Joining the World of Journals

Welcome to one of the nation’s only undergraduate research journals in mass communications.

The website of the Council on Undergraduate Research lists more than 200 undergraduate research journals nationwide (http://www.cur.org/resources/students/undergraduate_journals/).

Some of these journals focus on a discipline (e.g., Journal of Undergraduate Research in Physics), some are university-based and multidisciplinary (e.g., MIT Undergraduate Research Journal), and others are university-based and disciplinary (e.g., Harvard Political Review).

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

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

The three purposes of the journal are:

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

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

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A Celebration of Student Research

I am so proud that Elon University is home to the nation’s only undergraduate research journal in communications.

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

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

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

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

Dr. Rochelle Ford, APR
Dean, School of Communications
Editorial Board

More than 30 faculty members in Elon’s School of Communications helped to select nine undergraduate research papers for the fall 2020 issue. The papers, primarily written in upper-level courses, are nominated for consideration by faculty mentors, then undergo a double-blind peer review process by the Editorial Board.

Professors who served on the Editorial Board for this issue were Bill Anderson, David Bockino, Vanessa Bravo, Lee Bush, Naemah Clark, David Copeland, Vic Costello, Brooks Fuller, Kelly Furnas, Kenn Gaither, Jessica Gisclair, Don Grady, Ben Hannam, Sana Haq, Anthony Hatcher, Dan Haygood, Denise Hill, Jooyun Hwang, Jenny Jiang, Laura Lacy, Byung Lee, Derek Lackaff, Barbara Miller, William Moner, Phillip Motley, Tom Nelson, Jane O’Boyle, Glenn Scott, Kathleen Stansberry, Jessalyn Strauss, Amanda Sturgill, Hal Vincent, and Qian Xu.

Thanks also go to Associate Dean Kenn Gaither, who reviewed articles to help ensure the quality of the journal, and Tommy Kopetskie, who proofread articles, designed the online publication, and updated the publication’s website.

Editor’s Note

The COVID-19 pandemic brought traditional learning to an abrupt halt in March 2020. Turning on a dime, college educators quickly scrambled to convert half-completed in-person courses to all-remote instruction. Students sadly left campus behind amid great uncertainty and sometimes immense personal and family challenges.

Given that turmoil, it is somewhat remarkable that you are reading this edition of the Elon Journal. Yet, the articles that emerged over the remainder of that semester, and represented here, are outstanding in their scope and depth of analysis, reflecting the tenacity of students and mentors in producing high-quality work under unprecedented circumstances.

Online news coverage of the early pandemic itself became the focus of Maria Ramirez Uribe’s research. Health-related topics were also represented in Consuelo Mendoza Bruno’s examination of TikTok use by healthcare professionals, and Junie Burke’s analysis of abstinence-based sexual education videos.

Journalistic practice was the focus of two articles in this edition: Anton L. Delgado examined how student newsrooms decide to remove online content, while Jack Norcross studied how the composition of guests on Sunday news talk shows has shifted between two presidential administrations.

Two scholars analyzed cinematic representation: Sydney Dye focused on characters who come out as LBGTQ, while Valerie Sampson studied characters who have dissociative identity disorder. In addition, Morgan Collins’ article examining REI’s and Patagonia’s messaging against Black Friday consumerism, and Meghan Isaf’s study of college students’ use of social media for dating, each embody smartly conceived and well-executed research.

To see these students and mentors not only persevere, but thrive, in exceedingly challenging circumstances, is inspiring. Please enjoy – and celebrate - their fine work in this issue.

Harlen Makemson
Professor
Editor, Elon Journal
A Content Analysis of How Healthcare Workers Use TikTok
Consuelo Mendoza Bruno

A Qualitative Content Analysis of Abstinence-Based
Sexual Education Videos
Junie Burke

Resisting Black Friday: REI and Patagonia’s Stances on Consumerism
Morgan Collins

Ethical Erasure: An Analysis of Online Content-Removal Practices
in Award-Winning Student Newsrooms
Anton L. Delgado

Representing Sexuality: An Analysis of Coming Out in Contemporary Film
Sydney Dye

The Role of Social Media in Dating Trends Among Gen Z College Students
Meghan Isaf

An Analysis of the Political Affiliations and Professions of Sunday Talk Show
Guests Between Obama and Trump Administrations
Jack Norcross

The Portrayal of Dissociative Identity Disorder in Films
Valerie Sampson

Framing of Online News Coverage of the Coronavirus in the United States
Maria Ramirez Uribe
A Content Analysis of How Healthcare Workers Use TikTok

Consuelo Mendoza Bruno

Strategic Communications
Elon University

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

Abstract

Advances in technology have changed the way in which healthcare professionals and consumers access and use health information. Although healthcare professionals have already taken to social media to share healthy messages or to promote their work, TikTok poses a new set of opportunities and challenges. TikTok is a mobile video creation/sharing application that has grabbed the attention of young audiences around the globe. This study focuses on how healthcare professionals are using TikTok and how healthcare information is being portrayed on the short-video platform. Findings of this study indicate that healthcare professionals are following current online trends and posting videos on TikTok that include humor, self-criticism, and specific health content in meme-like forms to develop messaging that is likely to resonate with younger audiences.

I. Introduction

Advances in technology have markedly changed the way in which healthcare professionals and consumers access and use information. Social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have been used to train medical professionals, provide information to patients, and allow rapid communication in times of crises (Ventola, 2014). Although healthcare professionals have already taken to social media to share healthy messages or to promote their work, TikTok poses a new set of opportunities and challenges.

TikTok is a mobile video-creation/sharing application that has grabbed the attention of young audiences around the globe. TikTok has become the most downloaded Apple iOS video app, with youth ages 13-18 comprising half of the 500 million monthly users (Cheg, 2018). Healthcare professionals are now taking to the new platform to teach users about specific conditions and spread awareness on timely topics (Nied, 2020). Furthermore, physicians are leveraging the popularity of the platform among adolescents and young adults to enhance communication with their patients and share valuable health information (Hausmann, 2017).

TikTok’s executives have welcomed the platform’s uses for medical professionals. “It’s been inspiring to see doctors and nurses take to TikTok in their scrubs to demystify the medical profession,” said Gregory Justice, TikTok’s head of content programming (Goldberg, 2020). Additionally, the President of the Association for Healthcare Social Media (AHSM) has stated, “TikTok is a space where doctors do belong. Because patients are exposed to or are seeking health knowledge on social media, healthcare providers should be present on social media to serve as accurate sources of medical information” (Nied, 2020).

Keywords: health communication, social media, TikTok, content analysis, teenagers
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This study analyzes how healthcare professionals are using TikTok to reach young audiences and how healthcare information is being portrayed on the short-video platform. It does so by content analyzing 100 recent TikTok videos produced and disseminated by healthcare professionals.

This topic is important because healthcare professionals can use TikTok to potentially improve health outcomes, develop a professional network, increase personal awareness of news and discoveries, motivate patients, and provide health information to the public (Nied, 2020). Similarly, TikTok has the potential to improve patients’ access to healthcare information and other educational resources (Nied, 2020). In addition, mainstream media is starting to discuss this topic, making it relevant for a larger audience.

II. Literature Review

Since the start of social media in the late 1990s, these platforms have had a major influence on people’s personal and professional lives, impacting the way in which they communicate, stay connected, and share information (Zhu, 2019). Not only has social media become integral to how people live their lives, but it has also started to play an increasing role in how they manage their health (Eytan, 2011). In the United States, eight in 10 Internet users search for health information online (Surani, 2017), and more than 40 percent of healthcare consumers utilize social media for their healthcare information needs (Ventola, 2014).

For healthcare professionals, social media become a primary means to interact with the public and attract new patients (Gandolf, 2015). Studies have shown that when healthcare professionals participate in social media, it directly impacts their reputation and it attracts more patients to their practices (Kotsenas, 2018).

Many social media tools are already available for these healthcare professionals, including social networking platforms, blogs, wikis, media-sharing sites, virtual reality, and gaming environments. These tools can be used to improve or enhance professional networking and education, organizational promotion, patient care, patient education, and public health programs. Furthermore, healthcare professionals can also take advantage of social media platforms to improve the care of their patients and ultimately their outcomes (Ventola, 2014). Studies have also shown that patients value educational, online interaction with healthcare providers (Kotsenas, 2018). Similarly, social media can be used to improve patient satisfaction by increasing the time spent communicating with and having questions answered by their physicians (Ventola, 2014).

A survey of patients at an outpatient family practice clinic found that 56 percent wanted their healthcare providers to use social media for reminders, scheduling appointments, diagnostic test results, prescription notifications, and answering general questions. Social media can also improve patients’ access to healthcare information and other educational resources (Ventola, 2014).

Healthcare professionals are in a position to become trusted sources of reliable medical information on social media platforms. Patients, families, and caregivers are inclined to use the Internet as a source of health information, but professionals have the ability to filter unreliable or biased information and to guide patients to reliable sources (Gandolf, 2015). Also, social media can empower healthcare professionals to promote and change health-related behaviors and issues, ultimately affecting population health (Lee, 2019).

How Healthcare Professionals Are Using Social Media

Social media provides individuals the ability to quickly access information and communicate with others. Healthcare professionals are taking advantage of these tools to share information with patients in a variety of ways (University of Scranton, 2015). In a 2014 study, 60 percent of physicians favored interacting with patients through social media (Ventola, 2014). Additionally, unlike other health advice that patients may encounter online, physicians are using social media to develop messaging that patients are more likely to resonate with and act on. In fact, some physicians are using social media, including Twitter and Facebook, to enhance communication with their patients in a more personal way (Ventola, 2014).

Another effective use of social media is by collecting feedback from patients in order to better understand their preferences in healthcare (University of Scranton, 2015). There are many health conditions that respond equally to different types of treatments and it is hard for patients to come across well balanced information to assist them in their healthcare decisions (Kirby, 2007). In addition to sharing information with patients and evaluating patient preferences, healthcare professionals are also utilizing social media channels as part of their continuous medical education (University of Scranton, 2015).
How Health Information Is Portrayed Through Videos

During the last decade, videos have become an essential part of teaching, training and communicating with hospital employees, medical students, and administrators within the healthcare industry. Videos keep physicians and staff up to date with the latest information, methods, and practices. In fact, more than 66 percent of physicians are now using online videos to stay up to date with the latest clinical information (Panopto, 2019).

Additionally, on-demand videos have been shown to improve patient education and promote active patient participation in treatment decisions, while saving physicians’ time associated with individual counseling (Panopto, 2019). In a similar way, medical subject-matter experts are regularly participating in Facebook Live sessions to discuss particular health topics and answer viewer questions (Kotsenas, 2018). Physicians showing in detail exactly how to work through an assessment or diagnosis, or an administrator sharing the right way to enter data in the institutional records, are both examples of how healthcare organizations are already using videos to ensure that they are tapping into the full expertise of their teams (Panopto, 2019).

TikTok and Its Growing Popularity Among Adolescents

Founded in 2017, TikTok is the fastest growing social media application in over 150 countries. It has more than 500 million active users with more than 1 billion downloads (Zhu, 2019). As of December 2019, 56.5 percent of users are female and 43.5 percent are male (Clement, 2019). The platform’s mission is “to capture and present the world’s creativity, knowledge, and precious life moments, directly from the mobile phone” (Mohsin, 2020). Ultimately, there is a vast market of people looking for micro-entertainment and distraction for a few minutes during the day, and TikTok is providing just that for these individuals (Daniel, 2020). Users spend an average of 52 minutes per day on the app. Additionally, 90 percent of all TikTok users access the app on a daily basis, and more than one million videos are viewed every day. TikTok has been particularly successful in engaging younger generations, as 41 percent of users are aged between 16 and 24 (Mohsin, 2020).

TikTok thrives on irreverence, and users can be found making fun of themselves in embarrassing ways in public, performing silly pranks or doing skits, creating a meme culture within the TikTok community (Mediakik, 2019). TikTok users are also strongly encouraged to engage with other users through “response” videos or by means of “duets,” which increases users’ overall engagement (Herrman, 2019). Trending songs and tags also act as prompts for users to attempt dance moves or create their own variation on a theme (Sehl, 2020).

It is crucial to understand that TikTok is an experience based solely on algorithmic observation and inference. When you open the app, the first thing you see is not a feed of your friends, but a page called “For You,” which is an algorithmic feed based on videos you have interacted with, or watched. TikTok starts making assumptions the second you open the app, even before you have really given it anything to work with (Herrman, 2019). What really helps TikTok stand out among the competition is that it is more of an entertainment platform, instead of a lifestyle platform (Mohsin, 2020).

In regard to the platform’s layout, there are several design and technology factors that make it extremely popular with this younger generation (Cheg, 2018). For example, individuals can post about anything — humor, hobbies, fitness, travel, music, photography, dance (Daniel, 2020). Young individuals are also attracted to the shape of the videos as they are tall, not square, like on Snapchat or Instagram stories. Similarly, these individuals enjoy the platform’s ease of navigating through videos by scrolling up and down, like a feed, not by tapping or swiping side to side (Herrman, 2019). Lastly, young individuals enjoy the ease of adding text to their videos (Myers, 2020). The platform makes it easy for users to make their content fully accessible to viewers whether they are hearing impaired or just want to watch in silence without missing anything (Myers, 2020). Overall, young video creators enjoy how TikTok assertively answers their what should I watch and what should I post questions (Herrman, 2019).

How Adolescents Use Online Health Information

The Internet serves as a major source of information about health-related issues for adolescents (Ettel, 2012). In fact, according to a national study, 84 percent of United States teenagers ages 13 to 18 turn to the Internet and use digital tools for health information (Deardorff, 2015). Furthermore, a Northwestern study found that the top-four reasons teens search for health information is for school assignments, to take
better care of themselves, check symptoms or diagnose, or find information for family or friends (Deardorff, 2015).

While the reasoning for searching for health information varies among adolescents, an overwhelming majority specifically taps into online sources to learn more about puberty, drugs, sex, depression and other related issues (Deardorff, 2015). Similarly, in a study that surveyed 705 high-school students, teens were found to seek information related to skin care significantly more frequently than other topics, and a substantial proportion of students also sought information about birth control and sexually transmitted diseases (Ettel, 2012). Not only are adolescents turning to the Internet to read about health information, but teens have also admitted to changing their health behaviors and habits due to digital health information tools (Deardorff, 2015).

Doctors have the power to help teens understand topics related to healthy lifestyles, sexual development, and emotional problems. Healthcare professionals have the potential to serve as valuable online resources by answering questions and giving guidance during periods of physical and emotional changes (Gavin, 2019). The public often hears about the negative things young people do online, but teenagers are using the Internet to take care of themselves and others around them. The Internet is empowering teens to protect their health; therefore, healthcare professionals need to make sure they are equipped with the digital literacy skills to successfully navigate this online landscape (Deardorff, 2015).

Communication Between Healthcare Professionals and Adolescents

Healthcare professionals face several important challenges when it comes to communicating with adolescents. Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage where health-risk behaviors may begin and when individuals move from parental control to establishing their own separate relationship with health professionals. However, teens can be difficult to engage with when it comes to health care and health promotion, despite having access to more health information online (Skinner, 2003). One study found that youths would be open to increased interaction and support from health practitioners and saw them as reliable experts. However, teens also noted barriers to having timely access to these professionals (Skinner, 2003). This study demonstrates that both adolescents and healthcare professionals are interested in improving their communication between each other. Ultimately, communication between adolescents and healthcare professionals needs to reflect the unique nature of health care needs during developmental stages. When handled correctly, this can reduce the sense of uncertainty and enable young adults to take charge of their health and maintain stable relationships with their healthcare providers (Kim & White, 2018).

