes in—even if I don't believe in it—I'm going to shoot the movie the way George envisaged it" (Franich, 2011, para. 3). Other instances involved directors blaming actors, such as David Robbeson blaming his lead actor for a poor performance in his movie: "While I can't blame *The Last Sect* on David Carradine, his bizarre orations (improvised all—I've no idea what he's talking about most of the time) and the flute playing (not in the script) didn't help" (Robbeson, 2008, para. 3).

Most often, however, it was writers blaming directors and producers for not staying true to their otherwise brilliant scripts. J.D. Shapiro blasted those who brought his script for *Battlefield Earth* to the big screen: "My script was very, very different than what ended up on the screen. My screenplay was darker, grittier and had a very compelling story with rich characters. What my screenplay didn't have was slow motion at every turn, Dutch tilts, campy dialogue, aliens in KISS boots, and everyone wearing Bob Marley wigs" (Shapiro, 2010, para. 18). Similarly, Mathieu Kassovitz criticized the production team for *Babylon A.D.*: "I'm very unhappy with the film. I never had a chance to do one scene the way it was written or the way I wanted it to be. The script wasn't respected. Bad producers, bad partners, it was a terrible experience" (Brevet, 2008, para. 3). In these examples, filmmakers offloaded responsibility for their films' poor reception by blaming other members of the production team.

The strategy of shifting blame was a logical choice for filmmakers, especially with the multitude of people working on a given film. Obviously, the director of a film can control certain variables that lend themselves to a positive outcome, yet a single poorly conceived effort in the areas of screenwriting, cinematography, acting, or editing can derail the prospects for a good film in its totality. For example, with *Indiana Jones 4*, actor Shia Lebouf blamed Director Steven Spielberg, who then blamed screenwriter George Lucas. It would be easy to blame any of the other people on the set, but perhaps easier to blame those occupying roles in the filmmaking process immediately preceding or following the person offering the image repair.

Attacking the Accuser

Filmmakers would also frequently lash out at people who were disapproving of their films, such as general audiences or professional film critics. One example of an attack on a critic came from director Todd Phillips, who was upset that people would write negative commentary about his film, *The Joker,* without actually having seen it. He argued, "I think it's okay that it sparks conversations and there are debates around it. The film is the statement and it's great to talk about it, but it's much more helpful if you've seen it. There's been so much conversation around the movie by people who haven't seen the movie; thinkpieces written by people who say, 'I haven't seen the movie. I'm not going to see the movie.' And then they write two pages about the movie" (Sharf, 2019b, para. 2). Most of those people shifting blame criticized the general public for a lack of awareness or understanding of what the film was trying to convey. For example, Todd Phillips and Joaquin Phoenix (who played the Joker) both criticized audience members who felt the film promoted violence. Phillips suggested moviegoers maintained a double standard with violence being acceptable in some films and not in others: "He's [John Wick character] a white male who kills 300 people and everybody's laughing and hooting and hollering. Why does this movie get held to different standards? It honestly doesn't make sense to me" (Sharf, 2019a, para. 4). Phoenix argued that it is not his responsibility to help the audience interpret the movie correctly: "People misinterpret lyrics from songs. They misinterpret passages from books. I don't think it's the responsibility of a filmmaker to teach the audience morality or the difference between right or wrong. I mean, to me, I think that that's obvious" (Sharf, 2019b, para. 2).

Other filmmakers attacked the audience for being either hateful or ignorant. David Ayer, writer and director of *Suicide Squad*, felt that audiences were too vicious in their expressions of outrage: "Nothing hurts more than to pick up a newspaper and see a couple years of your blood, sweat, and tears ripped to shreds. The hate game is strong out there" (Fahey, 2017, para. 16). Similarly, Ben Ramsey argued, "*Dragonball Evolution* marked a very painful creative point in my life. To have something with my name on it as the writer be so globally reviled is gut wrenching. To receive hate mail from all over the world is heartbreaking" (Padula, 2016, para. 7). Some writers and directors felt the audience was too ignorant to understand their films. Cameron Crowe (writer/director of *Aloha*) wrote, "From the very beginning... 'Aloha' has felt like a misunderstood movie. One that people felt they knew a lot about, but in fact they knew very little" (Crowe, 2015, para. 1). Paul Verhoeven, director of *Showgirls*, believed audiences were not focused on the most important elements of his film: "Half the audience only ever had their eyes below her face, so of course they would say that! [responding to criticism of Elizabeth Berkeley's acting]" (Desborough & Patterson, 2015, para. 23). In sum, filmmakers attempted to save face by focusing attention on the negative attributes of those originally levying the attacks.

Attacking the accuser may have been a bad strategy for those who opted to use it since filmmakers depend on audiences for their livelihood. Perhaps this is also why mortification was so prominent; it functioned as a direct alternative to verbally "going after" the people who line their pockets. Although it makes practical sense that the savviest directors would certainly not bite the hand that feeds them, we would suggest that civility is generally on decline in the public discourse and that filmmakers might not be able to resist the temptation to engage in hostile exchanges with fans online. Celeste Condit (2018) argued that although groups of angry people online are often driven by "cultural traditions, ideologies, and histories...they are also substantively shaped by the distinctive set of characteristics that are constitutive of 'being angry together' as a pervasive social phenomenon" (p. 2). She maintained that the impetus for an angry public usually comes from the collective group believing that an offender has violated some "crucial social norm." Without these conditions, the anger is likely to be minimal. Therefore, the only conclusion that we can draw is that fan vitriol comes from a perception that these films violate some critical social/cultural norm, even when not overtly visible.

Good Intentions

Another strategy used by filmmakers was to argue that, in spite of their films not resonating with audiences, their intentions were good. For example, David Robbeson discussed his intentions with his film *The Last Sect*: "It wasn't supposed to be like this. The *Last Sect* wasn't merely my first film; it was the first screenplay I'd ever written, an epic tale of lesbian vampires who run an Internet dating service. I wrote it to be philosophical and sexy: long sessions of blood-dripping French kisses between breathless ruminations about the nature of mortality" (Robbeson, 2008, para. 1). J.D. Shapiro also emphasized his intentions with the film *Battlefield Earth*: "It wasn't what I intended—promise. No one sets out to make a train wreck. Actually, comparing it to a train wreck isn't really fair to train wrecks, because people actually want to watch those" (Shapiro, 2010, para. 2). And Vincent Gallo (writer/director/star of *The Brown Bunny*) defended the aims of his movie: "It was never my intention to make a pretentious film, a self-indulgent film, a useless film, an unengaging film" (Gibbons, 2003, para. 2).

These three examples are used to soften criticism by suggesting there was no overt effort to make a bad film. Using good intentions is logical insulation against audience perceptions that the directors were simply collecting a paycheck. This approach humanizes filmmakers and increases the likelihood that audience members will want to give them another chance.

Corrective Action

Some filmmakers used the strategy of corrective action by claiming that in the future, they would do something to make it up to audiences. For example, Matthew Vaughn, producer of *The Fantastic Four*, said, "One of my favorites is the *Fantastic Four*, so maybe one day I'll try and rectify the mistake" (Lussier, 2017, para. 2). Another example of corrective action is a statement made by David Ayer following the release of *Suicide Squad:* "I have to give the characters the stories and plots they deserve next time" (Robinson, 2017, para. 4). The last example is Ben Ramsey, who wished to provide audiences with a better effort than he provided with *Dragonball Evolution*: "I hope I can make it up to you by creating something really cool and entertaining that you will like and that is also something I am passionate about. That's the only work I do now" (Padula, 2016, para. 11). These filmmakers recognize that they cannot turn back the clock on audience disappointment toward their films, but encourage moviegoers to give them a shot at redemption in the future.

Corrective action was unlikely to be a very persuasive strategy overall since the movie theater experience cannot generally be fixed retroactively because doing so might, at a minimum, require a refund on every ticket. Corrective action allows filmmakers to make a sincere public gesture without directly prostrating themselves financially. One exception to this was director Tom Hooper, who recently sent out a "digital patch" that theater owners could download and add to the previous version of the movie *Cats* in order to update some of the visual effects (Ricker, 2019). We wonder, though, which might be worse for Hooper's overall image: 1) Releasing a film with poor digital effects; or 2) Distributing a patch to make up for the premature release of an incomplete film.

In sum, only two of Benoit's fourteen image repair strategies were not used at all. These were the strategies of accident (likely because movies do not just pop up spontaneously) and provocation (nobody is going to say "the audience irritated me, so I decided to punish them with a bad movie"). In this case, we do not believe that accident or provocation would have been appropriate and perhaps that is why they were not used by any of the filmmakers in our textual sample. In short, the most interesting element of this discourse is that audiences feel that failure in the entertainment world is nearly as egregious and offensive as are deviant and criminal behaviors.

Conclusion

We believe there are several important insights that can be gleaned from this analysis. First, and perhaps not surprisingly, filmmakers defend themselves with the same energy and intensity of previous cases of *apologia* in non-recreational spaces, such as those involving violence, sexual infidelity, drugs, and racism. However, what is odd is that audience members seem to take it very personally when a filmmaker fails to deliver on the promise of quality entertainment. Ironically, audiences have not been wronged the way victims of a crime might be, so asking for restitution for lost time and money in a recreational space is highly unusual. For example, Joel Schumacher was absolutely decimated after the release of *Batman & Robin.* In fact, the movie still holds an IMDB rating of 3.7 (out of 10) and people continue to post scathing reviews of it even 23 years after its original release. And Schumacher seems to recognize how hurt audiences were by his film when he said, “After *Batman & Robin*, I was scum. It was like I had murdered a baby” (Bodner, 2017, para. 3). Simply put, filmmakers feel a strong sense of responsibility for giving fans what they want, and fans feel deeply offended when filmmakers fail to deliver on those promises.

Second, fan reactions are also elevated when the disappointments come from directors, producers, or actors who have very good track records for producing quality. After all, Steven Spielberg has three Academy Awards and 17 nominations, but has been reviled for films like *Hook, 1941, and Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull.* James Cameron, director of box office hits like *Titanic, Terminator 1 and 2, Aliens,* and *Avatar* also surprisingly made *Piranha 2: The Spawning*. Seemingly decades of trust can be dismantled with a single poor outing. It does not mean audiences will stop attending movies made by these film titans; however, audiences may always have lingering doubt about the potential quality of the latest release knowing their favorite filmmaker is capable of producing a turkey of a movie.

Third, there seems to be a much greater variety of strategies used in this context than in previous cases of image repair in the literature. One explanation could be that there are fewer rhetorical constraints or exigencies with defending art. In cases of deviant or criminal behavior, an accused person would be foolish to use certain strategies such as minimization (“sexual assault is not that bad”) or transcendence (“I had some higher purpose for engaging in the sexual assault”). These fluctuating constraints are common with a variety of offenses, yet very few image repair strategies seem to be “off the table” for those simply defending a poor quality or controversial film. There are also fewer established norms when it comes to defending art because it is an understudied area of *apologia* discourse. Directors, producers, and actors are still trying to figure out which responses audiences will accept and which ones they will reject. The recent accessibility of social media now allows fans to take to the internet with their analyses of these films, thus increasing the likelihood of filmmaker *apologia* and providing a new context for scholars to examine.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, is the way that filmmaker *apologia* differs from other categories. Film *apologia* is not simply about the completed product, it is a defense of an individual’s livelihood. For example, Tiger Woods’ apology for cheating on his wife had no direct connection to his golfing ability. Nobody was questioning his legitimacy as a professional golfer, but they were challenging his morality. In contrast, when filmmakers are forced to apologize for a poor film, the question is raised as to whether they are capable of providing quality entertainment in the future, thereby suggesting that they should choose a new occupation.

Additionally, filmmaker *apologia* differs on the basis of the nature of offense and harm. A spontaneous act often causes emotional or physical harm to the recipient. There are medical bills to be covered, therapy to be offered, and trauma to be treated. However, when a bad film is created, there should not be any need for restitution. There is nothing inherently wrong with the act. Filmmakers simply tried to create an enjoyable film, but fell short. Thus, the motivation with filmmaking is to please the audience; the motivation for deviant acts is typically to inflict harm or acquire personal gain. Audiences can be more understanding regarding “heat of the moment” behaviors from a celebrity or athlete for a spontaneous act than with filmmakers who carefully thought through each detail of a movie and still created something that upset moviegoers.

Regardless of filmmaker intent, this study underscores a new reality that impacts the way this subcategory of movie *apologia* is viewed. We believe the cultural landscape of public blaming and complaining has taken a strong foothold and, when combined with people's reliance on technology, it is now much easier to complain to a collective of like-minded people who share perhaps only one unifying characteristic: they all hated this one particular movie, and they are not shy about broadcasting their experiences.

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Table 1. Benoit's *apologia* (image repair) strategies*

General strategy	Tactic	Example
Denial		
	Simple denial	I did not embezzle money.
	Shift blame	Steve took your wallet, not me.
Evade responsibility		
	Provocation	I insulted you, but only after you criticized me.
	Defeasibility	I was late because traffic delayed me.
	Accident	Our collision was an accident.
	Good intentions	I didn't tell you because I hoped to fix the problem first.
Reducing offensiveness		
	Bolstering	Think of all the times I helped you.
	Minimization	I broke your vase, but it was not an expensive one.
	Differentiation	I borrowed your laptop without asking; I didn't steal it.

	Transcendence	Searching travelers at the airport is an inconvenience, but it protects against terrorism.
	Attack accuser	Joe says I embezzled money, but he is a chronic liar.
	Compensation	Because the waiter spilled a drink on your clothes, we'll give you dessert for free.
Corrective action		Because the waiter spilled a drink on your suit, we'll have it dry cleaned.
Mortification		I'm so sorry I offended you. I regret hurting your feelings and I apologize.

*Versions of this table can be found in Benoit (1995 & 2015)

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Sense-making Reputation: Examining Stakeholders' Assessments of "Good" and "Bad" Companies

Lois Foreman-Wernet

This study explores the concept of corporate reputation from the perspective of stakeholders through conducting a series of focus groups. Through discussion about self-selected "especially good" and "especially bad" companies, participants explained the criteria by which they assessed reputation, the information sources that contributed to those assessments, the influence of Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, and the role that accountability played in their perceptions and behaviors.

There has been a good deal of attention paid to the issue of corporate reputation in recent years, and today we can find regular rankings of reputation in publications such as *Fortune Magazine*, the *Financial Times*, and *Management Today*, each with its own measurement criteria and methodology. We also have seen a burgeoning of academic and professional research on the concept of reputation and how to define it, measure it, predict it, and manage it. Much of the work on reputation is survey-based, and in many cases, data are collected from industry peers (Dowling & Gardberg, 2012). Therefore, this study explores reputation from a more qualitative, grassroots perspective. In particular, it sheds light on the process by which individual stakeholders assess corporate reputation in order to provide guidance to the field of public relations.

Literature Review

Aspects of Corporate Reputation

In a broad sense, reputation can be understood as how a given organization is perceived by its various publics or stakeholders. Walker (2010) defined reputation as a "relatively stable, issue specific aggregate perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects compared against some standard" (p. 370). Barnett et al. (2006) said reputation is "observers' collective judgments of a corporation based on assessments of financial, social, and environmental impacts attributed to the corporation over time" (p. 34). Doorley and Garcia (2011) provided a formula as a definition, stating that reputation = the sum of images = performance + behavior + communication (p. 4). And Davies (2011) defined reputation as "the impression stakeholders have of that organization, accumulated from a range of sources, including actual experience, media comment and content, sponsored communication and word of mouth" (p. 51). These last two definitions are particularly well suited for looking at reputation from a public relations perspective, with the first representing reputation from the standpoint of the organization and the second representing an audience orientation. Together, they serve as the foundation for the study that follows.

Those who value a strong reputation understand it to represent a crucial intangible asset that contributes to a company's bottom line through the loyalty of customers, ability to attract and retain the best employees, boost growth of price and purchase of stocks, and so forth (see, e.g., Agarwal et al., 2015; Doorley & Garcia, 2011; Friedman, 2009). There are varied perspectives in the literature on what elements or dimensions comprise a company's reputation, however. For example, Burke (2011) said that reputation is built on the elements of emotional appeal, vision, leadership and integrity, social responsibility, and a supportive workplace environment. Duhé (2009) posited that the three basic attributes of reputation are management quality, financial soundness, and social responsibility. Eisenegger and Schranz (2011) saw reputation encoded in the

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following six dimensions: products and services, financial performance, vision and leadership, workplace environment, social responsibility, and emotional appeal. Schwaiger (2004) theorized that reputation has two main dimensions, competence and likeability, that are driven by quality, performance, responsibility, and attractiveness. Thus, while there is a fair amount of overlap, scholars have conceptualized and operationalized reputation in different ways. Part of the difficulty of assigning reputational attributes is that different aspects are important to different publics or stakeholders (Jensen et al., 2012). This leads to the first research question:

> **RQ1**. How do an organization's primary stakeholders or publics describe (conceptualize) good and bad companies; i.e., what criteria do they use to assess corporate reputation?

The source of stakeholder perceptions, as Davies (2011) noted, is an important aspect of reputation. Scholars have differentiated types of reputation according to their source (Grunig & Hung, 2002; Yang & Cha, 2015). Those that are first order or primary reputations are based on personal experience and are more likely to influence one's attitudes and behaviors. Second order or secondary reputations are based on what others say or what is learned from media. Secondary reputations are more superficial and tend to conform to prevailing opinions. Reputations also can be based on a combination of the two, both direct and secondary sources. Personal experience, then, is foundational, and those personal experiences affect word-of-mouth testimony and its impacts, especially when the experiences are negative (Hong & Yang, 2009; Williams et al., 2012).

Media coverage can influence and validate (or invalidate) both personal experiences as well as individuals' interpretations of initiatives and communications that come from the corporation itself (Fombrun, 2012). Prior research has affirmed the agenda-setting effects of the media on corporate reputation, such that individuals' awareness, understanding, and opinions about a company can be influenced by news coverage and editorials (see, e.g., Carroll, 2009; Kim et al., 2015; Kiousis et al., 2007). As a result, public relations departments logically focus their efforts on securing positive and mitigating negative media attention.

Crisis situations create a particular reputational threat. As Coombs and Holladay (2014) noted, when negative events occur, individuals make assumptions or attributions about the cause. To the extent the company or organization itself is perceived to be at fault, the risk to reputation increases significantly. Additionally, how—and how quickly—the company responds to the crisis will affect the subsequent media reports and public perceptions, underscoring the importance of the communication function and the role of public relations (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007; Falkheimer & Heide, 2015). The second research question, then, is about reputational sources:

> **RQ2**. What information sources do an organization's primary stakeholders or publics use to assess corporate reputation?

Contextual Factors

The most important stakeholders are arguably those who have a direct monetary exchange with companies, including consumers, employees, and investors (MacMillan et al., 2005). These key relationships represent the mechanism through which reputation impacts corporations. As such, it may be especially useful to focus on the perceptions of individuals' experiences in these relationships rather than broader financial performance or executive leadership. As suggested above, within these key groups the role or identity of the stakeholder affects the nature of the organizational relationship and one's reputational assessment (Foreman et al., 2012). For example, in assessing a company's reputation, a consumer may be concerned with customer service, while an investor may be focused on stock prices.

Public relations scholars have long acknowledged the importance of building and maintaining organization-public relationships, and positive long-term relationships have been found to benefit an organization's reputation (Grunig & Hung, 2002; Kim et al., 2013). Ledingham and Bruning (2000) defined an organization-public relationship as "the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" (p. 62). Hon and Grunig (1999) noted that relational satisfaction is determined by the consistency of actions and the extent to which expectations about the relationship are positively reinforced. Thus, for example, one of the factors affecting reputational threat in a crisis is the duration and quality of the relationship and the incidence of prior similar issues or crises (Coombs, 2000); another is the actions of intermediaries, such as the media and activist groups (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015).

Although largely unarticulated in the organization-public relationship literature, the ethical underpinning of these relationships is understood (Bowen et al., 2016). For example, the roles of trust, authenticity, and mutuality in the organization-public relationship model assume that ethical values will drive the parties' behaviors and affect their relationships. The concept of two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) that emphasizes a balance between an organization and its publics and the dialogic model in public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002) are both inherently ethical. The prioritization of two-way or dialogic communication can lead to positive organization-public relationships through mutual understanding and respect (Chen et al., 2020).

Neher and Sandin (2007) defined ethics as a "systematic method for making [moral] judgments concerning voluntary actions of people" (p. 6). Especially for more involved publics, what an organization does is more important than what it says. The behaviors of management affect organization-public relationships, and the type and quality of those relationships affect stakeholders' perceptions – i.e., the organization's reputation (Grunig & Hung, 2002).

Farmer (2018) noted that reputation management must be based on trust and truth. Ethical public relations practice is about the fair treatment of stakeholders or publics, and it relies on communication that is transparent, open, honest, and respectful (Toledano, 2017). Unfortunately, there is increasing cynicism and distrust of all our social institutions, including business and government, based on a growing sense of systemic inequity and unfairness (Edelman, 2020). Furthermore, we have entered a "post-truth" world, where truth is relative and "personal values, beliefs and emotions take precedence" (Ihlen et al., 2019, p. 2). Both of these conditions are detrimental to democratic society and make reputation management both more difficult and more crucial.

At its foundation, the concept of reputation is based on social norms and moral judgments, resting on questions of what is "good" and what are the "right" actions to take (Terravecchia, 2017)? Moral principles are part of our culture and embedded in our understandings of appropriate behaviors in all realms of life. Indeed, the free market system itself is grounded in assumptions about the nature of a good society (L'Etang et al., 2011). The economic rationality of free trade assumes a cooperative system based on common understandings whereby the seller has something of value to the customer, each party treats the other fairly, and through a monetary or barter exchange, each party benefits. There exists a social contract of sorts between the seller and those with whom he or she transacts business, based on such social virtues as honesty and reliability. Thus, there is (at least theoretically) a self-enforcement of responsibility on the part of the seller or business in the interest of customers and other stakeholders (Sacconi, 2007).

This leads us to accountability and the idea that corporations should be answerable to someone, that they should be legitimate social entities (Habermas, 1975; Wæraas, 2007). Suchman (1995) defined legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (p. 574). Stakeholders are theoretically capable of responding to companies who do not act in compliance with agreed upon norms and ethical standards. In practice, however, individuals do not always exercise this power, most often because corporate infractions are not widely known or there is a lack of alternative options available (Valor, 2005). Recently, a growing corporate accountability movement concerned with global inequality, working conditions, and other perceived injustices has employed various tactics to "name and shame" companies in an effort to force accountability (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Smith, 2012; Utting, 2008). With the help of social media, activist groups have affected the reputations as well as the bottom lines of numerous well-known corporations. The third research question, then, is about accountability:

> **RQ3**. What role does accountability play in individual stakeholders' engagement vis-à-vis their reputational assessments?

Armed with information about corporations' socially responsible actions, consumers and others can make morally based decisions about companies with whom they wish to engage. In turn, we see companies using Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs and other signals of good citizenship as a means of competitive distinction. Carroll (1979) referenced CSR when he stated that "the social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations" of society (p. 500). More recently Ozdora Aksak et al. (2016) noted that it is a challenge to define CSR "because it entails many different approaches and because it changes according to the context, era, and culture," but implied in the concept is the idea that companies have a moral obligation to society (p. 79). This idea also is reflected in the principle of legitimacy and the notion that corporations will not survive if they do not meet the social norms and expectations of shareholders (Lee & Carroll, 2011; Tao & Ferguson, 2015). In recent years, for example, such concerns as environmental stewardship have become standardized as criteria against which corporations are judged (Kennedy et al., 2012).

The literature is replete with caution about the use of CSR programs and initiatives for competitive edge, however. Individuals are understandably skeptical about such efforts, so they must be transparently communicated (Kim & Lee, 2018) and seen as genuine and integral to the company's mission and operations, lest they be viewed as cynical, self-interested tools for manipulation of public perception (Dowling & Moran, 2012; Eisenegger & Schranz, 2011; Elving, 2013; Kim & Ferguson, 2014; Rim, 2018; Shim & Yang, 2016). This leads to the fourth research question:

> **RQ4**. What influence do CSR activities have on stakeholders' or publics' perceptions of reputation?

To gain a better understanding of how key stakeholder groups assess the reputations of companies with which they have relationships, this study sought to explore the decision-making processes of individual stakeholders. By looking at how individuals made sense of their relationships with corporations, it was possible to analyze the criteria they used to evaluate, the sources of information from which they made their judgments, the contextual factors that affected those assessments, and the conclusions and resulting behaviors that followed.

Methodology

To learn more about reputational assessments, it was necessary to select a methodology that considers the situational context of individual decision-makings. The study utilized Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003, 2013). Dervin's methodology conceptualizes humans as moving through time-space stepping (cognitively, emotionally, physically, spiritually) from one moment to the next, often drawing on habit or routine to guide them, but also capable of responding in other ways. The methodology assumes individuals are able to articulate their thoughts and feelings as they move through, and make sense of, a given moment, thus making them co-theorists in the research process. Sense-Making interviews use this metaphor of movement from a situation in context across a gap in time-space, whereby the sense-maker creates a bridge (from habit, thoughts, feelings, etc.) to an outcome (consequence or impact).

As a communication-based methodology predicated on a dialogic worldview that is compatible with the two-way symmetrical theory of public relations, Sense-Making provides a useful research framework for the field (Walker, 2006). Based on a series of philosophical assumptions and taking a process-oriented "verbing" approach to communication, Sense-Making provides a crucial procedural link between larger social organization and individual actions (Foreman-Wernet, 2003). As such the methodology is designed to bridge the gap between organizations and their publics, utilizing a dialogic interface that focuses on listening to understand the informant's perspective (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2006).

Although Sense-Making studies have most often employed individual interviews, the methodology also can be the basis for focus group research. What is different from typical focus groups when using the Sense-Making Methodology is that rather than spontaneous exchanges between participants, the turn-takings are more disciplined and include both reflective preliminary prompts and the use of self-journaling during the sharing rounds (Dervin & Devakos, 2010).

Recruitment

The IRB-approved study included 16 different focus groups from the Midwestern U.S., totaling 115 participants. A convenience sampling method was employed using volunteers from among the university student population as well as from several community groups to which the author reached out. Substantial efforts were made to include a broad range of participants, who were divided fairly equally female to male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 85, although the ages skewed younger based on the greater accessibility of students. Approximately two-thirds of participants were aged 18-25, about 20% were 26-49, and about 13% were 50 and older. In keeping with the demographics of the region, the majority were white, with 19% African American, 6% Asian, and 3% Hispanic. By nature of the study's design, which asked respondents to focus on companies familiar to them, the respondents represented the most influential stakeholders: customers (or, in a few cases, potential customers), employees, and investors. In order to provide maximal participant flexibility, there was no effort to identify these specific stakeholder roles in advance. Some of the members of the various groups knew each other, but that was not necessarily the case overall.

Procedures

Each focus group began with a scripting worksheet for participants to complete. First, each participant identified a company he or she believed to be especially "good" (self-defined) and wrote words or phrases to describe that company. Next, participants wrote reasons they thought the company was good and the source(s) (experience, person, media, etc.) they recalled supporting that reason. Then the same was done for a company the participant identified as especially "bad." Mapping the Sense-Making Methodology, the prompts functioned by focusing respondents on a situation (i.e., history with a company) paired with an outcome (i.e., conclusion the company is especially good or bad) and then having them provide the sense-making bridge (i.e., criteria and sources) that connected the two. In keeping with the Sense-Making principle of limiting the researcher's intrusion on the process, participants were given the freedom to conceptualize reputation, i.e., "good" and "bad" companies, in their own terms.

Focus group members were then seated in a circle or around a table, depending on the setting, and a strict sharing procedure was employed. During the first round of reporting, each participant, taking turns, shared what was written regarding the "good" company selected. Continuing around the circle, participants took turns sharing their thoughts aloud until none had more to add. A second, similar round of reporting followed, focusing on the "bad" companies, with participants taking turns and sharing their comments as long as necessary. Throughout the process, those listening (i.e., all participants who were not speaking at the time) were asked to use their journaling sheets to write down: 1) similar and dissimilar experiences; 2) things they had never heard before; 3) things they agreed or disagreed with; 4) confusions or things that challenged them; and 5) things that helped them. This provided a way to capture information that respondents were either not able to share due to the turn-taking process or not comfortable sharing aloud.

The focus group sessions averaged 50 minutes in length, with the first 10 minutes or so used to complete the scripting worksheets and the remaining time spent in sharing rounds. All sessions were audio recorded, and all participants consented to be part of the study.

Content Analysis

In order to analyze the results of the focus groups, the scripting sheets (pre-focus-group reflections) and journaling sheets (during-focus-group reflections) were read several times, and the focus group recordings were reviewed to catch any additional comments. A content analysis was then performed using these data sources. First, employing a grounded theory approach, coding schemes were developed using the constant comparative method to identify both criteria (reasons) and sources for participants' conclusions about "good" and "bad" companies based on the thematic thrusts of the data while also reflecting relevant reputational elements identified in the literature. Because of the large overlap between the scripting prompts requesting company descriptors and reasons given, responses for those prompts were grouped together during analysis.