Existing Perceptions of Using TikTok to Portray Health Information

With many younger social media users now preferring to receive information via video content rather than written content, healthcare professionals are using TikTok to grow engagement levels, create content that is unique and personable, and extend the core values of healthcare providers. The platform is becoming an integral part of healthcare social media ecosystems, allowing healthcare professionals to interact with citizens on a more personal level (Zhu, 2019). As one example, a physician at the University of Minnesota Medical School said the platform provided her an enormous platform to share medical public service announcements. Additionally, she noted that in order to get attention and views on TikTok as a healthcare professional, it is essential that medical messaging is tailored to the app’s irreverent form (Goldberg, 2020).

On the other hand, there are concerns that TikTok is tarnishing the perceptions of healthcare professionals (Nied, 2020). Some healthcare-themed TikToks that have gone viral have been widely scorned, and experts worry that these videos, shared far and wide, could spread the growing distrust in medical professionals. Sarah Mojarad, a science communications expert, said, “People are just posting content, they are not really thinking about their role as a medical professional and how that’s going to impact the public’s perceptions of medical professionals” (Andrews, 2020). Similarly, some physicians worry that TikTok’s brief, playful clips are blurring the line between general education and patient-specific medical advice, making it difficult to reach the right audience with the correct healthcare information (Goldberg, 2020). In summary, there is a fine line that healthcare professionals are walking between trying to get a message out that will appeal to this younger generation and being perceived as inappropriate or unprofessional.

Multiple studies have shown that the use of social media in the healthcare space is increasing exponentially (Surani, 2017). For this reason, it is necessary to study the way in which healthcare
professionals and institutions are using these platforms, and particularly TikTok (Nied, 2020). It is of interest to understand how the platform is changing the ways in which health information is being portrayed and shared to individuals, especially among younger demographics. TikTok is such a new space and there is still uncertainty as to how healthcare professionals should be and are currently using the platform (Andrew, 2020). Therefore, an analysis of TikTok content posted by healthcare professionals is appropriate. This paper helps fill that gap by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: How are healthcare professionals using TikTok?
RQ2: How are healthcare professionals tailoring medical messaging on TikTok to attract younger demographics?
RQ3: What types of videos are being posted by healthcare professionals on TikTok?
RQ4: Do viral TikTok videos created by healthcare professionals give these individuals a negative or unprofessional connotation?

III. Methods

This study consists of a mixed quantitative/qualitative content analysis of 100 videos to better understand how healthcare professionals are using TikTok. A content analysis is a research method for “analyzing written, verbal, or visual communication” (Elo, 2014). It is a systematic process of describing and coding occurrences, which then allows a researcher to group words, phrases, and data into classified categories; suggesting that they all have something in common (Elo, 2014). Several studies have adopted this method to analyze videos and to design coding procedures. Furthermore, this method is widely used when analyzing video-based content, especially in healthcare communications (Zhu, 2019). In this study, a qualitative content analysis was used to describe the occurrence of different categories.

Because academic studies with coding schemes for videos produced on TikTok are still scarce, this study uses codes of common practice for video-based health communication. Additionally, this study adapts an existing coding method used in a recent study that analyzed TikTok accounts run by Chinese Provincial Health Committees (Zhu, 2019).

To select the sample of videos to be analyzed, the researcher first downloaded the TikTok app on Apple iOS and created a new account. As stated in the literature review, when a user first opens the app, the first thing they see is a page called “For You,” which is an algorithmic feed based on videos the user has searched for, interacted with, or just watched (Herrman, 2019). Therefore, the researcher used several tools on the platform to assist the app in creating a “For You” page comprised entirely of videos related to healthcare.

The researcher used the platform’s search tool to search for the following terms: “healthcare,” “health information,” “healthcare providers,” “doctors,” “nurses,” “diseases,” and “health.” Based on the search results, the researcher was presented with an initial number of videos. The researcher then used the options to “like” videos and “follow” accounts in order for TikTok to develop a more extensive “For You” page composed entirely of healthcare-related videos posted by an array of healthcare providers. Following this, the researcher randomly selected 100 videos from the “For You” page. Each video was then watched from beginning to end and coded using instruments developed by both the researcher and Zhu (2019).

A Microsoft Excel worksheet was constructed to store the data extracted from the TikTok videos. The final coding scheme consisted of four dimensions: Account Information, Quantified Impact, Video Content, and Video Form. Additionally, each of these dimensions had several sub-dimensions. All 21 coding categories are outlined in Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Coding Categories</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Account Information</strong></td>
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<td>Username</td>
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<tr>
<td>Official Verified Account</td>
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<tr>
<td>Credentials Listed in Bio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Website Link</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Quantified Impact</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Followers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Likes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Shares</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Views</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Video Content</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Video Type</td>
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<tr>
<td>Video Theme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotion(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Character(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Video Form</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Background Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking/No Talking/Lip Synching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subtitles/Text</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caption</td>
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<td>Hashtags</td>
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When conducting a qualitative content analysis, many scholars suggest measuring either intercoder or intracoder reliability as a way to evaluate the reproducibility of the results (Van den Hoonaard, 2008). Intracoder reliability, in particular, refers to the consistent manner by which the researcher codes at different points (Van den Hoonaard, 2008). Since this study had only one coder, the researcher coded twenty percent of the videos twice, on separate days, and then measured the percent of agreement. In this case, the percentage of agreement between Coding Session 1 and Coding Session 2 was 93.7 percent.

IV. Findings

Account Information

Usernames play an important role in all social media platforms as they let other users know what kind of information the accounts are providing (Kumar, 2019). Of the 100 TikTok accounts that were analyzed, 56 included medical titles or abbreviations in their usernames. Several of the accounts included terms such as “dr,” “doc,” “md,” or “doctor” in their account usernames. Some examples include, @doctor.sina, @drleslie, @dr.mike_md, @doctor.jess, and @footdocdana. Creating a robust social username allows individuals to be discovered by others who could benefit from the association (Gartner_Inc, 2020). Evidently, healthcare professionals on TikTok are choosing to describe their medical backgrounds in their account usernames to improve their online reputation and increase their chances of being followed.

In addition to creating robust usernames, some healthcare professionals use their TikTok accounts to further promote personal websites and YouTube channels. In fact, 43 of the 100 videos included a link in their account bios. Links ranged from personal websites, to healthcare information websites, to other social media accounts. Additionally, 20 of the 100 TikTok accounts included links to YouTube channels, providing further evidence that healthcare professionals are taking advantage of these tools to share information with patients in a variety of ways.

Of the 100 TikTok accounts that were analyzed, only four did not list any credentials in their bios. The five most common healthcare credentials/titles that were listed on these accounts included OB-GYN, Labor and Delivery Doctor, Plastic Surgeon, Nurse, and Pediatrician/Family Doctor. These specialties cover healthcare questions and interests commonly addressed by younger demographics. As stated in the literature review, healthcare professionals are turning to TikTok with the purpose of providing health education to TikTok’s predominantly teen demographic (Andrews, 2020). The study also found that 21 of the 100 accounts included the titles “Medical Student,” “Medical Resident,” or “Nursing Student” in their bios. This suggests that young healthcare trainees may be using this platform to cultivate followers, who could in turn become prospective clients.

TikTok provides verified badges to help users make informed choices about the accounts they choose to follow. A verified badge means that TikTok has confirmed that the account belongs to the user it represents. Of the 100 TikTok accounts that were analyzed, only four contained blue check marks and were therefore verified. It is unclear why such a small number of accounts were verified. This brings up the question of whether healthcare professionals on TikTok should pursue verification as a means of establishing credibility.

Quantified Impact

The Quantified Impact dimension provided findings regarding these TikTok accounts’ influence and engagement levels. Specifically, the total number of likes of all videos analyzed was more than 14 million; one video had received only eight likes at the time of coding, while another had 2 million likes.

The total number of comments received were 170,295, with zero being the lowest and 41,000 the highest. Twenty-four videos received 1,000 comments or more; on average, each video received 1,702 comments. These high numbers of comments may indicate that the public considers health communication via TikTok as a two-way conversation. The total number of shares was 510,917, with zero being the lowest and 95,800 the highest. Additionally, 32 videos had been shared at least 1,000 times. Clearly, many of these videos being posted on TikTok by healthcare professionals are being vastly shared (Table 2).
Table 2: Quantified Impact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Followers</th>
<th>Number of Views</th>
<th>Number of Shares</th>
<th>Number of Likes</th>
<th>Number of Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>4,400,000</td>
<td>19,600,000</td>
<td>95,800</td>
<td>2,000,000</td>
<td>41,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>78,850</td>
<td>244,400</td>
<td>464.5</td>
<td>16,200</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>206,622</td>
<td>1,435,184</td>
<td>5,109</td>
<td>147,464</td>
<td>1,702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>20,662,214</td>
<td>142,083,175</td>
<td>510,917</td>
<td>14,746,483</td>
<td>170,295</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Video Content**

The Video Content dimension provided information regarding the types of videos being posted by healthcare professionals, the common themes among these videos, and the specific characters and settings of these videos.

In terms of video type, self-recordings took the lead (87 of 100). Forty-two of these videos also fell in the category of situational comedy, often with healthcare professionals as the main subject either dancing or standing in the video frame. For example, a blood and cancer doctor with the username @thetikdoc posted a video of himself mocking doctors being late to see patients. Another example is from a resident with the username @doctor.jess, who posted a video listing off ways to prevent mononucleosis, but in a comical way. Both of these show how some healthcare professionals are using the platform in a humorous manner. As stated in the literature review, unlike other platforms, TikTok thrives on its irreverence, distinguishing itself as a platform where users can be found making fun of themselves in embarrassing ways in public (Mediakik, 2019). Few videos fell in the cartoon, documentary, excerpt from TV program, and excerpt from news report video types. These results suggest that healthcare professionals are using the platform to humanize their professions, avoiding rigid hierarchies between doctor and patient.

The third most common video type was demonstration (27 of 100). Videos included in this category featured healthcare professionals demonstrating clinical skills or explanations of common medical interventions. For example, a foot and ankle surgeon with the username @toppodiatry posted a video of himself demonstrating different exercises one can do for plantar fasciitis (which causes heel pain). Another example was a physical therapist with the username @dr.carlosgamero who posted a video demonstrating what dry needling is like.

The most common video theme was the healthcare professional’s image, with 43 of the 100 videos displaying this topic. Videos within this category featured healthcare professionals either explaining or showing their daily life routines, talking about the number of hours and training it took to get to where they are, or mocking themselves and other healthcare professionals about things that occur in their professions. As indicated in the literature review, there have been professionalism concerns that TikTok is tarnishing the perceptions of healthcare professionals (Nied, 2020). The present study highlights that some healthcare professionals are choosing to use the app as a way to show their daily lives and the “hectic lifestyle” they deal with every day, but not necessarily in the most serious tone. Furthermore, this study indicates that some healthcare professionals are simply posting content and not really thinking about how these lighthearted portrayals may impact the public’s perception of them. In some cases, videos go beyond talking about what one does as a healthcare provider and instead mocks someone, or what someone was experiencing. Nineteen of the 43 videos in this category could be perceived as negative reflections upon the medical profession. On the other hand, these results also show that some healthcare professionals present information in a serious manner and do not refer to specific patient experiences. These results suggest that healthcare professionals are using TikTok to establish and extend their digital persona and reputation, but both negatively and positively.

The second most common theme was healthcare information, with 32 out of 100 videos displaying this topic. Videos within this category featured healthcare professionals explaining symptoms, diagnoses, procedures, and outcomes. For example, a primary care naturopathic doctor with the username @drgracechang posted a video explaining which lab results could explain low-energy levels. Another example was a family medicine doctor with the username @DrLeslie who posted a video explaining what a pap smear
will actually be like. Additionally, 15 videos in this theme offered insights into health issues that impact teens, ranging from how to talk to doctors about birth control, why it is a bad idea for a group of friends to share a drink, and what some common symptoms of depression are. Nine videos contained health information about women’s health, and five contained health information about skincare, further indicating that healthcare professionals are addressing health concerns of younger patients.

The third most common video theme was healthcare education, with 10 of the 100 videos displaying this topic. Videos within this category featured healthcare professionals teaching medical skills. For example, a labor and delivery doctor with the username @romi_joy posted a video on how to look for a good vein for an IV. Another example was a foot and ankle surgeon with the username @prescriber, who posted a video showing how to do a zip line suture.

In terms of characters, 91 of the 100 analyzed videos featured healthcare professionals, while only seven featured the general public, with patients included. This low number of patients involved in videos is most likely due to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which prohibits physicians from releasing information about a patient’s treatment and health status (Greevy, 2017). Protecting the privacy of patients is crucial, therefore these results indicate that healthcare professionals are choosing to abide by these regulations when using this platform.

It is also important to note that 52 of the 100 videos featured female healthcare professionals, while only 36 featured male healthcare professionals. In terms of setting, 51 of the analyzed videos were filmed at a hospital, 29 at home and 20 in unknown locations. These results suggest that healthcare professionals recognize the convenience of the platform and can post videos on the go, at the hospital, the clinic, or from home.

In terms of emotions, humor was included in 33 of 100 videos. Happiness was portrayed in 15 videos, and six videos were highly serious. Evidently, healthcare professionals are following the trends of TikTok, making their videos entertaining and humorous to appealing to the nature of the platform.

**Video Form**

The Video Form dimension revealed information regarding the format in which these 100 videos were presented. Eighty-two out of the 100 videos were accompanied by various types of music; 28 included original music, while 72 included music from TikTok’s library. Young individuals are drawn to trending TikTok challenges, which typically involve a popular song or hashtags, so it comes as little surprise that healthcare professionals employ music on the platform as well. Eighty-five of the videos included no talking; 15 of those videos included lip-synching. Messages are often produced in short clips that almost always include no talking and often feature lip-synching.

In terms of hashtags, 95 of the videos included at least one. The most common hashtags used among these videos were, #fyp, #tiktokdoc, #docsontiktok, #doctor, and #foryoupage. As described previously, TikTok is an experience based on algorithmic observation and inference. Hashtags play a role in this algorithm, which selects personalized content for individual users. The results from this study suggest that healthcare professionals are aware of this algorithm and are using trending hashtags to draw a greater audience to their content.

**V. Conclusion**

This study suggests that healthcare professionals are using TikTok to develop messaging that is likely to resonate with patients in younger demographics. Healthcare professionals are posting videos that include humor, self-criticism, and specific health content in meme-like forms. Therefore, the platform is becoming an integral part of healthcare social media ecosystems, allowing healthcare professionals to interact with young people on a personal level.

Healthcare professionals are using distinctive usernames to easily notify other users that their accounts are health-related. Additionally, they are using the platform to further promote personal websites and YouTube channels by including these links on account bios. Only a few of these professionals have verified accounts on TikTok. These professionals are receiving a large amount of comments on their videos, indicating that the public treats health communication via TikTok as two-way communication. Often,
healthcare professionals use trending songs and challenges to draw in younger users, and employ other popular platform trends such as subtitles and trending hashtags to gain followers. They most often employ self-recordings and demonstrations in their videos, and tend to focus on aspects of the professional’s image, healthcare information, and healthcare education.

As with any health information or message that is being shared across social media, it is important to make sure the content is professional and accurate. However, humor can help humanize healthcare professionals. Watching these professionals being, cheesy, humorous, and having a little fun during a hectic workday may appeal to younger users on the platform. When reaching teens, it is important to meet them where they are and, at this point, that space is social media, in general, and TikTok, in particular.

This study has certain limitations. First, this study only consisted of one coder, and while intracoder reliability was measured in a systemic way, having a second coder could help in the process of refining the instrument. Second, the number of likes, comments, shares, and followers may not sufficiently be measured in only on session, as they change daily. Further studies should include additional coding sessions to reflect the dynamics of this new social media platform. Third, although a content analysis is widely used method in video analysis, it may still have limitations when coding the special features of videos of short duration. Specific coding schemes for videos produced on TikTok are scarce.

These limitations open opportunities and rich avenues for further research. For example, while 100 TikTok accounts is a significant number for a qualitative research study, conducting a quantitative content analysis with a bigger sample could add nuance to the results obtained here. Furthermore, this study focused on what healthcare professionals are doing on TikTok, but not on the reasons why users follow these accounts, or the effects of using these sources of information. Research that studies the reasons for TikTok adoption and its usage, particularly related to healthcare-related content, is needed.

More study is also needed on how often teens are using online health tools, how much information they receive, what topics they are most concerned with, how satisfied they are with the information, what sources they trust, and whether they have changed their health behaviors as a result. All this research could then help government and private entities target healthcare information to younger clients. A long-term research agenda in this area is required and full of opportunities to expand knowledge in this field.

References


A Content Analysis of How Healthcare Workers Use TikTok by Consuelo Mendoza Bruno — 15


A Qualitative Content Analysis of Abstinence-Based Sexual Education Videos

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

Abstract

Sex-education programs in the United States aim to prevent risks such as sexually transmitted diseases and infections. Educational videos are often incorporated as part of sex-education curricula, and abstinence-based education has been endorsed by the federal government under the Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) program. This study examines eight sex-education videos from two abstinence-based sex education programs that are commonly used by programs receiving SRAE funding. Videos were analyzed for the presence of four health behavior and communication theories. This study also analyzed videos for the presence of SRAE program benefits such as “healthy relationships, goal setting, resisting sexual coercion,” among others. The videos were assessed using a qualitative content analysis and open-coding method. Findings suggest abstinence-based sex education videos often use fear appeals and tend to not emphasize the SRAE program benefits. Additionally, most videos portrayed ethnically diverse characters, mentioned love, or had a female main character.

I. Introduction

The necessity for sexual health education in the United States to prevent risks such as sexually transmitted diseases and infections, including human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, cannot be overstated. As such, it is taught by almost all U.S. K-12 schools in some form, although the framing, messaging, and content of sex education varies, depending on the community and local government. The framing of sex-education programs ranges from abstinence-based messages to comprehensive sex education, which includes birth control methods as viable options. In order to better understand the potential impact of abstinence-based sexual education messages and their role within health communication theories, abstinence-based sex education videos should be assessed for their message framing.

Although there are studies that have assessed the effectiveness of abstinence-based sexual education in comparison with comprehensive sexual education, and others which examine the effectiveness of health-education videos, there are none which examine theories of health communications and framing in abstinence-based sex-education videos. According to Aronson (2012), videos may influence the effectiveness of a health education intervention depending on characteristics of the video, such as the type of characters portrayed. As the federal government continues to allot funds for abstinence-based sex education, it is vital to

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examine messaging within videos used in these programs. Such an analysis may offer insight on how sexual education messages are framed in an abstinence-based curriculum.

II. Literature Review

Abstinence-Based Sex Education Programs in the United States

Although abstinence-based sex education is theoretically effective if students follow through on intentions to abstain from sexual activity, many students do not (Santelli et al., 2017; Santelli et al., 2006). In fact, according to Lynch (2017) and Santelli et al. (2017), abstinence-based sex education programs may actually be harmful to students, since they do not absolutely reduce rates of sexual activity and leave students without resources to exercise effective disease and pregnancy prevention. Although abstinence should be presented as an option to students, replacing comprehensive sex education with abstinence-only education may withhold salient information from students, therefore limiting their ability to make informed sex decisions on their own (Santelli et al., 2006).

The Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) program was created by Congress in 2016 as an effective re-branding of the “Competitive Abstinence Education” grant program, and is run by the Family and Youth Services Bureau in the Administration for Children and Families (Santelli et al., 2017). The SRAE program was funded with $10 million upon its creation in 2016. Additionally, in 2016, a total of $85 million was allocated to abstinence-only-until-marriage (AOUM) programs through the SRAE program and the Title V AOUM program, now known as the State Abstinence Education Program (Santelli et al., 2017). Originally known as Community-Based Abstinence Education, the SRAE program was a topic of controversy due to its removal of states’ authority in allocating funding and choosing recipients for sex-education grants (Kay & Jackson, 2008). The SRAE program claims to provide funding to evidence-based programs, all of which include eight benefits: “self-regulation, success sequencing for poverty prevention, healthy relationships, goal setting, resisting sexual coercion, avoiding dating violence, and resisting youth risk behaviors such as underage drinking and illicit drug use,” (Family & Youth Services Bureau, n.d., p. 1). In 2018, more than $12 million in SRAE funds were awarded to support school and community-based programs that teach participants how to “voluntarily refrain from non-marital sexual activity” (Family & Youth Services Bureau, 2017). Thirty-seven states in the United States mandate that information on abstinence be provided when HIV education is taught, and 28 of those say require abstinence to be “stressed” throughout HIV education (Guttmacher Institute, 2020). Target populations for messaging usually range between 11-19 years old, and programs cover topics including healthy relationships, goal-setting, puberty, sexual risks, and adulthood preparation.

Health Communication Theories in Abstinence-Based Sex Education

Grantees of the SRAE program use a variety of abstinence-based sex education curricula. Popular ones include Making a Difference! and REAL Essentials. Curriculum materials that align with SRAE goals often include a summary of theoretical foundations to show how the product is “evidence-based.” Making a Difference! employs the self-efficacy theory, which the program defines as “a person’s confidence in his or her ability to take part in the behavior,” such as increasing a student’s confidence in abstaining from sex (ETR, 2016). The program also utilizes the outcome expectancy theory, which Making a Difference! defines as “beliefs about the consequences of the [targeted] behavior” (ETR, 2016). In the case of abstinence-based sex education, the outcome expectancies theory may consist of depicting an individual becoming pregnant or contracting STIs. In order to integrate the self-efficacy and outcome expectancy theories, the Making a Difference! curriculum aims to promote confidence among students and portrays and explains potential consequences of engaging in risky behavior (ETR, 2016). The Making a Difference! Program goals include: “help young people change behaviors that place them at risk for HIV, STDs and pregnancy,” “delay the initiation of sex among sexually inexperienced youth,” “reduce unprotected sex among sexually active youth,” and “help young people make proud and responsible decisions about their sexual behaviors.”

The REAL Essentials program is an abstinence-based sex education curriculum which cites the transtheoretical model of behavioral change theory as its basis (The Center for Relationship Education). According to Anderson (2003), the transtheoretical model (TTM) of behavioral change theory uses the
stages of change in order to assist clients in altering certain behaviors. In Anderson (2003), four women who had reported past intimate partner violence were led through the stages of change: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. The findings supported the effectiveness of the TTM of behavioral change theory (Anderson, 2003). The REAL Essentials curriculum employs the TTM of behavioral change theory by preparing students to:

Identify areas where they may feel unwanted or unworthy when it comes to love, discover their personality characteristics, understand their relationship patterns and learn to identify relationship red flags, determine their personal strengths, create community support networks to help them succeed, develop strategies for setting boundaries and breaking unhealthy patterns, and start fresh with goals for relational health and future family stability (The Center for Relationship Education).

Although not mentioned specifically by the Making a Difference! Or REAL Essentials curricula, it is expected that the programs may use fear appeals messaging techniques. In the past, fear appeals-based messaging in the use of promoting public health campaigns in the United States has been controversial (Green & Witte, 2006; Tannenbaum et al., 2015). Green and Witte (2006) note a 3% increase in the HIV prevalence rate in Uganda after the replacement of fear-based approaches with “softer” approaches in the 1990s. The article infers that Americans assume fear-based health education does not work, due to historic “gay liberation and secularism,” and fear appeals should be reintroduced into the topic of HIV prevention (Green & Witte, 2006, p. 257). Similarly, Nabi & Myrick (2019) found that fear appeals messages were useful due to their arousal of hope among clients. The study found that hope has a positive correlation with intentions to alter behavior, especially when combined with the fear-appeals approach (Nabi & Myrick, 2019).

However, other literature has shown that fear appeals may have unintended effects on public health campaigns. According to Cho and Salmon (2006), individuals who are targeted with a fear appeals approach may have adverse reactions if targeted during the precontemplation stage of change, in which “individuals have no intention to stop a risky behavior within 6 months” (p. 92). They conclude that a fear appeals approach may nonetheless be effective, but should be tailored to the audience’s stage of change if possible, and accompanied by self-efficacy measures.

According to Tannenbaum et al. (2015), fear appeals messages are “persuasive messages that attempt to arouse fear by emphasizing the potential danger and harm that will befall individuals if they do not adopt the messages’ recommendations” (p. 1178). Tannenbaum characterizes fear appeals messages by the amount of fear intended to arouse in an audience, the presence of “efficacy statements,” or, “a statement that assures message recipients that they are capable of performing the fear appeal’s recommended actions,” and the amount of “depicted susceptibility and severity,” which refers to an individual’s personal risk for negative consequences (p. 1180).

This study will address a gap in present literature of how abstinence-based sex-education programs frame messages through the following research questions:

1. How do abstinence-based sex education videos use health communication and behavior theories, such as self-efficacy, outcome expectancies, and fear appeals?

2. How do abstinence-based sex education videos mention or depict the eight SRAE program benefits, if at all?

This study aims to explore the application of health communication theories in abstinence-based sex education videos. Although past studies have focused on the application of such theories in public health campaigns, and other studies have focused on the effectiveness of abstinence-based sex education, none have focused specifically on abstinence-based sex-education videos and their application of health communication theories.

III. Methods

This study used a qualitative content analysis to examine eight videos which complement one of two curricula: Making a Difference! or REAL Essentials. A list of 27 SRAE-funded programs from 2018 was used to identify popular abstinence-based curriculum materials. Two curricula were selected based on the
ability to easily purchase and access the teaching materials. Of the 27 grantees, six chose to implement the Making a Difference! curriculum and two chose to implement the REAL Essentials curriculum. The Making a Difference! curriculum included three videos and the REAL Essentials curriculum included five videos, totaling eight sex-education videos. Videos ranged in length from three to eighteen minutes, and claimed to address consequences of sex, relationships, HIV/AIDS prevention, and self-confidence, according to video descriptions included in the curricula. The schools, organizations, and departments that selected either the Making a Difference! or REAL Essentials curricula are listed in Appendix B.

Videos were coded for a range of themes and topics in order to determine major similarities and utilization of communications theory. Specifically, a single coder looked for examples of how self-efficacy, outcome expectancy, fear appeals, and transtheoretical model of behavioral change theories were represented, if at all, using coding sheets created in reflection of their described characteristics or elements, as outlined in the literature review. An open-coding style was also used to code for depictions of theories or repetitive elements in videos; new coding categories were created as they emerged from the videos. According to Schreier (2014), open coding is descriptive, and is often used to create coding categories. As coding categories were refined, coding sheets based on theories presented by the curricula were used to analyze content (Appendix A).

Theories were chosen if mentioned specifically by the curriculum as evidence. Self-efficacy and outcome expectancy theories were mentioned specifically by the Making a Difference! curriculum, and the transtheoretical model of behavioral change theory was mentioned specifically by the REAL Essentials curriculum. Although the fear appeals theory was not mentioned specifically by either of the curricula, present literature supports that it would be relevant in the coding process. Additionally, videos were coded for mention or depiction of the eight SRAE program benefits, which are outlined in the literature review.

IV. Findings

Each video was analyzed for certain components, as outlined in the methodology section. These elements are reflective of various communication and behavioral health theories, including self-efficacy and outcome expectancies theories, fear appeals theory, and transtheoretical model of behavioral change theories, in addition to the SRAE program benefits. Theories were chosen based on evidence provided by curricula. Elements used to code for self-efficacy and outcome expectancy theories are displayed in Table 1.

| Table 1: Presence of Self-Efficacy and Outcome Expectancy Theories (Utilized by Making a Difference!) |
|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Character shown abstaining from sex (Self-efficacy) | Character shown having a conversation with partner expressing want to abstain (Self-efficacy) | Character shown with STD (Outcome expectations) | Character shown with HIV/AIDS (Outcome expectations) | Character shown pregnant (Outcome expectations) |
| # of Videos | 4 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Percentage of 8 videos | 50.0% | 37.5% | 12.5% | 25.0% | 37.5% |

The element of self-efficacy theory that was used most often in the videos was a depiction of a character choosing to abstain from having sex (four videos, or 50% of total), followed by a depiction of a character having a conversation with a partner expressing their desire to abstain from engaging in sex (three videos, 38% of total). One example of a character shown choosing to abstain from sex is present here:
I guess that is why I have chosen to wait. Not to be a girl that falls easily, that believes every word, every story, everything they hear.... That was her decision. That's not for me. It's hard enough being a kid, without having to worry about raising one. I think I’ll just wait, until I’m ready to accept the responsibility. (Dunne, 2000).

Below is an example of a character having a conversation with a partner expressing a want to abstain:

*We've been together a long time, but he's really pressuring me* (The Subject is HIV, Making a Difference!).

As outlined in the methods section, videos were also coded for examples of outcome expectancy theory. The element of outcome expectancy theory that was most often used was a depiction of a pregnant character (three videos, or 37.5% of total), followed by a character with HIV/AIDS (two videos, or 25% total), and a character with an STD (one video, 12.5% total). Below is an example of a character depiction with HIV:

*My name is Eddy, I have the HIV virus in my body and I could develop AIDS.* (The Subject is HIV, Making a Difference!)

As mentioned in the methods section, an open-coding method was used and element categories were created as the videos were coded. As such, additional coding categories that are reflective of self-efficacy and outcome expectancies theories, among other coding categories, were created. Categories created through an open-coding process are displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2: Open-Sourced Coding Categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th># of Videos</th>
<th>Percentage of 8 videos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minority groups</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mention of abstinence</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main character: Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main character: Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious figures</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depiction or mention of condoms</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female character shown broken up with</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character testing for STDs/HIV</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Categories reflective of the self-efficacy theory includes the depiction or mention of condoms (2 videos, 25% total) and the depiction of a character testing for STDs/HIV (2 videos, 25% total). Of the elements of the TTM of behavioral change theory (Table 3), the mention of love was present most often in the videos (5 videos, 63% total). Other elements of the behavioral change theory were also present in the videos, including characters creating community support networks (2 videos, 25% total) and developing strategies to set boundaries and break unhealthy patterns (2 videos, 25% total).
Table 3: Presence of Transtheoretical Model of Behavioral Change Theory (Utilized by REAL Essentials!)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mention of love</th>
<th>Support self-discovery</th>
<th>How to identify relationship red flags</th>
<th>Determine personal strengths</th>
<th>Create community support networks</th>
<th>Develop strategies for setting boundaries and breaking unhealthy patterns</th>
<th>Goal-setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of Videos</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of 8 videos</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the elements of fear appeals theory (Table 4), depictions of fear in a character were used most often in the videos (7 videos, 88% total). Depictions of susceptibility personal to individuals (5 videos, 63% total) efficacy statements (4 videos, 50% total), and the mention of death (2 videos, 25% total) were also present in the videos. An example of a statement coded for susceptibility personal to individuals is present below:

“You can get HIV from having unprotected sex with someone who has the virus, so not having sex is your safest choice (Foregger, 2016).

Table 4: Presence of Fear Appeals Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fear depicted in character</th>
<th>Efficacy statements</th>
<th>Depicted susceptibility personal to individuals</th>
<th>Mention of death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of Videos</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of 8 videos</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the SRAE program benefits (Table 5), healthy relationships (4 videos, 50% total) were depicted most often, followed by a character considering poverty prevention (3 videos, 38% total) and goal-setting (3 videos, 38% total). Below is a statement a mother made to her pregnant daughter which was coded for a character considering poverty prevention:

“Raising a baby is hard, and I hate to say it, but money matters too. Sometimes, I don’t even know how we made it this far (Richardson, 2016).