Once the coding schemes were developed, the scripting sheets were reviewed again, and the contents were coded into a spreadsheet according to the various thematic categories for both "good" and "bad" companies. A second researcher[1] independently coded the responses, and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved. These final coded data were then tabulated to derive frequency counts for each category. While results are not necessarily generalizable, the frequency counts proved helpful to see patterns in participants' responses.

Finally, the journaling sheets were reviewed again in order to attend to points where differences in perception and understanding played out through the focus group process. These incidents provided an opportunity to look more deeply into some of the issues affecting reputation assessment. The consideration of these specific case examples shed light in a way that is not possible when looking at quantitative aggregates.

Results

The focus group participants identified 68 different companies they considered to be especially good and 72 they deemed to be especially bad, with multiple people choosing some companies on each list. The companies that participants named ranged from local grocery stores and restaurants to major multinational corporations. Most of the participants' comments related to their roles as customers or potential customers; however, in some cases, they responded as employees or investors.

Reasons

The reasons why participants chose their good and bad companies fell into the following categories: quality of products, quality of customer service, business management and performance, responsibility, and communication. The nature of responses in the groups led to combining into one category all references to economic performance as well as comments about management. Frequency results are displayed in Table 1 below.

[1] Special thanks to Deanna Fry for her assistance as second coder.

Good Companies

The most often cited reason for choosing a particular company as good was because of its products (70.4%). Participants said the companies they thought were good had products that were of "high quality," described variously as "top-notch," "classy," "well-designed," with "cool features," and offering a "lifetime guarantee." Some described high-quality products as "made with natural ingredients" and "no harsh chemicals," and for restaurants and grocery stores, food was "fresh" and "delicious." Price also was an important consideration, with participants saying the company has "great prices," products are "affordable," and you "get your money's worth." Another aspect of quality mentioned by some participants was the availability of a "wide variety of products" from which to choose.

Table 1. Percent of participants choosing reason for good and bad companies. Multiple responses possible for each participant.

Reason	Description	Good Company	Bad Company
Quality of Product	Product is good/bad quality, value, design; offers variety of products or not	70.4%	51.3%
Quality of Customer Service	Service is quick/slow, responsive/unresponsive, helpful or not, friendly/unfriendly	52.2%	42.6%
Management and Performance	Company is successful/failing, continued growth/losing business; places of business are well run/chaotic, clean/dirty, organized or disorganized	34.8%	46.1%
Corporate Responsibility	Company is principled/unprincipled; cares/doesn't care about environment; treats employees and others well/poorly; promotes charity and community support; shows concern for diversity and inclusion	53.9%	58.2%
Communication	Company is honest/untrustworthy, open and transparent/deceitful	15.7%	16.5%

Customer service was mentioned as a reason for identifying a company as good by 52.2% of participants. They noted that employees were "helpful," "informed," "friendly," "thoughtful," "willing to give advice," and "very customer oriented," and they "did more than asked" and "directed me to what I needed." Participants also said that customer service was "quick" and return policies were "easy" and "convenient."

Business management and performance were among the reasons for 34.8% of participants. They mentioned good companies as being "profitable," "professional," "global," "forward-thinking," and "pioneering," and they are able to recruit and retain a "high level of talent." Participants also noted that good companies' "stock prices have risen," and they have "strong financials," "remained strong through the recession," and "have been in business a long time." In a few cases, participants also addressed local management issues stating, for example, that stores were "clean and organized."

More than half of the participants (53.9%) mentioned aspects of corporate responsibility for their good company choices. Within this category, while some participants spoke broadly of companies as "socially responsible," having "strong values," or being a "good corporate citizen," many others were more specific, with significant mention of worker treatment, concern about the environment, charity and community support, and diversity.

Finally, in selecting good companies, 15.7% of participants included communication-related criteria. Good companies, they said, were "genuine," "credible," "trustworthy," "honest," and had "an authentic message."

Bad Companies

When discussing their chosen bad companies, 51.3% of focus group participants gave product quality as a reason. For the most part, participants' responses mirrored the good company product reasons. They described products as "cheap," "easily broken," and "not made to last," and they also mentioned frequent product recalls. Grocery stores and restaurants were identified as having food that was "greasy," "unhealthy," "fake and disgusting," "spoiled," and "expired." Pricing concerns were related to products being "expensive" and "over-priced," with some companies engaging in "price gouging."

Discussions of customer service also largely reflected the opposite of descriptors for good companies, with 42.6% of participants identifying bad customer service. For these participants, employees had a "bad attitude" and were "rude," "unwelcoming," "inconsiderate," "unhelpful," "slow," "unfriendly," and "careless." Focus group members also discussed bad service in terms of companies using a "robot answering service" and having "no loyalty to long-term customers," and they complained of stores being "poorly staffed" with "long lines to check out." One participant, explaining the choice of a local restaurant as especially bad, said, "The order is never correct, and they seem mad when told."

Business management and performance was indicated by 46.1% of participants as a reason for evaluating companies as bad. Corporate performance was described as "behind the times," "short-sighted," "not visionary," "unprofessional," "unprofitable," and "losing market share." Participants noted bad companies' "failure to capitalize opportunity" and "to innovate," and that they used an "old business model," "lost focus on mission," and "let stockholders down." Several participants mentioned the problem of companies operating as virtual monopolies, implying that competition helps to reign in excesses. Others noted "bad marketing" and "poor judgment," and several talked about the annoyance of "up-selling" by trying to get customers to buy extra products or services. Management concerns were referenced by describing stores as "cluttered," "cramped and dirty," "messy," "unorganized," and "poorly run," with "things lying on the floor" and "boxes everywhere." One participant discussed a generally "unpleasant in-store experience, cluttered, loud, disorganized."

Comments in the responsibility category received the highest percentage of participants' reasons (58.2%). Broad terms such as "unethical," "corrupt," "irresponsible," "immoral," and "greedy" were used, and a couple of participants mentioned actual or alleged criminal activity. In one case, a focus group participant explaining company choice, said, "Despite high prices and profits, I don't see them trying to make the world a better place." As with the good companies, most participants' responsibility-related comments fell into several different themes, including worker treatment, concern about the environment, diversity and inclusion, and animal welfare. It is interesting that participants' discrimination concerns addressed not only ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation but also body type. Several group members mentioned clothing companies' discrimination against larger sized women, which "excludes average people from buying and promotes judging."

Finally, 16.5% of participants pointed to companies' communication. General descriptive terms included "bad" or "awful" communication, "fake," "not genuine," "disrespectful," and "arrogant." One important theme that arose in multiple focus groups was companies' failure to take ownership of crises or problems, expressed as "nonresponsive," "blamed others," "doesn't take responsibility," and "never really apologizes." A second theme in this category was deceit, whereby companies were said to be "manipulative," "deceptive," and "secretive," and they "hide the truth," "claim to be awesome but have dirty secrets," and "market [harmful or unhealthy products] to younger audiences."

Sources

Sources, or means by which focus group participants gained information to support their reasons, were broken into the following four categories: personal experience, corporate communications, media, and word of mouth. Most participants relied on personal experience, at least in part, to base their evaluations of good (78.3%) and bad (65.2%) companies. Usually this experience was as a customer, but often it was as an employee, and in some cases it was as an investor. See Table 2 below for results.

Table 2. Percent of source mentions for information about good and bad companies. Multiple responses possible for each participant.

Source	Description	Good Company	Bad Company
Personal Experience	Encounter or engagement directly experienced by the individual	78.3%	65.2%
Corporate Communication	Communication directly from company; e.g., commercials, company websites, public statements, in-store information	18.3%	10.4%
Media	Communication through news media, documentaries, TV shows, social media, other non-company media	24.3%	28.7%
Word of Mouth	Communication from friends, family, others personally known	10.4%	8.7%

Corporate communication directly with stakeholders was indicated as a source by 18.3% of participants discussing good companies and 10.4% of those referencing bad companies. In the case of good companies, participants singled out commercials (both generally as well as during the Olympics and Super Bowl), e-mails, and in-store information about social responsibility. For bad companies, the direct company sources identified were commercials, websites, and corporate social media responding to crises.

News and other media sources were mentioned by 24.3% of participants discussing good companies and 28.7% for bad companies. For good companies, focus group members saw newspaper, magazine, and television news stories. Additionally, several of those who chose Toms had read a book by the founder, and one person was favorably influenced by the TV show *Undercover Boss*. For bad companies, sources similarly were newspaper, magazine, and television news stories along with social media reports, books, and documentaries. Several of those identifying McDonalds as a bad company mentioned watching the documentary *Supersize Me* and another was influenced by the documentary *Food Inc.*

Word of mouth information was relatively infrequently mentioned for either good or bad companies, at 10.4% and 8.7%, respectively. For the most part these sources were friends and family members who shared their work experiences.

Varied Perspectives

A review of the journaling sheets showed that focus group participants had many similar experiences and agreed with much that was reported by others. However, the use of the journaling sheets also made possible consideration of points at which perspectives diverged, understandings changed, and struggles occurred – many of which were thoughts not vocalized in the group.

Participants noted a number of things they had never heard before. These broke out into several distinct groups of comment. In some cases, not surprisingly, group members reported they were unfamiliar with certain companies or products mentioned. Some were not aware of positive information, such as good wages and benefits provided by Starbucks and Costco, how Jeni's ice cream supports the community, and Home Depot's discounts to veterans. In other cases, participants had not heard negative stories, such as Johnson & Johnson testing its products on animals and Nike using sweatshop labor.

Although there was much agreement within the focus groups, there were many things said that participants did not agree with and wrote about on their journaling sheets. There were many cases where participants indicated that although others reported bad experiences with products or services, they had good experiences, and vice versa. There also were several companies about which numerous participants expressed disagreement with other group members. For example, while McDonalds was identified by many as bad, several defended the restaurant, with one writing, "I don't think they're trying to be healthy; they're cheap and convenient," and another writing, "You get what you pay for." Similarly, while Walmart was among the most frequently cited bad companies, several disagreed, with one person arguing that while there are some bad quality products, there is a whole range from which to choose. Another disagreement was related to BP, which many concluded was bad because of the Gulf oil spill and how BP handled the aftermath; however, one group member noted that as an investor, BP was good, because it continued to pay dividends throughout the crisis.

Focus group participants identified a number of statements that led to confusion for them. Most of the time, this confusion was based on conflicting or mixed opinions and experiences. One participant, for example, was confused by others thinking Nike is a good company, because it has a "problem with sweat shops, is overpriced, and treats workers poorly." And in the group where General Motors was chosen as a bad company because in the process of the 2009 auto bailout stockholders lost out, one participant was confused as to whether it was the company or the government who was at fault.

The focus groups were helpful to participants in four basic ways. For some, it was simply interesting to hear others' opinions and "personal testimony" and to better understand people's perspectives regarding a range of companies. For a few participants, it was helpful to get specific information that was shared, such as knowing about selling books back to Amazon. A number of participants said that the discussions confirmed their support and continued patronage of given companies or – in a couple of cases – caused them to change their understandings and intentions for future purchases. Finally, several participants mentioned that the focus group sessions caused them to think more about the companies they support and to ensure there is alignment between the companies' values and their own.

Discussion

The focus group sessions provided insight into the various factors that influence reputation and, thus, guidance for public relations practitioners. The norms of good business included expectations of high-quality, affordable products as well as responsive, friendly, and knowledgeable customer service. Participants also expected companies to be successfully run and well managed, ethical and caring, and open and honest in their communication. Thus, with regard to the reputational criteria used to describe good and bad companies, the study generally validated what other research has found (see, e.g., Fombrun, 2012). As touched on in the section above, the importance of certain criteria – and thus individual assessments – at times varied depending on the focus group member's stakeholder role as a consumer, employee, or investor.

With regard to sources, it is interesting to note that relatively few participants mentioned word-of-mouth. This is likely a factor of the request for especially good or bad companies and the preponderance of other, more direct sources, but it may be an artifact of the sampling method. Not surprising is that for both good and bad companies, participants cited personal experience most often as the source of their perceptions. This is in keeping with the literature on primary reputation (Grunig & Hung, 2002), since participants were asked about companies they deemed to be especially good or bad, and the strongest impressions would come from personal experience. Media were the next most influential sources. Videos, especially documentaries, appear to be quite effective in highlighting perceived injustices and malfeasance, and people are more inclined to pay attention to and remember these. This supports the agenda-setting theory of the media and its role in corporate reputation (e.g., Carroll, 2009).

The study underscored the risk inherent in corporate crises. One prominent theme with bad companies was failure to take responsibility for their actions. This is in direct support of the crisis communication literature and the need to immediately address crisis situations, take responsibility when at fault, and promptly remedy the problem or issue (Coombs, 2007).

On the positive side of corporate communication, participants mentioned a number of effective tactics, including emails, company websites, in-store displays, and commercials. These were more often mentioned as sources for good companies, likely because of positive relationships already established between the organization and its stakeholders. These individuals would likely be more open to receiving corporate messages and may even request information or seek it out. It is interesting to note the apparent effectiveness of commercials, especially those that aired during high-visibility sports events like the Olympics and the Super Bowl. Participant responses would suggest that despite the high cost of such commercials, their placement may be effective, especially for communicating about corporate values and CSR.

Corporate Social Responsibility

This study brought to the forefront discussion about how to define CSR and what distinguishes normal and expected corporate behavior from what is noteworthy and exemplary. As mentioned above, participants expected good companies to have quality products, responsive and friendly customer service, and successful management. They furthermore expected good companies to be honest and caring and to treat employees, customers, and investors well. These were the norms by which companies were judged. The study indicated that CSR initiatives for competitive distinction must rise above what is normally expected. As an example, one focus group participant cited the inclusion of in-store placards that Starbucks displayed to inform patrons about its sustainability efforts while customers waited in line. Beyond this and a few similar examples, there was a surprising lack of awareness among participants of what we would usually consider to be CSR efforts. The results highlighted the need for CSR initiatives to align with the mission and values of the company and also to be effectively communicated (Foreman-Wernet, 2019). One interesting finding was with charity or philanthropic activity. While charity was identified as a theme for good companies, respondents did not mention lack of charitable giving as indicative of a company bad.

This study illuminated some areas where what companies have identified as socially responsible behaviors may not align with their publics' expectations. In environmental stewardship, for example, focus group participants, especially younger Millennials and early Gen Z, seemed not to be content with simply not polluting but expected companies to initiate sustainability efforts. Millennials are considered to be those born between 1981 and 1996, while those born in 1997 and after are Generation Z (Dimock, 2019). Similarly, there was frequent mention among those groups regarding diversity and inclusion and, to a lesser degree, animal welfare. These results reflected the concerns of Millennials and Gen Z surveyed in larger studies and point to changing societal norms and, in turn, expectations for corporate behavior (see, e.g., Cone Communications, 2015; Porter Novelli/Cone, 2019).

Accountability

With regard to accountability, there are several points to be made. First, in acknowledging the obvious, because of the Internet, positive and negative information about companies and their actions is today readily accessible and also easily distributed via social media. That fact itself lays the groundwork for corporate accountability. As this study revealed, however, the evaluative process for individuals is complex; multiple criteria are weighed and some normative judgments are contested. Participants' responses showed, in part, the power of the media and of activist groups, and many of the issues that were mentioned as problematic were those brought to the public's attention through awareness campaigns and other coordinated efforts. Finally, there is indication that people are holding companies accountable, at least to some degree. Focus group members said they utilized the criteria above in determining what products and services to purchase. Additionally, a number of participants mentioned their intention to patronize those companies whose values they shared and to avoid those with whose values they disagreed. To the extent that participants' perceptions were changed during the focus group process, it was the result of receiving additional information such that they were encouraged to try something new or to look into a concern mentioned. For example, one participant wrote that the focus group's discussion of Facebook privacy issues "helped me to think more deeply about the company."

Participants' discussions of "what not to do" may have shed more light on the topic of reputation than discussions of what good companies do. This is no doubt because good actions often go unnoticed while bad actions, because they are normatively different and noteworthy, catch our attention more easily. The effect is amplified when consumer complaints and incriminating videos can quickly go viral. Thus, this study underscored the importance to corporations of transparency, ethical business practices, and effective crisis management, and it provides guidance for corporate communicators.

Limitations

There were several obvious limitations to this study. First, the use of focus groups limited the ability to generalize results, especially since the groups were skewed toward younger participants. Additionally, by asking respondents to identify extremes of good and bad companies, the study excluded reputational consideration about the bulk of less exemplary or objectionable companies and emphasized personal experience over other information sources.

Future studies might delve further into participants' responses to learn more about their perceptions and to clarify the terms and descriptors they used. For example, it might be helpful for respondents to expound upon statements such as a company has "strong values" or an "authentic message." Such knowledge would enable public relations practitioners to ensure better alignment between the organization and stakeholders. The study also uncovered the need to further investigate whether lack of charitable giving is perceived in a neutral or negative way when assessing corporations. Future studies might focus on specific stakeholder groups and/or information sources. Specifics on the devices participants used to access videos and other information might also be helpful. And research could be conducted with certain demographic or consumer growth segments in order to gain more in-depth perspectives from those populations.

Conclusion

This exploratory study looked at corporate reputation from the perspective of stakeholders. Focus group members provided written and verbal responses. The results offered the opportunity to consider more deeply how people make sense of their engagements with corporations vis-à-vis reputation.

The study suggested that beyond their traditional communication role, public relations professionals and departments can positively contribute to an organization's product development and customer service, as well as to overall management practices, when practicing reputation management in the role of public relations counselor. The study examined the roles of personal experience, direct corporate communication, the media, and to a lesser degree word-of-mouth testimony in helping to shape people's perceptions. Overall, attention to the voices of individuals in key publics or stakeholder groups and how they assessed good and bad companies illuminated the reputational decision-making process and its ramifications for the field of public relations.

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Beckoning "Boss Babes:" Examining Mary Kay's Online Recruitment Rhetoric

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This essay critically examines the rhetoric that multi-level marketing (MLM) companies use online to recruit independent salespeople. By using a selection of Mary Kay Inc.'s webpages as a case study, I analyze persuasive tactics in the text through the lens of Charland's constitutive rhetoric and argue that these tactics, through seemingly well intentioned, are steeped with manipulative ideological underpinnings. By constituting audiences, MLMs like Mary Kay Inc. are making use of pervasive systems in society to their advantage, using entrepreneurialism, smashing the patriarchy, and spiritualism to develop second personas for their target audience and encouraging them to join their organization. This bleeding the line between social and economic spheres not only increases the company's bottom line, but also makes virtual visitors believe that they have been a part of the organization all along through the company's online call. While other scholars and journalists have noted that MLMs are often highly manipulative in recruiting practices, this essay, through borrowing a method originally used to better understand political rhetoric, can shed light on how such manipulation is done, and why it might be especially persuasive for its target audience.

Introduction

Multi-level marketing networks have changed the economic and social landscapes both nationally and worldwide. While a separation between work and home has culturally, in the United States, been the expected norm, companies that make millions by recruiting people to sell directly to friends and neighbors have caused this once definite line to blur. Starting with charismatic door-to-door encyclopedia salesmen, and evolving into Tupperware parties that gather dozens of women over hors d'oeuvres and wine, network marketing tactics have grown and developed to keep up with ever-changing social trends (Biggart, 1989). Now in the digital landscape of the twenty-first century, the independent salesforce that defines multi-level marketing companies has turned to new tools to sell their goods outside of its immediate geographic location.

While social media and other online contexts are helping independent salespeople sell their wares, it also helps them tap into another money-making resource: recruitment. Virtual contexts enable multi-level marketing companies to cast a wider net in attracting new salespeople all over the world. No longer does one have to be recruited by a salesperson in real life to join a multi-level marketing company, instead they can learn from and connect with salespeople virtually. Company websites are rich with persuasive appeals on the life-changing aspects of starting a career or side hustle in network marketing.

Although it appears that these appeals are considering the genuine interests of the recruit when taken at face value, looking closer, it seems there is much more than meets the eye. Through the use of rhetorical criticism methods, this research will examine the history and context of these companies, identify current literature related to multi-level marketing in online contexts, and analyze the online recruitment rhetoric of one of the largest multi-level marketing companies in the world, to bring to light the hidden persuasive forces that beckon new independent salespeople. Additionally, this research will examine the ethical considerations associated with this type of rhetoric and discuss the importance of continuing research on these types of communication.

Literature Review

Multi-level marketing companies (MLMs) have several different names including direct sales, network marketing, and business network sales (Marie, 2018a). While they go by several names, there are

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a few identifying factors that categorize MLMs specifically. First, MLMs are a type of organization that falls within the larger group of direct sales organizations (DSOs). While DSOs are interchanged with MLMs frequently, they represent a larger pool of businesses. DSOs have historically been face-to-face salespeople, selling products outside a fixed business location, like door-to-door salespeople or telemarketers. MLMs, on the other hand, are a specific type of DSO that also incorporates recruitment into their business structure (Biggart, 1989). Companies such as Amway, Tupperware, Mary Kay, and LuLaRoe, for example, not only use this structure to sell a variety of goods outside of a brick-and-mortar store, but also recruit a global workforce. In this business model, salespeople in MLMs get a commission from selling products or services they purchase at wholesale and can also increase their profit margins by recruiting others into purchasing bulk orders at a better rate, receiving royalties from the sales of those in their "downline," or people they recruit, and getting commissions for recruiting people who are effective recruiters themselves (Biggart, 1989).

Recruitment, therefore, plays a huge role in MLMs and looks vastly different from recruiting strategies of typical business firms. While traditional firms seek experienced candidates to bring in outside talent and expertise, as well as increase retention rates, MLMs are less concerned with candidates' previous work background and qualifications. Instead, these organizations largely recruit people with little to no experience in selling (Biggart, 1989). Instead of searching for demonstrated skill or talent, recruiters typically look within their social circles, looking for people who will see the recruitment process as building relationships (Marie, 2018a). Recruiters frame joining MLMs as an opportunity to do more than make money, but more importantly develop relationships through mentorship and find a fulfilling purpose in life (Marie, 2018b).

Many MLMs are also tied closely to religion and use these appeals to further captivate their workforce. Organizations like Thirty-One Gifts and Young Living Essential Oils have strong connections to Christianity with their mission, vision, and values (Thirty-One Gifts, n.d.; Young Living Essential Oils, n.d.). Even MLMs that have looser ties to religion still tap into its ideologies with mantras such as Mary Kay's "God first, family second, career third" (Ash & Pendelton, 2008 p. 128). People selling for MLMs report having reaffirmed their faith through participating in MLMs and find that participation is not solely about money, but the way that they can serve God and their community through the organization (Luca, 2011).

These emotional, relational, and sometimes spiritual appeals are especially persuasive toward women. With 75% of women making up direct sellers in the United States (Direct Selling Association, 2018), it is clear that this type of organization is attractive to women in particular. Since the beginning of direct selling and MLMs, women have been the primary focus both as customers and salespeople. Once men came back to their factory jobs after World War II, women were seeking acceptable ways to find empowerment (Biggart, 1989). MLMs ended up not only being a lucrative opportunity but the only opportunity for women to work and still maintain duties at home. With MLMs, women were able to gain autonomy and flexibility and also receive social rewards through their participation. Women could receive mentorship from other women, coordinate fun social events, and climb ranks through MLMs, blending the line between public life and home life into a rewarding and fulfilling experience for many. Not unintentionally, it also allowed MLMs to tap into a women-powered workforce that would accept lower pay and have fertile social networks that would yield substantial sales (Marie, 2018b).

Those who have studied MLMs in detail, however, are wary of this organizational structure because of two of its foundational principles: endless chain and prosperity thinking. The endless chain refers to the idea that there is an unlimited supply of people to recruit. With recruits having to incur risk by literally buying into the MLM system with kits, training, etc. it is assumed that they will eventually make their money back and earn substantial profits by recruiting others. However, it is mathematically false that there will always be a pool of people to recruit; eventually, someone is going to be at the end of the chain who has to foot the bill. This is precisely the reason that MLMs are sometimes regarded as pyramid schemes. Following the same principle, pyramid and Ponzi schemes draw recruits in by insisting that there will always be people to recruit when this is not the case, causing the people on the top of the pyramid to reap huge rewards while those on the bottom encounter the financial strain (Koehn, 2001). With prosperity thinking, people are persuaded by the idea that if they work hard enough and are moral, the economic system will enable them to prosper (Haller, 2012). While it sounds good and well-intentioned, this type of thinking is credited for what ultimately caused such failures as the 2008 housing crisis (Marie, 2018a). There is no guarantee that solely from working hard and being a good person, you are guaranteed wealth, but it is this mindset that is ingrained and promoted throughout MLMs as a whole (Koehn, 2001). The connection between MLMs and pyramid schemes is further strengthened by the rate at which sellers lose money. According to a 2011 Consumer Awareness Institute study, a staggering 99.6% of MLM sellers have lost money through direct selling (Taylor). Additionally, 95% of direct sellers quit within the first 10 years (Taylor, 2011), demonstrating the dissonance between the promises of prosperity thinking and the reality of finding success within these businesses.

Despite aspects that are found to be questionable through the lens of research, MLMs and direct sales are a large part of the American economy. There are a reported 6.2 million direct sellers in the United States as of 2018, accounting for $35.4 billion in retail sales (Direct Selling Association, 2018). While there are benefits outside of financial gains for those associated with MLMs, the organizational structure heavily financially favors those who recruit, forming a hierarchical structure.

To better understand this phenomenon, this research will focus on one of the leading MLMs that also primarily focuses on women: Mary Kay Inc. This organization, like other MLMs, is driven largely through recruitment and relationships between women. For more than five decades, Beauty Consultants and Sales Directors, the lifeblood of Mary Kay Inc.'s independent salesforce, operate retail businesses in nearly 40 markets worldwide (Mary Kay Inc., n.d.a). Founded in 1963 by Mary Kay Ash, a former network salesperson herself, Mary Kay Inc. is an organization that does more than sell skincare products, but also offers “unlimited opportunities to women” first and foremost. (Ash & Pendleton, 2008, p. xxiv). By using self-instructional material from newsletters, magazines, manuals, classroom study, and firsthand experience guided by trusted mentors, new Beauty Consultants are indoctrinated with Mary Kay culture and ideology (Ash & Pendleton, 2008). Now, materials have also moved online to digital portals where Beauty Consultants and Sales Directors can access and manage sales data, goal tracking, recognition, tutorials, news, and more from www.marykay.com (Ash & Pendleton, 2008).

The company website is also where prospective recruits can get more information about joining the Mary Kay independent sales force. By clicking “Sell Mary Kay” at the top banner of the website, users are welcomed with information about becoming a Beauty Consultant and are prompted to connect with a local Sales Director or Beauty Consultant. The page also links out to a campaign entitled One Women Can ®, a campaign that has been in place in some form as early as 2013 with the “One Woman Can” Makeover Contest, part of Mary Kay's 50th-anniversary celebration (Mary Kay Inc., 2013). This campaign features seven videos of current Mary Kay consultants telling personal stories about their experiences with the company.

While scholars have examined multi-level marketing companies and online persuasion in communication scholarship, there is a great opportunity to learn more about these companies and their newer recruitment strategies through the lens of rhetorical criticism. The following sections will examine the current academic landscape related to these topics and address areas in which MLMs and their rhetorical strategies might be examined further.

Multi-Level Marketing in Research

Several studies have been conducted on multi-level marketing companies, or similarly structured, alternatively named companies. What we see with this collection of studies are the ways that MLMs frame their organization towards their independent salesforce. Many of these studies analyze the way that companies and salespeople co-construct identities, including how companies construct legitimacy, by highlighting entrepreneurism to attract recruits (Carl, 2004). When a salesperson’s personal beliefs of need for autonomy, flexibility achievement, and success match with the discourse of the organization, the salesperson tends to identify closely with the organization and brand, and are thus more tied to the organization (Carl, 2004). Organizations and salespeople also co-construct dreams centered around personal goals related to family, altruism, etc. (Pratt, 2000). By presenting themselves as a more enlightened and accommodating way to do business, MLMs distance themselves from traditional business models and focus their organizational structure around the success of the individual rather than the company (Pratt, 2000). Scholars have continued to explore how this business structure can ultimately turn the salesperson into the primary commodity of the company (Kong, 2001). It appears through these studies that not only do MLMs distance themselves from hierarchical business practices by feeding on the dissatisfaction of bureaucracy, they also can position themselves as altruistic and power-free (Kong, 2001). While prioritizing individual autonomy makes these organizations seem altruistic, they serve the ends of the organization (Kong, 2001). Salespeople are not owners of their own business like they might feel; they are similarly serving the ends of their MLM like any other retail company (Kong, 2001). This leads to questions about the ethical nature of MLMs, as their organizational structure directly opposes the perceived benefits of direct sellers, prioritizing the company over individuals.