Table 5: SRAE Program Benefits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self-Regulation</th>
<th>Success sequencing for poverty prevention</th>
<th>Healthy Relationships</th>
<th>Goal-setting</th>
<th>Resisting Sexual Coercion</th>
<th>Avoiding Dating Violence</th>
<th>Resisting Underage Drinking</th>
<th>Resisting Drug Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of Videos</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of 8 videos</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
V. Discussion

Health Behavior and Communication Theories

This study examined the use of the self-efficacy, outcome expectancy, behavioral change, and fear appeals theories in eight abstinence-based sex education videos. The self-efficacy theory was present in at least half of the videos, most often through the portrayal of a character choosing to abstain from sex. Adolescents’ perceived self-efficacy and consequent self-confidence correlate with their ability to enact upon decisions beneficial to their sexual health (Rotosky et al., 2008). Therefore, the inclusion of the self-efficacy theory should be a cornerstone of sex education videos, yet the self-efficacy theory was not present in up to half of the eight videos. By omitting the self-efficacy theory, not all videos included in the study provide adolescents with an evidence-based skill to make beneficial sexual health decisions for themselves.

The outcome expectancy theory was present less often than the self-efficacy theory, but was portrayed in at least three of the eight videos. Limited research is available on the effectiveness of the outcome expectancy theory in sex education. As mentioned in the literature review, the Making a Difference! curriculum defines the outcome expectancy theory as portraying the potential consequences of engaging in sexual risky behavior. Future research should explore the effectiveness of employing the outcome expectancy theory by providing potentially positive outcomes in place of negative ones in sex education.

Although each element of the behavioral change theory was present in at least one video, none of the videos employed all elements of the behavioral change theory. The theory is founded on the four stages of change, but REAL Essentials employs other elements to reflect the stages of change in making educated sexual risk decisions. For example, REAL essentials claims to “Identify areas where they [students] may feel unwanted or unworthy when it comes to love, discover their personality characteristics,” which may be considered examples of the pre-contemplation stage. Of the elements of the behavioral change theory, the mention of love was portrayed most often. Although limited research is available on the effectiveness of love in adolescent sex education, experts in the field have argued on its behalf, due to the feeling of happiness it brings to students (Cassar, 2018).

Out of the elements of the fear appeals theory, fear depicted in the character was portrayed most often, appearing in seven out of the eight videos. As mentioned in the literature review, experts in the field of health communication have argued both on behalf of and against the use of fear appeals in public health. Cho and Salmon (2006) suggest that fear appeals may be most effective when a population is also provided with self-efficacy measures, which, as aforementioned, was included in only half of the eight videos. The use of fear appeals theory in the sex education videos varied, from the use of suspenseful music as a patient waited to take an STD test, to the use of wind and shadows as a patient dreamed she was pregnant. While some of the videos were accompanied by depictions of the outcome expectancy theory, others focused on more abstract ideas, such as break-ups or death. In order to effectively utilize fear appeals theory, depictions of fear should be accompanied by both elements of self-efficacy and accurate and factual depictions of outcome expectations.

SRAE Program Benefits

Videos were also coded for the program benefits listed by Sexual Risk Avoidance Education program. Healthy relationships were portrayed most often, in four of the eight videos. Three of the eight videos included depictions of a character aiming for future financial success. Most of the program benefits were portrayed in less than three videos. Although the SRAE program claims to be beneficial to students participating in the curricula, most videos did not portray the program benefits.

Additional Observations

As mentioned in the methodology section, this study utilized an open-coding process. Open-coding categories were created as videos were coded when prominent themes or figures were noticed repetitively. Most notable were the presence of ethnic minority groups, which were included in seven out of the eight videos. Of these videos, either Latinx or African American characters were portrayed. According to Myers, Richardson, and Chung (2019), the representation of different ethnicities in health communications materials is vital in communicating an organization’s recognition of the way culture and values influence an individual’s
experiences. Notably, the videos used by the REAL Essentials curriculum, created by Scenarios USA, were written by students. Because students wrote these materials, the inclusion of diverse representation is especially vital in accurately portraying students’ lives. However, certain videos may be more effective depending on where the curriculum is used. For example, in Scenarios USA videos, students from Texas chose to include Latinx characters and included Spanish dialogue, while a student from New York depicted an African American character living in the city. Further research might explore the possibility of providing students with videos that have characters and settings applicable to their geographic location and cultural setting.

V. Conclusion

This study examined health behavior and communication theories in eight abstinence-based sex education videos. Although there are 27 SRAE program grantees, only eight grantees use the curricula assessed in this study. Other curricula were not included primarily because of the barriers to purchasing the curricula (access and cost). Additionally, this study was limited to eight videos and is not a representative sample of abstinence-based sex-education video materials commonly used. Examples of health behavior and communication theories were coded for as the coder saw fit, and coding categories of theories, when not listed by evidence, were limited to the coder’s interpretations.

Future research should explore the effectiveness of the outcome expectancy and fear appeals theories, the role of love, and the portrayal of ethnic minorities in sex education. Although the Sexual Risk Avoidance Education Program aims to benefit for students, the claimed benefits were not present in all of the sex-education videos. Because abstinence-based videos included in the study do not frequently portray the SRAE program benefits, they may not provide students with skills the program touts. Additionally, because theories such as the self-efficacy theory or the TTM of behavioral change theory are not prominently featured, students’ abilities to make informed, beneficial sexual-health decisions may be limited.

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Resisting Black Friday: REI and Patagonia’s Stances on Consumerism

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Abstract

As consumers’ expectations for brands to take stances on social and political issues continues to grow, the trend of corporate social advocacy (CSA) is important to consider. This study examines two campaigns from outdoor retailers REI and Patagonia against “Black Friday” consumerism on the day after Thanksgiving. Through the lens of CSA, this qualitative case study explores company press releases, social media regarding the campaigns, and traditional media coverage. Individual user comments left on Patagonia’s and REI’s Instagram posts regarding the campaigns also were studied to determine how the campaigns were received. The findings shed light on the reaction of consumers when companies take stances on social issues that seem to risk their existence as businesses, and the importance of alignment between corporate goals and CSA.

I. Introduction

Businesses have been involved in the shaping of politics and social movements for decades. While much of this activity has been hidden from the public in the past, the recent rise in social media has made the political and social stances of businesses increasingly visible (Edman, 2010; Gaines-Ross, 2017). In 2017, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg took a public stance against President Trump’s first executive order limiting immigration to the United States, writing on his Facebook page, “We should also keep our doors open to refugees and those who need help. That’s who we are” (Wong, 2017). Along similar lines, Merck CEO Ken Frazier reacted to Trump’s response to the tragedy in Charlottesville by resigning from the president’s Manufacturing Jobs Initiative and stating, via the Merck Twitter page, “America’s leaders must honor our fundamental values by clearly rejecting expressions of hatred, bigotry and group supremacy, which run counter to the American ideal that all people are created equal” (Gaines-Ross, 2017).

Not all political stances come from the voice of the CEO; Nike built a campaign in support of NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick’s protest of the national anthem. The athletic retail giant received widespread support for the campaign despite its controversial nature (Boren, 2018). Meanwhile, a study from APCO Worldwide found 90 percent of consumers expect brands to be “involved in taking on society’s most pressing concerns” (APCO, 2018). Similarly, a study from Porter Novelli/Cone found that 90% of Generation Z believes companies must address social and environmental issues (Porter Novelli/Cone, 2019).
As companies continue to face rising pressures to comment on divisive political and social issues, corporations' engagement in these areas, especially when the issues lack direct relevance to companies, is important to consider (Dodd & Supa, 2014). While some corporations take stances that could alienate stakeholders, others take stances that seem counterintuitive to the success of business overall. In 2019, outdoor retailers REI and Patagonia took stances against consumerism by continuing their campaigns against Black Friday sales following Thanksgiving. For businesses, taking a stance against Black Friday can mean risking major profits and disenchanting consumers who look forward to the national day of shopping. This study will compare the two campaigns and evaluate social media reaction in order to determine the importance of these types of campaigns as a type of corporate social advocacy (CSA).

II. Literature Review

This literature review details relevant corporate social advocacy literature, the history of Black Friday, the movement against Black Friday, and corporate branding against Black Friday.

Corporate Social Advocacy

In recent years, corporate advocacy regarding social issues has been discussed in academic literature as a subset of corporate social responsibility, or CSR. CSR has been defined as the relationship between business and society (Snider, Hill, & Martin, 2003) and involves organizational operations that connect back to greater societal economic, ethical, legal, or philanthropic concerns (Kim & Reber, 2008). CSR initiatives are also designed to portray a company as responsive to the needs and concerns of society (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006). CSR is viewed as strategic to an organization, and “rational managers of business firms invest in CSR initiatives as long as they earn extra profits” (Palazzo and Scherer, 2010). When used as a CSR strategy, CSA serves as a method for businesses to engage with publics on significant issues.

CSA, however, extends beyond CSR into commenting publicly on how social issues should be addressed in the political sphere, as seen through the previously mentioned Facebook and Merck examples in which CEOs used social media to call for a specific course of action on a divisive issue. Whereas CSR as a business strategy addresses social issues that are likely to generate uniformly positive responses from consumers, CSA occurs when a company responds publicly to controversial political topics (Dodd & Supa, 2014). While CSR may include supporting a cause to garner positive public support, CSA frequently involves taking sides on political issues that tend to be more controversial (Clemensen, 2017). For example, while most agree on the overall importance of protecting the natural world, the solutions for doing so can be vastly different depending on political perspectives, which seem to be increasingly widening.

CSA typically involves corporate engagement in social issues to advance a public good or cause deemed important to a corporation; however, the extent to which corporations can actually serve as advocates for social issues or public policy is the subject of much debate. While corporations may appear to be acting for the public good, Dutta (2019) argues that this demonstration of commitment to the public interest is typically aligned with the organization’s profit maximization. Through narratives of serving democracy, “development and public good are often paradoxically co-opted within efforts of community relations and CSR to strategically achieve goals of privatized organizational effectiveness” (Dutta, 2019, p. 53).

Indeed, in many cases, corporate advocacy can and has been used by businesses and industry trade groups to maintain the status quo for business, including reducing the potential for government intervention in corporate activities (e.g., Cutler & Muehling, 1989; Miller & Sinclair, 2009; Sethi, 1977; Sinclair & Irani, 2005). Campaigns have been used by American Electric Power to reduce regulations on coal mining and by the American Petroleum Institute to encourage citizens to oppose EPA regulations on GHG emissions (Gaither & Gaither, 2016). These campaigns work to advance corporate goals, all while consolidating power in the hands of “elite local, regional and international actors in transnational networks of private profiteering” (p. 53). Corporations also often faces allegations of greenwashing, a term coined by environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986 to describe companies that promote their environmentally sound practices while engaging in other damaging behavior behind the scenes. Often, companies create campaigns to promote the good they create for people and the planet as a way to mask their harmful activities. A classic example can be found in Chevron’s People Do campaign, which “showed Chevron employees protecting bears, butterflies, sea turtles and all manner of cute and cuddly animals” (Watson, 2016).
Corporate Motivations for CSA

CSA in more recent years has involved commenting publicly on government policy and social issues that may not have direct relevance to business objectives and corporate goals. CSA may involve either supporting or countering government policy and social movements; unlike CSR, corporations engage in CSA with the understanding that it likely will not be well-received by all stakeholders. Gaither, Austin, and Collins (2018), for example, found that Dick’s Sporting Goods’ CSA on gun control following the Parkland, Fla., school shooting was undertaken despite the fact that corporate executives expected “polarized reactions” and potentially negative sales impacts. This lack of direct and obvious relevance to the company, coupled with the potential for divided response among stakeholders, may heighten skepticism among stakeholders regarding corporate motivations for engaging in CSA.

Research on CSR, meanwhile, suggests initiatives are best received by stakeholders when the actions a company takes align with the values of the company. Ellen, Webb, and Mohr (2006) investigated how consumers respond to CSR initiatives that are attributed to be values-, stakeholder-, strategic-, or egoistic-driven. Values- and stakeholder-driven motivations lie on opposing ends of a spectrum: “consumers will evaluate CSR efforts more positively when they are driven apparently by corporate values and more negatively when they are in response to stakeholder requirements” (p. 150). Similarly, strategic- and egoistic-driven motivations are opposites, since “attributions related to typical strategic goals of getting and keeping customers are inherent in the existence of a firm as a social actor and are widely accepted,” while “attributions such as taking advantage of a cause or nonprofit have negative, egoistic connotations and are not likely to be widely accepted” (p. 150). Their findings suggest CSR initiatives that are viewed as being driven by values and strategic motivations, both of which would be internal to the company rather than being imposed by external factors, tend to garner the most positive response among consumers.

Ellen, Webb, and Mohr’s findings have not been examined within the context of CSA; however, Korschun et al. (2016) studied how consumers respond when companies take a stance on divisive political issues when the company is seen as being values-oriented versus results-oriented. The authors defined values-oriented companies as companies that presented themselves as making decisions and acting based on stated values (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, L.L. Bean, Starbucks, and Whole Foods); whereas results-oriented companies are driven by the goal of achieving marketing objectives. ExxonMobil, which states in its “guiding principles” that the company continuously achieves “superior financial and operating results while simultaneously adhering to high ethical standards” (ExxonMobil, 2018, para. 1), was referenced as an example of a results-oriented company. Their findings suggest not taking a stand in regard to a social issue may be more problematic for some companies than even taking a stand with which consumers disagree, depending on how values-oriented the company is perceived to be. Korschun et al. (2016) found that abstention on a controversial issue (versus taking a stand) resulted in lower purchase intentions for companies that were perceived to be guided by values. The authors concluded that public response to a company’s political stance was mediated by perceived corporate hypocrisy relative to what type of company consumers perceived them to be—values-oriented or results-oriented (Korschun et al., 2016). Korschun et al. (2016) and Ellen, Webb, and Mohr (2006) together suggest the need for the motivations of CSA to be investigated to see if alignment of the advocacy with a company’s values affects the response of consumers.

Values Fit and Consumer Response to CSA

The question of what political or social issue to take a stance on is important for corporations to consider. Aside from the perception of consumers of the orientation of the company, whether it be values-driven or results-driven, for example, the mission and goals of the corporation may mediate how consumers react to their stances. While conventional wisdom may suggest that some consumers are likely to react negatively toward corporations’ stances on political and social issues, new research shows that consumers respect companies that take stances on issues that align with their stated corporate values (e.g., Dodd & Supa, 2014; Gaither, Austin, & Collins, 2018; Korschun et al., 2016). Outdoor retailers, for example, may be best suited to take stances on social and political issues related to the protection and preservation of the natural world.

Black Friday and Its Backlash

Macy’s was the first store in the United States to advertise for post-Thanksgiving shopping in 1924,
during the Thanksgiving Day Parade; however, the day after Thanksgiving did not become known as Black Friday in the United States until the late 1950s. As large crowds of consumers ventured into downtown Philadelphia for the weekend to watch the Army-Navy football game, the police started referring to the day as Black Friday due to the chaos created from the influx of people. The shopping craze on the day between Thanksgiving and the traditional Army-Navy game continued to gain popularity in the 1970s and 1980s (Daly, 2019). Today, Black Friday has become so popular as to spill over into Thanksgiving Day itself, with stores opening the evening of the holiday and deals continuing online over the weekend and into Cyber Monday. The growing craze surrounding the holiday has received considerable backlash. In Canada in 1992, the first Buy Nothing Day was organized to protest Black Friday and the ideals of consumerism (Shearer, 2018). Since the first Buy Nothing Day in 1992, the movement has spread to 65 other nations.

While individuals and nonprofits have supported the movement against Black Friday, it has been rare for corporations to oppose the shopping holiday; however, it has become more popular for brands that are concerned with their image in terms of environmental and social responsibility to abstain from participation in Black Friday. In 2019, a group of more than 200 brands in France, united under the slogan “Make Friday Green Again,” pledged to avoid using discounts and instead donate 10% of their Black Friday sales to nonprofits (Paddison, 2019). While this stance against hyper-consumerism may be bold, other corporations go so far as to completely shut down on the holiday, such as REI. While these anti-consumerism stances may seem antithetical to the definition of business, these corporations may be taking a wise stance by tapping into the frustration of their consumers. Rather than joining the chaos of Black Friday, these brands are alternatives (Garber, 2015). As brands continue to take stances against Black Friday, the language in these campaigns, including their goals and motivations, and the consumer response, is important to consider.

**Research Questions**

This study seeks to address a gap in corporate social advocacy literature regarding corporate campaigns against Black Friday. In order to do so, this study will answer two questions:

1. How does Patagonia’s Gift of Giving campaign compare to REI’s Opt to Act campaign?
2. How have these campaigns been received by stakeholders?

**III. Methods**

To answer research question one, a qualitative case study of campaign content was conducted. Case studies utilize a theoretical framework to explore multiple sources of evidence rather than single elements of communication, thus allowing for in-depth insight and a look at the phenomenon as a whole (Yin, 2014). Using a case study methodology, this study triangulates multiple data points, including company press releases about the campaigns, social media regarding the campaigns, and traditional media coverage of the campaigns. This case study summarizes the goals, priorities, and features of each campaign, and evaluates the campaigns against the mission statements of the companies themselves. To answer research question two, individual user comments left on Patagonia’s and REI’s Instagram posts regarding the Gift of Giving and Opt to Act campaigns were qualitatively analyzed to determine how the campaigns were received.

The Opt to Act campaign and Gift of Giving campaign were chosen for this study because both campaigns are from outdoor retailers who have interest in protecting the natural world. Although other corporations outside of the outdoor retail space have similar campaigns, these two campaigns were chosen for the study for ease of comparison. The sample for research question one, which included press releases, social media posts, news articles, and each company’s own website detailing the campaign against Black Friday campaign, was collected manually online. The sample for research question two, which involved a qualitative content analysis of user comments on social media from each company relating to each campaign, was collected using a web scraping tool. This sample included comments on pre-campaign and post-campaign posts on REI and Patagonia’s Instagram pages. Of the four posts, 387, 51, 47, and 173 comments were analyzed for a total of 658 comments. Comments were analyzed to determine how consumers reacted to the CSA engagement, including indication of purchase intention and overall perceptions of the company.
This study used the grounded theory method of open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1998) to determine themes as they appeared. To answer research question one, texts were analyzed for mentions of goals, specific features to each campaign, and any alignments with the companies’ stated missions. To answer research question two, comments were considered units of analysis and were analyzed for the inclusion of themes, including general sentiment (positive/negative) toward the campaign and the company. The web tool exportcomments.com was used to webscrape each of the posts to collect comments. Comments were imported into Excel for ease of qualitative analysis.

IV. Findings

Overview of REI and the Opt to Act Campaign

The origin of REI’s 2019 campaign against Black Friday lies in its Opt Outside campaign, which began in 2015. On Black Friday in 2015, the outdoor retailer became the first company of its size to shut its doors in a form of protest. In this first declaration of war on Black Friday, REI was concerned with its employees, noting that it was closing stores and paying employees as if it were a regular workday “so they can do what they love most—be outside” (Nudd, 2015).

In 2019, with a new CEO at the helm, the REI campaign was broadened. In effort to combat the consumerism that fuels Black Friday and its environmental consequences more than just one day a year, the company launched Opt to Act. The year-long campaign features actions individuals can take each day to limit their ecological footprint, kicked off by a nationwide day of action on Black Friday 2019. The Opt to Act campaign hinges on the idea that collective action can achieve more than individual action. The words “Together our action goes further” headline the campaign website (REI, 2020). REI CEO Eric Artz highlighted this goal in the press release announcing the campaign, saying, “As a single company, our impact is limited, but as a community, we can drive change that powers meaningful action beyond our walls […] As a co-op, we know that many people taking many small steps together can add up to big changes. Collective intention will drive collective impact” (REI, 2020).

The stated mission of REI is “To awaken a lifelong love of the outdoors, for all” (REI, 2020). With the goal of the Opt to Act campaign being to encourage collective action to create positive change through “simple challenges to reduce your impact, get active, and leave the world better than you found it,” the company mission statement and campaign goals are aligned. By encouraging individuals to consider their impact on the natural world, REI is in turn working toward its overall mission of awakening love for the outdoors. When people consider how they are hurting the natural spaces they love most, their love and care for the outdoors has the potential to grow.

Features of the Opt to Act Campaign

In order to achieve this goal of inciting collective action, or creating small changes laddering up to bigger changes, REI created a list of 52 activities, one for every week between Black Friday 2019 and Black Friday 2020. The actions include the elimination or replacement of several habits that contribute to ecological footprints, such as using reusable bags or hanging laundry to dry instead of using a dryer. REI has options for website visitors to add these weekly actions as reminders to their calendars or to download a checklist of the options to carry out on their own time.

The Opt to Act campaign also kicked off with a day of action on Black Friday 2019. With all stores closed and no orders processed online on Black Friday, REI paid all of its 13,000 plus employees as if it were a normal workday, and asked members and employees to join one of 11 clean-ups around the country. The clean-ups, coordinated by the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics and United By Blue, were listed as activities to sign up for on REI’s website.

REI also considers its own impact as part of the campaign, noting on the Opt to Act webpage, “when it comes to reducing our impact, we know individual choices aren’t the whole story. Businesses need to act, too” (REI, 2020). REI goes on to detail the actions it has taken as a company to reduce its environmental footprint, including rethinking the business model, reducing unnecessary waste across the co-op and the industry, and committing to fight for life outdoors every day.
Lastly, the Opt to Act webpage encourages conversation among individuals in order to “stay engaged in the fight for life outdoors” (REI, 2020). The webpage links to REI Conversations, a space in the website for stakeholders to engage in conversation surrounding sustainable living and make suggestions to REI regarding its own sustainability policies.

**Motivations of the Opt to Act Campaign**

The motivations of the Opt to Act campaign seem to be mixed. Through its solicitation of member feedback and asking what members want the co-op to do next, REI appears to have stakeholder-driven motivations. REI's concern for its employees also points to stakeholder-driven motivations. Chief Customer Officer Ben Steele shared of the initial decision to close doors on Black Friday in 2015, “To be really transparent, we didn’t know if it would work. We really focused on our employees” (Biron, 2019).

As the campaign grew from Opt Outside to Opt to Act, however, the motivations shifted. As Steele said in an interview with Business Insider: “The next generation of people who love the outdoors may not have an outdoors to love in the same way […] That’s absolutely an existential risk for our business, but more than that, it’s an existential risk for our purpose and our passion,” (Biron, 2019). Steele acknowledges that the current threat posed to the environment through business as usual is also a threat to REI as a company; with no outdoor life to be lived, there is no need for outdoor gear. This acknowledgement makes the campaign, as an attempt to mitigate against the impending climate crisis, appear to have strategic motivations.

However, Steele goes on to emphasize the campaign as an attempt for REI to lead with its values: “What we’ve seen in the retail space is more and more organizations saying, ‘What does it mean to lead with our purpose? What does it mean to lead with our values?’ Steele said. ‘We’re understanding the power of that and the evolving consumer expectation that organizations need to do more than just sell stuff. [#OptOutside] became a demonstration of that philosophy and that belief,” (Biron, 2019).

**Overview of Patagonia and the Gift of Giving Campaign**

Patagonia's rhetoric against Black Friday started in 2011 with a full-page ad in the New York Times with the text “Don’t buy this jacket” superimposed over one of the company’s iconic Better Sweater quarter zips. For the first time in 2016, the store decided to donate all of its Black Friday profits to grassroots environmental groups working to combat the climate crisis. In 2019, following the launch of its digital platform Action Works, the outdoor retailer decided to use Black Friday as an opportunity to raise funds for the grassroots environmental groups that use the platform. The Gift of Giving campaign kicked off on Black Friday 2019 and ran until December 31, 2019. During this month-long period, Patagonia pledged to match all donations made to environmental grassroots groups on the Action Works platform. By mid-December, $10 million had been raised on the platform, all of which Patagonia matched.

The stated mission of Patagonia is “we’re in business to save our home planet” (Patagonia, 2020). With this mission in mind, the Gift of Giving campaign seems to align with Patagonia’s values. Rather than just saving the planet, Patagonia is attempting to use its platform to make the connections and money necessary to do so. With the Gift of Giving focusing on monetary donations rather than other kind of support, Patagonia places emphasis on the “business” piece of its mission statement.

**Features of the Gift of Giving Campaign**

The premise of the Gift of Giving campaign was to raise funds for environmental grassroots groups that Patagonia already supports with its 1% for the Planet grants. All of these groups have access to Patagonia Action Works, a digital platform the company launched in 2018 with the intention of connecting its audience to these grassroots groups to achieve collective environmental action. During the Gift of Giving campaign, donations were made on the platform to a group of choice, either in one's own name or in someone else’s name as a gift. When donations were made as gifts, the receiver of the gift was sent an email that a donation had been made on Patagonia Action Works on their behalf. This email included a personalized link with space for a note from the gift giver and information regarding the grassroots group of choice (Patagonia Action Works, 2020).
Motivations of the Gift of Giving Campaign

The Gift of Giving campaign appears to be an attempt of Patagonia to extend its sentiment against Black Friday. Vice President of Marketing Corey Bayers shared in an interview with Fast Company that the company has tried to downplay the importance of Black Friday for many years: “We’re actually pretty anti-Black Friday in our planning, but we have the functionality for these donations through Action Works, and we’ve always toyed with this idea” (Beer, 2019).

The press release announcing the campaign also highlighted the company’s feelings toward Black Friday through a statement from CEO Rose Marcario: “Black Friday is often a day when we go out and buy things we don’t really need and give them to people who don’t really want them […] This year, consider giving to our home planet in the name of someone you love. Give to the tireless, community-based groups who work to save clean water and air in your neighborhoods, our public land treasures, our wild animals and birds, and our wide oceans” (Simpson, 2019). Marcario’s statement emphasizes the work of the grassroots groups rather than individual contribution to environmental action. Rather than giving its stakeholders actions to lessen their environmental impact or to contribute to the formation of strong environmental policy, the Gift of Giving campaign focuses on combating the hyper-consumerism upon which Black Friday thrives through giving an alternative to making commercial purchase as holiday gifts. This dedication to combating hyper-consumerism could be seen as a values-driven motivation; however, since Patagonia is raising money for the grassroots groups that it already supports through its 1% for the Planet grants, the motivation for this campaign could be perceived as stakeholder-driven or strategic-driven.

Overview of Social Media Reaction

Opt to Act Campaign Announcement Reaction

To announce the Opt Outside campaign, REI posted a video on its Instagram page on October 23, 2019, focusing on the environmental impact of single-use plastics and highlighting the campaign as a solution (REI, 2019). After several overwhelming shots of how plastic is used in single-use situations, the video ends by framing Black Friday as the “kickoff” to a year of action.

Overall, the reaction to the video was positive. Several of the comments praised the video and the campaign, through reactions such as: “Best Black Friday P.S.A. I’ve seen yet” or “Love this video! Great job!” Several of the positive comments also indicated a commitment to go outside and abstain from shopping on Black Friday or to stop using single-use plastics, making commitment to REI or solidarity with the campaign sentiment a major theme of the public reaction.

There was some negative reaction to the campaign launch video. These types of comments generally fell into two categories. While some of the comments implied that REI was overstepping its role as a company with this kind of campaign and indicated lack of care for protecting the natural world, others claimed that REI was not doing enough or was being hypocritical to attempt to combat plastic pollution while being such a large contributor to the problem. From these two types of disapproving comments, two themes were derived: individuals who believed REI should do less as a company, and individuals who believed REI should do more as a company. Of the comments questioning REI’s commitment, some even questioned the plastic that was used to create the video, asking “But what did they do with all the trash to make this commercial though?”

Post-Opt to Act Campaign Reaction

After the Opt to Act campaign began on Black Friday, REI posted a picture on Instagram on November 30, 2019, highlighting the cleanup efforts of the day before and promoting the 52-week long Opt to Act plan. The caption of the photo stated: “To everyone who went out and cleaned up this Black Friday—that was just the beginning. Check out The Opt to Act Plan (link in bio) for 52 weeks of sustainable action. #OptOutside” (REI, 2019). Although this post received considerably less traffic than the announcement post from October 23, the overall sentiment was still positive. Several of the positive comments included statements that individuals had participated in the nationwide cleanup on Black Friday or that they would be interested in participating in the 52-week long plan, again indicating the theme of solidarity with REI or the Opt to Act campaign itself.

Only two of the comments on this post indicated negative sentiment. One of these highlighted the hypocrisy of the post itself, showing a plastic bag being used to clean up other plastic items that had been
littered; the other called out individuals for blindly supporting REI without considering the company’s own environmental impact.

A common trend among both posts was the company’s willingness to reply to comments. REI more often replied to comments with positive sentiment, such as those indicating a willingness to spend time outside or participate in Opt to Act; however, REI did reply to some of the more critical comments asking for suggestions on how to mitigate its own environmental impact. Further conversation was carried out between individuals who tagged each other in the post, contributing to REI’s goal of inciting collective environmental action in order to make the biggest change. This willingness to engage in conversation highlights REI’s stakeholder-driven motivations.

**Patagonia ‘Gift of Giving’ Announcement Reaction**

On November 29, 2019, Patagonia posted a video with graphics detailing the Gift of Giving campaign (Patagonia, 2019). This campaign announcement did not receive as much traffic as REI’s Opt to Act campaign announcement; however, the reaction to the post was positive overall. Several of the comments included praise for Patagonia as a company, and many of the comments thanked the company, making gratitude for Patagonia a major theme among public reaction. Several comments were also made by grassroots environmental groups who could receive donations through the campaign, while comments were made by individuals indicating and tagging groups they would be donating to. These types of comments indicated a theme of solidarity with and commitment to the campaign.

Five negative comments were made on the post. Of these five, four were complaints that Patagonia was not partaking in Black Friday sales. One of the comments asked why Patagonia was not supporting charities outside of California, to which Patagonia replied that they were supporting grassroots groups outside of California and that they could all be found on the Action Works platform. However, this comment raises the point that donations could only be made to the platforms Patagonia supports through 1% for the Planet grants, which are heavily located in California.

**Post-‘Gift of Giving’ Campaign Reaction**

On December 16, 2019, Patagonia posted another video with graphics on its Instagram page announcing that the goal of raising $10 million in support of grassroots groups had been reached, and that Patagonia had matched all donations for a total of $20 million to be donated (Patagonia, 2019). Again, the overall reaction was positive. Many of these included messages thanking Patagonia, and several included gratitude on behalf of specific grassroots groups or initiatives that had been supported through the campaign.

Eight of the comments made indicated negative sentiment. Two of these were implying that Patagonia is doing too much to protect the natural world without enough focus on human lives; one comment, meanwhile, was calling out Patagonia for selling overpriced items yet claiming to be anti-consumerist; another comment claimed that $20 million was only “a drop in a bucket” and that Patagonia should be doing more; and one called out Patagonia for the greenhouse gas emissions it causes through raising sheep for wool. One of the comments was both positive and negative, praising Patagonia for its efforts but calling for further action to be taken. These negative comments indicate discontent with Patagonia’s actions and expectation for the company to do more to make an impact.

Conversation among viewers was also high on Patagonia’s posts, with several comments tagging friends. Across both posts, individuals commented that they had donated or that they would donate to a group on Patagonia Action Works in the future. Patagonia was less responsive to the comments on its posts than REI, with only four replies across both posts.

**V. Discussion**

Both REI and Patagonia have mission statements and reasons for being that indicate it would make sense for them to take a corporate stance against Black Friday. As outdoor retailers, these companies have reason to stand up for the protection of the natural world and stand up against those things that are harming it, such as the hyper-consumerism on which Black Friday thrives. This alignment of values and stance is
crucial to the success of corporate social advocacy, and other companies should consider their own missions and goals before carrying out a similar campaign, rather than just taking advantage of a social movement such as Buy Nothing Day.

While the internal perception indicated that these campaigns were values-driven, it must be considered what these campaigns have done for the betterment of each brand’s image. While REI is staying top-of-mind with its stakeholders through its 52-week long action plan, Patagonia received much applause for raising $20 million for grassroots groups. Examples of corporations taking stances that are truly values-driven may be difficult to determine and requires further study.