As discussed previously, data demonstrates that MLMs are heavily gendered, being largely made of and for women. MLMs, and particularly women-centric MLMs like Mary Kay, seem to be a haven for entrepreneurial-minded women who are seeking to overcome obstacles. By finding a network inside of MLMs, it appears that these women are provided with the empowerment that they seek. Through pamphlets, conferences, and other media, Mary Kay not only encourages the relational and entrepreneurial aspects of MLMs, but also embeds conflicting ideals of femininity and feminism (Banks & Zimmerman, 1987). Mary Kay includes messaging that reinforces the stereotype of the female realm being in the home but also co-opts liberal feminist ideals of upward mobility (Banks & Zimmerman, 1987). It appears that this intermingle of traditionally conflicting ideologies creates a site where women are limitless with their entrepreneurial ambitions but can do so with the flexibility that enables them to care for their families and home. With white women entrepreneurs, in particular, the paradox of constraints and achievements is what ultimately creates a sense of empowerment (Gill & Ganesh, 2007). Finding the much-needed support, autonomy, and flexibility in a patriarchal landscape is a great obstacle for women seeking fulfillment (Gill & Gensesh, 2007).

Other researchers have examined the way hyper-femininity and luxury are promoted in Mary Kay culture through makeup, furs, diamonds, and the iconic pink Cadillac, solidifying the concept of the "ideal woman" as a mask when analyzing May Kay through cultural and performative lenses. By creating an "aesthetic of excess," the MLM can deconstruct and destabilize the patriarchal ideal woman, making it clear that this ideal is nothing more than a facade. Therefore, making gender central to the concept of Mary Kay, with this frame, is not co-opting liberal feminist ideals, but rather turns feminism on its head (Waggoner, 1997).

Internet Persuasion Research

Already there have been foundational research on the importance of the internet in businesses and analysis of the recruiting efforts of traditional businesses. Findings through analyzing the online recruitment tactics of Fortune 500 companies lay out an interesting framework of how these organizations create "movements of persuasion" through three levels of content (Young & Foot, 2005). Multimedia additions in particular, such as employee testimonials, have been found to create more credibility and attraction among internet users (Walker et al, 2009). In the context of retail sales, scholars find that audio/visual content performs better among browsers as opposed to text and images on these sorts of persuasive web pages (Appiah, 2006).

Based on available scholarship related to the matter, researchers undoubtedly find it important to study online contexts. While much rhetorical criticism is focused on works that have audiences interacting linearly and predictably, websites are more challenging. Two opposing forces, centrifugal and centripetal, cause the website viewer to go through the information hierarchically, from start to finish, and a dispersive way, moving along the page out of order (Warnick, 2005). These forces, while making it challenging for rhetorical critics, also pose an opportunity for new and inventive insight into the field according to scholars

(Warnick, 2005). Likewise, academics have identified websites as gateways through which organizations commonly interact and make impressions on their audience. One such study concludes:

> Websites are on-stage work areas where a performance is given to an actual or implied audience of potential customers, employees, suppliers, partners, and regulators . . . they provide frames of symbolic representations that inform and lure these potential stakeholders in to take a closer look. (Winter et al., 2003, p. 311)

Understanding online texts in this way, therefore, appears to open the door to analyzing websites through a rhetorical lens; they seem to have the same components such as audience, symbolic representation, and persuasion tactics that are frequently the focus for other rhetorical works such as presidential addresses.

Justification for Current Research

While the above scholarship helps us understand key components of MLMs, gender, recruitment strategies, and online persuasion, we must be aware of the limitations of these works and what new scholarship might do to address these gaps. All of the articles that address MLMs and business practices of firms are well over ten years old, (Carl, 2004; Kong, 2001; Pratt, 2000; Gill & Ganesh, 2007), some are even over 20 years (Waggoner, 1997) or 30 years old (Banks & Zimmerman, 1987). Even articles covering the internet and persuasion, though covering modern topics, are dated over ten years ago (Yong & Foot, 2005; Walker et al, 2009; Appiah, 2006; Warnick, 2005; Winter et al., 2005). With the speed of technological advances and the evolution of the internet and social media use in society, it is important to consistently address this type of work as rhetorical persuasion strategies and tactics in this sphere are constantly changing and adapting. Understanding how more advanced technology, situated in this time and place, will enable scholars to track these changes to better understand what the future of online persuasion (and other technologically mediated persuasions) might look like, and how it will impact audiences.

Likewise, although there are studies that encapsulate a variety of aspects related to MLMs including identity construction (Carl, 2004; Pratt, 2000), framing tactics (Kong, 2001), and gender roles (Banks & Zimmerman, 1987; Waggoner, 1997), they do not address recruitment strategies of women specifically. Scholarship on recruitment is more heavily discussed through the lens of the traditional firm (Young & Foot, 2005; Walker et al, 2009; Gill & Gensesh, 2007), and with the structure of MLMs being vastly different, it is unclear how well these works carry over. Therefore, there is a clear path in which scholarship can go to address these gaps; examining MLMs through their online recruitment contexts via rhetorical criticism has the potential to lead into an interesting and underrepresented field of vision.

Method

In this research study, we will explore Mary Kay's MLM by examining how its recruitment websites operate as constitutive rhetoric. Considered as a method of rhetorical criticism, such investigation is a way of analyzing how audiences are "hailed" and ultimately co-create the persuasive discourse that is targeted toward them, contributing to a larger narrative rooted in a perceived historical context that is co-constructed by the rhetor and intended audience. The following section will briefly cover the foundational literature and concepts of the constitutive method, provide examples of how this method has been successful in gaining insight into other research, argue how the method fits with rhetorical criticism generally, and within the specific context of Mary Kay's online recruitment rhetoric, and define steps for analysis.

Maurice Charland (1987) develops the constitutive rhetoric method from Kenneth Burke's (1969) idea that identification can serve as an alternative to persuasion as a subject of rhetorical inquiry. Charland (1987) demonstrates how rhetoric can create the means possible to create a new target audience, calling forth a group of receptive participants by way of interpellation. Through interpellation, an audience member recognizes herself as being addressed in the rhetoric and actively participates in the discourse, adopting what Edwin Black (1970) terms the "second persona." Rhetorical critics have utilized Charland's constitutive rhetoric to analyze a variety of texts and audiences. Along with the original study on "peuple Québécois," researchers have adopted the method in other political and historical contexts, including the analysis of Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (Leff & Utley, 2004), women senator's legislative rhetoric (McGowan-Kirsch, 2019), and the Canadian suffragette movement (Thieme, 2010). It has also been used in the corporate sphere to explore marketing strategy (Stein, 2002) and corporate stewardship (Hanan, 2013; Smith, 2000). Constitutive rhetoric, furthermore, has been used by researchers to analyze rhetoric online through media such as Twitter (Woo et al., 2020) and blogs (Perks, 2015).

Researchers, like the ones listed above, find the constitutive rhetoric method particularly useful because of its ability to engage with texts in a way that highlights its ability to create new identities that have seemed to have always existed and construct narratives with these identities, creating depth of context to justify future actions. While some academics believe that rhetoric is called into being by the situation (Bitzer, 1968), this method is fueled by the constructive power of rhetoric and identifies not only how the rhetor is creating and defining audiences, but how the audience, also, in turn, engages and constructs their new identity. It is a useful way for researchers to engage with a text without missing the crucial involvement of evolving discourse; they can get a glimpse of the here and now of a rhetorical moment by examining the context of what it took to get to this rhetorical moment, and predict what it might mean for the future. Constitutive rhetoric can additionally serve in an advocacy context for research as well, shedding light on how rhetors persuade or manipulate audiences to take a certain action. Understanding the ideological tricks that these rhetors use can illuminate power imbalances and spark discussions on the ethical nature of such rhetorical means (Charland, 1987).

This method, therefore, is particularly useful within the context of MLMs and Mary Kay's recruitment, as we can take what we understand to be the constructed context of the moment, and apply it to how MLM corporations can persuasively define their target audience of recruits. By looking deeper into these subtle and pervasive forces, we can unearth clues within the text to determine how corporations are using these structures to have their audiences persuade themselves into joining their cause. While we might only be getting a glimpse into what is happening in this specific time and place, a better understanding of the construction of identities that MLMs help create is important in understanding the powerful hold that these groups have on our society and help us wrestle with the question of whether this control is within society's best interests.

Drawn from the work of Charland, and those who have built upon his work, the following sequenced series of questions, will act as a guide for textual analysis:

a. Who appears to be gathered as the target audience for this text?
b. How is the audience being invited to see themselves? What "second persona" are they meant to adopt?
c. Which ideologies/structures inform the audience to identify this way? How do these ideologies/structures make themselves present in the text?
d. What paradoxes are revealed with how the text invites the audience and assumes it already exists?
e. How is the audience called to act? How does this perpetuate the continuation of the identity?

As a final piece to the analysis, there must also be a discussion about the ethical nature of the rhetoric. As Charland (1987) notes, because of the cyclic nature of constitutive rhetoric, with text both being informed by past context and future action, critics must consider how previous and current texts might reach beyond the realm of an audience's free choice. Therefore, as a final consideration in the analysis, we must engage with the ethical nature of the text; to what extent does the audience self-select themselves to participate in this identity?

With this particular artifact, analyzing textual clues will determine the ideal target audience for Mary Kay's online recruitment strategy. Pulling examples from the two primary recruitment web pages and seven embedded videos will then construct a full picture of how the audience is invited to see themselves and tie it to key ideologies that make themselves present. Next, the study will address the paradoxes related to how the text creates this "second persona" and how it assumes its prior existence before examining how the audience is called by the corporation to act to propel this identity. Finally, the research will conclude with a discussion about the ethicality of this constitutive rhetoric.

Analysis

This analysis will address the series of five sequenced questions posed in the previous section by reviewing key quotes and observations from the text. By taking this course of action, it will be revealed how Mary Kay Inc. is constituting a rhetorical audience and creating a means for the audience to act on their identity.

Who Appears to be Gathered as the Target Audience for this Text?

By looking for textual clues on Mary Kay's landing page, "Sell Mary Kay," we can begin to develop a profile for the ideal audience member for Mary Kay Inc.'s online recruitment. While virtual visitors are greeted with information regarding the Independent Beauty Consultant program through this page, the last heading states the target audience most clearly; Mary Kay was "Started by a Woman, for Women" (Mary Kary Inc., n.d.b, para 7). Mary Kay specifically names women as being the key demographic for its target audience and continues to describe the ideal audience member throughout the rest of the page in a more subtle way. The company exclaims, "You've got dreams. Whether it's earning a little extra cash or making a full-time commitment, the Mary Kay opportunity offers the freedom, flexibility, and, of course, the fun that you've been looking for" (Mary Kay Inc, n.d.b, para 4). Through this quote, we can better understand more about the type of women that Mary Kay Inc. is after, someone who is goal-orientated but needs or desires some kind of support that they are unable to find elsewhere. Mary Kay is looking for women that have a void that needs to be filled (whether that void is constructed by herself or revealed by Mary Kay), whether it be the need for financial freedom, a flexible schedule, or a reason to get out of the house and socialize.

Even more subtly, Mary Kay Inc. describes its target audience by having virtual visitors form identifying links between themselves and the current Independent Sales Force. The company sparks this identification of their online audience through the text, "[t]he prizes and perks are fabulous, and nothing beats the encouragement and empowerment you receive from other women like you" (Mary Kay Inc., n.d.b, para 4). By using the phrase "women like you," the audience is called to draw comparisons between their identity and the identity of the Beauty Consultant that is portrayed on the website. On this page specifically, this is done primarily through imagery; photos of happy women grace the audience's screens. Women are smiling, are wearing confidence-boosting makeup (primarily brightly colored lipstick), and are embracing friends and family. Mary Kay's target audience therefore can be summed up as people who see themselves as confident and capable women with busy lives, looking for an opportunity to reach a new dream, or women who aspire to see themselves in this way.

How is the Audience Being Invited to See Themselves?

While the target audience likely already identifies herself as a woman outside of the context of this webpage, other aspects of the ideal Mary Kay consultant are constituted within this artifact to create a "second persona" (Black, 1970) that virtual visitors can easily slip into and adopt as easily as a pink Sales Director jacket. On the landing page, virtual visitors are greeted with a flashy name for this persona with the bold, headline text "Be a Boss Babe!" (Mary Kay Inc., n.d.b, para 1). This title, in conjunction with the imagery, enables the target audience to better understand what a "Boss Babe" is. Juxtaposed with the smiling, beautiful women that are in the arms of their loved ones, there is also imagery related to luxury including the esteemed pink Cadillac, designer handbags, and golden office decor. Women are invited to examine what their life could look like with Mary Kay, filled with family, friends, luxury, and happiness all at once, painting a picture that a Mary Kay "Boss Babe" has it all.

These images are further reinforced through active-verb statements that call the reader to further visualize herself as a Mary Kay "Boss Babe." Mary Kay encourages visitors to their website to "[p]ut yourself in the driver's seat with an opportunity to earn the use of a Mary Kay Career Car, one of the best-in-class car incentive programs in the world" (Mary Kay Inc., n.d.b, para 4). By "putting themselves in the driver's seat" Mary Kay is asking its audience to adopt this second persona of a "Boss Babe" by imagining themselves owning and using the luxury powder pink cars that elegantly wheel through the browser window and appear to be the cause of the women's elated expressions. Having the audience think through this scenario helps them embody this persona and enables them to adopt the identity and emotions tied to being a Mary Kay "Boss Babe."

Women are encouraged to learn more about this second persona by clicking through to the "Real Voices" page that is linked to the landing page by the phrase "One Woman Can Pursue Her Dreams." On this secondary page, the audience encounters seven testimonial videos[1] highlighting the experiences of women that serve as Mary Kay's "Boss Babe" role models. At the top of the page, browsers are welcomed with the text:

> One Woman Can … make an impact, change lives, drive her dreams, give others hope, take that dream vacation. Thousands of women have discovered what their Mary Kay businesses can do to design the lives they want. These women share their personal stories to inspire you to have your own "can-do" success. (Mary Kay Inc., n.d.c, para 1)

With this text, women get a fuller, more elaborate description of what a Mary Kay "Boss Babe" means for the audience personally. When the audience adopts this persona, as thousands of women have done before, she has the opportunity to not only make her life change for the better, but to improve the lives of others. Seemingly selfish, life-changing aspects of living a more luxurious life by going on lavish vacations and driving fancy cars are intertwined by higher ideals like improving the community and taking care of her family to enforce the idea that a "Boss Babe" does not have to choose one or the other, but can do both. They are not limited solely to being presented with the vision of life that is expected through traditional gender norms but instead are invited to construct their reality with the help of Mary Kay, consequentially gaining freedom and autonomy while also maintaining a family.

Which Ideologies/Structures Inform the Audience to Identify this Way?

The "Real Voices" page is also rich with clues about the ideologies and structures that inform the target audience constituted identity of "Boss Babe." The videos and text on these webpages are littered with examples of how entrepreneurialism, patriarchy, and spirituality play major roles in enabling the target audience to identify with this "Boss Babe" persona and tap into persuasive emotional appeals.

Entrepreneurialism

Entrepreneurialism plays a significant role in how the "Boss Babe" role models describe their success with Mary Kay. In Video 3, the narrator discusses her experience becoming a top sales director:

> I woke up one day and I thought I might be able to do this. And that's when I decided to treat my business like a business instead of just something fun I could do to make $100…The beautiful thing about Mary Kay is that you don't always have to go hard. You can work your business any way that you want. I really needed to spend 12 months in the full Mary Kay year like I know how to work and not just pick and choose the months that I was going to work. And that's when I really saw my business explode. (Video 3, 1:05-1:40)

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[1] With the way that the "Real Voices" web page was laid out and videos embedded, there was no clear or pre-existing scheme to label or reference these videos with in-text citations. To distinguish and cite quotes from these videos, the author labeled the videos Video 1-7, starting from the upper left video and moving to the right and downward. The following sections will cite video quotations in format (Video X, timestamp of the quote), i.e. (Video 3, 1:05-1:40).

With this excerpt, we can see how entrepreneurialism is idealized by enabling the narrator to become financially successful through putting on the "Boss Babe" persona and dedicating her time and energy to Mary Kay. The more time and effort she puts into the business, the more rewards she can reap, gaming the free enterprise system. Hard work is correlated with earnings; while you don't *have* to put in the full-time hours as she does, she attributes making a larger profit to working more hours and dedicating her time and energy to selling Mary Kay. Where a salaried position a person gets paid the same no matter the energy or effort, Mary Kay "Boss Babes" use their entrepreneurial drive to make as much money as they are willing to go for within the capitalist system. She continues later saying, "I knew in Mary Kay that the harder I worked, the faster I would grow and live the life that I was looking to live" (Video 3, 1:52-1:57). Entrepreneurialism here gives her the ability and opportunity to pursue her dreams and become her ideal self by giving her flexibility and autonomy in her career. She is directly responsible for her success; no one is limiting the amount of effort she puts in beside herself.

Entrepreneurialism also helps inform the target audience when narrators draw direct comparisons to corporate America. The Narrator in Video 4 describes her experiences moving between Mary Kay and corporate America:

> An opportunity came around where I was given a position at a gas marketing firm. And I thought you know what, I'm going to take time and step away from Mary Kay. Here I was in corporate America with an amazing opportunity, but then I found after the honeymoon stage, people were just unhappy. And I was coming from Mary Kay and happy all the time…You know, when we see a lot of women that are stuck in a nine to five, they're stuck in that same old, same. And I share with them about the Mary Kay opportunity and how it can help to build their confidence. (Video 4, 0:30-2:40)

Here, the entrepreneurial system of Mary Kay is classified as fostering happiness and freedom as compared to a stifling corporate America where workers are unhappy with their restrictions. She characterizes the entrepreneurial aspects of Mary Kay as confidence-boosting, further reinforcing the fact that this type of business is more about developing people rather than the company's bottom line, and the people that work for Mary Kay are better off because of that.

Smashing the Patriarchy

Smashing the patriarchy is another distinguishing ideology that makes itself present in the testimonials of the current Mary May "Boss Babes." The narrator in Video 2 discusses one of the major effects that the patriarchy has on women and the way that Mary Kay addresses it:

> I had always wanted to be in the dental field and I thought it was a career of a lifetime being a dental hygienist but Mary Kay came into my life. You know as a hygienist there wasn't a lot of room for growth. It felt like all the time when I was there, I was building the doctor's goals and dreams, when I really could be building my own…I made that transition and quit dental hygiene and never looked back. I ended up using my first use of a pink Cadillac months later. (Video 2, 0:03-0:45)

Here, patriarchal forces are present in the account of the narrator not being able to break through the glass ceiling and move up in her career. Mary Kay in this scenario was able to allow her to break past the ceiling and become successful as a "Boss Babe." This classic patriarchal limitation is familiar to many working women and is instantly recognizable within the narrator's story. Mary Kay, therefore, can use this patriarchal shorthand to demonstrate how the company can help its audience overcome this obstacle.

Smashing the patriarchy is also prevalent in how some narrators address the roles of their spouses within their business. The narrator in Video 1 details her situation with this account:

> As I was growing my business, I had some challenges that we, as Latin women, know exist and experience in our homes. I was expecting to get a lot of support from my spouse, but sometimes because they love us, they don't want to see us struggle. In some ways that was one of my biggest challenges. When I was becoming more determined and successful in this business, I became a little discouraged since I wanted my significant

> other to support my growth in this business…Mary Kay's Top Sales Director trip has been a great miracle in my life because my husband turned the TV on at the hotel, my name was on the screen. It was such a wonderful thing! He yelled, "Hey! Come see your name on the screen!" He was so delighted. He never imagined that the woman by his side was one of the top Latinas on this trip, in the whole country. (Video 1, 0:19- 1:50)

Here, instead of the patriarchal forces enacting themselves in the workplace, we are shown how they also take place in the home. Again, these forces are familiar to women and this story shows that not only is Mary Kay able to address issues of patriarchy in the workplace but also helps with the hierarchical structures in the household. Women can earn a substantial living and earn the buy-in from their husbands. What is interesting with this idea, however, is how, despite the patriarchy being addressed in a way that seems to overcome the hierarchical system at home, this video, and others that accompany it, nonetheless reinforce the idea that women are and should be the ones that care for their families. While mothers can now help provide for their families, they nonetheless should also be the ones to make sure that they are cared for at home. The narrator in Video 7, for example, states:

> Before Mary Kay, I commuted 100 miles a day, worked 60 hours a week. My oldest at the time was going to go into kindergarten and I didn't know how I would be able to drop her off, work, and pick her up. I didn't know how people did that. (0:22-0:37)

While it doesn't seem an issue for the narrator of this video to work outside the home, there is the underlying expectation that she must also care for her children by way of being able to drop them off and pick them up from various places. To her, it seems like there is an expectation to do this herself and not seek help from a spouse, family member, or friend. Mary Kay, in this sense, helps her maintain the patriarchal status quo at home by giving her the flexible hours required to do the gendered tasks of childcare but does not relieve her of her childcare duties in any sense.

Spiritualism

Lastly, spiritualism plays an ideological role in developing the emotions that the target audience has toward Mary Kay. The organization, through its video testimonials as well as word choices, positions itself as a guiding and communal institution, much like a church. The narrator in Video 4 describes her spiritual experience with Mary Kay after she experienced a miscarriage:

> It became so difficult. Corporate America put a timeframe on my grieving, you know, and not allowing that time to grieve and to experience that situation, where Mary Kay was just a full-on embrace. Every day we have food at our door…a lot of my sisters would just call and say, we were thinking about you…I thought I need to get back to my pink bubble. (Video 4, 1:15-1:52)

Here, Mary Kay evokes spirituality by serving as a revenant community of sympathizers. The sisterhood of Mary Kay, like a sisterhood within a church, is providing comforts of food and positive thoughts and prayers for the narrator. She describes this community as a "pink bubble" additionally evoking feelings of warmth and protection like one might experience in a church community.

Word choices throughout the webpages more clearly make connections between Mary Kay and spirituality. Mary Kay, for example, is described as a "values-based company" that has "purpose and staying power" (Mary Kay Inc., n.d.b, para 7). Putting values and purpose above profits positions Mary Kay closer to a charitable organization rather than a company. Testimonials even include words and phrases such as "miracle" and "saving my life" and "life-changing" when discussing the impact of Mary Kay (Video 1). Not only is the company providing a source of income, but it is further becoming equated to religion in the sense that it is changing the hearts and minds of its people.

What Paradoxes are Revealed with How the Text Invites the Audience and Assumes it Already Exists?

Interestingly, the sections that help identify the target audience for Mary Kay's online recruitment initiative also reveal the paradox that exists between how the corporation invites the creation of the audience and assumes that the audience already exists. The primary example is when Mary Kay points out, "the prizes and perks are fabulous, and nothing beats the encouragement and empowerment you receive from other women like you" (Mary Kay Inc., n.d.b, para 4). With this quote, there is an assumption that because "women like you" are helping to encourage and empower you to become a Mary Kay woman and you, because you are a Mary Kay woman, would also seek to encourage and empower others. Therefore, there is a paradoxical tension between needing encouragement and empowerment from others and already being a source of encouragement and empowerment. The corporation already assumes that the audience member has that ability within her while she is interacting with the text. Additionally, this paradox is evident in the text through the quote: "You've got dreams. Whether it's earning a little extra cash or making a full-time commitment, the Mary Kay opportunity offers the freedom, flexibility, and, of course, the fun that you've been looking for" (Mary Kay Inc., n.d.c, para 4).

Not only does Mary Kay enable people to pursue their dreams, but this framing demonstrates how the company can become their dream. Mary Kay not only provides access to enable you the time and flexibility to seek to fulfill one's ambitions, but it also fills the emptiness that freedom and flexibility can provide. Mary Kay is essentially serving up a dream to their audience on a silver platter, maybe a dream that they never knew they had. These two quotes engage the virtual visitor by letting them know that they are already the person that they wish to be, whether or not they know it yet.

How is the Audience Called to Act?

The constituted audience in this scenario is called to act through the provided text in a way where the audience is naturally cognizant of what to do. The primary call to action is linked on both the landing page and the "Real Voices" page when they are prompted to "Get Started" or "Start Your Journey." When virtual visitors click this link, they find the "Mary Kay Beauty Consultants Location: Find Mary Kay Cosmetics and Consultants Near You" page, an online tool that connects interested viewers to Beauty Consultants that are geographically nearby. On this page, viewers are instructed to

> Connect with a current Independent Beauty Consultant who can introduce you to the Mary Kay Opportunity and help you submit an Independent Beauty Consultant Agreement to the Company! Mary Kay® products can only be purchased by the Company and sold through our direct sales business model by Independent Beauty Consultants. Find a Beauty Consultant to help you start your own Mary Kay business today! (Mary Kay Inc., n.d.d, para 1)

These instructions provide clear, low-barrier first steps for their target audience to adopt their new second persona in the real world by networking with a local Mary Kay representative. Simply by contacting a consultant in the real world, the audience is actively becoming one with the second persona and continuing the spread of the company ideology by then serving as a point of contact for others in the future. This call to action seems natural and fluid within the constituted rhetoric; this is the obvious action that "Boss Babes" would have thought to do themselves, and by embedding the contact form on the website, Mary Kay Inc. has eliminated any obstacles to taking action.

Discussion & Contributions

Taking into consideration the five questions in the analysis of Mary Kay Inc.'s recruitment webpages and the One Woman Can ® campaign, there is still the question of why this analysis is important.

The following sections will dig into questions dealing with the "so what" of this research, examining specifically the ethical nature of this context.

By engaging the text with Charland's (1987) constitutive rhetoric as a methodological lens, it is important to discuss the ethical nature of the situation in which MLMs are taking advantage of the target audience's positions and constraints to first identify with the second persona, and then embody the identity and act in a prescribed way. Within this method, subjects of the rhetoric are not perceived as totally free because they bring with them previous experiences, conceptions, limitations, etc. that are rooted in ideologies, societal expectations, and norms outside of their control.

With the example in this essay, these positions and constraints are rooted in the audience's identity as women; they are constrained by the specific way society defines and expects a woman to think and behave, ranging from constraints and expectations related to being a mother, wife, feminist, women in business, etc. Therefore, there is no situation in which the target audience is unburdened by this previous experience and conceptions of what it means to be a woman; instead of having the agency to create a complete, unique identity for themselves, they are subjected to the constraints that society has pushed. Mary Kay Inc., in turn, takes these popularized notions of what it means to be a woman and uses them in their online recruitment web pages and campaign.

While there is variety in the way a woman can be, i.e. mother, sister, friend, business owner, she is nonetheless constrained with specific options and manufactured obstacles. While there is a feeling of free choice when engaging with the text, these constraints position the organization's laid-out options as one of the better choices given the set of circumstances that the target audience inherits by way of identifying as a woman.

In this sense, we can make the argument that Mary Kay Inc. is engaging in manipulation because they are seemingly aware of these constraints and are using them to persuade their audience to join their cause, resulting in the company making more money. For the perfect audience member, there is only an illusion that she is choosing to become part of Mary Kay's independent sales force. However, with the way the rhetoric is constructed, this choice was never hers; she was going to be an independent salesperson all along. In this sense, the company is not acting ethically with its online recruiting because of its coercive nature. Therefore, by MLMs engaging in constitutive rhetoric strategies, there is no way that they could act fully ethically.

What lessens the ethical burden in this situation, however, are the positive experiences that independent beauty consultants receive from becoming a part of this organization. Although adding members to the independent salesforce does indeed contribute positively to the company's bottom line, as we see in the analysis, this relationship is largely mutually beneficial. While "Boss Babes" work to the economic advantage of the company, they are also receiving economic, social, and sometimes spiritual benefits themselves. "Boss Babes," when they engage fully with the Mary Kay Inc. experience, get the recognition, scheduling autonomy, economic freedom, mentorship, friendships, and a whirlwind of other positive benefits that might be worth succumbing to coercive methods. Looking at the positive benefits from a utilitarian perspective, Mary Kay Inc. comes out looking like a positive force in women's lives rather than an evil corporation. Despite questionable methods of persuasion, the company has made a noteworthy impact in the lives of its salesforce. Even if attributing this impact as "life-changing" or a "miracle" might seem hyperbolic, these words depict the real emotions that "Boss Babes" embody and attribute to their Mary Kay experience. Even if MLMs, in general, have questionable structures and premises, we must still acknowledge the real benefits that these organizations have on populations that have limited availability of experiences that give them fulfillment. By positioning themselves as one of the only options that women have to experience these feelings while "having it all," Mary Kay Inc. has both exploited and empowered women in the same stride. Therefore, MLM companies like Mary Kay Inc. cannot be deemed completely good or bad; truth in this situation, as well as in most situations, seems to lie somewhere in between.

Conclusion

While the heyday of the door-to-door salesmen might have come and gone, multi-level marketing companies have demonstrated their lasting footholds on national and global economies. Blurring the line between social and economic spheres, these companies have found pervasive and persuasive strategies to grow their independent sales forces and make millions of dollars year to year. Through this essay, we explored the context of these organizations and dug deeper into the strategies that one of the leading MLM corporations utilizes to spread its power and influence in the digital age. By analyzing Mary Kay's virtual constituted audience through target audience, second persona, ideologies, and paradox, we get a clearer picture of how MLMs create persuasive arguments and enable their audience to feel as if they have been a part of the movement all along.