While both campaigns claim to be anti-consumerism, it is perhaps unrealistic for a business to be completely against the idea of buying things. While REI chose to keep doors closed on Black Friday and has done so for the past four years, Patagonia has kept its doors open on the day. Even if the company does not offer deals on Black Friday, the fact that Patagonia remains open indicates that the profits from this day must be somewhat important to the company. And while REI may have had its doors closed on Black Friday, it encouraged consumers inquiring about certain items to visit the store on other days through replies to Instagram comments such as, “We’re going to have great deals this holiday season, just not on Black Friday.”

This is not to say that a company cannot take a stance against Black Friday successfully; both of these campaigns, as indicated through research question two, were widely celebrated by stakeholders on social media. As a true example of corporate social advocacy, campaigns against Black Friday could trigger backlash, so other brands may consider where they could be accused of hypocrisy before launching such a campaign.

Transparency could also be important to the success of these campaigns. While the negative comments in response to REI’s Opt to Act campaign called out the company for focusing on the waste created from single-use plastic while being a major contributor to the problem itself, REI is open about its waste output. On the Opt to Act website, REI recognizes its own part in the problem and details ways it is attempting to shrink its own footprint; moreover, the campaign recognizes that change is needed. Rather than condoning its behavior through business as usual, REI conveys one key message in its Opt to Act launch video: “Change isn’t easy. Starting is.” Patagonia, similarly, attempted to change behavior by giving its stakeholders an alternative to buying holiday gifts to give to “people who don’t really want them” (Simpson, 2019). Through their campaigns against Black Friday, neither REI nor Patagonia are claiming to be perfect models of environmentally-friendly businesses; rather, they are taking a stance against hyper-consumerism and encouraging their stakeholders to not only listen, but to act to make change.

As the coronavirus continues to take its toll in the United States, companies will have to rethink their Black Friday models to discourage massive crowds and mass chaos that the day usually generates (Kavilanz, 2020). Companies could turn to REI and Patagonia as models; REI’s Opt to Act campaign encourages outdoor activities that can be carried out at a safe social distance, while Patagonia’s Gift of Giving campaign allowed individuals to make donations online, from the comfort of their homes.

VI. Conclusion

This study provides insight on the campaigns against Black Friday by two outdoor retailers, Patagonia and REI. The motivations of each company to carry out these campaigns is relevant to their individual missions, shedding light on the importance of alignment between campaign goals and overall corporate goals. The overall reaction to both campaigns was generally positive on social media, with a few comments indicating the hypocrisy of businesses that fuel the hyper-consumerism behind Black Friday taking a stance against the holiday. However, it must be considered that these companies are not taking stances against consumerism in general and are simply using their corporate platforms to enact change that will ultimately be necessary to the survival of their businesses. Other corporations may consider how they can use their own platforms to enact similar change.

This study was conducted over the course of one semester and the four-month time frame limited the extent of examination and the number of campaigns that could be studied; therefore, two prominent campaigns of the outdoor retail space were chosen for ease of comparison. Only one platform, Instagram, was chosen to represent public response to the campaigns in order to limit the number of comments. This
study was also conducted in midst of the coronavirus pandemic, which brought numerous challenges. Future research could consider similar campaigns of other corporations and how they might differ from businesses that are not heavily reliant on the protection of the natural world. This research may also investigate public response to these campaigns across other platforms.

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References


Ethical Erasure: An Analysis of Online Content-Removal Practices in Award-Winning Student Newsrooms

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Abstract
As society has realized, the internet is forever. This study analyzes the decisions and ethical guidelines top-tier student news organizations use when deciding whether to remove content from their online publications. This research reveals a lack of an industry-wide ethical standard for both professional and student newsrooms. In-depth interviews with student leaders delve into the questions and concerns weighed by these leaders when confronted with these ethical dilemmas. This paper compares the handling of these situations and creates a basic framework for student news organizations to follow when deciding these issues.

I. Introduction
Newspapers can be thrown out and broadcasts archived, but as the millennial-proverb goes, “The internet is forever.” The eternity of online news coverage, specifically relating to crime reporting, has been brought into the limelight by the debate over an individual’s “right to be forgotten,” also known as the “right to erasure.” The ongoing discourse over ethical online content removal has happened at every level of the journalism industry leaving many reporters and editors caught in a catch-22\(^1\) between integrity and empathy.

Many professional U.S. newsrooms have yet to develop a fully-fledged removal policy, but an exception to that is Cleveland.com (Webster, 2018). A group of journalists working for the online news website have been developing a new model to address public concern over the right to be forgotten. After fielding removal requests, these journalists meet every month or so to discuss and decide what content stays and goes. These meetings can result in photographs, names and even entire articles being removed online. At the moment, however, the “Cleveland Model” is only considered experimental. Without professional standards to use as a guide, student media organizations are left to handle the same debate.

During his tenure as the editor-in-chief of The Daily Northwestern, Troy Closson found himself at the epicenter of a national controversy about his newsroom’s content-removal practices. Student reporters covered protestors as they rallied against former-Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who was visiting Northwestern University. These journalists later used the university’s online directory to identify and request interviews from the students involved in the protest. This sparked backlash among activists who felt this was an invasion of their privacy.

\(^1\) A catch-22 is a dilemma where there is no escape because of mutually conflicting or dependent conditions.

Keywords: journalism, ethics, online news, student media, newsroom policy
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They demanded both a formal apology from The Daily Northwestern and the removal of any published names and photographs relating to student activists. Closson, alongside seven other leaders, conceded by issuing an apology and removing the controversial content from the newsroom’s website. That’s when the catch-22 caught Closson. Hundreds of professional journalists took to social media to both berate and support his decision. But without any industry-wide online content removal standards, the debate around The Daily’s actions remains inconclusive. Barely over a month before the debacle at Northwestern, a similar controversy sparked national debate at Harvard University regarding the Harvard Crimson’s reporting on U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.²

This research plans to study and compare the current online content removal practices of award-winning student newsrooms. This study will use the information gathered from the policies to develop a general guideline for students to consider when navigating these ethnically-ambiguous situations.

II. Literature Review

In mass communication literature, student media is still a relatively untapped scholarly topic. This literature review summarizes the few scholars that have explored niche topics regarding the development and implementation of student media ethics. Research conducted in this field has focused on the increase in student media participation, the role of student media on college campuses, the importance of journalism education, and the development of student media ethics. The purpose of this literature review is to create a solid foundation of understanding in preparation for this research paper’s transition into the topic of online content removal in student media organizations.

In the last 20 years, the U.S. has seen the final front pages of almost 1,800 newspapers and a 45% reduction in newsroom employment — the sharp decline of local news organizations and professionals has left thousands of citizens across the country without a local news source (Abernathy, 2018). This local news crisis has created a void that student news organizations — especially collegiate ones — have begun to fill. This task is especially prevalent in “news deserts,” which have no other source of local news to rely on. These daunting statistics have done little to slow high school and collegiate student interest in journalism.

According to a 2019 national survey conducted by The Education Week Research Center (EWRC), 30% of high school journalism educators have seen an increase in student interest in pursuing journalism in college. Approximately the same statistical growth is mirrored in the number of students interested in majoring in journalism, as well as the number of students participating in collegiate student media. Some scholars suggest this rising interest in journalism is associated with “the increased professionalism of journalism students where focus is set on becoming the scrutinizer. From this point of view, it is not the independency in everyday work that is important but making a difference in society,” (Andersson & Wadbring, 2015, p. 134).

The role of student media on college campuses

With the decline of local news and rising interest in student media, scholars have studied the role of student media organizations on college campuses. A survey from the EWRC found that 81% of student respondents trusted student media “a great deal” or “a fair amount.” That percentage of trust rose to 91% among journalism educators. Little to no research has been done to understand the factors that lead to the establishment of trust between student news organizations and its audiences. Scholars have been able to identify the roles the student press fulfills on a college campus: historically documenting events, creating a public forum, acting as a watchdog for community issues and providing a training ground for the next generation of journalists (Russo & Hapney, 2013). Other scholars have also looked into the role of college newspapers as a pedagogical tool, presenting the purposes of a collegiate paper. According to scholars, the role of a collegiate newspaper can be seen as an attempted mirror of the professional world or a normative training ground for the next generation of journalists that is shaped and run by student decisions (Bockino, 2018).

Scholars have taken time to research the role collegiate media plays in providing a training ground for future professional journalists. Current literature suggests “student journalists do more than simulate.

² For more about The Harvard Crimson’s catch-22, read here: https://nyti.ms/2MFzWKd
They use their knowledge and skills engaging in ‘real life.’ When they report on courts, these are real courts,” (Burgh, 2003, p. 108). While these hard skills are critical to develop before entering the professional world, research states that the “vaunted divide between the academic and the practical is a false dichotomy,” (Burgh, 2003, p. 110). According to Burgh, “in order to perform their functions journalists need an education which enables them to put themselves and their society in perspective; find out anything and question everything. Motor skills yes, but also the intellectual confidence which comes from knowledge,” (Burgh, 2003, p. 110). There is currently not a large base of literature about the prevalence of this type of education among collegiate communication institutions. But when looking into the use of collegiate journalism as a pedagogical tool, a small body of literature has developed specifically around the education of ethics. Interestingly enough, scholars have found that the priorities set by journalism students and educators regarding journalism education are often not in accordance (Braun, 2009).

The development of student media ethics

Research on professional journalists has found that those working in the field of journalism have higher levels of moral development and should be considered strong ethical thinkers. “When ethical problems are professionally focused, journalists perform even better. This suggests that giving journalists the opportunity to work through more ethical dilemmas … bodes well for the profession. This also indicates there is a journalistic domain of knowledge and that journalists think even better about ethical problems in that domain than they do about general problems,” (Coleman & Wilkins, 2004, p. 521). Since, according to Burgh, student journalists are journalists, the same findings can be generally applied to students working in collegiate newsrooms.

This is supported by the work some scholars have conducted regarding the reactions of student journalists to different ethical situations. Scholars have found that “students with experience in student media would show higher levels of concern and expect stronger penalties for unethical journalistic practices than those without experience in student media,” (Conway & Goshek, 2009, p. 474). This study allows others conducting research in this field to hypothesize that student journalists would maintain those same levels of ethical standards, when engaging with public requests for the removal of content. At the moment, this can only be predicted. The same study “points out the continued efforts that need to be made in understanding the different motivations, interests, and beliefs of students in today’s journalism and mass communications programs,” (Conway & Goshek, 2009).

A knowledge gap in student media

While there has been research conducted regarding rising student media participation, the role of student media on a college campus, the importance of journalism education, and the development of student media ethics, this study will focus on understanding the general practices of top-tier student media organizations regarding online content removal. This research comes at a time when the professional and collegiate worlds of journalism are being asked difficult questions regarding crime coverage and a citizen’s right to be forgotten (Rosen, 2012).

The analysis and discussion of this content will be viewed through the lens of “the harm principle,” a subcategory of ethical theory. This principle was created by British philosopher John Stuart Mill, who believed the only reason power should be rightfully exercised over a citizen within a civilized community, against their will, is to prevent harm to others (Holtug, 2002). This principle is ideally used for this research because it reflects one of the four principles of ethical journalism established by The Society of Professional Journalists, “minimize harm.” These standards are what many student newsrooms strive to abide by. Through understanding how top-tier student media organizations navigate the principles of ethical journalism during discussions about the content removal, this work will attempt to create a general guideline for other student newsrooms that may face similar discussions in the future.

Research Goals and Questions

This study’s research questions focus on understanding the current online content removal practices of top-tier student media organizations and develop a general ethical guideline for other student newsrooms to use when dealing with content removal requests from the public.
RQ1: Are there common online content removal practices among award-winning student newsrooms? If so, what are they? If not, how are removal requests handled?

RQ2: How can the practices of these organizations be used to create an ethical standard that other student newsrooms would be able to use?

III. Methods

This study conducted thorough in-depth interviews with the leaders of award-winning student media organizations to analyze the newsroom’s online-content removal practices. The interview process revealed common themes and ethical practices. The information gathering process for this research is based on a study that conducted in-depth interviews with cancer patients in order to compare different experiences during the varying stages of the disease (Boudioni et al., 2000, p. 910). By studying top-tier student newsrooms, this research hopes to create a reputable standard for other student journalists to consider implementing.

While a definitive list of the best student newsrooms in the country is unavailable, many top organizations are recognized with student journalism’s preeminent prize, the Pacemaker Awards. These are presented by the National Scholastic Press Association to organizations that have produced top-tier work on online, newspaper, yearbook, magazine, and broadcast platforms. Entries are judged by groups of professionals based on coverage and content, quality of writing and reporting, leadership, design, photography and graphics. Since this research focuses on the removal of web content, it will analyze the recent winners — from 2016 to 2019 — of Online Pacemaker Awards. Among this group, this study will focus on news websites in four-year institutions.

During this time frame, four student media organizations won an Online Pacemaker three times. For showing this high degree of consistent excellence in online student media, the following newsrooms were selected for this study: The Daily Egyptian at Southern Illinois University, The Minnesota Daily at The University of Minnesota, The Equinox at Keene State College, and The Daily Bruin at The University of California, Los Angeles. The primary student leader of these websites — who usually holds the title of editor-in-chief — was interviewed about their organization’s current online content removal practices. Their participation in this research was granted if the students explicitly gave their informed consent to have their responses recorded and studied. These leaders were asked three sets of questions.

The first set (S1) of questions developed a basic understanding of the newsroom and the student leader’s role in the organization.

S1Q1: What year did your website launch?
S1Q2: How many staff members work in your newsroom?
S1Q3: How long is your tenure as the editor-in-chief of your newsroom? What is the process behind being selected for this position?
S1Q4: Can you describe your crime coverage? What incidents do you report or not report? If reported, what information do you publish?
S1Q5: What is the newsroom’s editorial relationship with the college or university? What type of monetary or mentorship support does the organization receive from the college or university?

The second set (S2) of questions focused on understanding the process the student media organization goes through to establish newsroom-wide policies. This set also broke down potential examples of the student newsroom’s current online content removal practices.

S2Q1: Is there a code of ethics or a policy manual that is followed in your newsroom?
S2Q2: What is the process that establishes these ethics and manuals? Who are the individuals involved in creating these?
S2Q3: Does the organization have a formal policy regarding the removal of online content from its website?

S2Q4: Has a member of the public ever requested to have related-content removed? If so, can you explain the circumstance? And how was the removal request handled?

The third set (S3) of questions focused on hypothetical situations of online content removal requests by a member of the public. These illustrated how the organization and the student leader would deal with different scenarios.

S3Q1: Imagine your newsroom reports on a student charged with drug possession and the intent to distribute — publishing their name, crime and mugshot. Several weeks later, that student asks to have that content removed because of the way the article has negatively affected their social standing. How would this be handled?

S3Q2: Imagine your newsroom reports on a student being charged with driving under the influence. A year later, that student sends their expungement to the newsroom and requests that the content is removed because of the way it has negatively affected their job search. How would this be handled?

S3Q3: Imagine your newsroom publishes a photo of a crowd of people attending a public event. Several weeks later, a student asks for the photo to be removed because she can be easily identifiable. The student is from a conservative country that requires women to wear certain religious clothing. She states that if her relatives see the photo, she will be in danger of bodily harm. How would this be handled?

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The recordings were coded to look for common themes throughout the student leaders’ responses, and answers were sorted by similarity. The results of the coding were used to develop a general best practices guideline for other student media organizations.

IV. Findings

General findings

The student leaders of all four newsrooms were willing to participate in the study. To contextualize the circumstances of the editors, the chart below provides general details about each student media organization.

<table>
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<th>Table 1. Student Media Organization Graphics</th>
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<td>The Daily Egyptian</td>
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An unexpected finding from the study was the varying relationships between the student media organization and its host institution. All four newsrooms receive financial funding from its host institution through some form of student fee, and are housed in university property free of charge. The media advisers for three of the student newsrooms are also faculty members of the host institution. While strong connections between the newsroom and its host institution existed, all four editors considered their organizations editorially independent, meaning the student editors have the freedom to make decisions without interference from the host institution.

All four editors-in-chief interviewed for this research were women. Among these leaders, two were seniors and two were juniors.

**Research Question One**

This research found no common online content removal practices among these award-winning student newsrooms. Each organization handled removal requests uniquely. Only two of the organizations had publicly-available statements regarding content removal. The two newsroom policies, which are available on the organizations’ websites, are:

**The Daily Egyptian**
Stories published in the Daily Egyptian are kept in our online database in perpetuity. We do not remove stories that have been published from our website (The Daily Egyptian, 2020).

**The Minnesota Daily**
Removing published content should be considered on a case-by-case basis, but generally regarded as a last case scenario. We stand behind our standards of transparency, and therefore do not remove content from the public’s eye after it has been published except in extreme circumstances. Circumstances which may warrant content being “taken down” after publication include extreme cases of libel or blatant inaccuracy. All other unforeseen situations must be handled with caution and in line with the standards of the organization. The editor-in-chief should ensure that a copy of what was removed is easily accessible should it need to be examined. If content is removed, it must be clearly communicated with the audience, typically in the form of an editor’s note, as to remain transparent (The Minnesota Daily, 2020).

Rana Schenke, editor-in-chief of The Daily Egyptian, clarified that there are exceptions to her organization’s statement that says content is not removed. While the policies and perspectives of both these newsrooms stress the importance of avoiding content removal when possible, neither explain the process of how removal requests would be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. When explaining the internal handling of removal requests, the responses from the editors of The Daily Bruin and The Equinox — which did not have a publicly available policy — were very similar to the policies of the other two newsrooms. The two editors stated that content removal requests were dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and while content removal was avoided, it was possible in extreme cases.

Between these four newsrooms, there was no coherent trend or common explanation for how these policies were formally updated. It was clear, however, that the editors-in-chief of each newsroom was in charge of facilitating any changes to organization-wide policies.

This research clearly shows that no common online content removal policy exists and that the policies of student newsrooms are subject to change at any point during the tenures of different editors-in-chief. The tenures for this position usually last for a semester or an academic school year. While no two policies may be exactly the same, seven key themes emerged through comparing the processes of these student leaders.

**Theme one: Determining the decision**

These four newsrooms practice two primary methods of deciding the outcome of removal requests. The Daily Egyptian, The Minnesota Daily, and The Daily Bruin share a similar model where the editor-in-chief
is the lone decision maker on whether or not online content is removed. The advice of others may be sought depending on the situation, but the ultimate decision is made by the editor-in-chief. Since the editors-in-chief make the final call, they are also in charge of removing the content from the website.

The Equinox, on the other hand, makes decisions regarding removal requests through a majority vote from its editorial board. This board generally consists of 16 student members holding a variety of leadership positions in the newsroom. The number of board members, however, is subject to change depending on the time of year and the level of student interest in the organization. When handling a removal request, the editor-in-chief explains the situation to the board and then facilitates a discussion on the merits of the request. This discussion concludes with a vote and the decision is only acted on if 51% or more of the board votes in favor of the action. The process of what would happen in the event of a tie vote is unclear, however, Puja Thapa, administrative executive editor of The Equinox, said this was not a common issue. Following the vote, one of the board members, the webmaster, would be in charge of removing the online content.

**Theme two: Asking for advice**

The use of advisory or editorial boards when handling removal requests is divided equally among the newsrooms. Both The Equinox and The Daily Egyptian have access to a student editorial board when dealing with removal requests. In contrast to The Equinox, the editor-in-chief of The Daily Egyptian chooses when to seek the opinion of the board and only uses it for counsel.

While the editors-in-chief of The Daily Bruin and The Minnesota Daily do not elect to use editorial boards when making these decisions, both editors stated that when dealing with removal requests they often ask for the advice of other editors and reporters involved. Depending on the situation, editors may also seek the advice of their newsroom adviser. Both editors-in-chief stressed that they seek the advice of others for the majority of removal requests.

The use of editorial boards or the advice of others is completely dependent on the editor-in-chief at the time — it is not an institutionalized requirement at The Daily Egyptian, The Daily Bruin and The Minnesota Daily.

**Theme three: Reasoning behind removals**

Many nuanced details were debated by the editors-in-chief of these newsrooms during the times they addressed removal requests. While it would be impossible to create a complete list of relevant details applicable to every request, there were some common questions these editors asked themselves. The questions are:

- **Requester identity:** Is the individual requesting for the content to be removed actually the individual being affected by its publishing? How can this be verified?

- **Request reasoning:** Is the individual claiming the misreporting or fabrication of information? If so, is their claim verifiable? Or are they claiming that while the published content is accurate, it has a negative effect on their life?

- **Potential harm:** How is the content negatively affecting the individual? How would the removal of this content negatively affect the rest of the general public? Does one outweigh the other?

- **Public service:** Is the article still serving the public? Can this information still be considered public interest?

- **Historical record:** Will the removal of this article or identifiable information concerning the individual be erasing history important for future generations?

These topical questions are simply the foundation of a toolbox that can be used in discussions regarding online content removal. Every nuanced situation would naturally add to the toolbox.
Theme four: Ethical erasure

All of the editors-in-chief in this study clearly stated the complete removal of an article was avoided at all costs. Whenever possible it was preferred to issue a correction or replace identifiable information with ambiguous terms. For example, the name John Doe would be replaced with “a student.”

Theme five: Presenting to the public

It is the responsibility of the editors-in-chief of all four newsrooms to act as the main line of communication between the individual requesting the removal of content and the student media organization. Several of the editors interviewed for this study emphasized three critical aspects of this communication. First, only the editor-in-chief communicates with the requester because having one distinct newsroom representative is critical to maintaining clear communication with the individual. Second, all communication between the editor-in-chief and the requester is on-the-record. Copies of email threads and phone conversations are meticulously kept. Third, the requester deserves a response. Whatever the end result regarding the removal request may be, the editor-in-chief must notify the individual about the final decision.

The editor-in-chief is also in charge of clearly communicating the response to a removal request to the rest of the public. For example, a removal request was filed to The Minnesota Daily regarding an editorial published by the organization, which was proven to be inaccurate and misleading. While completely removing the editorial from the website was considered, Cleo Krejci, former editor-in-chief of The Minnesota Daily, decided against it. She instead chose to issue an italicized Editor’s Note at the top of the story explaining her decision and referring readers to the correction. Krejci’s published note, which is available on the organization’s website, read:

Editor’s note: there is a substantial correction for this article. We are choosing to leave the original body of text for the sake of transparency – not as an endorsement of the inaccuracies. The correction can be found at the bottom of this page. (Krejci, 2019)

According to Krejci, her decision was in keeping with The Minnesota Daily’s policy that states “If content is removed, it must be clearly communicated with the audience, typically in the form of an editor’s note, as to remain transparent.” When handling removal requests, The Minnesota Daily was the only newsroom that had a policy detailing its communication with the public.

Theme six: Appealing to advisers

Even though the type of adviser relationships varied between the four newsrooms, the choice to involve advisers was always a conscious decision made by the editor-in-chief. According to all of the editors, it is not common practice to involve advisers in every removal request discussion. Both The Minnesota Daily’s and The Daily Egyptian’s written policy do not mention adviser involvement. The decision to do so was clearly in the hands of the students in each of these newsrooms.

Theme seven: Picking the pace

The timeliness of handling removal requests varied between the newsrooms and the individual cases. No common timespan in which the editors-in-chief would resolve a removal request emerged. The handling of such requests varied from less than a day to more than a year.

Research Question Two

The diversity of responses from the four editors made it clear that when dealing with such a nuanced topic as removal requests, no single all-encompassing ethical standard exists. The discovery of these seven themes, however, can be used to create a general guideline that newsrooms can use and later adapt to their own circumstances.
V. Discussion

The creation of a general ethical structure for collegiate and high school newsrooms is especially difficult when considering the hundreds of varying circumstances faced by different student media organizations across the country. Even though in this case one size doesn’t fit all, the seven themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews with the editors-in-chief of these award-winning student organizations can be compiled to create an ethical foundation for other newsrooms to follow and later update.

It is critical to the survival of a free student press that the ultimate decision regarding online content removal remains solely in the hands of students. In this case, in the hands of one student. The decision-making process of The Daily Egyptian, The Minnesota Daily and The Daily Bruin — where the editor-in-chief makes the ultimate decision to keep or remove content — is the most efficient and universally usable way to handle removal requests. The Equinox’s democratic approach to removal requests would always pose a logistical challenge when bringing together so many individuals. The idea of allowing too many students an equal vote in such an ethically-charged decision may also pave the path for groupthink and bandwagon decision making. The position of editor-in-chief is also often elected in student newsrooms, meaning that members often do have a voice in deciding their leader. Even though editors-in-chief are ultimately in charge of making the decisions, they would be wise to consider the advice of those around them.

The importance of listening to all sides of the argument is critical for the editor-in-chief when making these decisions. To ensure that vibrant discussion and critical thinking is a part of every removal request decision, the creation of an Ethical Advisory Board would be beneficial, with the purpose of assisting the editor-in-chief. This board would consist of both permanent and rotating members, such as:

- **Newsroom adviser/s:** The thoughts and opinions of advisers would be instrumental in a discussion because diversity in thought is critical to ethical decision making. The experiences of the adviser both in the professional world and at the student newsroom would be invaluable. This position would be a permanent member of the board.

- **Managing editor:** The student immediately below the editor-in-chief, most commonly called the managing editor, would provide an important student perspective to the discussion. In many cases, the person in this position eventually transitions to the editor-in-chief role. It would be important for the managing editor to be a part of the ethical discussion and learn about ethical decision making before having to make the final decision. This position would be a permanent member of the board.

- **Section editor:** The student leader of whichever section the removal request is pertaining to is also included on the board. This person would add their niche expertise to the discussion and provide another student voice. This position would be a rotating member of the board.

- **Reporter/Writer:** The content creator is also included within ethical discussions to ensure that the situation is put into proper context and all sides of the issue are given equal voice. This position would be a rotating member of the board.

- **Unaffiliated professional journalist:** If possible, bringing in a local journalist to weigh in on the discussion would be a significant contribution. Including someone who is unaffiliated with the student newsroom and completely removed from the situation would provide an untainted new perspective.

To reiterate, these five individuals would weigh in on a removal request decision, but the editor-in-chief would still make the ultimate decision. While the power must always remain in the hands of students, it is critical that editors-in-chief are given adequate guidance. At the end of the day students are making professional decisions while still learning the ins-and-outs of the trade:
We are playing with a lot of really impactful information. .... As students, the fact of the matter is that we are inexperienced, and we are still learning. So, there's a lot of room for error. And I think it calls upon the editor-in-chief and the managing editor to really be cognizant of that power and ask around for a lot of help and making sure that you make the best decision so you don't harm somebody. (C. Krejci, personal communication through an in-depth interview, March 26, 2020).

The creation of an Ethical Advisory Board would also assure that meaningful discussion and ethical consistency plays a role in every removal request. One of the greatest difficulties faced by student media organizations is the constant turnover of leadership, which can lead the public attempting to find inconsistencies in ethical policies:

It seems that a lot of the same people reach out, each year to different editors-in-chief because they think that there’s a chance that the policy changed or something, so it’d be worth asking again, [which proves] the importance of having a consistent policy in place.” (A. Forburger, personal communication through an in-depth interview, April 4, 2020).

The tenures of the four editors-in-chief included in this research lasted for a year or less. This constant transition between leaders makes it exceedingly difficult for decades-old student media organizations to remain consistent in its handling of removal requests. The creation of an Ethical Advisory Board would take steps towards remedying this.

When communicating with the public, it is critical to remain completely transparent about any changes to published content. If edits are introduced into an article following a removal request, it is advised that the changes are addressed in an Editor’s Note at the top of the story. The placement of the note is critical. Its location at the beginning of an article is the best assurance a reader sees the note before continuing to read. In its simplest form, the note may explicitly state what type of content was removed — a name, an address, a photo. The editor-in-chief is advised to be in charge of deciding whether or not to explain the reasoning behind the removal. The extensiveness of the explanation is a discussion that the editor-in-chief can have with the Ethical Advisory Board.

The rate of removal requests received by a student newsroom will fluctuate and forever remain unpredictable. In an effort to assure some form of consistency, the Ethical Advisory Board and the editor-in-chief is advised to commit to meeting at least once a semester to discuss all removal requests. Understandably, bringing together the board for every request may prove to be logistically difficult. By committing to at least a meeting a semester, the editor-in-chief would be able to communicate with the individual requesting content removal when they can expect a decision.

This research confirms the research discussed in the literature review, further emphasizing the importance of collegiate journalism as a pedagogical tool for professional journalism and the development of student media organization ethics. The suggestion of an Ethical Advisory Board expands upon the established research on student media ethical guidelines and prompts a discussion for the need of more industry-wide consistency.

VI. Conclusion

This research is an exploratory study that is metaphorically a stab in the dark. The topic of student media ethical practices is woefully under researched; this paper is an attempt to illuminate issues facing student journalists. While the newsrooms studied are among the best in student media, four organizations is not enough to fully represent the dozens of newsrooms that produce excellent student journalism. It is advised that a larger sample of student media organizations are examined in the future. While the newsroom selection was completely based on the number of recent Online Pacemaker Awards, the host institutions of these four student media organizations happened to be all public schools. To provide a more usable ethical foundation, researchers may consider including the online content removal practices of top-tier student newsrooms in private schools.
The understanding of ethical practices across newsrooms in similar contexts is critical to making sure an industry standard is developed. This is true for both student, local, and national newsrooms. Further ethical research could be conducted into the different levels of journalism to ensure the public is experiencing fair and ethical treatment across the country. One of this study’s interesting findings is that all four editors-in-chief interviewed were female. Future research could also be conducted into the role of women in student newsrooms. Anecdotally, it seems that women make up the majority of student media organizations around the country — and even the majority of student populations. But for an unknown reason, it seems very few women eventually find themselves in leadership positions in professional newsrooms (Beam & Di Cicco, 2010). For the survival of an all-encompassing news agenda and public service reporting (Craft & Wanta, 2004), any obstacles keeping women from taking on leadership roles in newsrooms needs to be fully identified and subsequently removed.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. However, in full transparency, at the time of this study the author was a leader of a student media organization. During his time in student media, the author dealt with several online content removal requests. The author does not believe this affected the study or its findings.

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References


Abstract

Coming out as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender is often a very complex and vulnerable aspect of an individual’s life. How this is represented in film can have significant impact, as film is often perceived as a perception of real events. Using a qualitative content analysis, this study analyzed ten films categorized by the Internet Movie Database as the top “coming out” films. The study sought to analyze how coming out, the reaction of others to a character coming out, the circumstances that pushed a character to come out, and the diversity of the primary characters each were portrayed in popular film.

I. Introduction

With the gradual increase of LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and Others) representation in popular cinema over the past decade, the attention of the film industry is slowly shifting from solely increasing the number of queer characters on screen, to creating diversity within LGBTQIA+ characters. Annual reports from various organizations show the quantitative breakdowns of which production companies include which percentage of queer characters in major motion pictures. What’s harder to find, or often cannot be found, is a similar breakdown of which production companies include queer characters that are essential to a film’s plotline, have complex character development, or whose identity is centered around something other than their queerness. In 2017, only 12.8 percent of major studio films included LGBT characters. However, out of that 12.8 percent, only 64 percent of those films included LGBT characters that were “tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect” and not “solely or predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity” (Ifeanyi, 2018).

A commonly portrayed aspect of queer identity is “coming out,” or when an LGBT character opens up or reveals their sexuality to other people. For individuals who use the portrayal of queer characters in film to determine their own sexual identity, they may view coming out as a necessary step in claiming their queer identity (Cover, 2000, p. 80). With the rise of queer representation in film comes the rise of framing coming out as the only aspect of queer life.