Digging deeply into these types of corporate communications contexts is important to understand the power that "values-based" companies have over their publics. By looking past the bright pink, sparkly exterior we can better understand the effects that persuasive marketing content has over us, and become better aware of how we might be hailed into action by seemingly unassuming means. By continuing research such as this, we as a society, can become better consumers of media and better understand what is being asked of us as we consume content. By doing so, we will be able to take back some of the power from these large companies and be better situated to make our own decisions about our economic and social lives.

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Incel Mass Murderers: Masculinity, Narrative, and Identity

Kelly M. O'Donnell

Since 2009, at least 10 men have committed mass murder because they self-identified as incels (involuntary celibate) and the number of incel mass murderers continues to grow. The purpose of this article is to examine incel mass murderers and inceldom through their perceptions of their masculinity and identity as detailed in the narrative artifacts that six of them left behind. The narrative manifesto of Elliot Rodger, the most famous of the incel mass murderers, spread across the internet in 2014, when Rodger went on his killing spree. Other men in the incel community—of which Rodger was a member—canonized him and shared their own experiences with inceldom using Rodger's narrative as a blueprint to articulate their experiences with their masculinity and identity. In this work, I utilize textual analysis to demonstrate how the social construction of masculinity influences these mass murders. In this case study, I use these narratives to explicate how these men grapple with the idea that they have failed at masculinity and have scapegoated women in order to find redemption through the act of mass murder. My findings reveal that these narratives, especially those by Elliot Rodger, have real-world implications as these men did not just revere Rodger, but followed in his footsteps by committing mass murder.

Introduction

The term incel or involuntary celibate, emerged in online spaces known as the Manosphere, a "place" on the internet where men from all over the country and the world congregate in forums or comment on blogs where they trade in misogynistic rhetoric that varies in intensity (Manosphere glossary, n.d.). Much of the Manosphere is dedicated to painting women as evil while simultaneously teaching men how to sleep with them as objects to be had or won through the techniques of "game." The typical user on incel forums utilizes these spaces to vent their anger and frustration at what they deem is an unfair world that has left them without sex through no fault of their own. The Manosphere tends to be filled with young white heterosexual men, or men who identify as white, and the stench of privilege seeps through the screen as one reads their posts and comments. Incel communities direct their hate primarily toward women, but also toward men who are either "Chads," good looking men who are able to "get" lots of women, or at men they see as less deserving of sex than they are, yet are able to have sex, nonetheless.

On May 23, 2014, Elliot Rodger went on a killing spree that left six people dead and twelve others injured before he turned his gun on himself (Yan et al., 2014). Rodger left behind a 137-page manifesto/narrative of his entire life detailing every slight by every person he could remember—both men and women—from childhood to the day he died (Rodger, 2014). His narrative is organized chronologically as a chronotope "where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" and "ma[de] narrative events more concrete, ma[de] them take on flesh" and "provide[d] the ground essential for the showing forth, the representability of events" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 250). In other words, by showing the increasing futility of his pursuit to attain the things he needed to feel complete, i.e. a girlfriend, prestige, and "true" masculinity in the eyes of his father and other men, Rodger's narrative paints a picture for the reader that renders them a part of the narrative through their commensurability with him. Fluck (2013) agreed, stating that while reading does not allow the reader to interact with the author socially, the act of reading provides readers with "recognition" which she argued is "inextricably linked with questions of identity formation" (p. 46). There have been many other men who not only followed in Rodger's footsteps by committing mass murder because they were incels, but did so after paying some sort of homage to Rodger via the various artifacts that they left behind.

Narratives are a way of defining one's self and constructing the reality that one needs to feel that they are a recognized part of society (Taylor, 1994). Many incels found recognition in Elliot Rodger's narrative. Incel boards are filled with narratives of self-hate or hate for the status-quo, but none of the

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millions of posts on incel boards tapped into a narrative of recognition the way that Rodger was able to accomplish. Taylor (1994) argued that "the demand for recognition…is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity, where this latter term designates something like a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being" (p. 25). The very definition of an incel is imbedded in a lack of masculinity because to be masculine is, among other things, to have the ability to complete manhood acts (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) such as having a heterosexual relationship with a woman that culminates in sex. As indicated by discussions on incel boards these men feel that they are not a part of society because their problems are ignored or scorned. Rodger's (2014) narrative manifesto details the ways in which he was wronged throughout his life because he did not live up to what he perceived as society's definition of what a man "should" look like, be like, and act like, in other words, the ideal masculine male. In the sections that follow, I describe several of the men who found recognition in Rodger's narrative and also carried out mass murder. It is impossible to answer the question of why these men in particular committed mass murder as Rodger's manifesto is widely available on the internet, but we can presume that the allure of the logic behind the guilt-redemption cycle (Burke, 1941) played a part in these men's actions, as well as finding recognition in these acts (Taylor, 1994).

Sunstein's (2009) theory about group polarization suggests that men first identify with one another and communicate in an echo chamber which causes them to act in increasingly extreme ways. Group polarization cannot fully account for these acts of extreme violence, however. In this study, I examine the narratives, however short they may be, that these men left behind and how Rodger's (2014) narrative inspired them to follow in his footsteps. I utilize a range of concepts and theories to discuss how Rodger's narrative operated to recognize (Fluck, 2013; Horlacher, 2019; Somers, 1994; Taylor, 1994) these men, their masculinity or lack thereof, and the precariousness of masculinity (Allan, 2018; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Fleming & Davis, 2018; Kimmel, 2013; Mindy, 2006; Munsch & Gruys, 2018; Myketiak, 2016; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). The first section of this study explains incel culture, who Elliot Rodger is to the incel community, and the details of the five other mass murderers who were, I argue, directly inspired by Rodger's narrative. The second section is a review of literature. The narratives these men left behind range in length and depth, but all point to a connection to Rodger. Interspersed within the literature are excerpts from the narratives these men left behind to illustrate the generative aspects of his efforts which connect to his followers after his death.

In this essay, I examine how the need for recognition played a part in the mass murders perpetrated by the five incels who were inspired by Rodger's narrative. Throughout this study I address how the guilt-redemption cycle (Burke, 1941) was used as a tool to justify the actions of these men which was articulated by Rodger's (2014) reasoning in his manifesto. I utilize a close textual analysis of Elliot Rodger's (2014) 137-page narrative manifesto and the videos he left behind in addition to the artifacts left behind by the other five incels: Chris Harper-Mercer in 2015, William Edward Atchison in 2017, Nikolas Cruz in 2018, Alek Minassian in 2018, and Scott Beierle in 2018. I then pulled together the commonalities I found between Rodger's artifacts and those left behind by the other mass murderers I examined. I did not examine every incel mass murderer to date as their numbers have grown at an alarming rate but chose these five for their close ties to Rodger's beliefs and their direct link to his narrative as will be shown below.

Incels, Incel Mass Murderers, and Elliot Rodger

Incels are typically young white heterosexual men (Weill, 2019). They are not a homogenous group, although heterosexuality and virginity are the two threads of identification that holds them together. Anger and hate are prevalent on incel forum posts, and posts are often misogynistic, racist, or churlish and seem to be an outlet for their overdetermined affective energies rather than a place to find a solution to their perceived lack. While these online spaces sometimes espouse racist views, racism is not a core tenet of inceldom therefore, I do not address the racism explicitly, except in the case of Chris Harper-Mercer who was part Black as well as racist, a point that is explored below. Reddit has banned several incel boards (Bell, 2017) in an attempt to slow the radicalization and advocacy of violence that have been attributed to these boards. To view the boards that are still active, Reddit gives users a warning about the offensive content before allowing users to view the content. On Braincels, one of the few incel boards left on Reddit, a user posted a meme that stated, “interesting detail about the uterus—makes sense” as the caption to a scientific image of the uterus next to the Satanic ram’s head, which have a similar shape, suggesting that women are evil (OpenSVideoEditor, 2019). Posts like this are common, most are far more graphic in their textual and/or visual content. Though this post seems benign on the surface, it scapegoats women and other posts go further, advocating for a society where sex is a right, a sentiment advocated in Rodger’s manifesto (2014).

Incels congregate in online forums to assure themselves that they are not at fault for being virgins. “Virgin status among men is generally looked down upon by both the virgins themselves and other men, socially disempowering them” (Fleming & Davis, 2018). Rodger’s narrative is a story of disempowerment, but also one of self-hate. Burke (1937) argues that the genre of the grotesque in literary forms “comes to the forefront when confusion in the forensic pattern gives more prominence to the subjective elements of imagery than to the objective, or public, elements” (p. 76-77). Essentially, Burke’s (1937) grotesque and Fleming and Davis’ (2018) study of virgin shaming are concomitant in that they speak to the subjective perception of what Burke (1941) terms guilt or embarrassment. Thus, they both are symbolically created assumptions about one’s status as a virgin, which places them lower on the hierarchy of men. This will be discussed further in the section on masculinity, but it is crucial to note here in the description of incels because they are far more concerned with their virginity than other men are.

Many incels were disillusioned by the Pick-up Artist (PUA) community. PUAs promised men that they could have sex if they learned misogynistic tactics called “game.” These tactics do not work for every man and rely on belittling women and other tactics that border on rape (Roosh, 2015). Elliot Rodger (2014) did not mention trying to learn game in his manifesto but spent time on a site called PUAhate.com that has since been taken down. Rodger’s posts covered a range of topics, but of the 46 archived posts attributed to Rodger on PUAhate.com that I was able to locate, 11 advocated for finding a way to fix society through violent means, rid the world of women or sex through decree, or for incels to band together to end their suffering (Poobear, n.d.). In one archived post, Rodger stated:

> The problem is women, they are primitive in nature and incapable of thinking rationally. If they are allowed to choose who to breed with, humanity will never advance. Look at civilizations over 100 years ago. In a way, they were much more civilized, simply because women were restricted and controlled (Poobear, n.d.).

Rodger (2014) repeated this sentiment in his manifesto. The connection between incels’ rhetoric and Rodger’s rhetoric shows that this type of reasoning typifies incel thinking and is regurgitated by users to maintain a consistency in their victimage and its cause i.e. women as the scapegoat (Burke, 1941).

Burke’s (1941) first explanation of the guilt-redemption cycle detailed four aspects or steps: “in-born dignity” which is ascribed to us through our place in the hierarchy, a “projection device” also known as scapegoating, “symbolic rebirth” or re-attaining one’s dignity through the scapegoat process, and “commercial use” or convincing others of the righteousness of the scapegoating process (Burke, 1941, pp. 301-303). Burkean scholar William Rueckert (1982), utilized all of Burke’s works which mention these aspects, and compiled them into seven phases of the guilt redemption cycle: “the Negative, Hierarchy, Guilt, Mortification, Victimage, Catharsis, and Redemption” (p. 131). For incels the negative is expressed by their perceived lack of “real” masculinity which places them lower, in their opinion, on the social hierarchy. Reuckert (1982) explained that for Burke, men can experience guilt inwardly or outwardly as embarrassment. They experience mortification because of this embarrassment and argue that they are victimized by some group, in this case, women whom they scapegoat. To achieve catharsis, they seek to find a way to get rid of the scapegoat so that they can be cleansed and redeemed (Reuckert, 1982). The narrative in Rodger’s (2014) manifesto details this process ending with Rodger’s version of redemption which entails him committing mass murder to be freed from the cyclical nature of the guilt-redemption cycle. The cycle continues, as there is always another reason to feel guilty or embarrassed, another scapegoat to blame and so on (Burke, 1941).

Incel Mass Murderers

There are no concrete numbers on how many incels visit incel forums yet reports suggest that they are in the tens of thousands. They are not centralized and many of the forums incels use allow them to make multiple accounts with different usernames that cannot be traced back to their email addresses. It is important that both the media and academics look seriously at these men because of the real-life implications of their actions. Since Elliot Rodger went on his killing spree in 2014, the number of men who are committing crimes because of their status as incels is growing which has serious implications for women everywhere.

A little over a year after Rodger committed his mass killing, Chris Harper-Mercer went on his killing spree. Harper-Mercer went to Umpqua Community College in Oregon on October 1, 2015 and killed nine people, himself, and injured another eight people (Griffin, 2015). The night before Harper-Mercer went on his killing spree he posted on a message board on 4chan: “Some of you guys are alright. Don’t go to school tomorrow if you are in the northwest,” a cryptic warning foreshadowing what he was about to do (Griffin, 2015). Harper-Mercer (2015) left behind a manifesto that mentions Elliot Rodger 4 times, stating that Rodger “stand[s] with the gods” (p.1), that he is committing this crime for Elliot Rodger, he modeled his manifesto after Rodger’s, and that “Elliot is a god” (p. 5). Harper-Mercer (2015) was “40% black” (p. 2) according to his short manifesto, yet the largest section of his narrative is concerned with why “the black man is the most vile creature on the planet” (p. 2). On incel forums racism abounds, but Harper-Mercer (2015) seemed to identify with his white heritage as he “passed” as white. Despite his racism, he focused on killing women during his killing spree (Griffin, 2015) illustrating that while race is an issue for many of these men, misogyny more accurately defines their belief system.

William Edward Atchison killed two people and then himself at Aztec High School on December 7, 2017 (Luperon, 2017). Encyclopedia Dramatica (n.d.) has a collection of screenshots of posts that they attributed to Atchison which reflect the kind of language used in Rodger’s manifesto about women and ending his suffering. From media reports it is unclear whether he was actually an incel, but in online forums he was known to go by names of other mass murderers, including Elliot Rodger (Luperon, 2017).

Nikolas Cruz was hailed as an incel hero because he committed mass murder on Valentine’s Day in 2018, killing 17 people and injuring another 17 (Murphy, 2018). He did not commit suicide like those before him, and as of this writing, he is in the middle of his trial. Cruz was white but had been adopted by a Hispanic family when he was born and has a Black brother (Contrera, 2019), but is a virulent racist and anti-Semite (Murphy, 2018). Incels claim him as one of their own dubbing him “St. Nikolas.” It is not clear if Cruz self-identified as an incel, but in the police search of his phone and his browsing history there are several indications that he was an incel. For example, five days before he went on his killing spree, Cruz searched “how to get into a relationship,” “how to get a girlfriend,” and “how not to be afraid of the girls you like” (Camp et al., 2018, slide 14). These are sentiments that pervade incel forums. Those who knew him described him as lonely and obsessed with mass murderers, including Elliot Rodger (Futrelle, 2018a).

On April 23, 2018, Alek Minassian drove a rented van down a crowded street in Toronto, killing 10 and injuring another 13 (Kassam & Cecco, 2018). Before he committed this atrocity, he posted an update on Facebook that mentioned the ‘incel rebellion’ and Elliot Rodger (Ma, 2018). The incel rebellion is also referred to as the beta rebellion or beta uprising which is a call to arms that the denizens of incel forums use to try to unite incels (or betas: men lacking confidence, physically weak, and submissive to women) to overthrow the alphas (good looking men who are confident, domineering, athletic, and successful with women) with violence. Minassian did not commit suicide like several of the others and is awaiting the verdict of his trial in Toronto.

Scott Beierle, on November 2, 2018, went into a yoga studio in Tallahassee, Florida and killed two women, himself, and injured six others (Zaveri et al., 2018). He had been arrested for grabbing women or harassing them prior to the shooting (Zaveri et al., 2018). He left behind a number of artifacts, however most of them are not available to the general public. He wrote a “revenge fantasy” when he was in high school that ended with the main character, Scott Bradley, brutally murdering his classmates (Hendrix, 2019, para. 38). He also wrote songs and essays about his animosity toward women (Hendrix, 2019). His series of YouTube videos are highly misogynistic, particularly one in which he praises Elliot Rodger.

Elliot Rodger

Elliot Rodger has reached thousands of men through the artifacts that he left behind. The media abounds with stories of the canonization of Elliot Rodger after he died (for example, see Edwards, 2018). May 23rd was dubbed "St. Elliot Rodger Day" by incels and is celebrated with memes, posts on social media, and even the changing of one's profile photo on that day to memorialize and honor Rodger's (2014) "Day of Retribution" (p. 101), the name he gave to his plan to kill as many women as possible (Edwards, 2018). A Google search of YouTube videos using the search terms "Elliot Rodger tribute" produced thousands of hits with thousands of views and likes on a sample of 20 videos. Futrelle (2018b) is a freelance writer who runs an anti-misogyny blog called *We Hunted the Mammouth* and reports frequently on what he terms the cult of "Saint Elliot." He noted that incel mass murderer Nikolas Cruz was also heralded as a saint by the incel community after the shooting at Margory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL on Valentine's Day in 2018 (Futrelle, 2018a). The symbolism of the date he chose is on the nose and on Incels.Me (before it was shut down) featured numerous postings about Cruz, applauding him for his actions, "A hERo rises on this day of incel exclusion (Florida Valentine's Day School Shooting)" (O TaKu_WarrIOr, n.d.). The capitalization of the "ER" in hero is a homage to Elliot Rodger.

Rodger (2014) continually lamented his inability to have sex or even have a romantic relationship with a woman and became obsessed with this idea to the point that it defined his view on life. As Taylor (1994) pointed out, those who "have internalized a picture of their own inferiority…are condemned to suffer the pain of low self-esteem" (p. 25-26). Through the course of his narrative Rodger moves from desire and anxiety to anger and rage, a movement that is explored by scholars of masculinity (Fleming & Davis, 2018; Johnson, 2017a; Kimmel, 2013; Vandello et al., 2018). He thought that by enacting a socially accepted form of masculinity he could acquire the object of his desire and would be freed from his anger and rage (Rodger, 2014). Less than a year before he went on his killing spree Rodger (2014) detailed his experience at a party he went to in an effort to meet women, which would right all the past wrongs he felt he had endured as an incel and put himself on the path to a good life.

> I walked around in my drunken confidence for a few moments…and tried to act like a normal party-goer. I soon became frustrated that no one was paying any attention to me, particularly the girls…As my frustration grew, so did my anger. I came across this Asian guy who was talking to a white girl. The sight of that filled me with rage. I always felt as if white girls thought less of me because I was half Asian, but then I see this white girl at the party talking to a full-blooded Asian. I never had that kind of attention from a white girl! And white girls are the only girls I'm attracted to, especially the blondes…I angrily walked toward them and bumped the Asian guy aside, trying to act cocky and arrogant to both the boy and the girl…Rage fumed inside me as I realized that I just walked away from that confrontation, so I rushed back into the house and spitefully insulted the Asian. (Rodger, 2014, p. 121)

Vito et al. (2018) and Myketiak's (2016) assessments of Rodger's manifesto agree that moments like the one described above are related to his inability to enact his vision of idealized masculinity which is white masculinity. "He privileges whiteness" as "that is what he believes has the most power and status" (Myketiak, 2016, p. 298). He refers to himself as "Eurasian" to emphasize his whiteness, and while I agree with Vito et al (2018) and Myketiak's (2016) emphasis on how race features in his manifesto/narrative, it does not give the full picture of *why* he killed seven people (including himself). It is his "own self-deprecation" that "becomes one of the most potent instruments of [his] own oppression" (Taylor, 1994, p. 26). Rodger (2014) was angry with himself because he let someone else have the object of his desire, which could have been any good-looking white woman, without putting up a fight. For Rodger, putting up a fight would have secured at least part of his masculinity, but as he continually saw himself as weak, he continued to suffer.

Masculinity, Narrative, and Identity Formation

Incels subscribe to a form of masculinity that is predicated on a hierarchy between the genders and between men. The contention that women are lesser humans than men pervade incel forums. In these spaces, men judge one another in order to assert their superiority or argue they deserve to be higher on the hierarchy of men due to their intelligence or simple entitlement. Messerschmidt (2019) argues that the concept of hegemonic masculinity "has become ubiquitous, serving as the principal touchstone for most research on masculinities" (p. 85). However, the concept has often been misused in that scholars have seen the concept as a fixed set of characteristics rather than focusing on gender relations (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018, 2019). Messerschmidt (2019) clarifies this point by arguing that hegemonic masculinity is about the reification of gender hierarchies that subordinate women. However, the attributes that Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) used to define hegemonic masculinity define the social construction of what "true" masculinity is, i.e., "the most honored way of being a man" (p. 832). These characteristics include resistance to domination by others, sexual conquest, physical strength, violence, "compliance to patriarchy" (p. 848), "and the subordination of women to men" (p. 832). The fact that men benefit from the maintenance of the domination of patriarchy in the social order, though, is not necessarily "based on force," (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846) but shows that at minimum they are "complicit" in hegemonic masculinity (p. 832) as "one's place in the social hierarchy also expresses one's value" (Johnson, 2017b, p. 16). In other words, "real" power is not necessary for a man to be a part of the system that reifies patriarchal privilege as it functionally operates as a form of power through its circulation in society as defining the reality of what constitutes masculinity, hegemonic or otherwise (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Ironically, scholars of masculinity studies have noted the constraining force of the existence of hegemonic masculinity, which has indeed led to the dominion of what I will instead call "idealized masculinity," in that it forces men to adhere to its tenets (Allan, 2018; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Johnson, 2017a).

Hegemonic masculinity or idealized masculinity was not created by academics in the 1980s, but rather through a social construction, the embodiment of which has continued to evolve over time (Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Kimmel, 2013, 2018; Messerschmidt, 2019). This construction of ideal masculinity is unintelligible as it has different meanings for different men. It, however, retains its core: patriarchy and power. But that is the idealized form. Allan (2018) argues that "masculinity has become a site of perpetual desire, but also, and importantly failure. To strive for masculinity is manly; to fail is not" (p. 182). Incels must also decode and decide upon the kind of masculinity they are striving for and its relative worth in comparison with other men. As noted above, the idea of worthiness is inherent to defining masculinity (idealized or otherwise) and produces anxiety on multiple levels, an idea that will be further explored in the next section. An important takeaway is that whether men embody idealized masculinity or not, the idea remains embedded in the social constructions that dictate how men perceive themselves and other men.

For incels, the socially constructed version of idealized masculinity is "felt as a burden in a culture that appears to organize itself around the visibility of differences and the symbolic currency of identity politics" (Robinson, 2000, p. 3). Robinson (2000) did not have incels in mind when she wrote this, but incels view themselves as a marginalized group in comparison with the "alphas" or "Chads" who they perceive as embodying idealized forms of masculinity. Myketiak (2016) argues that this is because "the ways they situate themselves in stories, link[s] to their understanding of and relationship to social and cultural contexts" (p. 293). Allan (2018) adds that "we need to think about the homosociality not only of masculinity, but also the affects that are felt, lived, and performed in being (of trying to be) masculine, which is to say, the homosociality of shame" (p. 182). This shame is what drives the embarrassment felt by men in the guilt-redemption cycle that feeds the vitriol seen in posts on incel forums.

Robinson (2000) stated that there are competing forces between men and "society" that are used to define men and masculinity—nature and social construction—which effectively reifies the "'truth' of a primal masculinity" (p.156). She continued, that if we socially construct gender to fit within "society" then there must be a naturalistic or biological quality of masculinity (and femininity) that is innate and that these competing forces illustrate the emptiness of social construction, which for some men is a clear indication that the qualities or attributes of masculinity are suppressed by social constructionism (Robinson, 2000).

Robinson's (2000) appraisal of a natural masculinity is descriptive rather than argumentative and is echoed throughout the Manosphere and in the incel community but for different reasons. Incels feel that there is a problem with masculinity because no matter which way they approach it they can neither fulfill the natural expectations associated with it nor can they embody and enact the socially constructed idealized form or any form of masculinity that is socially acceptable. It is their "marginalization and disempowerment [that] serves as technologies for them to understand who they are" (Johnson, 2017a, p. 239). This is the case because if they are powerless, they can transform that feeling into a mechanism to not only understand who they are but also to legitimize or excuse their praise of mass murderers who seek to restore balance between natural masculinity, idealized masculinity, and where they stand on the social hierarchy by incorporating their embodiment into the social construction of manhood through violence.

The desire and anxiety that Allan (2018) explores are these competing forces which create a situation for incels that perpetuates these feelings as their community is defined by their inability to receive the benefits that are promised by masculinity, which Kimmel (2013) dubbed aggrieved entitlement. Aggrieved entitlement suggests that these men's anger results from their desires being denied by outside forces over which they have no control (Kimmel, 2013). For incels, the "things" are women, which they simultaneously desire and hate. Part of the hate they feel comes from their perception that they do not and cannot embody anything resembling idealized masculinity. They view heterosexual sex with women as not just a rite of passage, but the defining characteristic of becoming a man which can produce anxiety (Mundy, 2006). "Attached to shame is a deep fear of the possibility of being shamed" i.e., anxiety "for not living up to the standards which have been imposed on us [men]" (Allan, 2018, p. 183). These men feel they are entitled to sex because they possess the biological need or imperative to be sexually active which feeds their understanding of completing the transformation into manhood by completing these kinds of 'manhood acts' (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009).

Incels both attribute their lack in masculine embodiment as innate in their physicality which fails to adhere to idealized masculine norms and their inability to complete manhood acts that causes other men to judge them as lacking in masculinity (Allan, 2018; Coston & Kimmel, 2012; Fleming & Davis, 2018; Munsch & Gruys, 2018; Myketiak, 2016; Robinson, 2000; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009; Vandello et al., 2008).

Elliot Rodger (2014) believed that once he entered college, he would be able to change his life and live like "everyone else." Throughout his narrative, his feelings vacillated between despair and anger at his situation, often comparing himself to other men and seeing his lack, and then at other times he compared himself to other men and viewed himself as superior to them (Rodger, 2014). However, despite his anger at other men for "having" what he did not have, he continued to focus on how women were preventing him from completing the manhood acts that would make him whole and he therefore decided that because his masculinity was threatened by what he viewed as rejection, he would be a man by enacting revenge on these women by killing them. He describes his aggrieved entitlement in the following excerpt from his manifesto:

Flocks of hot, young girls go out in their shorts and bikini's, further tantalizing my sex-starved body every time I look at them…I had nothing left to live for but revenge. Women must be punished for their crimes of rejecting such a magnificent gentleman as myself...These are crimes that cannot go unpunished. The more I thought about these injustices that were dealt to me, the more eager I became for revenge (Rodger, 2014, p. 118).

Ochs and Capps (1996) argue that through narrating one's story they "frame an event as problematic by drawing upon listeners' commonsense knowledge of what is expected in particular circumstances" (p. 27). Rodger's manifesto does not appear to have one particular audience in mind, but his manifesto appeals to other incels' "commonsense knowledge" that to be a man one must have sex and failure to engage in that act is a breakdown in the natural order of things. Horlacher (2019) concurs, arguing that the socially constructed definition of what a man *is* or *should be* is conveyed through the internalization of the subject position created by an incel's knowledge that he is not a man. Rodger's sheer incredulity that he occupied this subject position is what turned his despair into anger and aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel, 2013).

In the quote above, Rodger referred to himself as a “magnificent gentleman,” he restated this identity multiple times in his manifesto and his YouTube videos, settling on “the supreme gentleman” as the true descriptor of his being. Fluck (2013) argued that “identity is created by images of the self” which are “all driven to establish a sense of distinction or moral superiority over others” (p. 49). Chris Harper-Mercer (2015) wrote from a similar perspective in his manifesto, “I have always been the most hated person in the world. Ever since I arrived in this world, I have been under siege from it” (p. 1). He admitted that he was a 26-year-old virgin, but that “long ago [he] realized that society likes to deny people like [him] these things. People who are elite, people who stand with the gods. People like Elliot Rodger” (Harper-Mercer, 2015, p. 1). As stated above, Harper-Mercer (2015) was inspired by Rodger who he viewed as “a god” (p. 5), a man, who, like him, was *denied* access to manhood or true masculinity. Both Rodger and Harper-Mercer felt they were denied homosociality (friends), girlfriends, sex, money, power, and prestige by some outside force, and that force in turn denied them access to ideal masculinity which in turn denied them the things they wanted. The circular logic they used betrays them as it shines the light on their perceived lack rather than actual lack, which lies on the epistemological battlegrounds of socially constructed visions of ideal masculinity. Burke (1937) terms this a frame of acceptance which he defines as “the more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it” (p. 3). Rodger and Harper-Mercer adopted the role of victims of the socially constructed technologies which both define their lack and their superiority by placing ideal masculinity at odds with an ideal masculinity that values their perceived intellect thus placing them in the precarious situation of both being and not being. Their confusion about the definition of masculinity created by the evolution of masculinity made them believe they were both inside and outside of ideal masculinity as other “lesser” beings perpetuated one version while overlooking theirs.

Before going on his killing spree in Toronto, Alek Minassian posted the following on his Facebook page: “Private (Recruit) Minassian Infantry 00010, wishing to speak to Sgt 4chan please. C23249161. The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys! All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!” (Ma, 2018). “Chads” and “Stacys” are Manosphere terms for alpha men and women (Manosphere glossary, n.d.). An archived post from PUAhate.com attributed the following post to Rodger, who wrote: “Having the will to fight against those who would cause us misery is what separates the strong from the weak. The world is this way because you allow it to be” (Poobear, n.d.). The archived posts that have been attributed to Rodger show that he supported the effort to overthrow the status quo as he and other militant incels saw it and routinely urged violence to achieve these ends. As described above, part of hegemonic masculinity is asserting one’s self in front of other men and preventing themselves from being subjugated by other men. Military service is often connected to hegemonic masculinity in that war serves to protect the weak, women and children, and “our way of life.” Minassian’s attempt to align his killing spree with a military style post calling himself a member of the infantry, for example, is an illustration of the type of language which likens the incel struggle with an unjust war that threatens their existence.

Incels and Social Construction of Masculinity

Ochs and Capps (1996) argue that “at any point in time, our sense of entities, including ourselves, is an outcome of our subjective involvement in the world…Personal narratives shape how we attend to and feel about events. They are partial evocations of the world as we know it” (p. 21). Rodger (2014), Harper-Mercer (2015), and Minassian (2018) all shared a similar telos in their narrative built on the supposition that they were lacking in some way and that others were responsible for this lack and its attendant pain. Inceldom is not a sickness or caused by others, it is a label that these men put on themselves which is shaped by the socially constructed characteristics of manhood that incels feel mark their lack of manhood. Bakhtin (1981) recognized that people “go through something” but that this something “affirm[s] what they, and precisely they, were as individuals, something that did verify and establish their identity” (p. 106-107). The narratives that these men left behind, however short or cryptic, show that they never experienced the evolution of masculinity and held onto one aspect that affirmed their brokenness and/or oppression, i.e., their virginity.

Incels use their narratives to "discursively reinforce the status quo" (Munsch & Gruys, 2018, p. 376), but not necessarily the status quo of hegemonic masculinity, but rather idealized masculinity as constructed by incels which is overtly misogynistic, violent, and vitriolic. Fluck (2013) explained this point by stating:

> Systems of recognition are replaced by new status orders and recognition regimes that are more open but also more volatile, constant struggle must be an essential element of the search for recognition. This struggle produces winners and losers, manipulators and victims, betrayers and betrayed, insiders and outsiders, all driven to establish a sense of distinction or moral superiority over others. (p. 49)

The new status orders that Fluck (2013) described are, for incels, experienced both inside and outside of the world they create for themselves and the larger societal structures within which inceldom exists. Incel forums are filled with caustic exchanges between men who are supposedly oppressed in the same ways. They post pictures of themselves and ask the others to rate them, no matter how good-looking a man might be he will be ridiculed for even asking to be rated, teased for small imperfections, attacked for his height or weight, and racism abounds. The struggle that these men experience in their day to day lives spills over into their online lives where a new hierarchy has been created that reinforces the very status quo they claim to abhor and rail against, creating a community built on self-hate and contempt. These men are attempting to be recognized for their exceptionality as simultaneously the most oppressed group and the highest of the low.

Elliot Rodger's YouTube videos were filled with self-deprecation and long diatribes about his sophistication and gentlemanly qualities (R.A.W.W., 2014). Nussbaum (2001) suggests that "emotions are appraisals or value judgments, which ascribe to things and persons outside the person's own control great importance for that person's own flourishing" (p. 4). Rodger's videos and manifesto suggest that he *felt* that his superiority was not seen by others and as a result he suffered and was unable to flourish as a man or even as a person. Men like Rodger, Harper-Mercer, and Minassian wanted to start a movement among incels to right the world. Rodger (2014) occasionally suggested that society needed to "go back" to a better time, a time when marriages were arranged, and he was guaranteed sex at some point in his life. The frustration that incels express in the form of anger at one another suggests that they are their own worst enemy because they cannot organize and force a new world order into existence. "Insofar as they involve acknowledgment of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency, emotions reveal us as vulnerable to events that we do not control; and one might hold that including a large measure of uncontrol in one's conception of a good life compromises too deeply the dignity of one's own agency" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 10). Their identities are tied to manhood acts (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) that will affirm their masculinity and general worth as human beings, but they attribute success and failure to forces outside of their control (Somers, 1994), i.e. "the cruelty of women" (R.A.W.W., 2014).

After Nikolas Cruz committed his mass murder on Valentine's Day in 2018, a user on Incels.Me stated, "I'm not even incel anymore and actually have it better than many normies yet I still can't help but feel 'good' every time this happens" (Zyros, 2018). Cruz was heralded by incels online as St. Nikolas. Rodger (2014) had considered carrying out his mass murder on Valentine's Day stating that it "would have been very fitting, since it was the holiday that made me feel the most miserable and insulted, the holiday which young couples celebrated their happy lives together" (p. 131). TheVman (n.d.), an Incels.Me user posted "holy shit its on valentine's day! what a fucking hero! we have a new model! PLZ BE UGLY PLZ BE UGLY. WE NEED INCEL AWARENESS." This comment suggests that incels who frequent these types of forums need to constantly have their positionality reaffirmed through the addition to their annals with more mass murders that illustrate how precarious their manhood is to the point that it drives members of their community to commit these acts of violence.

The incel mass murderers discussed here tied their identities to Elliot Rodger's in an attempt to alleviate their anxiety over their inability to enact the social roles that conceptions of idealized masculinity stipulate (Salecl, 2004). The ultraviolent acts they each perpetrated were connected to a “desire to change their identities,” (Salecl, 2004, p. 5) which they found impossible due to their self-identification as incels. This desire then informed their inability to make the types of meaningful connections with women that would have resulted, ideally, in their enacting the manhood act of sexual intercourse. “The cultural script for manhood implicitly and explicitly sanctions physical aggression as a way of demonstrating masculine status to the self and others, particularly when that status has been threatened” (Vandello et al., 2008, p. 1327). They resorted to mass murder to find release from their anxiety and embarrassment to assert themselves as men. By associating themselves with Rodger they were able to gain notoriety, even postmortem, that as noted above, canonized them among other incels.

Chris Harper-Mercer (2015) argued that people like himself and Elliot Rodger were “denied everything they deserved” and that “society left us no recourse” (p. 1). Harper-Mercer (2015) went on to acknowledge that after he committed his mass murder, people would think they could have done something to prevent him from carrying it out, but that they would have failed because he had “no job, no life, no successes,” (p. 1) suggesting that only men who succeed have something to live for. “My advice to others like me is to buy a gun and start killing people…It is my hope that others will hear my call and act it out. I was once like you, a loser, rejected by society” (p. 1-2). For these men violence is the only way to reassert their manhood.

Conclusion

This essay explored the incel community which has turned from a group of disaffected men into a group that praises mass murderers that come from their ranks. Elliot Rodger was not the first incel mass murderer, but he has inspired other men to follow in his footsteps as evidenced by the artifacts these men have left behind. The number of incel mass murderers continues to increase and the thread that holds them together is Elliot Rodger. The men in this study left behind artifacts that are easily accessible on the internet and when a site takes something down it pops up again somewhere else. Rodger’s (2014) narrative spells out exactly what he thought was wrong with himself and what he thought was wrong with the people who were preventing him from becoming a man, i.e., having sex with a woman. These men used their narratives to define their masculinity or lack thereof and sought out a telos that would rectify their embarrassment, i.e., mass murder. Essentially, they followed the guilt-redemption cycle (Burke, 1937) to attempt to achieve some kind of redemption, but many of these men killed themselves and so their redemption came in the form of the artifacts they left behind.

The research that has been done on incels and Elliot Rodger in particular has not addressed ways to intervene in the spread of these narratives and the hate that defines them. Incel boards and websites are frequently taken down due to the hate that they espouse. Incel forums are a bit of a Pandora’s box in that once they got onto the internet, it is impossible to truly erase their messages from the internet. There are websites out there for men who feel that their status as an incel is ruining their lives and they provide group support to help these men manage their embarrassment and shame. However, until society stops putting pressure on men to enact their masculinity in idealized ways it is unlikely that the killings and hate will stop. That is not to say that there is no hope, society is always changing, but it is important to note that it changes at a snail’s pace and sociological and psychological research is needed to pinpoint how to fix these problems on that kind of scale.

The contributions in this project to existing communication scholarship are essential to understanding how identity and masculinity are influential to our knowledge about society and masculinity. While these case studies impact the discipline, there is much more work to be done regarding masculinity and incels. This work has promise influencing future scholarship regarding men, power, influence, and behavior in incel research.

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Applying Leader-Member Exchange Theory to the College Classroom: An Investigation of Student Communication Behaviors

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Instructional communication research has demonstrated the importance of the instructor-student relationship in the classroom. This study aimed to apply leader-member exchange theory (LMX) to the instructional setting by examining the quality of the instructor-student relationship and its influences with student classroom communication behaviors. Participants were 132 undergraduate college students. Results indicated that students who perceive in-group relationships report more involvement citizenship behavior than students who perceive out-group relationships. In addition, students who perceive in-group relationships report less expressive dissent than students who perceive out-group relationships. Finally, students who perceive in-group relationships engage in more oral participation and out-of-class communication with their instructors than students who perceive out-group relationships.

The college classroom is an environment that is co-created by instructors and students. In recent decades, instructional communication researchers have thoroughly examined the relational perspective of teaching by examining several instructor behaviors. The instructor-student relationship is one that shares many qualities of other interpersonal relationships (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Furthermore, teaching has been described as a relational process (DeVito, 1986) that undergoes the same process of interpersonal relationships. One difference in the instructor-student relationship is the equality of power that is typically associated with other interpersonal relationships. One theory that has been applied empirically in several research studies that examines the relational approach of individuals who do not have equal power is leader-member exchange theory (LMX; Graen, 1976; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX, traditionally applied to the superior-subordinate relationship within organizations, addresses the quality of the relationship and is based on the assertion that superiors develop different relationships with their subordinates. The primary purpose of this current research study is to apply leader-member exchange theory to the instructional setting by exploring the instructor-student relationship and its influences on student in-class and out-of-class communication behaviors. By using LMX as a theoretical framework, we can better understand how the perceived quality of the instructor-student relationship is related to students' classroom communication behaviors.

Literature Review

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

With a focus on the quality of relationships between superiors and subordinates, leader-member exchange theory (LMX) contends that superiors communicate with subordinates differently based on the quality of the relationship (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen, 1976). Supervisors can communicate with their subordinates in a supervisory style that focuses on authority and formality, or they can communicate in a

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leadership style that focuses on the interpersonal relationship and mutual liking (Kassing, 2000). Therefore, based on this communication style, subordinates perceive to be a member of the in-group or the out-group. In-group members feel supported by their superiors (Kassing, 2000), and they engage in more open and upward communication with their superiors (Krone, 1991). Out-group members do not experience the same support from their supervisors and typically feel avoided and not engaged in the workplace (Lee & Jablin, 1995).

Empirically, LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) has been applied in organizational settings regularly. However, in a few studies, LMX has been applied to instructional contexts (Horan et al., 2013; Mosley et al., 2014; Myers, 2006). Myers (2006) used LMX to explain students' motives to communicate with their instructors. He discovered that students who perceived in-group relationships with their instructors used the relational, functional, participatory, and sycophantic motives to communicate at higher rates than students who perceived out-group relationships with their instructors. However, no differences were discovered with the excuse-making motive to communicate. In another application of LMX to the instructional setting, it was discovered that increased instructor-student interactions produced a higher quality instructor-student relationship from the student perspective (Mosley et al., 2014). However, student achievement was not predicted by the perception of LMX relationship. Horan and colleagues (2013) discovered that students' perception of classroom justice and their LMX relationship with their instructors were positively related. Furthermore, when students perceive an in-group relationship with their instructor, they are less likely to engage in antisocial communication behaviors.

The instructor-student relationship is rather unique because it shares several qualities with other interpersonal relationships while simultaneously sharing qualities with superior-subordinate relationships. Similar to other interpersonal relationships, instructors progress through a relational process with their students and utilize "effective interpersonal communication skills to achieve satisfying outcomes" (Graham et al., 1992, p. 11). However, as Myers (2017b) argued, instructional communication researchers should consider examining the instructor-student relationship through a superior-subordinate lens. In these types of relationships, the superior possesses formal authority to evaluate and direct the activities of subordinates (Jablin, 1979), as well as provide leadership and mentorship (Sias, 2009). Given that instructors engage in these activities with their students, as well as recognizing that the classroom shares many characteristics with organizations (Sollitto et al., 2013), analyzing interactions between instructors and students from an organizational perspective is advantageous for instructional communication scholarship. LMX is an appropriate application of an organizational communication theory to the instructional context as it will offer insight about the dynamics of the instructor-student relationship. Consequently, to investigate the communication of students, this study considers four student behaviors: classroom citizenship behaviors, instructional dissent, oral participation, and out-of-class communication.

Classroom Citizenship Behaviors

Myers and colleagues (2016) applied the concept of organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) to the instructional setting using Organ's (1988) initial conceptualization that OCB is "individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and in the aggregate promotes the functioning of the organization" (p. 4). Examples of citizenship behaviors in the organization are helping, sportsmanship, and civic virtue. Recognizing that college students use citizenship behaviors in the classroom, Myers and colleagues (2016) investigated classroom citizenship behaviors (CCB) and discovered three major categories: involvement, affiliation, and courtesy. *Involvement* contains behaviors related to being actively involved and interacting in the classroom. *Affiliation* is focused on collaborating with classmates inside and outside of the classroom and being supportive and helpful toward classmates. *Courtesy* pertains to the use of etiquette and respect in the classroom. It was discovered that students' use of CCB was positively associated with connected classroom climate, instructor rapport, emotional interest, cognitive interest, affective learning, perceived cognitive learning, state motivation, and communication satisfaction (Myers et al., 2016). Katt et al. (2017) explored relationships between CCB and student traits. They discovered that communication apprehension and the involvement CCB were negatively related, that extroversion was positively related to all three CCBs, and that openness and conscientiousness were positively related to both involvement and courtesy. Acknowledging that students use different types of CCB in the instructional setting, an advantageous avenue to explore would be how the perception of the LMX relationship influences students' use of CCB. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been forwarded:

> **H1:** Students who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors will report more classroom citizenship behaviors (i.e., involvement, affiliation, courtesy) than students who perceive out-group relationships with their instructors.

Instructional Dissent

Instructional dissent is defined as the student expression of complaints or disagreements related to classroom or instructor issues (Goodboy, 2011). Students communicate instructional dissent in three ways: expressive dissent, rhetorical dissent, and vengeful dissent (Goodboy, 2011). *Expressive dissent* occurs when students want to express their feelings or vent to their classmates, friends, and family in an effort to improve their emotional state. *Rhetorical dissent* is directed at the instructor and occurs when students want their instructor to remedy a problem or issue related to the class. *Vengeful dissent* is an extreme form of dissent when students attempt to ruin an instructor's reputation. In an attempt to seek revenge on an instructor for a perceived wrongdoing, vengeful dissent is directed toward other students, instructors, and administrators. Goodboy (2011) discovered that instructional dissent was positively associated with student challenge behaviors and negatively associated with perceived classroom justice. Students' own traits and characteristics also can influence their use of instructional dissent. Verbally aggressive students typically employ rhetorical and vengeful dissent, whereas students high in argumentativeness report using more rhetorical dissent (Goodboy & Myers, 2012). Furthermore, students who reported higher learning orientation, rather than grade orientation, expressed more rhetorical dissent (Goodboy & Frisby, 2014). Instructor behaviors also play a role in the expression of student dissent. Buckner and Frisby (2015) discovered that instructor confirmation was negatively associated with expressive and vengeful dissent but not rhetorical dissent. A gap currently exists in the literature that investigates how the perception of the instructor-student relationship influences students' expression of dissent. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been posited:

> **H2:** Students who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors will report less expressive dissent, rhetorical dissent, and vengeful dissent than students who perceive out-group relationships with their instructors.

Oral Participation

Class participation has been defined as "any student comments offered, or questions raised in class" (Fassinger, 1995, p. 86). Although participation is highly valued (Remedios et al., 2008), oral participation is just one behavior that indicates student engagement in the classroom (Frymier & Houser, 2016). Engagement in oral participation is influenced by instructor behaviors and student characteristics. Students' oral participation in the classroom is more likely to occur when their instructors are humorous (Goodboy et al., 2015), use confirming behaviors (Goodboy & Myers, 2008), and use self-disclosure (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994). Nevertheless, some students may never participate orally in class due to their own characteristics or traits. Students high in communication apprehension are less likely to participate in class (Clark & Yeager, 1995). However, students with higher state motivation (Frisby & Myers, 2008; Frymier & Houser, 2016), higher confidence (Karp & Yoels, 1976), and higher willingness to communicate (Chan & McCroskey, 1987) are more likely to orally participate. Frymier and Houser (2016) explained that most instructors expect students to make oral contributions and to ask questions in class. This expectation, along with the expectation that higher quality LMX relationships with instructors should produce more oral participation, leads to this hypothesis:

> **H3**: Students who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors will report more in-class oral participation than students who perceive out-group relationships with their instructors.

Out-of-Class Communication

Out-of-class communication (OCC) is defined as face-to-face communication between students and their instructors outside of the traditional classroom setting (Fusani, 1994). However, the study of OCC extends to student-initiated email messages and other mediated interactions with instructors (Zhang, 2006). Examples of OCC can include visiting instructors during their office hours, advising, instructor involvement in student organizations, and conversations before and after class (Aylor & Oppliger, 2003). The instructor can certainly encourage OCC with their students, as OCC has been found to be positively associated with instructor immediacy (Jaasma & Koper, 1999), humor use (Aylor & Oppliger, 2003), and use of affinity-seeking strategies (Myers et al., 2005).

Students' own traits and characteristics can influence their engagement in OCC as well. Students who are more likely to engage in OCC with their instructor are more motivated (Goodboy et al., 2009), cognitively flexible (Mansson, 2015; Martin & Myers, 2006), and argumentative (Mansson et al., 2012). In a recent meta-analysis examining the relationships between students' OCC and their learning outcomes, positive summary effects were discovered between OCC and both affective learning and perceived cognitive learning (Goldman et al., 2016). Given that employees with high-quality leader-member exchanges enjoy a host of benefits (Sollitto et al., 2014), it is plausible to hypothesize that when students have high-quality leader-member exchanges with their instructors, they will be more likely to engage in OCC. Therefore, the following hypothesis is forwarded:

> H4: Students who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors will report more out-of-class communication than students who perceive out-group relationships with their instructors.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants were 132 undergraduate college students enrolled in introductory level communication courses at a medium-sized midwestern university. Of the 132 participants, 43 were male, 83 were female, and 6 participants neglected to report their sex. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 46 years, with an average age of 21 years (M = 20.55, SD = 3.3). The majority of participants was White/Caucasian (n = 105; 80%), followed by Black/African American (n = 17; 13%), Middle Eastern (n = 4; 3%), Hispanic or Latino/a (n = 2; 2%), Multiracial (n = 3; 2%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (n = 1; 1%). Fifty-seven participants indicated they were currently in their first year of college, whereas 23 were sophomores, 27 were juniors, and 25 were seniors. On average, the participants were enrolled in 5 courses (M = 4.89, SD = 0.9; range = 1-9 courses) across 15 credit hours (M = 14.53, SD = 2.2; range = 3-21 credit hours). Participants also reported information about their instructor and the course. The majority of the instructors were female (n = 77; 58.3%), whereas 54 of the instructors were male (i.e., 40.9%). One participant (i.e., 0.8%) did not indicate the sex of their instructor. Students also reported on classes in which the enrollment ranged from 5 to 99 students (M = 26.87; SD = 14.1).

Students were provided with a cover letter stating the purpose of the study and the questionnaire. Before beginning the questionnaire, participants were instructed to refer to the instructor and class they had immediately prior to the data collection session (Plax et al., 1986). The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and data collection started during the twelfth week of the semester.

Instrumentation

Participants completed a questionnaire that included a list of demographic questions and a battery of instruments. The battery of instruments included the Leader-Member Exchange 7 Scale (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), the Classroom Citizenship Behaviors Scale (Myers et al., 2016), the Instructional Dissent Scale (Goodboy, 2011), the Oral Participation Scale (Frymier & Houser, 2016), and the Out of Class Interaction Scale (Knapp & Martin, 2002).

The Leader-Member Exchange 7 Scale (LMX 7) uses 7 items to inquire about the quality of the superior-subordinate relationship. For the purposes of this study, the LMX 7 scale was adapted to reflect the instructor-student relationship. Myers (2006) was the first to modify the LMX 7 to the instructor-student relationship. Therefore, the current study used the same wording of Myers' initial scale adaptation. This scale uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Previous reliability coefficients for this scale have ranged from .87 to .89 (Kassing, 2000; Myers, 2006). Gerstner and Day (1997) noted that the LMX 7 has the soundest psychometric properties of all available LMX instruments. In the current study, a reliability coefficient of .92 was obtained (M = 3.57; SD = 0.96).

The Classroom Citizenship Behaviors Scale uses 23 items to measure students' reports of their involvement, affiliation, and courtesy behaviors in the classroom. The scale uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*) to measure the frequency of the behaviors. Previous reliability coefficients for this scale have ranged from .57 to .92 for the three subscales (Katt et al., 2017; Myers et al., 2016), with the lower reliability typically for the courtesy subscale. Confirmatory factor analyses have been conducted in previous studies (Katt et al., 2017; Myers et al., 2016) and have indicated a good model fit. In this study, the alpha reliabilities were all acceptable: .90 for involvement (M = 2.34; SD = 0.85), .94 for affiliation (M = 1.61; SD = 1.12), and .78 for courtesy (M = 3.25; SD = 0.80).

The Instructional Dissent Scale includes three dimensions to measure students' frequency of complaints about class-related issues. The three dimensions include expressive, rhetorical, and vengeful dissent. Responses were solicited using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). Previous reliability coefficients have ranged from .83 to .96 for the three subscales (Goodboy, 2011, 2012; Goodboy & Frisby, 2014; Goodboy & Myers, 2012). Goodboy (2011, 2012) provided psychometric evidence and scale validity in previous studies. In the current study, reliability coefficients were .92 for expressive dissent (M = 1.37; SD = 0.94), .78 for rhetorical dissent (M = 1.24; SD = 0.84), and .90 for vengeful dissent (M = 0.29; SD = 0.63).

The Oral Participation Scale measures students' self-reports of their oral participation during their classes. Using 7 scale items, responses were solicited using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Frymier and Houser (2016) obtained a Cronbach's alpha of .91 for the instrument. Psychometric evidence and validity for the Oral Participation Scale have been demonstrated in previous research (Frymier & Houser, 2016). In this study, the alpha reliability was .79 (M = 2.23; SD = 0.78).

The Out of Class Interaction Scale is a 13-item scale that assesses students' levels of interaction with their instructors outside of the classroom. Responses were solicited using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Previous reliability coefficients for this instrument have ranged from .84 to .87 (Goodboy et al., 2015; Martin & Myers, 2006). Psychometric evidence and validity for the Out of Class Interaction Scale have been demonstrated in previous research (Knapp & Martin, 2002). In this study, the alpha reliability was .91 (M = 2.68; SD = 0.83).

Data Analysis

Previous LMX research (Lee, 1999; Myers, 2006) has categorized participants into three groups (i.e., in-group, middle-group, out-group) based on their responses on the LMX 7. For the purposes of this study, 63 participants were categorized as having an in-group relationship with their instructor, 25 participants were categorized as having a middle-group relationship with their instructor, and 44 participants were categorized as having an out-group relationship with their instructor. Given that the focus of the study was on the differences between in-group and out-group participants, responses from the middle-group category were not analyzed. The hypotheses were analyzed using a series of analysis of variance (ANOVA) and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), with the two LMX 7 groups serving as the independent variables and the outcome variables (i.e., CCB, instructional dissent, oral participation, and OCC) serving as the dependent variables. For the MANOVA tests, Wilks' lambda was used to test whether there are differences between the means of identified groups of subjects on a combination of dependent variables. Wilks' lambda is the most frequently used measure in multivariate tests. Furthermore, eta-squared (i.e., η^2) is most often reported for straightforward ANOVA designs that are balanced and have independent cells.

Results

For classroom citizenship behaviors (H1), the MANOVA was significant, *Wilks's* $\lambda = .83$, $F(6, 254) = 4.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. Students who perceive in-group relationships ($M = 2.64$, $SD = .80$) with their instructors report more involvement citizenship behavior than students who perceive out-group relationships ($M = 1.95$, $SD = .82$). There were no significant differences between the in-group and out-group for the affiliation citizenship behavior or courtesy citizenship behavior.

Table 1
Differences in Classroom Citizenship Behaviors by LMX Group Membership

Citizenship Behavior	In-Group* M (SD)	Out-Group^ M (SD)	*F*	η^2
Involvement	2.64 (.80)	1.95 (.82)	9.92†	.13
Affiliation	1.57 (1.15)	1.67 (1.12)	0.09	.00
Courtesy	3.35 (.72)	3.19 (.90)	1.27	.02

Note. *63 participants, ^44 participants, $^{\dagger}p < .001$

For instructional dissent (H2), the MANOVA was significant, *Wilks's* $\lambda = .83$, $F(6, 252) = 3.98$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$. Students who perceive in-group relationships ($M = 1.09$, $SD = .80$) with their instructors report less expressive dissent than students who perceive out-group relationships ($M = 1.74$, $SD = 1.04$). There were no significant differences between the in-group and out-group for rhetorical dissent or vengeful dissent.

Table 2
Differences in Instructional Dissent by LMX Group Membership

Dissent Type	In-Group* M (SD)	Out-Group^ M (SD)	*F*	η^2
Expressive	1.09 (.80)	1.74 (1.04)	6.92†	.10
Rhetorical	1.27 (.86)	1.08 (.81)	1.68	.03
Vengeful	0.21 (.54)	0.37 (.67)	1.12	.02

Note. *63 participants, ^44 participants, $^{\dagger}p < .001$

For in-class oral participation (H3), the ANOVA was significant [$F(2, 129) = 5.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 =$

.07]. Students who perceive in-group relationships (M = 2.44, SD = .75) with their instructors engaged in more oral participation than students who perceive out-group relationships (M = 1.99, SD = .80).

For out-of-class communication (H4), the ANOVA was significant [$F(2, 128) = 17.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .21$]. Students who perceive in-group relationships (M = 3.05, SD = .82) with their instructors engaged in more out-of-class communication with their instructors than students who perceive out-group relationships (M = 2.19, SD = .63).

Table 3
Differences in Communication Behaviors by LMX Group Membership

Communication Behavior	In-Group* M (SD)	Out-Group^ M (SD)	F	η^2
Oral Participation	2.44 (.75)	1.99 (.80)	5.02†	.07
OCC	3.05 (.82)	2.19 (.63)	17.31†	.21

Note. *63 participants, ^44 participants, $^{\dagger}p < .001$

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which students' relationship quality with their instructors affects their in-class and out-of-class communication behaviors. Specifically, this study applied LMX theory to the instructor-student relationship to examine differences between in-group and out-group perceptions. There were three sets of findings in this study. First, it was discovered in the sample collected, that students who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors use the involvement classroom citizenship behavior more frequently than students who perceive out-group relationships. There were no differences between the groups for the affiliation or courtesy citizenship behaviors. The finding that high-quality instructor-student relationships relate to more involvement citizenship behaviors in the classroom is plausible because students feel comfortable communicating with instructors to whom they feel close. Examples of the involvement citizenship behavior include asking questions in class, providing examples, and engaging in conversations with the instructor (Myers et al., 2016). When there is a high-quality instructor-student relationship, students are likely concerned about maintaining that strong relationship and hope to be viewed favorably by the instructor. It makes sense that no relationship was discovered between LMX and the affiliation citizenship behavior. With affiliation, the focus is on classmates (i.e., forming study groups, helping with homework). While these are positive and helpful behaviors, students can be affiliated with their classmates regardless of the quality of the instructor relationship. In a similar vein, the courtesy citizenship behavior pertains to showing respect toward classmates, which is a behavior that is positive and useful, but not necessarily related to the relationship with the instructor. Students can choose to be courteous towards others regardless of their instructor-student relationship.

The second finding of this study was that students in the sample who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors use expressive dissent less than students who perceive out-group relationships. No differences between the groups were found with rhetorical dissent or vengeful dissent. It makes sense that students who have lower-quality relationships with their instructors' will dissent in expressive manners. With expressive dissent, the focus is on complaining to others (i.e., classmates, family, friends) about the instructor and the course in an attempt to feel better. Students who perceive an out-group relationship with their instructor might feel that their instructor does not care about them or their learning. Goodboy (2011) found that when teachers misbehave (i.e., grading unfairly, offensiveness, indolence), students are more likely to dissent. Coincidentally, if an instructor misbehaves in class and if a student perceives a low-quality relationship with instructor, then expressive dissent is more likely to occur. Though it was hypothesized that rhetorical dissent and vengeful dissent also would be related to LMX, it is plausible that those relationships were nonsignificant. Recall that rhetorical dissent is only designed to fix a perceived wrongdoing (Goodboy, 2011). In essence, students can perceive a wrongdoing in class but still perceive a high-quality relationship with their instructor. This lack of relationship between LMX and rhetorical dissent corroborates previous research on the lack of findings between instructor confirmation and rhetorical dissent (Buckner & Frisby, 2015). It is also worthy to note that the amount of vengeful dissent reported among students was incredibly low. In fact, the majority of students (n = 86) reported using no vengeful dissent at all.

The third finding of this study was that students in the sample who perceive in-group relationships with their instructors orally participate more in class and communicate with their instructor outside of class more frequently than students who perceive out-group relationships. When instructors use effective teaching behaviors including, but not limited to, humor (Goodboy et al., 2015), confirmation (Goodboy & Myers, 2008), and self-disclosure (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994), students in the sample collected are more likely to participate inside and outside of class. Perhaps the use of these behaviors by instructors allow students to perceive a higher quality relationship with their instructors. The significant relationships found in H3 and H4 provide evidence that perceived relationship quality and student communication behaviors are related.

Practical Implications

Based on the results of this study, several practical implications are noteworthy for instructors. First, instructors should work to develop positive relationships with their students. Instructors should start by learning their students' names, information about each of them, and their learning styles and needs. Further, instructors can use this information to make the course content relevant to the student by using useful and applicable examples (Frymier & Shulman, 1995). These actions will allow the student to feel that their education is personalized to them (Waldeck, 2007). Davis (2009) noted that the first day of class is incredibly important for the instructor-student relationship, and instructors should start forming these relationships early in the semester.

Second, instructors should make themselves readily available to students. Not only should instructors hold regular office hours, but they could also consider other mechanisms for availability such as video chats, social apps (e.g., Slack), and staying after class to answer any questions. Instructors should investigate the preferred methods of student communication. For example, some students might prefer traditional office hour visits whereas other students might prefer communicating on a social app. Whatever the case, instructors should articulate clear guidelines and expectations for communication.

Third, instructors should work to facilitate connectedness in the classroom (Dwyer et al., 2004). When students feel connected to the instructor and their classmates, they report greater learning outcomes and increased communication (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). When facilitating a connected classroom climate, instructors can promote openness and inclusivity among their students. It is likely that students will communicate more frequently with the instructor and their peers in open and inclusive classrooms.

Limitations and Future Directions

A limitation of the current study is that the data only included a one-time glimpse of the instructor-student relationship and the communication behaviors. It has been demonstrated in research that the instructor-student relationship fluctuates over the course of the semester (Myers, 2006, 2017a). Therefore, an advantageous future direction of research would be to examine how the quality of the instructor-student relationship (LMX) evolves over the course of the semester, and how that influences the student communication. A second limitation of the current study is the lack of institutional, age, and ethnic diversity in the sample, therefore results should be interpreted with caution. The sample was collected through convenience sampling, but additional efforts could have been made in increasing the diversity of the sample. A third limitation of this study is that specific instructor behaviors were not measured. Perhaps a more comprehensive view of this line of research would be to assess a causal model of how instructor behaviors influence the instructor-student relationship (LMX), and then assess how that relationship influences student communication. If instructional researchers continue to apply LMX to the instructor-student relationship, then a future direction of research could be to develop a quantitative measure specific to this relationship. As of now, the current adaptation of the superior-subordinate relationship scale measure LMX relationships is the only quantitative measure that exists. This scale adaptation should be subjected to a series of factor analyses to verify the factor structure.

Another area of future exploration regarding LMX theory in the college classroom would be to determine relationships with personalized education (Waldeck, 2007). Personalized education includes instructor accessibility, instructor interpersonal competence, and course-related practices. It would be reasonable to assume that students who perceive to be in their instructors' in-group would report higher levels of personalized education. However, it could be advantageous for future research to determine if students who perceive to be in their instructors' out-group perceive a lack of personalized education. Answering these questions would assist instructional communication scholars with determining if perceived relationship quality is related to personalized education. Furthermore, if instructional scholars continue to apply LMX theory to the classroom setting, another avenue of future research could be to investigate the experiences of graduate students. Graduate students and graduate teaching assistants could have different levels of relationships with their instructors than undergraduate students. It could be beneficial to determine the extent to which graduate students perceive in-group or out-group relationships with their instructors and to determine relationships with communication behaviors.

Conclusion

Collectively, the results from this study suggest that students perceive to be in their instructors' in-group, middle-group, or out-group, and that perception influences the manner in which they communicate with their instructors. Specifically, students who perceive to be in their instructors' in-group report more involvement citizenship behavior, less expressive dissent, increased in-class oral participation, and increased levels of OCC. Through their research, instructional communication researchers (i.e., Fassinger, 1995; Frymier & Houser, 2000, 2016; Goodboy et al., 2015; Myers, 2017a) have continuously demonstrated that quality student-instructor relationships produce benefits for student participation, learning, and communication. This study provides evidence that when students perceive a high-quality relationship with their instructors, they are more likely to communicate and less likely to dissent. Instructors should consider that one motivating factor for their students' communication is the perception of their relationship with their instructor. Therefore, instructors should communicate with their students in a positive manner while using a host of effective instructor behaviors (i.e., affinity-seeking, self-disclosure, immediacy, humor, confirmation, content relevance, instructional clarity).

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Adherence to the Academy: Power Relations with the Colonized Student

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In response to crises of legitimacy, institutions of higher education mobilize conciliatory discourses and initiatives, ostensibly to challenge privilege and power. Instead, these discourses often reify the very power relations they critique through policies and pedagogies that disembody marginalized students from their lived experiences and colonize their lifeworlds. This essay explores the power relations in teacher-student relationships through critical communication pedagogies and instructional communication perspectives. Diversity, equity, and inclusion discourses can both challenge and reproduce hegemonic power relations in classroom communication. The essay is constructed as a poem to maximize the contested terrain for what constitutes hegemony and counter-hegemony. The purpose is to engender a more affective and embodied representation of teacher-student power relations by using reflexivity and critical theory. Metaphor and allegory underpin a mindfulness approach to thinking, feeling, and theorizing how power is constructed and fluid in education.

1. Seeing and Knowing[1]

You see us
    We imagine you

One and a half-sided point of view

We
Soften the focus when the colonized speak

We granulate truth and render
Impressionistic phantasmagoric[2]
Unknowable

2. Discipline and Disembody

Disciplinary discourses discipline[3]

Concepts colonize

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

We
Maroon hearts on islands
Amidst seas of epistemic oceans
Launch voyager ships carrying cognition cargo

The best praxis

We
Insist on disembodied experience

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3. Application and Measurement

We
Sharpen the focus when the colonized approach colonizer concepts
Including concepts of resistance
— Watch closely and see what they do with them

Mostly
Fail to look pretty, Think pretty

Fail to disarm us[4]

Aperture chosen
Conceals unconscious power
Biography
History[5]

Aperture chosen
Mobilizes
New social technologies of control
— Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

We make space for othering

We
Refine methods and techniques— knowledge and concepts
We theorize through
Intersectionality— mythical normativity and demystification[6]
Critical pedagogies

We embrace reflexivity, autoethnography[7]
We burn through bonfires of citations to appease the gods of journal science[8]
…

We hold onto our capital[9]

Key Terms and Concepts

You/Colonized = Students
We/Us/Colonizers = Faculty and Instructors
Soften the focus = Perform inclusion
Sharpen the focus = Inoculate privilege from diversity and equity

Notes from a Colonized Student: In the Margins of Transformative Communication Pedagogy

Difficult conversations, difficult for
All the educators, lovers, haters
All the students, and more[10]
A historical, societal, monumental, trial
Hard to talk in classrooms immersed in
Unconscious denial

Isms we resist
But race is hard to miss
Discomfort in *difference*
Emotions run hot despite psychological distance

Technologies of control through canons of science
Death, tears, protest, defiance
Pain temporarily confining me
Until I communicate mindfully[11]
Let's keep the conversation going
New ways of seeing, being
Knowing[12]
Feel our bodies[13], feel us all
Vulnerable, fearful, joyful, raw
Deep listening, heart presence
Open to difference
Be present[14]

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[1] See essay 1 in Berger (1972) for reflections on seeing and knowing, history as relationship between past and present, and the concealment of social relations in academic and aesthetic discourses.
[2] See Buck-Morss (1991) for her elucidation of phantasmagoria in the reconstruction of Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project.
[3] Foucault (1977) articulates the role of observation in creating "docile bodies" through disciplinary practices.
[4] Dominant groups in higher education use implicit bias and microaggression trainings to shield themselves from acknowledging their complicity in upholding systemic social and epistemic injustices; and to protect the very privilege and oppression ostensibly targeted by inclusiveness initiatives (Applebaum, 2019). We problematize whether the discourse trinity of diversity-equity-inclusion, as well as other resistance discourses, perform power similarly, and to what extent elements of hegemony and counterhegemony are present within them.
[5] The "sociological imagination" reveals the intersectionality of history, power, and biography (Mills, 2000).
[6] See Yep (2016) for how the potential of communication education might be realized in "transformative communication pedagogy" and the demystification of "mythical intersectional normativity."
[7] The dialogue our poem evokes by exploring faculty-student relations illuminates key themes identified by Linabary et al. (2017) in their autoethnographic account of designing and instructing an organizational communication course, specifically the structural constraints on individual and collective agency, tensions of power and voice, and seeing classroom tensions as opportunities to employ creativity and collaboration as transformative praxis.
[8] Our endnote citations are too many and too few. There are too many in that we desire the poem to speak for itself, listen for itself, think for itself, feel for itself, and rise on its own. Our poem must perform work as all poetry performs work, by what it says and what it does not say. The gaps and spaces, the things unsaid, do much of the heavy lifting. Citation practices pose a risk of weighing down the poem, evaporating the power of the poem, blind folding the readers-co-authors and demanding they tell us what they see. Yet our endnote citations are too few to address the breadth of scholarship implicated by the poem. Full representation remains always out of reach and immune to the corrective drive (Hemmings, 2011).

We affirm the value of situating research and theory within broader disciplinary and interdisciplinary traditions to open meaningful dialogue with authors and readers. At issue is how are citations used within the text — as literary convention, as storytelling tactics, as performance of expertise and claim to a privileged subject position as possessor-producer of knowledge, or as meaningful action to deepen reflection and foster understandings of the text, raise questions, and dialogue with scholars inside and outside the academy.

The metaphor of burning "bonfires of citations to appease the gods of journal science" signals the ritualistic performance of storytelling in journal writing and the power dynamics embedded in journal communities. The metaphor agitates with its implicit critique of conventional, formulaic, and uncritical use of citations in disciplinary storytelling. Agitation is one of the powers uniquely suited to poetry — the power to agitate and throw into question what is known and unknown about the world. It is not our position that citations are superfluous or that they inevitably reify power relations. Nonetheless, we do see parallels between conventional, uncritical journal science writing and conventional, uncritical pedagogy in the classroom.

As Hemmings (2011) argues, citation practices and mobilizing affect are storytelling tactics that secure and make believable dominant narratives in journal science. Citation practices and textual affect are aspects of political grammar and therefore target points for intervention to transform dominant narratives.

We see potential in poetic inquiry to translate and open obtuse academic discourses, rendering specialized knowledges more accessible to a larger public. This is due to the power of metaphor, embodied writing, and to experimentation with literary conventions in journal science which often alienate potential readers-co-authors. We did not author this poem as only autoethnography, immanent critique, and critical communication pedagogy, but also to disrupt what Hemmings (2011, p. 19) calls the "technologies of the presumed" and to theorize within the new spaces created by the disruption.

We concur with Hemmings (2011, p. 162) that citation practices are "productive rather than descriptive" and can act to erase or fetishize scholarly contributions. We feel ambivalence about the inclusion of citations anchored to individual lines in the poem because their presence elevates the risk for over-interpretation or premature misunderstanding due to the fetishization of cited scholarly works. Moreover, lines within a poem must be understood in relation to the contextual totality of the poem, and citation practices anchored to individual lines run the risk of dismembering the poem into incoherent parts. We hope to mitigate these risks by housing our citation practices in endnotes, and through the practice of citation restraint.

The above prose about what we desire our poem to do, the type of writing it is and the goals that animate it, along with the decisions we made regarding citation practices and the use of endnotes, embraces the spirit if not the form of an ars poetica poem. Faulkner (2007, 2016) proposes ars poetica as criteria for the evaluation of research poetry by making explicit the goals of the work by which the work itself can be measured, as well as the methods employed through discussion of aesthetics, craft, and process.

[9] See Bourdieu (1986) for theorization of "cultural capital" and "social capital."
[10] Chen and Lawless (2018) discuss the need for educators to facilitate difficult conversations in classrooms to address the challenges of the diverse global world. In this poem, we deploy "diversity agenda" strategies (p. 379).
[11] Huston (2010) explains how students may communicate mindfully (CM) to strengthen their conversational skills, listening skills, and emotional intelligence. CM has potential to increase awareness of experiences as they arise moment by moment in the classroom, including awareness of power operating between students and between faculty and students. We see potential in CM for the democratization of knowledge production and subverting reified power relations in the classroom. This liberation potential derives from CM's emphasis on active listening, being curious about difference and the experiences of others, cultivating openness to new experiences and creative spontaneity, and intentionally letting go of attachment to habitual thinking, acting, sensing, and believing.
[12] Critical pedagogy and critical pedagogy assessment have potential to facilitate new ways of seeing, being, and knowing through focused attention to power and social justice, and through emphasis on facilitation and process over prescription (Fassett & Warren, 2006; Freire, 2018; Kahl, 2013). Innovations in arts-based research methodology foster a more engaged, embodied, and empathic social science (Faulkner & Cloud, 2019; Leavy, 2017).
[13] We concur with Faulkner (2018) that achieving embodiment and reflexivity is an important refusal of the mind-body dialectic. Poetry has the flexibility and capacity to act as theory and methodology. The choice to use poetry in social science is a feminist practice often with a social justice impetus (Faulkner, 2017; Prendergast, 2009).
[14] Our poem advances a postmodern (informed) critical theory of communication that employs feminist methodology (Agger, 2006; Faulkner, 2005, 2018, 2019) to understand power relations between universities, faculty and students. It can be read as "Vox Theoria - Literature-voiced" poetry (Prendergast, 2009). We reflect on how power relations and academic expertise constrain dialogue and liberation potential in classroom learning, including authentic dialogue as might be imagined in the phenomenological tradition of communication theory. We see liberation potential in communicating mindfully (Huston, 2010), which is compatible with critical pedagogies (Fassett & Warren, 2006; Faulkner & Cloud, 2019; Freire, 2018) if students are empowered to author their embodied experiences in the classroom, and when they have access to ample and diverse concepts of justice, critique, and freedom, born inside and outside of the academy. This includes concepts birthed by activists and left social movements. Rationales for attending to the dialectical and dialogical relationships between academic and non-academic discourses can be found in Freire (2018), Said (1994), Craig (1999, 2015), Carbado et al. (2013), and Collins (2019). We concur with Craig (2015) that different traditions of communication theory speak to "different problem frames and normative visions of communicative

practice" (p. 366). Regarding the "problem frame" of racial and social injustice in institutions of higher education, we assert the critical tradition of communication theory (Habermas, 1984, 1987; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972), infused with insights from postmodern and feminist theory (Agger, 2006), has pragmatic value. Postmodern (informed) critical theory provides theoretical explanations for the mobilization of diversity, equity, and inclusion discourses by universities and faculty in public relations campaigns, task forces, syllabi, and classrooms, as a response to perceived threats to power and capital from racial and social justice movements. Our poem problematizes the discourses of diversity, equity, and inclusion (a re-branding of multiculturalism), as well as critical theory and feminist discourses of hegemony-counterhegemony and transformative praxis and interrogates the power and subject positions of the actors pushing them. In the "Notes from a Colonized Student" section of the poem, we author liberation discourses of embodiment, emotion, vulnerability, anticolonialism, antiracism, feminism, defiance, difference, democracy, deep listening, and presence. See Wilkinson (2010) for the poetic theorization of these discourses in greater depth and complexity.

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Access Before Praxis: Lessons Learned About Critical Communication Pedagogy and Socioeconomic Barriers from 2020

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Communication scholars and professionals often turn to Critical Communication Pedagogy (CCP) to best reach college and university students of all backgrounds. One particular demographic category that reveals disproportionate levels of access to tools for success in the college classroom. In our essay, we first examine several fundamental dimensions of the theory and praxis of CCP and then explain how these aspects of both theory and practice were fundamentally challenged for instructors and exacerbated for students who lacked socioeconomic privilege and experienced food and housing insecurity since March of 2020.

Introduction

> *February 2020: An instructor is discussing a subject with students that challenges their positionalities. Essays are coming forth where students are showing growth in their personal journeys.*
>
> *Early March 2020: An assurance is made to the students that if we have to transition online, we will do our best to make sure that they will learn all they can, that the course will meet its outcomes, and we will keep a positive attitude.*
>
> *Late March 2020: A student emails a professor and mentions that their book is in a locked dorm room on campus and wants to know how to access the material.*
> *Late March 2020: A student emails a professor from their phone and lets them know that they have limited access to the Internet.*
> *Late March 2020: A student emails a professor to let them know that they are in-between living spaces.*
> *Late March 2020: A student lets their professor know that they are sorry that they have not turned anything in, but they just could not get motivated to complete the assignment.*
>
> *Early April 2020: A student logs into the learning management system for the last time with weeks to go.*

*****The narrative experiences included are not verbatim interactions that any of the authors have experienced with students. These are hypothetical narratives designed to reflect the multitude of challenges that may resonate with instructors' experiences.*

Communication scholars and professionals often turn to Critical Communication Pedagogy (CCP) as a theory and practice for best-reaching college and university students of all backgrounds. One particular demographic category that reveals disproportionate access to tools for success in the college classroom is socioeconomic status. In our essay, we first examine several fundamental dimensions of the theory and praxis of CCP. Then, we explain how these aspects of both theory and practice were fundamentally

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challenged for instructors when dealing with students who lacked socioeconomic privilege and experienced food and housing insecurity since March of 2020. Finally, we offer strategies that instructors may employ to best connect with students who are experiencing challenges to meet fundamental needs.

Critical Communication Pedagogy

The goal (theory) of critical pedagogy differs from the praxis-based realities that instructors and students encounter on an ongoing basis. Education scholars first presume that the purpose of this approach to education must begin with critical theory and follows the premise:

> *Men and women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege.* The critical educator endorses theories that are, first and foremost, *dialectical*; that is, theories which recognize the problems of society as more than simply isolated events of individuals of deficiencies in the social structure. (McLaren, 2003, p. 69)

Fundamentally, critical pedagogy's function recognizes that social ills must be solved before larger goals of awareness, consciousness-raising, and ultimately, learning, can be achieved. Paulo Freire acts as a founding voice for many modern-day education scholars who study and practice critical pedagogy. His (1970/2000) work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* draws from experiences of having taught literacy skills to members of the laboring class in Brazil. It includes a theoretical foundation in regard to the relationship between teachers and students concerning the dimensions of power, equality, and reciprocity:

> A revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice *co-intentional* education. Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. (p. 69)

A Freierean approach considers the relationship that teachers and students should opt to create through mutual dialogue to avoid a more traditional and oppressive monologic *banking* form of education that solely asks students to memorize and repeat information.

So, what is a Critical "Communication" Pedagogy? In terms of practice, critical pedagogy adds to Freirean assumptions about how teaching practices ought to occur in terms of symbolic action and connects the role that language has in constructing social barriers (Kahl, Jr., 2013). However, it is easiest to first reflect upon what communication actions are not critical forms of learning (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Rote memorization without meaningful goals, ignoring or invalidating individuals' experiences, and the silencing of voices are just a few aspects that are not critical pedagogies. In developing a few principles of how these actions occur, educators recognize that "in critical communication pedagogy, identity is constituted in communication" (p. 39); "culture is central to critical communication pedagogy, not additive" (p. 42); and "critical communication educators embrace social, structural critique as it places concrete mundane communication practices in a meaningful context" (p. 45).

For all of the actions and goals that go into building a framework for CCP, one major concern to consider regards the barriers that may exist before meaningful learning can occur. While all students will hold different standpoints in relation to identity, power, and privilege, we contend that one major factor that has become especially illuminated since March of 2020 involves the isolation of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. In contemporary times, the lack of affordability of a college education may cause students to take on insurmountable debt. Calling upon significant findings from the Hope Center at Temple University, we contend that the class divisions in higher education systems are architectonic to the continuance of inequities as an important mission of public universities should be giving access to students who can afford to enroll (Nasaw, 1979).

The Hope Center and Students from Low-Socioeconomic Backgrounds

The Hope Center (2020a) is expeditiously pioneering a national movement to unveil and mitigate the burgeoning crisis of basic needs insecurity in higher education. Since its inception in 2013, the Center has implemented scientific research to amend institutional policies that promote cultural injustices and impede students' academic success. This research is routinely transcribed into compact open-source tools for public access on the Hope Center's website. From book chapters and scholarly journal articles to instructional guides and webinars, the Hope Center (2020b) positions its work as "an easy to access library [for] researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and journalists" (para. 3). Their coalitional and co-intentional initiatives strive to revolutionize post-secondary class divisions that dehumanize students for profit through an approach that emphasizes public accessibility and distribution. One such resource is the #RealCollege survey, which is "the nation's largest, longest-running annual assessment of basic needs insecurity among college students" (Baker-Smith et al., 2020, p. 2). Baker-Smith et al. (2020) explain that the Hope Center distributes the survey as a primary means in its attempt to help rectify a dearth of federal knowledge regarding the harsh realities of students' inaccessibility to food and housing. The systemically ingrained pervasion of these realities is alarming. In its February 2020 report, the Hope Center estimated "that at least 6 million students are delayed or deterred on their path to a degree because they don't have a safe and stable place to live or enough nutritious food to eat" (Baker-Smith et al., 2020, p. 9).

Students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds have a "higher-than-average risk" of being unceremoniously derailed by this statistic (Baker-Smith et al., 2020, p. 22). Bahrainwala (2020) maintains that the precarity incurred by some students regulates their non-citizenship in educational systems. Post-secondary infrastructures benefit "traditional students" from high-socioeconomic backgrounds who can afford a full-time education rather than "nontraditional students" from low-socioeconomic backgrounds whose employment and part-time enrollment jeopardize their access to learning structures. It has become increasingly clear that "the majority (70%) of students who experience food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness are employed" and academically compromised (Baker-Smith et al., 2020, p. 23). Basic needs pale in comparison to the financial requisites of collegiate participation, and students' divided attention and inculpable negligence inadvertently thwart their education.

Henry Giroux, a philosopher who examines many critical issues in higher education, has extensively recognized the long-standing concerns for students in poverty. Prominently, Giroux (2002) claims that "spiraling tuition costs coupled with evaporating financial aid increasingly put higher education out of reach for working-class and middle-class youth" (p. 427). From a structural standpoint, pre-pandemic educational access was already problematic. However, as the crisis has continued with a fluctuating job market, inconsistent government assistance, and schools' inability to drastically reduce costs, the barriers to access are growing. In the foundations of critical pedagogy, we discuss the importance of the Freirean approach of making education *co-intentional*. Although both teachers and students opt to see themselves as equally affected participants in systemic oppression, a stratification in participation still exists. As more instruction requires online participation, interaction, and methods that necessitate access to software, stable computers, and consistent Internet connection, the attempt to make education co-intentional may never begin in the first place.

August 2020: A student responds to a professor's welcome email that describes the format of the class and mentions that they live in a rural area, so meeting synchronously would be difficult as paying for data on a hotspot is very expensive. The professor responds that they could take an asynchronous section if one is available or could wait until the next semester when one is offered.

Food and Housing Insecurity

Food and housing insecurities are often mutually inclusive. As the Hope Center's February 2020 report confirms, "students' overlapping challenges in the data demonstrate that basic needs insecurities are fluid and interconnected" (Baker-Smith et al., 2020, p.15). Yet, these experiences are distinct. Food insecurity is "the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire such food in a socially acceptable manner" (p.11), ranging from mild (e.g., worrying about running out of food) to severe (e.g., not eating for a day due to a lack of money for food). Housing insecurity involves all barriers that "prevent someone from having a safe, affordable, and consistent place to live" (p. 12). Some examples include insurmountable increases in rent, defaulted accounts, or leaving one's residence due to a lack of safety. Homelessness constitutes a troubling facet of housing insecurity in which students do not have a consistent place to live. In most cases, "students who experience homelessness temporarily stay with a relative or friend, or couch surf" (p. 13). Regarding these challenges, the Hope Center's fall 2019 survey found that "39% of respondents were food insecure in the prior 30 days," "46% of respondents were housing insecure in the previous year," and "17% of respondents were homeless in the previous year" (p. 2).

With the onset of coronavirus, a revised version of the #RealCollege survey was quickly issued to colleges and universities in April 2020 (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020, p. 2). The Hope Center found that "nearly three in five students experienc[ed] basic needs insecurity" in various overlapping forms and struggled with their schoolwork (p. 19). Unsurprisingly, "nearly 70% of students who lost a job" and "63% of students whose pay or hours were cut" experienced basic needs insecurity at higher rates (p. 14). Inferentially, the pandemic exacerbated the basic needs insecurity that students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds experience.

Food and housing insecurity are central concerns that also form barriers to access in higher education. However, these issues are even deeper and more personal than general socioeconomic barriers as they require a new level of self-disclosure from students. We return to the notion from Fassett and Warren (2007) that communication is at the center of how we make sense of our identities. In a two-way model of education, these identities are co-constructed and yet participants may come with experiences that are never revealed. Relationships are key in building trust, promoting student success, and making educational exchanges more meaningful (Goldrick-Rab, 2020a). Even more so, cultivating a "culture of care" in which collaborative interactions are commonplace is crucial to developing an understanding of student precarity, especially in a time when students are posed with a variety of insecurities (Goldrick-Rab, 2020b, p.3). Paulo Freire describes the type of praxis that we must consciously avoid when building a critical approach to education: "The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable" (1970/2000, p. 71). The core component is reality and how we seek to make sense of it *with* our students. The data from the Hope Center reveal that many students are food and/or housing insecure and this may not be a reality that is readily perceptible to all instructors. A lexicon for mutual dialogue goes underdeveloped when students' experiences of basic needs insecurity are structurally veiled and excluded from the course curriculum. This could explain why students have a hard time revealing the dire circumstances they experience. It is important for us to know that the identities we, both instructors and students, present may not align with the realities in which we live.

> *A future month: A professor emails a student to check in because they haven't logged into the course in a while.*

The basic needs insecurity that plagues students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds is often veiled by the idealized trope of the *poor college student.* The connotation of the phrase misses addressing the students who face real challenges of poverty. Our argument strives to recognize that educators who wish to engage in methods of critical pedagogy for a liberating educational experience also face a significant set of structural barriers that make starting the learning process difficult or nearly impossible. Instructors are understandably drained from the structural pressures of living and working amid a global pandemic. Westwick and Morreale (2020) explain that "the rapid transition to remote learning has had diverse impacts on professors, instructors, and graduate teaching assistants" (p. 217). Indeed, with an intensified convergence on their home environments, many educators are dealing with exacerbated family care responsibilities and personal hardships while copious others are facing the material insecurities of reduced income due to financial restrictions placed on their respective departments. In the face of these challenges, teachers are forging ahead and working overtime to maintain dialogue-based communication in remote learning environments that have significantly disrupted their personal and professional lives. Unfortunately, the technology governing educational experiences has served to further subvert pedagogical goals oriented around instructor and student interaction (Swerzenski, 2020).

Martínez-Guillem and Briziarelli (2020) explain that remote learning has reduced communication with students to "technical questions of connectivity" because learning management systems (LMSs) tend to function as mere logistical tools of transmission thus normalizing a monologic approach to education. The conversion to online instruction has, in other words, undermined the learning process through its transformation of "social relations among people (i.e., instructors and students) into social relations between modules and their associated interfaces [where] co-constructed lived experiences are dematerialized and substantiated in colorful images on LMSs such as Blackboard or Canvas" (p. 362). The Hope Center suggests that teachers can begin to confront structural challenges that veil socioeconomic barriers by proactively encouraging students to engage with them comrades in the learning process (Goldrick-Rab, 2020b, p. 1). The capacity for instructors to provide support, especially when they have made themselves more accessible to accommodate student needs during the pandemic, is salient. As we move to the future months and years, we must understand that communication is the component in critical pedagogy that can allow for co-intentional learning to begin.

> *A future month: A student sends a reply asking if they can talk with a professor about some challenges they have been facing.*

Quotidian forms of communication, like email correspondence, can significantly help bolster student success. However, in a paradox, the pandemic has both centralized and abated the impact of this specific medium. Class emails are sent to all course participants to provide instructional support, boost morale, and spark interactions that can inform their educational enlightenment. The content of these messages is vital in a time when students are relying more heavily on instructional communication to help them survive college and the pandemic (Ao, 2020). Instructors are working hard to avoid non-critical forms of remote learning that invalidate students' experiences and induce stress. Yet, indiscriminate messages containing important information can seem impersonal and be disregarded by students who feel disconnected from learning structures in the virtual classroom.

Although email is a concrete and essential communication practice in educational settings, its use has become exceedingly mundane and ineffectual. A revision to *how* the medium is employed within course contexts could foster greater faculty-student engagement and create openings for students to receive the support they need to survive and learn. In their study entitled, "My Professor Cares: Experimental Evidence on the Role of Faculty Engagement," Carrell and Kurlaender (2020) introduce *light-touch feedback* as a critical intervention that advises instructors to send personalized emails to students at specific times throughout a given semester. Said emails can be tailored to any course but should generally include "(1) how [students] are progressing in the class; (2) how to be successful in the class moving forward; and (3) the availability of the professor and other supports" (pp. 6-7). By inviting students to engage in discussion about their performance through light-touch feedback, faculty not only demonstrate their dedication to student outcomes but also prompt further conversation regarding barriers that unjustly render students' basic needs security and education mutually exclusive.

To illustrate its potential, Carrell and Kurlaender (2020) found that students, in response to faculty feedback, revealed personal challenges impacting their course performance such as having to handle tuition payments and reconciling work schedules with coursework. This is an important discovery for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds who suffer structural disadvantages and isolation. Here, we can perceive the promise of light-touch feedback to augment the alignment of basic needs security with students' educational success and persistence in college.

Light-touch feedback frames email correspondence within a scheme that allows educators to significantly co-construct meaningful survival *with* their students in academic environments. This is particularly true for contemporary online classrooms that are provisional and riddled with uncertainty. Light-touch feedback facilitates faculty-student reciprocity and co-intent on physically distant, virtual realities to identify (in)effective learning structures and barriers to access. Meaning is drawn from the phronesis of this mutual engagement to mitigate fatigue, systematize a process of co-constructing self-efficient student identities, and offset pedagogical regressions that are typical of web-based conferencing platforms that allow participants to engage in self-silencing behaviors (e.g., muting audio and video). Taking some time to implement light-touch feedback can play a pivotal role in making colleges and universities more supportive places that recognize students as humans first.

The Hope Center provides educators with a succinct timeline for the implementation of light-touch feedback and resources for email templates, basic needs security statements to include in course syllabi, and welcome surveys as standalone tools and measures that can contextualize the use of the intervention (see Goldrick-Rab, 2020a and Goldrick-Rab, 2020b). Fundamental communication fortifies workable solutions to the barriers that students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds face. This is true even for instructors who are unable to send personalized emails due to large class sizes or other pressing obligations. Acknowledging students' basic needs can help empower them to seek various forms of campus and university assistance. From reaching out to academic advisors and connecting with health professionals or obtaining support from food banks, financial aid, emergency housing, and transportation services, cultivating a culture of care occurs at all levels in the educational structure. This culture can be prompted in the classroom through instructional communication. Teachers' incorporation of methods to effectively connect with their students can take everyday communication practices and not only construct a foundation for pedagogical innovation but create vital opportunities for support throughout the larger academic community.

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Interpersonal Relationship Dynamics: On the Perception of Conflict in College Students

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College friendships are a multifaceted system of conflict dynamics counterbalanced by the adolescent mindset. The current research on friendships among college students focuses solely on interactions between dyads, this study furthers current understandings of the perception of conflict and its effect on conflict styles, emotion, and life satisfaction. Methods by which data was collected included an online survey taken by undergraduate college students. Results indicated that emotion and conflict styles are related to the perception of conflict in students. Qualitative data indicated that emotional support is important to college students and affected their overall life satisfaction positively. Discussions of limitations and future research directions are offered.

Introduction

College friendships are a multifaceted system of conflict dynamics counterbalanced by the adolescent mindset. Analyzing the conflict dynamics between undergraduate students in a group setting can provide a multi-perspective lens into how conflict is handled within those groups of friends. Examining this community can also give further insight into how conflict is perceived by students in the current generation.

Current research in friendship among college students focuses solely on dyadic interactions (Boman et al., 2019). However, it is speculated that students experiencing excessive stress are more likely to put themselves around a group of friends, rather than a dyadic relationship between two persons (Dissing et al., 2019). For that reason, this study will acknowledge that college friendships are more likely to be based in groups. The phrases "my core group of friends" and "the friend group" are meant to articulate the self-reported group of friends with which an individual is closest. The goal is not to define the amount of people in a core group of friends, but rather, to examine how conflict is perceived within it.

This study will analyze the contrasting perceptions of conflict between college students. By analyzing this idea in a broad context and discovering similarities in results, this research aims to understand common perceptions between students on how a conflict is approached within their core group of friends. Over the course of this study, the importance of the perception of conflict within friend groups will be analyzed among college undergraduates. A review of literature will provide background understanding of the key variables: friend groups, conflict, emotion, and life satisfaction. The methods used to find data will be explained alongside the results. Additionally, implications of the gathered data will be discussed. An interpretation of limitations will be provided at the end.

Literature Review

The content here will explain the relevance of friend groups among undergraduate students with the perception of conflict, emotion, and life satisfaction as variables to the study. This information provided will lead to a thorough understanding of those variables and their importance to this study.

Friend Groups

Speculation suggests that students who have higher perceived amounts of stress will surround themselves with more people (Dissing et al., 2019), thus forming larger groups of friends. This may be because students who feel that their emotional needs are met embrace the idea of close emotional relationships among friends; indicating that emotional support may offset the effects of stress; reporting a

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higher reason for living (Hope & Smith-Adcock, 2015). College students desire friendship now more than ever, likely because late-age adolescents are especially at high risk for experiencing loneliness (Cutrona, 1982). It is equally important to recognize that these friendships they forge may be sought out due to internal loneliness; it should not be assumed that they were cultivated due to being socially well suited for each other, or rather 'compatible' (Spithoven et al., 2018). These groups are generally smaller and more personal, as students opt to stick with whatever friendship is immediate to them.

Understanding friendship between students entails more than examining a perfectly compatible dyadic coupling of individuals; it is necessary to examine the differing perceptions of conflict students have. The college interpersonal relationship could offer a distinct lens into the outcomes of communication within a group setting. Adjusting focus to this idea is meant to further establish that the interpersonal difficulties a student faces is as complicated as the way they go about solving them. Several people are involved when conflict emerges, which often complicates how understandings are negotiated among friends (Hornstein, 1967). Dissecting a potential way to smooth out communication in groups is imperative for implementing measures to improve communication in this increasingly growing demographic.

Perception of Conflict Styles

Differing views of how to approach conflict resolution may vary among adolescents based on the communication styles learned from their families. As a result, adolescents unknowingly enter into relationships with others who have very different perceptions of how to address conflict. Research has shown the importance of understanding constructive conflict management for that reason (Dost-Gözkan, 2019). In spite of this, current literature has only presented finite information on conflict in friendships between adolescents, and seldom out of the contexts of dyads (Bowen et al., 2019). A student's conflict style affects the way conflict flows through a friend group due to different outcomes for differentiating and colliding conflict styles (Antonioni, 1998). Given that students often surround themselves with other students when dealing with stress (Dissing et al., 2019), analyzing these conflict styles further will deepen understandings of the complexity inherent to friend group conflicts.

While the interpretation of conflict styles within current literature varies, the overarching goals of the individual styles appear to be similar across research. They differ only in what they are referred to as in current research (Adkins, 2006; Antonioni, 1998). Common responses to conflict fall into categories that include: collaboration, competition, avoidance, harmonization and compromise. A collaborating conflict style refers to both individuals working to find the best outcome for a conflict. A competing style is an authoritarian approach to the situation. Avoidance is actively dodging disagreement. Harmonizing is suppression of emotion to keep the peace during conflict. And finally, compromise is finding a middle ground accommodating to both preferred outcomes (Adkins, 2006). Each student is unique in their conflict style. When a group has several different approaches to conflict because of their individual styles, it may present difficulty for individuals to reach shared understandings (Antonioni, 1998). This adds to the growing question of how the perception of a certain conflict style may play into a student's reaction to that conflict. Understanding how perception of conflict interacts with an approach to conflict within an individual in the context of a group setting is the aim of this research. Exploring the ways that students perceive conflict is the first step.

RQ1: Does one's self-reported conflict style predict how people perceive conflict within a friendship group?
RQ2: How do students' individual conflict styles impact how they perceive the conflict styles of their friendship group as a whole?

Emotion Regulation

Emotional reactions to conflict influence decision making (Mordka, 2016). However, emotions evoke a broad complex of sensations that do not have a concrete meaning, and therefore, remain speculative in nature (Charland, 2006; Mordka, 2016). Due to this, scholarly understandings of the role emotion plays in conflict vary (Pollak et al., 2019). In any case, it is clear that emotion is not only a response to conflict, but also an instigator of it (Caldara et al., 2017).

To set the groundwork, emotional regulation tactics are how students go about managing emotions once they experience a reaction. The reappraisal tactic manages emotions by acknowledging feelings and using that as a means to guide a response to conflict. The suppression tactic refers to subduing emotional reactions as a means to better control a response to conflict (Gross & John, 2003). These tactics vary from student to student and depend on the emotion that a student experiences. Furthermore, research indicates that individuals use prior emotional knowledge to try and predict the intensity of an emotional reaction in others. However, individual ability to do so is flawed due to the fact that students rely on their personal emotions to guide the thought process (Gendron et al., 2020). This suggests that an individual perception of another person's reaction to conflict may be largely influenced by that individual's internal emotional reaction to the situation.

Understanding how college students regulate emotional reactions on a level that we are able to quantify in relationship to conflict styles is imperative. Due to the detrimental reactions that youth can have due to these complex emotions (Pollak et al., 2019; Hope & Smith-Adcock, 2015), acknowledging the gap in research here may prove useful in improving communication tactics. In other words, college students experience complex emotions and those emotions are extremely difficult to quantify. Despite that, focusing on emotional reactions and viewing how they are related to the perception of conflict in a group setting can organize those thoughts into a recognizable pattern, thus prompting further inquiry. In doing this, emotions, and potentially how students regulate them, may be given a working function in relation to perception of conflict (Pollak et al., 2019).

RQ3: Does emotion regulation predict how individuals perceive conflict in their friend groups?
RQ4: How would students describe when their friend group does not respect their emotions?

Life Satisfaction

It is helpful to recognize that friendship is something beneficial for student success (Bronkema & Bowman, 2018). Students who report having a close college friend they are able to connect with have higher reasons for living (Hope & Smith-Adcock, 2015). This, however, would only account for the benefits of friendship and not underpinnings of the conflict that happens within it. Current research has yet to focus on friendship as a factor of overall life satisfaction in spite of growing evidence that shows friendship satisfaction as a facet of life satisfaction (Heller et al., 2004). This gap in research leaves an area of opportunity for inquiring into whether life satisfaction is affected by conflict styles. More specifically, examining the perception of conflict styles as it relates to individual and group settings. The perception of conflict may be positively linked to life satisfaction; research outlined the need for constructive conflict resolution patterns to contribute to their life satisfaction as a whole (Dost-Gözkan, 2019). Additionally, with an analysis of the relationship between emotional regulation strategies and life satisfaction, the most effective emotional regulation strategies at keeping life satisfaction higher may be discovered.

RQ5: Is self-reported conflict style related to life satisfaction?
RQ6: Is perceived group conflict style related to life satisfaction?
RQ7: What themes are present in the qualitative emotion data set that would suggest support in friendship affects life satisfaction?
RQ8: How does life satisfaction, emotional regulation style, and self-reported conflict style predict how conflict is viewed in group friendships?
RQ9: Is emotion regulation (reappraisal and suppression) related to life satisfaction?

Methods

To test perceptions of conflict among college students, a convenience sampling method was performed via a Qualtrics survey. Use and distribution of the survey was approved by The University of

Akron Institutional Review Board. The survey was sent out to college undergraduate students through the Communication, Research, and Theory Network (CRTNET) and an email listserv. All information given by students was done so anonymously. Guidelines for inclusion in the data set were defined as college students pursuing an undergraduate degree with a close group of friends. Participants were not given parameters on how large their close group of friends may be, just that the group was close to the student and engaged in regular communication. Any participants that did not meet those criteria were excluded from the research.

Participants

The total number of participants (N = 137; female n=87; male n=48; non-binary n=1), were all undergraduate college students with ages ranging mainly between 18-26 (M=20.84; SD= 3.43 years). Students reported as White (69.85%), Black or African American (12.50%), Asian (9.56%), Hispanic or Latino (2.94%), and other (5.15%). Academic standing varied among Freshmen (20.30%), Sophomore (29.32%), Junior (33.08%), and Senior (17.29%). Their GPA was a B average of 3.32/4.00.

Conflict Styles

Five different types of conflict styles were measured via the use of a scale: collaborating, competing, avoiding, harmonizing, and compromising (Adkins, 2006). Respondents were asked to fill out the measure twice: 1^{st}) a self-reported approach to conflict and 2^{nd}) a perception of how their core group of friends approached conflict. The measure originally focused on generalized approaches to conflict, whereby the questions were adjusted to acknowledge friendship, e.g. changing general words such as “others” (and similar instances) to “my core group of friends.”

The scale used was a Likert one having five choices. Higher scores indicate the use of a conflict style (1=never, 5=always). Use of this scale was meant to address perception of conflict. Items for each style were added to give a total score per conflict style. Self-reported approaches to conflict scale examples include: “I explore issues with others to find solutions that meet everyone's needs,” and “I try to see conflicts from both sides. What do I need? What does the other person need? What are the issues involved?” Examples of perception of group approach to conflict scale vary from “My core group of friends and I find solutions that meet everyone’s needs” and, “My core group of friends try to see conflicts from both sides. What do we need? What does the group need? What are the issues involved?”

Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation was measured using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2013). The scale is meant to measure the control someone asserts over their emotions through the lens of emotional reappraisal and suppression. The questionnaire had 10 questions. The scale was a Likert one with seven responses allowed: 1 being strongly disagree and 7 strongly agree. Emotion regulation scale examples: “I control my emotions by changing the way I think about the situation I’m in” and to contrast, “I control my emotions by not expressing them.”

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction was measured using the Students’ Life Satisfaction scale (Hubner, 1991). The scale is a simple seven-item questionnaire intended to measure global child life satisfaction in individuals over the age of eight. This scale was a Likert one with six options. Answers range from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Neutral options were not provided. Use of the measure here meant to simply and clearly allow students to self-report their satisfaction of life. Scale examples include “My life is going well” and, “I have what I want in my life.”

Open-Ended Response to Conflict

Use of open-ended qualitative response options on conflict in relation to each individual scale was a way this study aimed to gather qualitative data. The method here is meant to fill potential gaps in knowledge obtained from the scales. This study excluded any responses that did not pertain to the subject or that were not filled to completion. The open-ended qualitative response options were given at the end of each Likert scale. A total of four open-ended responses were provided and students were given free rein to respond to each qualitative data statement (QDS) in a text box provided.

QDS1: Describe a moment where your core group of friends impacted your life satisfaction in any way.

QDS2: Describe a moment where you felt you handled a conflict well but your primary group of friends disagreed.

QDS3: Describe a moment where you felt your primary group of friends handled a conflict poorly, but your primary group of friends disagreed.

QDS4: Detail a moment in which you felt that your core group of friends may not have respected your emotions.

Demographics

The demographics gathered focused on general descriptors. Specifically, respondents were asked to describe their ethnicity, age, gender identification and sexuality. Academic demographics were gathered pertaining to years in college, academic standing and grade point average. With this, students were also asked of their employment status. Subsequently, students were asked to indicate their relationship status.

Data Analysis

Themes in the data set were gathered via a thematic analysis of the open-ended question responses students gave at the end of each scale. Codes included in the data set were relevant to the information found within the written answers; there was no official goal for the analysis except to find similarities within results. The processes of finding similarities in results focused on locating specific usage of words and/or phrases that indicated an idea or concept related to the perception of conflict.

Quantitative data were analyzed using regression. Predictor variables were entered in one step and examined with respect to each individual conflict style. Results are reported in Tables 1, 3, and 6.

Results

Research question one asked whether or not self-reported conflict style predicted how people perceive conflict within their friend group. To answer this question, several linear regressions were conducted to determine how the five self-reported conflict styles predict how individuals perceive that their group uses each style (collaborating, compromising, harmonizing, competing, avoiding). Each regression was significant ($p < .001$), with R^2 ranging from .20 (group collaborating) to .33 (group harmonizing). Table 1 reports the standardized betas for each regression.

Results showed several significant predictors related to how individuals viewed the conflict in their friend groups. Those who indicated they used competing and harmonizing conflict styles were likely to perceive that their friend group used a collaborating conflict style. Individuals who use a compromising and competing conflict style were more likely to believe their group used a compromising conflict style. For the group harmonizing style, three self-reported styles were predictors: compromising, harmonizing, and competing. Perceptions of the group as using a competing style were predicted by individual compromising and competing styles. Lastly, individuals who believed their group used an avoiding style were more likely to use an avoiding style themselves, as well as a competing style. Overall, the self-reported competing conflict style predicted all five of the group conflict styles. However, the self-reported collaborating conflict style did not predict any of the group conflict styles.

Table 1

Regressing Self-Reported Conflict Styles on Perceived Styles of Group Conflict

Predictors	Group Collaborating	Group Compromising	Group Harmonizing	Group Competing	Group Avoiding

	β	β	β	β	β
Self-Report Collaborating	.17	-.04	-.08	-.03	-.05
Self-Report Compromising	-.04	.38**	.27*	.24*	-.03
Self-Report Harmonizing	.21*	.04	.29**	.07	.08
Self-Report Competing	.28**	.32***	.21*	.40***	.19*
Self-Report Avoiding	-.02	.02	.01	.07	.52***
Model R^2	.20***	.29***	.29***	.31***	.30***

Note. All betas are standardized betas. N = 133.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Research question two inquired into the prevalence of avoidance strategies used as a tactic for conflict resolution was within friend groups. A theme analysis inquiring into the qualitative data responses revealed that avoidance tactics were used by the student and/or the group in conflict. Data used for the theme analysis involved responses to QDS3 and QDS2 - table 2 reports that data.

Results show that students limited communication between opposing parties as a decided-on method, by the group, of preventing future conflict. Emotional suppression was as common as avoidance; in those responses, the common underlying theme in answers involved, as respondents wrote it, "keeping the peace." The method was used to explain why emotions were being suppressed in various situations. Additionally, students detailed moments where an individual was forcibly removed from communication within the group, or as students phrased it "was cut off;" students reported the choice as a way to further prevent conflict. However, there were several students who indicated they have never experienced a disagreement in their friend group. In those responses, students alluded to pre-established common values and beliefs within the group. In other cases, various students indicated that conflict was worsened by using communication strategies, causing situations to remain tense. In those results, students indicated that the group reacted defensively to confrontation and/or the group disagreed strongly on the situation.

Table 2
Theme Analysis of QDS2 and QDS3 on Conflict

Theme	Example Word Usage	Code Extracted	Frequency	Relative Frequency
Suppression	"Kept my mouth shut," " keep the peace"	Suppression of emotion to prevent conflict.	36	0.18
Avoidance	"Left the conversation," "avoided them"	Actively dodging conflict.	35	0.17
Cutting off	"Cut off," stopped talking"	Abrupt halt in communication due to a conflict.	7	0.07
No disagreement	"Never personal," "can't think of a time"	Indicated never feeling a disagreement.	31	0.15

Unresolved	"Got a lot worse," "they got defensive"	Indicated, that after communication, the problem grew.	37	0.18

Note. N=201 (108 in QDS3. 93 in QDS4.)

Research question three was proposed to discover whether or not college students' emotion regulation styles predict how they view conflict in their friend group. To test this question, a series of regressions were conducted with both emotion regulation styles (suppression and reappraisal) predicting each of the five conflict styles. Results are presented in Table 3.

Overall, emotional reappraisal more strongly predicted four of the five conflict styles. The only conflict style where emotional suppression was a stronger predictor was for the avoidance conflict style. Emotional suppression also was a significant predictor of four conflict styles, with the exception of compromising. People who saw their friend groups as using the compromising style were more likely to use emotional reappraisal in their lives.

Table 3

Regressing Self-Reported Emotion Suppression and Emotion Reappraisal with Perceived Group Conflict Styles

Predictors	Group Collaborating β	Group Compromising β	Group Harmonizing β	Group Competing β	Group Avoiding β
Emotional Suppression	.18*	.15	.25**	.18*	.26**
Emotional Reappraisal	.30***	.42***	.31***	.21*	.20*
Model R^2	.14***	.21***	.18***	.09**	.12***

Note. All betas are standardized betas. N = 133.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Research question four asked how students would describe their interpretation of the group's respect for their emotions, specifically, regarding how they may not have been respected within their friend group. A theme analysis conducted on the qualitative data from QDS4 found common responses - students indicated several themes throughout the set. The data is reported in Table 4. Mostly, students indicated that when their emotions were not paid attention to by others, they perceived that their emotions were not respected. It is worth noting that some students felt their emotions were always respected; in those instances, common responses included themes of emotional support and emotions being listened to.

Additionally, student answers indicated instances of emotional suppression and, more so, emotional reappraisal. In the suppression related responses, students indicated suppression as a way to prevent future conflict. Instances where students felt unable to share their emotions also fell were present in suppression as well. In those instances when emotional reappraisal was prevalent, students described communicating personal emotions and preferences with the friend group.

Research questions five and six were proposed to determine how the self-reported conflict styles, perceived group conflict styles, and emotional regulation relate to life satisfaction. To test these questions, Pearson correlations were applied to each of the variables. Research question five addressed self-reported conflict styles and life satisfaction. The only significant relationship that emerged from these tests was for the collaborating style. Individuals who used a collaborating conflict style were more likely to feel that they were satisfied with their lives (r = .18, p < .05). Research question six was proposed to test how life satisfaction relates to perceived group conflict styles. Results showed that none of the group conflict styles were found to be significantly related to life satisfaction.

Table 4
Theme analysis of QDS4 on Emotion

Theme	Example Word Usage	Code Extracted	Frequency	Relative Frequency
Being ignored	"Didn't seem to care," "Ignoring"	Friend group ignoring a communicated emotional preference of a student.	25	0.25
Emotions respected	"listened to," "my friends always support me"	Students failing to report an experience.	15	0.15
Emotional suppression	"I don't really express my emotions," "restrict my emotions"	Students indicate they did not communicate emotions with the group.	16	0.16
Emotional reappraisal	"I told them how I feel," "expressed my point of view"	Student indicates communicating emotions with the group.	24	0.24

Note. N= 99

Research question seven examines how students would describe the effect their friend group has on personal life satisfaction. A theme analysis into QDS1 was performed to find common responses. Data is reported in Table 5.

Table 5
Theme Analysis of Qualitative data for QDS1

Theme	Example Word Usage	Code Extracted	Frequency	Relative Frequency
Support	"Support," "been there for."	Implied and/or direct instances of moral support.	63	0.55
Cheered up	"Cheered me up," "helped me out of a funk,"	Description of a lifted negative emotional state due to friends.	20	0.18
Sense of belonging	"Included," "a part of."	Described sense of belonging to the friend group.	10	0.09
Abandonment	"Abandoned," "cut off,"	Description of feeling abandoned by the friend group.	5	0.04

Note. N= 114

Results indicate that students felt their life satisfaction benefited from the friend group in many ways, but moral support was uniquely common. In these responses, it was regular for a student to indicate their friend group being important to the student. Additionally, students reported being lifted out of a negative emotional state by their friend group. Those responses described deep depressions that the friend group helped a student out of; all responses within this theme indicate that friend groups can greatly impact the mental health of a student for the better.

Research question eight was proposed to look at the combined effects of life satisfaction, emotional regulation, and self-reported conflict styles on how individuals perceive conflict in their friend groups. To test this question, a regression was completed with each of the independent variables (life satisfaction, emotional reappraisal, emotional suppression, five conflict styles) for each of the group conflict styles. Table 6 shows the results of this test.

Table 6

Regressing Emotional Regulation, Life Satisfaction, and Self-Reported Conflict Styles on Perceived Styles of Group Conflict

Predictors	Group Collaborating β	Group Compromising β	Group Harmonizing β	Group Competing β	Group Avoiding β
Emotional Suppression	.18*	.13	.20*	.14	.15
Emotional Reappraisal	.14	.24**	.16	.03	.18*
Life Satisfaction	.05	.04	-.03	-.11	.03
Self-Report Collaborating	.16	-.09	-.07	.02	-.08
Self-Report Compromising	-.04	.36**	.26*	.24*	-.04
Self-Report Harmonizing	.17	-.004	.24*	.05	.04
Self-Report Competing	.24**	.27**	-.02	.36***	.14
Self-Report Avoiding	-.03	.02	-.02	.03	.51***
Model R^2	.25***	.39***	.36***	.34***	.35***

Note. All betas are standardized betas. N = 133.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Individuals who were more likely to suppress their emotions and use a competing conflict style in their lives were more likely to perceive their friends as using a collaborating conflict style. Those who use emotional reappraisal, as well as compromising and competing conflict styles were most likely to believe their group used a compromising style. Individuals who reported that they suppress their emotions and use a compromising and harmonizing conflict style in their lives were more likely to feel their group used a harmonizing conflict style. The competing group conflict style was predicted by two self-reported conflict styles: compromising and competing. Lastly, those who use emotional reappraisal and self-report as avoidant in their conflict style were more likely to report that their friend group used an avoiding conflict style.

Research question nine was proposed to view whether emotion regulation styles were correlated with life satisfaction. As seen on table three, while emotional suppression was not significantly related to life satisfaction, individuals who indicated that they used the reappraisal emotional style reported that they were happier (r = .26, p < .01).

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between students' perceptions of their own and friend group conflict styles. This discussion explores the meaning and implications of the results.

Emotion

The data clarifies a point made prior stating that individuals lack the prowess necessary to accurately predict the emotional reactions of another person (Gendron et al., 2020). Those reactions a student experiences while in conflict determine how that student perceives the group reaction to the situation. This was clear in QDS4; students who felt they were not listened to perceived that as the group was fully ignoring them. Students indicated no middle ground; when students felt an emotion, they felt it to the fullest capacity possible out of the conflict. The responses presented showed that when the student feels a certain emotion during conflict within a friend group, the students drift towards jumping to the conclusion that those friends were the catalyst for those feelings. This occurred despite the fact that many of the conflicts that students experience in groups happen due to externalities and/or circumstances beyond their control. In a sense, the internal emotion a student feels during a conflict is pointed at others in the group. Rather than directing the anger of the situation at the circumstances that facilitated the environment students find themselves in, the students will choose to blame each other.

Furthermore, emotion regulation tactics employed by students do indicate that students who reappraise their emotions are more likely to employ beneficial conflict styles. This includes compromising and collaborating. Implications of this information could suggest that college students would benefit from taking a step back and being proactive about how they will decide to regulate their reaction. It is unrealistic to change the way a student feels, but rather how a student reacts to those feelings can be adjusted. This, alongside emotional reappraisal, could help modify communication and minimize conflict opening up new pathways for solving situations.

Conflict Styles

Various conflict styles lead to varying perceptions of what conflict style the group is using. The conflict styles students perceive generally coincide with the goal of a student's personal conflict style. For example, compromisers are more likely to view the group as collaborators due to the fact that collaborators work for the same outcome as compromisers. Vice versa, with avoiders, they are more likely to view others in the group as harmonizing because both of those styles have the same goal: for the conflict to stop without communication. Students want to believe that those around them have the same goals for solving conflict. Additionally, the research data shows that collaborators are happier than the other conflict styles users. This may be because those students actively see their problems being solved rather than letting those small conflicts build up. This could be an implication as well. If future students are encouraged to collaborate in conflict, this research suggests that those students may feel high levels of life satisfaction. Due to the detrimental consequences of an unhappy student (Pollak et al., 2019; Hope & Smith-Adcock, 2015), addressing this phenomenon in future research may be worth putting some time into. That way there is more comprehensive and personable information present that can be offered to students in a constructive setting.

The data also suggests that the college students sampled tend to be highly competitive when they are trying to solve conflict. This poses an interesting point, not only because competing is a more authoritative approach to conflict, but also because competing could have a negative effect on conflict. Speculation could suggest that if a student is a competitive conflict style user, that would imply others can perceive that. This could potentially lead students to respond to that conflict style by being more competitive, or in a worse outcome for the friend group, disengaging completely and cutting friends off from the group due to their aggressive conflict resolving behavior. As stated before, students can and will jump to conclusions about the way they feel if given the opportunity and a competitive conflict style encourages that thought process substantially due to its aggressive nature. Implications could suggest that, while a competitive style can come in handy in some cases, conflict resolution among college friends about interpersonal happenings in the group may not be that case.

In conclusion, the qualitative data results show that students who employ avoidance as a strategy for solving conflict view themselves as peacekeepers. Meanwhile, there is ample evidence to suggest that students who use collaborative tactics as a means to solve conflict are happier than those who use avoidance tactics. Additionally, though it works for some situations, using competing as a style for solving conflict can be a slippery slope.

Life Satisfaction

Early in the study, whether or not conflict styles relate to life satisfaction was questioned; the data indicated that it does not. This research found that students felt greatly impacted by their friend group in a different sense—via support. An analysis of the qualitative data showed that students felt their life satisfaction was improved when their friend group supported them. Students provided an in-depth personal description of how they felt supported in their friend group. Implications here could suggest that students who feel supported in their friend groups are more likely to have higher life satisfaction. This could mean that students can be encouraged to find friends that they feel supported around and curb those they do not. Furthermore, implications of the results suggest that students who collaborate and feel supported are more likely to feel higher life satisfaction in their friend group.

Practical Implications

At this research's core, the idea of being aware of one's reactivity during tense communication within interpersonal relationships is omnipresent. Conflict, put simply, is just communication interpreted in a way that is offensive to another individual. Being cognizant of this individual reactivity provides ample enough opportunities to regulate the emotions an individual may feel. This research brings forth the value of being proactive about the way one is reactive. Stepping back, deciding what the value of this difficult communication is, and *then* moving in the direction of working to solve the conflict is key. Ram Dass, formally PhD. Richard Alpert, said it best, "It is important to expect nothing, to take every experience, including the negative ones, as merely steps on the path, and to proceed." In modern psychology, the concept of mindfulness suggests that if an individual having thoughts takes a non-judgmental approach to observing those emotions, there is more opportunity to regulate complex feelings (Ong & Shults, 2010). Much like the words spoken by Ram Dass, this suggests that emotions can be observed, taken with a grain of salt, approached objectively, and understood with clarity.

The ideas that build into emotional regulation and mindfulness boil down to the same things; being aware of one's thoughts rather than acting on them. And though this research concentrated on a youthful demographic, the implication of the findings can be expanded to the daily machinations of functioning adults. This research may not be the first to recognize the importance of perceiving conflict, it does provide further evidence that suggests becoming aware of and responding to one's own and others' communication styles is key to improving the current status and/or longevity of a valued relationship.

Limitations and Future Research

A major limitation present in this study was its inability to grasp anything beyond perception in this context via survey research. There is a hyperbolic wall separating what is real and what students see; this research focused only on what the students see. Over the course of this study, the intention was to examine the perception of conflict in college students within their friend groups. The study found that perception of conflict is related to emotion and conflict styles. Additionally, it was discovered that emotional support in friend groups is vitally important to students.

Future scholars should invest time into understanding what strategies of communication work best within groups of individuals to best get information across. The total emotional mindset of an individual does not have to be understood to figure the best way to communicate with that mindset. Finding common approaches to communication that facilitate a healthy, productive conversation should be the focus of future research. The college friendship is a multifaceted system of conflict dynamics counterbalanced by the adolescent mindset. However, the perceptions and reactions of this mindset can be analyzed to better help students with communication in their close interpersonal relationships.

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"You Change the World When You Change Your Mind:" Social Judgment Theory in the Musical *Kinky Boots*

Courtney Weikel

This project applies Sherif and Hovland's (1961) social judgment theory to the musical Kinky Boots through a rhetorical analysis of the script and a recorded performance of the London West End Production. Specifically, I analyze how Latitudes of Rejection, Latitudes of Noncommitment, and Latitudes of Acceptance are illustrated in Kinky Boots by observing how the characters react to Lola's appearance, Charlie's decision regarding the future of the shoe factory, and decisions on the Milan fashion show. By observing how ideas are placed into an individuals' latitudes, I found that audience members can observe their own reactions, along with other people's reactions, when introduced to new ideas such as career choices and identities and gender performances. I suggest that audience members can learn life lessons such as overcoming prejudice through watching Kinky Boots.

Introduction

Kinky Boots, a musical that blends the worlds of a shoe factory owner and an entertainer, portrays the benefits of people altering their perspectives towards those different from them. This musical, written by Harvey Fierstein with music and lyrics written by Cyndi Lauper, was originally based off a 2005 movie with the same name (Blistein, 2018). This musical had its first preview on March 3, 2013, opened on April 4, 2013 at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre, and recently closed on April 7, 2019 (The Broadway League, n.d.). The show ran for 2,507 performances and became the 25th-longest-running Broadway show in history (Blistein, 2018). *Kinky Boots* grossed $297 million from its Broadway performances alone (Blistein, 2018). In addition to the Broadway performances, the musical has been performed in England, Germany, Korea, Canada, Australia and Japan (Blistein, 2018). The musical has received six Tony awards: Best Musical, Best Original Score for The Theatre, Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role in a Musical, Best Choreography, Best Orchestrations, and Best Sound Design of a Musical (The Broadway League, n.d.).

This musical has also received positive reviews from critics. Adam Feldman (2013) of *Time Out* notes that "the musical holds up for the same reason Price & Son's products do: solid craftsmanship and care. Lauper is a musical-theater natural, combining bright, infectious melodies with simple but effective lyrics. As each act progresses, the energy rises palpably, boosted by a heart-strong cast" (para. 2). Chris Jones (2018) of the *Chicago Tribune* describes *Kinky Boots* as "both an idealized escape and a kind of fascinating, even a calming, reflection of the massive social change occurring on both sides of the Atlantic" (para. 11).

The story of *Kinky Boots* focuses on Charlie, who inherits his father's shoe factory after his father passes away. Charlie lacks a passion for this business and the factory is going bankrupt. He must make the decision whether to stay in London with his fiancée and start a new life or return to Northern England and take over the business. Charlie chooses the latter in order to continue his father's legacy. Because of the bankruptcy, Charlie needs to reinvent the business with a new product. Assisting with this is Lola, a drag performer who meets Charlie accidentally when he tries defending her against hooligans outside of a pub. After breaking a heel, Lola complains that her drag boots are cheaply made but very expensive. She mentions the challenge of finding shoes that are durable enough for dancing. Charlie then realizes an untapped footwear market: cross-dressers who need durable and reliable footwear. Charlie gets the idea to create boots for cross-dressing men with the help of Lola. Lola makes an appearance at the factory, where she is harassed by multiple workers for being a cross-dresser. Charlie and Lola realize they have more in common than they thought, as they both are unsuccessfully trying to live up to their fathers' expectations.

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Don, a factory worker, judges Lola for the attire she wears at the factory. Lola tells Don that he is jealous that she receives more attention from the female employees than he does. The pair argue over what it means to be a real man, which eventually leads to Don challenging Lola to a boxing match. The fight ends with Lola allowing Don to win to prevent him from feeling disrespected when he returns to work at the factory. However, she challenges Don to accept people for who they are.

After production begins, Charlie realizes he doesn't have enough money to travel to Milan for a fashion show to display the company's new boots. Lola suggests using her "Angels" (fellow drag queens) as models rather than paying for professional models. After fighting with both Nicola and Lola, Charlie is left alone in the factory, frustrated with himself. Don convinces the other employees to go back to work and accepts Charlie and Lola for who they are. Finally, they receive enough money for Milan, but Lola refuses to go after her fight with Charlie. In Milan, Charlie prepares himself to model the boots, but before he goes out, Lola and her Angels arrive and take over. The remaining workers model the boots, accepting one another for who they are. Lola not only helps Charlie with his business, but also in becoming the man he needs to be. Through their teamwork, they discover they are more similar than they thought.

I chose to study *Kinky Boots* as the messages and issues mentioned in the storyline are important for audience members to learn. The primary message of the musical is acceptance; accepting yourself and accepting others for who they are as individuals. The plot illustrates a need for society to adapt and alter their viewpoints on people they perceive as different. In Lola's story, she faces challenges in being her true self to those she loves, her father, and those she interacts with daily. The key lesson here is that people should accept others for who they are rather than maintaining their preconceived prejudices. Through this rhetorical analysis, I apply Sherif and Hovland's (1961) social judgment theory to the musical *Kinky Boots.* I apply the concepts of this theory to the musical, and study how we take a position on an idea based off our current attitudes. Through examining the characters and how they interpret situations, ideas, and concepts, I notice how and when they adopt changes into their own latitudes of acceptance, rejection, and non-commitment. By observing character relationships in the musical, audience members are provided with insights about important life lessons, such as overcoming prejudices and accepting others for who they are. These life lessons, which connect with social judgment theory, also apply to viewers' everyday lives which is important as we observe how people react to new situations, concepts, and ideas.

Social Judgment Theory

Social judgment theory was established by Muzafer Sherif and Carl I. Hovland (1961) in *Social Judgment: Assimilation and Contrast Effects in Communication and Attitude Change*. The main premise behind social judgment theory is that an individual considers new ideas, compares these new ideas to his/her/their current point of view, and determines where these ideas are placed on his/her/their attitude scale (O'Keefe, 1990). This is a subconscious process that frequently happens throughout our daily lives as we are constantly exposed to new ideas. Sherif and Hovland (1961) state that "a person's attitude on an issue may well influence the way he appraises relevant behavior and events" (p. 4). A listener determines how an issue or idea agrees or disagrees with his/her/their attitude and judges how he/she/they feels based on that. A person's position is based on his/her/their most preferred position, judgment on various alternatives, and level of ego-involvement with the issue ("Social Judgment Theory," n.d.). Sherif and Hovland (1961) describe an example of a baseball game where the umpire declares a player on the favored team as "out," which results in boos from the crowd. The fans immediately boo the umpire for ruling against their team even though they haven't looked to see if the umpire was correct in this ruling. This portrays how some individuals choose to pass judgments and act on them. Sherif and Hovland (1961) further explain attitude in the following terms:

> An attitude toward an object, person, group or social issue is not directly observable but is inferred from a persistent and characteristic mode of reaction to that stimulus or stimulus class. The object of attitude is placed in a category or class favorable or unfavorable in some degree, high or low in some degree, acceptable or unacceptable in some degree in the individual's scheme of things. One essential aspect of the attitudinal reaction is a categorization process, whether or not the individual is aware that he is passing a judgment. (p. 5)

This process includes placing these judgments into different latitudes or categories. According to Sherif and Hovland (1961), there is a process in which an individual solicits an expression of his/her/their attitude toward an issue, person or group, places that issue within a framework, and assigns it to a category (p. 5). Individuals place items (statements, objects, groups) into categories based on personal preference. These categories are known as latitudes under acceptance-rejection (Sherif & Hovland, 1961, p. 7). Latitudes of acceptance are when an individual finds an idea reasonable, latitudes of rejection are when an idea is unreasonable, and latitudes of non-commitment are when a person neither accepts nor rejects the idea (Sherif and Hovland, 1961, p. 7). One's attitude determines the outcome of the judgmental processes and effects. According to O'Keefe (1990), "persuasion occurs at end of the process where individual[s] understand a message, comparing [it] with [their] current position on that issue, depending upon position of anchor point, latitudes of acceptance, rejection and non-commitment with level of ego-involvement" (p. 4). Sherif and Hovland (1961) go into further detail about the discrimination task and judgment process that occurs as individuals consider new ideas. They state:

> The discrimination task which requires the individual with a strong attitude on an issue to choose one of two objectionable statements as more favorable than the other, the subject's reactions to such a task and toward the experimenter by subjecting him to it may be more significant psychologically than the choice itself. The judgment of items related to an attitude involves placement in terms of the individuals reference scale, but it becomes placement in which the degree of acceptance or rejection is significant. (pp. 10-11)

Individuals react to new ideas in a variety of ways depending on their personal attitudes. In the storyline of *Kinky Boots,* the characters are facing a multitude of new ideas such as their beliefs of cross-dressers and the fate of their factory. Based on their personal attitudes toward the ideas, they act accordingly to either reject, accept, or feel non-committed to a reaction.

A number of scholars have applied social judgment theory to their research studies. Robert Wigton (1996) applies social judgment theory to the study of medical judgments. Wigton (1996) states that:

> Medical judgments characteristically involve decision making under uncertainty with inevitable error and an abundance of fallible cues. In medicine, as in other areas, SJT research has found wide variation among decision makers in their judgments and in the weighting of clinical information. (p. 175)

He concludes that this theory provides physicians with insight on decisions and allows the medical research community to have these tools for studying judgments within their practices (Wigton, 1996).

Smith et al. (2002) apply this theory when studying the decisions involved when treating depression. Their research "aimed to assess the extent to which clinical guidelines influence the treatment decisions of GPs involved in the management of depression as well as to determine the amount of agreement or disagreement among individual GPs" (Smith et al., 2002, p. 60). One of their findings concluded that "the overall utilization of the cues in the GPs' decision strategies differed from guideline recommendations. However, both the guideline experts and the GPs placed importance on the 'duration of symptoms' cue" (Smith et al., 2002, p. 60).

> Another finding had to do with agreement in antidepressant prescriptions. They reported that:
> One participant said they were 100% certain that the guidelines indicated an antidepressant for this patient whereas another expert thought the patient definitely should not be prescribed antidepressants. If the guidelines were hard and fast rules that were clearly explained then the guideline expert's responses should be yes or no decisions. (Smith et al., 2002, p. 57)

This theory is useful to notice "the uncertainties embedded in the environment that decision makers face and does not assume they are fully informed" (Smith et al., 2002, p. 51). By applying social judgment theory, we can observe how the participants place their opinions regarding the antidepressants into different latitudes. Also, social judgment theory "allows identification of levels of agreement or disagreement among clinicians as well as tracing the source of any disagreement, by the analysis of individual decision strategies" (Smith et al., 2002, p. 52). Through the use of this theory, they are able to identify those participants that place the usage of these antidepressants into their latitudes of acceptance or rejection and allow them to justify their decision process. By providing insight on how a decision is made, clinicians can weigh the information used in making decisions (Smith et al., 2002, p. 52).

Thompson et al. (2005) apply this theory when studying "nurses' use of clinical information when diagnosing hypovolemic shock in a series of simulated cases presented via computer" (p. 68). Social judgment theory is applicable to "establish the relative contribution to judgment of differing levels of information (Thompson et al., 2005, p. 73). Their study observes the changes in informational usage before and after receiving a lecture. One of their findings is that "nurses' information use is not linear and the utility for decision judgment derived from clinical information is not distributed equally" (Thompson et al., 2005, p. 68). Thompson et al., (2005) contend that:

> Social judgment approaches have utility as tools for evaluating educational interventions. Many evaluations of educational interventions simply focus on changes in knowledge rather than practice. Whilst SJT does not directly observe changes in practice it does evaluate changes in real judgments and choices. (p. 75)

They also state that "conjoint and social judgment analytic approaches are a potentially valuable way of planning and evaluating educational interventions for nurses" (Thompson et al., 2005, p. 76).

Asemah and Nwammuo (2017) observe the implications of social judgment theory and persuasive advertising campaigns. As advertising is a powerful tool to promote and encourage consumers to purchase a good or service, social judgment theory can be applied since "the effect of a persuasive message on a particular issue depends on the way that the receiver evaluates the position of the message" (Asemah & Nwammuo, 2017, p. 75). Asemah and Nwammuo (2017) believe understanding social judgment theory is vital for companies as it allows for companies to spend money on advertising campaigns more effectively (p. 75). Asemah and Nwammuo (2017) state that "formative research should be conducted to determine the audience's latitudes of acceptance, rejection and non-commitment for the particular social norms that will form the content of the messages with which the audience will be saturated" (p. 80). They argue that:

> Messages that fall within the latitude of non-commitment should result in perception and behavior change, whereas messages that fall in the latitude of acceptance are less likely to be accepted due to assimilation effects. Messages in the latitude of rejection should not result in perception or behavior change due to contrast effects. (Asemah & Nwammuo, 2017, p. 80)

Asemah & Nwammuo (2017) suggest that "social judgment helps the consumers to interpret the advertising campaign and decide whether to act positively or negatively" (p. 81).

Upon reviewing literature, it is clear that social judgment is a pervasive phenomenon that impacts how humans interact with one another to negotiate their sense of value, whether that value be positively or negatively interpreted. By applying social judgment theory to the musical *Kinky Boots,* I will examine how the characters react to different ideas throughout the musical. When different ideas, characters, or situations appear, the characters' reactions can be classified into different latitudes. Some fall under the latitude of acceptance and others under the latitude of rejection. My analysis includes examples of how a character may react to a new idea, such as turning the shoe factory into making boots for cross-dressers. I hope that this paper will add to this body of literature by showing how a mid-20th century communication theory can be applied to a contemporary text with lessons for 21st century audiences. While this production is based on a true story, the lessons to be learned from it are relevant for all audiences in the process of understanding the importance of acceptance.

Analysis

In *Kinky Boots,* characters are presented with new ideas and concepts throughout the musical, which allows for audience members to observe how characters react to these ideas. Through the application of Muzafer Sherif and Carl I. Hovland's (1961) social judgment theory, I observe how career expectations, social identities, and gender performances in *Kinky Boots* are placed into the characters' latitudes of acceptance, latitudes of noncommitment, or latitudes of rejection.

Charlie's father, Mr. Price, is not enthused by Charlie's decision to leave the factory and go to London. He places this idea within his latitude of rejection as he would rather have him be working with him. Mr. Price states, "your life, your future is right here in this factory. You belong here" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 8). The musical centers around the shoe factory that Charlie inherited, Charlie's decision concerning what to do with it, and what Charlie does to keep it running in order to have the employees retain their jobs. At first, Charlie wanted to close the factory when their current buyer cancelled the contract that they had with Price & Sons. The employees reacted negatively to this decision. For instance, Don placed this idea into his latitude of rejection, stating, "do what you like, but you can't fire me" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 27). Lauren, another employee tells Charlie to change the product to make something that appeals to more buyers. She also places Charlie's idea of closing the factory idea into her latitude of rejection, as she would rather change the product than see the factory close. However, Charlie's fiancée, Nicola, would prefer for the factory to close because this would enable her and Charlie to begin their life together in London. She tells Charlie, "we may have been born in a small factory town, but we sure as hell don't have to die there" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 8). I believe Nicola is placing this idea into her latitude of acceptance, which is when an individual finds an idea reasonable (Sherif and Hovland, 1961, p. 7). Nicola wants Charlie to pursue a life with her rather than continue his father's dream of maintaining a successful shoe factory.

Through texts such as *Kinky Boots* it is suggested that audiences can observe how people form their points of view through the tensions they encounter within their lives, such as living by others' desires or their own desire. When individuals live through their own desires, they acknowledge how others place ideas, situations, and concepts into their own latitudes by being able to observe more points of view. If the individual is living through others' desires, they are more likely to conform to others' latitudes and reasonings rather being individualistic in making decisions. This is seen throughout *Kinky Boots* when Charlie is trying to decide the fate of the shoe company as his fiancée wishes for a closure of the factory whereas the workers believe he should continue to manage the factory. Charlie feels the need to make his decision based off of the others' opinions rather than his own. Another character that struggles with these tensions is Lola, a character who is not widely accepted by society, as she contradicts the societal norms. Lola struggles with the idea of altering who she is to please others, including her father, or to continue pursuing a career as a drag performer which is her own desire. Based on the tensions each character faces, their points of view regarding certain matters or ideas may vary.

In the beginning of the musical, as well as towards the end, Charlie shows interest in becoming a real estate agent instead of running a shoe factory, and Nicola would like to start the business with him. At the beginning, Charlie is willing to begin a life in London with his fiancée, even if that means leaving his father's shoe factory to do it. According to Sherif and Hovland (1961), when "one solicits an expression of an individual's attitude toward some social issue, person, or group, one typically finds that the process involves placement of the issue in a framework and assignment to a category" (p. 5). It appears that at first, Charlie places the idea of becoming a real estate agent into his latitude of non-commitment. Latitudes of non-commitment are when a person neither accepts nor rejects the idea (Sherif and Hovland, 1961, p. 7). Charlie seems willing to leave for London with Nicola for the purpose of beginning a life with her and planning their wedding, but he seems less enthused about becoming a real estate agent. However, later in the musical, Charlie is seen in the shoe factory producing his new line of "Kinky Boots" when Nicola makes an appearance with a real estate agent, Richard Bailey, who is willing to sell the property. Nicola and Richard Bailey begin with a proposition to turn the factory into condominiums. Nicola tells Charlie, "the deal Richard's put together will rid you of the factory, settle your family's debts and insure our future with a career-defining opportunity. We even get a model flat, rent free, while we're selling" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 56). At this point in the musical, Charlie places this idea of selling the factory and beginning a career in real estate into his latitude of rejection. He wants to continue with the factory as he has faith in what they are currently producing.

This newfound faith stems from a new friend he encounters named Lola. When Charlie first meets Lola, she complains to him that the boots she wears for drag performances do not support her in the way that they should. Shoe factories are not producing boots for crossdressers that allow the heel to hold up their weight without it breaking. Charlie offers to fix Lola's broken heel, which gives him an idea a few days later. He discovers that the under-served niche market he was looking for is "properly built-to-last women's boots for women who are men" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 32). At first, the factory workers were skeptical about producing flashy boots. The shoe factory was previously producing very bland, conservative shoes that were made for rich people and would last them a lifetime. This new idea would be geared toward a completely different demographic. Lola is excited for this idea; she accepts this concept because of the benefits of the product for herself, her Angels, and other drag performers. When Lola presents sketches of these boots, several employees compliment her ideas, which places them into their latitudes of acceptance. Charlie commits to this idea; he states, "I'm willing to gamble the fate of this whole enterprise on you as a designer" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 42). At first, Lola rejects this idea, mentioning how she doesn't even know how to make a shoe, let alone design one. Once she places this into her latitude of rejection, Charlie tries to convince her to accept the idea. Charlie tells Lola he sees her passion for shoes and convinces her that she will wonder for the rest of her life what would have happened if she had taken this opportunity. Because of Charlie's argument, Lola changes her mind and places the idea of becoming a designer in her latitude of acceptance. This then leads to Lola becoming a designer, creating sketches of boots for her and her Angels to wear.

This example illustrates how other people's logical and emotional arguments can convince others to adjust their latitudes of acceptance and rejection to consider new ideas. In this scenario, Charlie persuades Lola to become a designer by logically stating that she if she refuses to try, she will always regret not having taken the opportunity. Audience members may observe how their decisions are influenced by the people around them and the ideas that they place into their own latitudes. When we adjust our latitudes upon being influenced by another, we may learn about these new ideas in a different way than expected.

Since her first appearance in the factory, Lola had received negative comments regarding her appearance. One day, Lola decides to dress in male clothing, but this only results in more negativity from her male coworkers. Leading the group of negative commenters is Don, who always had a problem with the way Lola dressed. At one point, he comments, "you could try dressing like a bloke, for starters" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 63). He places Lola's appearance in his latitude of rejection since the beginning of the musical. Don challenges Lola to be a real man and fight with him in a boxing match. Lola accepts the challenge, as she had a boxing background, and almost wins the match. Lola decides to allow Don to win the boxing match which surprises Don. She allowed him to win to prevent him from feeling disrespected by the other factory workers. Lola then challenges Don to accept others for who they are which results in Don placing Lola's appearance in his latitude of acceptance.

Lola confides in Charlie, admitting that her father had always been unhappy with her desire to be a performer. For Lola's father, performance as a career choice was always in his latitude of rejection as it went against his ideals of a son, which ultimately resulted in the rejection of his son. Lola mentions how her father wanted to train her to become a boxer in order to pursue the champion's belt that he was never able to obtain. Lola states, "when I appeared for a fight in a white cocktail dress… he disowned me. Refused to see me, even when he came down with lung cancer" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 51). Lola's father placed the idea of Lola cross-dressing in his extreme latitude of rejection; not only did he disagree with it, but he completely took Lola out of his life because of it. This is an example of how the rejection of an idea can lead to rejection of a certain individual or individuals. For example, individuals who are LGBTQ+ are sometimes rejected from their family or friends' lives if these friends or family are highly conservative or religious. Some individuals place the idea of people being LGBTQ+ into their own latitudes of rejection, which results in those individuals also being rejected.

In the second act of the musical, Charlie, Lola, and the factory workers plan for the boots to be showcased at a fashion show in Milan. Unfortunately, there are not sufficient funds for the trip. The original plan was to hire Italian models to wear the boots and for hair and makeup staff to prepare them for the runway. Lola presents the idea of using her Angels instead for the fashion show to cut back on the costs of the trip because her Angels not only outperform the models but also do their own hair and makeup. Charlie immediately rejects this idea, not willing to gamble his family's business on using Lola and her Angels for the show. He comes after Lola saying, "I don't know which is more daft; what you're saying or what you're wearing" (Fierstein & Lauper, 2013, p. 79). At first, Charlie places the idea of using Lola and her Angels into his latitude of rejection because he believed it was too much of a risk for Milan, where purchasers at the fashion show expected to see professional models. While his original plan falls through and Charlie is the only model showcasing the footwear, he is relieved once Lola and her Angels arrive in Milan to showcase the new line of "Kinky Boots." The crowd loved the performance given by Lola and her angels which made Charlie confident in the show. Thus, Charlie then placed the idea of Lola and her Angels into his latitude of acceptance.

By applying social judgment theory to *Kinky Boots*, I am able to observe how certain characters react to different ideas regarding individuals' career choices, identities and gender performances, especially once they encounter contrasts to their perspectives on these ideas. Some are seen reacting in extremely negative ways while others are indifferent to or gladly accept new ideas. I now discuss ways for interpreting these differences and how they impact individuals' social judgments and experiences.

Discussion

By applying Sherif and Hovland's (1961) social judgment theory to the musical *Kinky Boots,* I analyzed how characters react to new concepts and ideas, including the future of the shoe factory, producing a new style of shoe, and interactions with drag performers. *Kinky Boots* has a conflict-driven storyline, as some characters in the musical indirectly show hostility towards each other. For example, a portion of the musical included Don's negativity to Lola, which was resolved once they had a boxing match and learned to accept each other. Other examples included characters' reactions to Lola's appearance, Charlie's decision to keep the factory running, and Charlie's decisions regarding the Milan fashion show. By observing how ideas are placed in individuals' latitudes of acceptance, non-commitment, or rejection, audience members can introspectively observe how they themselves, as well as others around them, may react when confronted with new ideas and situations. When audience members observe how the characters in *Kinky Boots* react to certain ideas, they may feel an understanding for how they themselves make decisions based off of similar matters. The development of Don's attitude towards Lola and cross-dressers may influence audience members to look past the appearance and focus on the person and accept them for who they are. Musicals such as *Kinky Boots* allow for an understanding of different perspectives when it comes to a certain idea or situation.

Social judgment theory is applicable in our everyday lives and can help us examine how people react to new situations, concepts, or ideas. For example, imagine that an individual is employed at a company that wants to upgrade their technology, which requires getting rid of traditional ways of completing tasks. Some employees may feel this upgrade is needed to become more efficient, thus placing the company's decision in their latitudes of acceptance. Others may be repelled by this idea, as it takes away the tradition of the company, and place the company's decision in their latitudes of rejection. Those who feel indifferent place the decision in their latitudes of non-commitment. While every individual is entitled to their own beliefs and opinions, at times it is beneficial to align everyone's latitudes for the greater good. By discussing which option is of best interest for the company, some individuals may feel inclined to alter their latitude as they see other perspectives. Oftentimes, individuals make their decisions with key findings and information lacking. Upon learning more about the situation, they may see their latitude has changed. This theory can be applied to real life, as we often subconsciously place new ideas into these latitudes.

In his book *The Philosophy of Literary Form,* Kenneth Burke (1967) states how proverbs are used for consolation or vengeance. Proverbs can also describe reoccurring situations. Burke (1967) states how they are used for social relationships and are "recurring so frequently that they 'must have a word for it'" (p. 293). Burke (1967) suggests that "art forms like 'tragedy' or 'comedy' or 'satire' would be treated as *equipment for living,* that size up situations in various ways and in keeping with correspondingly various attitudes" (p. 304). The lessons audience members learn through the relationships in *Kinky Boots* are applicable to their everyday lives. Through viewing *Kinky Boots,* audience members learn the value of challenging stereotypes and pursuing passions. *Kinky Boots,* as well as other musicals and popular culture texts, can serve as "equipment for living" by providing audiences with life lessons through its story. At first, people may remain with their latitude of choice until they observe other people changing their perspectives and latitudes. This could be because when it comes to new ideas, those who are quick to make a choice of latitude may feel pressure or negativity from others. However, once other people make the decision to change their latitude, others may be inclined to follow.

This paper explores how social judgment theory established by Sherif and Hovland (1961) can be applied to the musical *Kinky Boots*, allowing the audience to observe how we evaluate new ideas and compare them with our current attitudes. This musical allows audience members to observe the relationships and choices of the two main characters, Charlie and Lola. Additionally, the evolving relationship between Charlie and Lola provides more ways for audience members to feel connected with them if they are able to identify with the characters or how they react to situations. Audience members are also able to see the relationship between Lola and Don, which provides important lessons about overcoming prejudices, such as when one individual had a certain idea, the other would be opposed to it or would place it into his/her latitude of rejection. However, once their relationship changed and they accepted each other, they placed each other's ideas into their own latitudes of acceptance. When an individual places another into their latitude of rejection, they proceed to place any idea they make into their latitude of rejection without understanding the situation. Through connection with others and forming trust, individuals are more willing to place their ideas into their latitude of acceptance as they believe in the relationships formed. By using musical theatre as "equipment for living," we can learn life lessons about relationships and interactions with others.

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