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Apparently, though, it’s the only aspect Hollywood believes a largely straight audience wants to see. . . . Filmmakers seem to have no idea what to do with people who are already out, who are, to paraphrase the old protest slogan, here, queer and used to it. Coming out is a profound and dramatic moment, but what about all the other moments in our lives? (Giese, 2018)

Is it possible that production companies over-represent coming out in relation to the other aspects of queer character’s lives and identities? How is coming out most commonly portrayed in popular studio films? The representation of coming-out narratives in popular film are both complex and revealing of the information being distributed to an entire generation of individuals looking for role models and guides to follow in the discovery of their own identities. This study will analyze the representation of coming-out narratives in contemporary major motion pictures, along with the events leading up to, reactions to, and results of the event.

II. Literature Review

The following is a review of articles on the history of queer representation in cinema, what queer representation in today’s cinema looks like, and the impact of queer representation in cinema.

History of Queer Representation in Cinema

The conscious exclusion of LGBT representation began with the Motion Picture Production Code of 1934, which prohibited the inclusion of “sex perversion or any inference of it.” These codes were created by the movie industry to self-regulate the moral content of films being produced. The goal was to ensure films were “wholesome” and of “correct thinking.” By 1959, the code, which became more of a guideline for filmmakers wanting their films to play in American theatres, could deal with “pretty much any topic but homosexuality” (Mangin, 1989). In 1968, the code was replaced with a rating system that classified the appropriateness of content for each film, similar to the ratings of G, PG, PG-13, and R still used in American cinema today (Mondello, 2008). By replacing the Motion Picture Production Code, the film industry granted individuals and families more control over the content they chose to view. However, this change in production codes did not have a drastic impact on the portrayal of queer characters in films or attitudes towards queer individuals in society. In America, homosexuality was classified as a mental disorder until 1974 (Hulan, 2017). It was not until 1982 that a film, Making Love, produced by 20th Century Fox, gave a gay character a happy ending, an issue that is still prevalent with the portrayal of queer characters in the film, television, and literature industries today (Bays, 2019).

Queer Representation in Cinema Today

Today, there is much more of a variety in queer coming-of-age and love stories. One organization has taken it upon itself to monitor the progress, or lack of, of LGBTQIA+ characters in movies produced by major film companies. GLAAD, an organization created to monitor various media to create a more LGBT accepting culture, releases annually the GLAAD Studio Responsibility Index, which analyzes the inclusion of LGBT characters in studio films released the previous year. The 2019 report, which analyzed films released in 2018, found that 20 percent of all major motion pictures were considered “LGBT inclusive,” a 6 percent increase from the 2018 report. GLAAD defines LGBT-inclusive films as any film that includes a character who identifies with the LGBT community. The significant increase in LGBT-inclusive films can be attributed to the increase in LGBT characters in leading roles and LGBT characters receiving 10 or more minutes of screen time. However, still over half of LGBT characters had less than three minutes of screen time, and transgender characters received a total of zero minutes of screen time in all major motion pictures released in 2018.

Within LGBT films, there is a subcategory of films that pass the “Vito Russo” test. This test, named for a co-founder of GLAAD, analyzes the inclusion of LGBT characters beyond merely putting a queer character on screen. For the film to pass the test, it must fulfill three requirements. The first requirement is, “The film contains a character that is identifiably lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer.” The second requirement is, “That character must not solely or predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity.” The final requirement is, “That character must be tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect.” Out of the 20 films that were considered LGBT inclusive in 2018, 13 passed
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the Vito Russo test (GLAAD, 2019).

The guidelines put in place by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (M.P.P.A.) makes including queer characters potentially a financially risky choice. The M.P.P.A. is “generally harder on films featuring gay sex or characters than it is on movies featuring straight sex” (Abrams, 2018). Award-nominated films such as Battle of the Sexes and Love, Simon put the M.P.A.A. ratings into question, as there is speculation that if both of the films had featured straight relationships, their rating would have been PG rather than PG-13. The reason both films were rated PG-13 was due to, “thematic elements, sexual references, language, and teen partying.” The M.P.P.A. denies the higher viewer discretion based on the inclusion of same-sex relationships, saying:

The rating system does not make any judgment about the content, including sexuality, depicted in movies. Rather, raters ask the question any parent would ask: What would I want to know about this film before I decide to let my child see it? . . . Elements such as violence, language, drug use, and sexuality are continually re-evaluated through surveys and focus groups to better assist parents in making family viewing choices. (Abrams, 2018).

Stephen Follows, a researcher in the film industry, found that PG-13 rated films generally account for 47-53 percent of highest-grossing films, while R-rated films generally account for 18-24 percent (Follows, 2019). If the inclusion of same-sex relationships has the potential to change a film’s rating from PG-13 to R, then the inclusion of LGBT characters will only be an option for studios willing to potentially risk a smaller box office return.

Even if the inclusion of LGBT characters and relationships do not have a direct impact on a film’s rating, it can create other ways of negative financial impact, especially in films tailored towards families. In the 2017 live-action Beauty and the Beast, it was leaked that LeFou, the sidekick of the man vying for Belle’s love, was queer identifying, suggesting that the film would include an “exclusively gay moment.” In response, one theater in Alabama refused to show the film, Russia gave the film an “adults only” rating, and Malaysia pulled the film from theaters after Disney refused to cut more than four minutes of footage (Girard, 2017).

Interestingly, one of the most controversial scenes in Beauty and the Beast was problematic to LGBTQ+ advocates as well:

As the camera circles Belle and Beast during their ‘happily ever after’ dance number, for just a moment it shifts to LeFou, who steps into a single dance move with another man before the camera cuts back to Belle and Beast and the credits roll. It is nothing less than insulting to the LGBTQ+ community. (Girard, 2017, p.174)

Disney has faced criticism from LGBTQ+ advocates for portrayals in other films as well. “Every time Disney has supposedly included a queer character, any evidence of said queer identity was easily missed or misconstrued,” wrote one critic of the company. “Disney uses LGBTQ representation to drum up interest, but ultimately forces its audiences to draw its own conclusions” (Gupta, 2019).

Importance of Queer Representation in Popular Film

Do film companies have a responsibility to accurately represent LGBTQIA+ individuals in their films? Or is leaving the audience to their own conclusion a perfectly acceptable decision? Daniel Mangin estimates that “approximately 10% of the American population is homosexual” but their representation in film history is almost “invisible” (Mangin, 1989). While a more recent report conducted by The Williams Institute suggests that the LGBTQIA+ population in America is closer to 4.5% of the population, or roughly 9 million people, Mangin’s argument of the lack of queer representation in film still holds validity (The Williams Institute, 2017). A lack of representation in film can lead to difficulty for individuals who are looking to build an “understanding of sexuality” regardless of their sexual orientation. Even for those not looking to develop a deeper understanding, the representation, and portrayal of human sexuality in films is often perceived as truthful to viewers, especially those, “predominantly unaware of alternative, resistant, academic, or textual-reading discourses” (Cover, 2000, p. 76).
While the amount of representation that queer characters receive is important, production companies also need to consider how these people are being portrayed and what their circumstances are. Many times, the first interaction that individuals will have with non-heteronormative relationships and LGBT identity is through film and television programs that portray both the coming of age and the coming out of individuals. These films often portray “themes of painful adolescence, confrontation with the older generation, the contrast between socialization and selfhood, erotic pubescence, confusing infatuation, and the formation of sexual identity.” In addition, “the bullying of bashing of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) persons (particularly adolescents) have become common themes in popular communication of the 1990s and 2000s” (Padva, 2004, p. 365).

Through the late 1980s, LGBT identifying individuals were commonly misrepresented in popular film and television as “confused youth” that could not fit into the strict societal gender binary. This included male-identifying individuals portrayed both as not manly enough and gay, and female-identifying individuals portrayed both as not feminine enough and a lesbian. These characters were then bullied, verbally and physically, by peers, educators, and family members (Padva, 2007, p. 116). This content showcases the lack of acceptance, love, and understanding by people close to the individual, and can be damaging to the person’s identity and health. Media begins to influence an individual’s choices and role models from a very young age (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). This exposure to potentially traumatic content regarding sexuality can have a lasting impact on individuals.

III. Methods

Based on the literature review, the author developed the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How is coming out portrayed in contemporary films?
Research Question 2: What are the circumstances that compel a character to come out in these films?

This study applies a qualitative content analysis to a selection of movies that include characters coming out. First, a list generated by the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) was selected. This database lets users be very specific about what type of movies they may want to view based on the parameters they set. IMDb has a specific category for films that portray various aspects of LGBTQIA+ life, whereas most other databases only get as specific as “LGBT films.” A list titled, “Most Popular Coming Out Movies and TV Shows” was selected. From the list of films under “coming out,” the following two parameters were set by the author:

1. The media must be a feature film.
2. The media must have been released from 2010 to 2020.

These parameters ensure that the films are in fact feature-length motion pictures (rather than a short film or episode of a television series) and were released in the past decade. With these parameters set, IMDb listed the following ten films: Rocketman, Call Me By Your Name, Vice, Blockers, The Imitation Game, Legend, Blumhouse’s Truth or Dare, Love, Simon, Boy Erased, and And Then We Danced.

Multiple scenarios will be analyzed while watching the films. These include the opinions regarding sexuality the character is exposed to before coming out, the circumstances that compel a character to come out, and the reactions they receive to their coming out. However, the data collected will not be exclusively limited to these criteria. As additional information regarding a character’s coming out is given, it will be recorded as well.
IV. Findings

The ten films analyzed presented a wide range of circumstances and reactions to characters coming out as gay. But they do more than just showcasing reactions – the films also show a variation in framing different aspects of LGBTQIA+ individuals' lives. The films proved to be diverse in narrative, but occasionally similar in theme. The characters that came out were represented in a variety of ways, as were the characters that either supported or neglected the individual. In this analysis section, the author will elaborate on some of the more prominent themes and discoveries made throughout the research process looking at three of the 10 films watched: *The Imitation Game, Blockers, and Love, Simon.*

*The Imitation Game:*

*The Imitation Game* is a historical drama that centers on the code-breaking work of Alan Turing during World War II. The film is divided into three various time periods: Turing’s childhood, the war, and the 1950s. While the film doesn't revolve around Turing’s sexuality, it does give a wholistic view of the role his sexuality played in his life. From his first love, to a classmate named Christopher, his coming out to the woman he is engaged with, and his suicide attributed to government-ordered hormonal therapy, the audience witnesses the tragic arc of Turing’s life.

The circumstances of Turing’s coming-out while working at Bletchley Park are more complex than what was portrayed in the majority of other films viewed. Turing first came out to a colleague, John Carincross, at a celebration for Turing’s recent engagement to Joan Clarke. Carincross replied by saying, “You can’t tell anyone, Alan. It's illegal.” Turing’s reluctance to come out can be attributed to the criminalization of homosexuality in Europe during the mid-20th century. Turing comes out to Clarke in an effort to have her leave Bletchley Park, thinking she is in danger of violating the Official Secrets Act. When he tells Clarke he is a homosexual, Clarke says that she has always had her suspicions, but they love each other in their own way, and they could still be happy together. Turing then lies and says the only reason he kept her around was to use her for her knowledge, but now that they have broken Enigma, he no longer has a need for her.

At the end of *The Imitation Game*, the following text comes on screen:

> After a year of government mandated hormonal therapy, Alan Turning committed suicide on June 7th, 1954. He was 41 years old. Between 1885 and 1967, approximately 49,000 homosexual men were convicted of gross indecency under British law. In 2013, Queen Elizabeth II granted Turing a posthumous royal pardon, honoring his unprecedented achievements. Historians estimate that breaking Enigma shortened the war by more than two years, saving over 14 million lives. It remained a government-held secret for more than 50 years. Turing’s work inspired generations of research into what scientists called Turing Machines. Today we call them computers."

This additional information comes only moments after the audience sees the negative physical and mental impact of the hormonal therapy. This is an incredibly important inclusion because it frames the punishment of Turing’s homosexuality as negative for the audience, rather than leaving them to form their own conclusion rather the events that occurred were justified. Clarke adds to this in the final moments of the film by tell Turing:

> Do you know this morning I was on a train that went through a city that wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t for you. I bought a ticket from a man that would likely be dead if it weren’t for you. I read up on my work, a whole field of scientific inquiry that only exists because of you. Now if you wish you could’ve been normal, I can promise you I do not. The world is an infinitely better place precisely because you are in it."

Learning that Alan Turing committed suicide after watching a film about his accomplishment likely leaves the audience feeling impacted and changed by the story (Tyldum, 2014).

*Blockers*

*Blockers* is a comedy about three parents attempting to block their three teenage daughters from losing their virginity on the night of their senior prom. This was one of two films of the ten watched that had a female-identifying character come-out. Throughout the film, one of the three main characters, Sam, is
struggling with her sexuality, and comes out as gay to her two closest friends at the end of the film. *Blockers* was one of only two films were the character’s queer identify received only positive reactions from the people closest to them. While this film is monumental in portraying positive female sexuality, it would not pass the Vito Russo test.

The Vito Russo test has three requirements that a film needs to pass in order for it to be considered LGBTQIA+ inclusive, and *Blockers* only passes one of the three. One of the three main characters, Sam, does in fact identify as gay, which passes the first requirement of the test. However, of the three main characters, Sam is by far the most underdeveloped and the least complex character. She is predominantly defined by her sexuality, which goes against the second requirement of the test. Lastly, if Sam’s storyline were to be completely removed from the film, there would be very little impact on the overall narrative of the film. This goes against the third requirement of the Vito Russo Test (GLAAD, 2017).

While this film doesn’t pass the test, it is monumental in presenting a female-identifying gay character that receives nothing but positive reactions from both her friends and family when she comes-out. Additionally, Sam is not forced or pressured to come-out, she has complete control throughout the entire film. Sam’s coming-out feels incredibly relatable and personal -- something that young adults could relate to. (Cannon, 2018)

**Love, Simon**

*Love, Simon*, a coming of age film, presents an aspect of LGBT life that is often not portrayed in film: the process of coming out over and over again. Many of the films build-up to the moment that a character comes out, but what is generally overlooked in cinematic productions is that if an LGBT-identifying character comes out to just one person, that does not mean everyone knows. Through the last half an hour of the film, Simon is consistently engaging in conversations regarding his sexuality. Simon’s mother tells him:

I knew you had a secret. When you were little, you were so carefree. But these last few years, more and more, it’s almost like I can feel you holding your breath … I need you to hear this: You are still you … you get to exhale now. You get to be more you than you have been in a very long time. You deserve everything you want.

Simon’s father asks Simon how long Simon knew he was gay. When Simon replies with “since I was thirteen,” the father is upset that he missed this part of his son’s life for four years. The father says, “Just in case the message got lost somewhere. I love you and I’m really proud of you and I wouldn’t change anything about you.” The conversation ends with the father suggesting that they sign up for Grindr together, with Simon refuting that his father obviously does not know what Grindr is. These types of conversations show that there are in fact conversations and questions once a character comes out.

This film also touches on the rampant heteronormativity in society -- specifically “straight” being the default sexuality. This film asks, why do only gay people have to come out? This is then followed by a montage of Simon’s friends coming out as straight to their parents while the parents respond with phrases such as, “Are you trying to kill me?”, “Oh God, help me Jesus,” and tears. Additionally, heteronormativity seems to be incredibly prominent in the town Simon lives in, because when one kid decides to anonymously come out on the school’s gossip website, this becomes the talk of the town. There also only appears to be one kid attending Simon’s school that is openly gay.

However, the film does not revolve around casual conversations regarding Simon’s sexuality. For the majority of the film, Simon is forced between protecting his identity or betraying the trust of a friend when a character, Martin, discovers the emails where Simon has revealed his sexuality. Martin forces Simon to choose between being outed or setting him up on a date with Simon’s friend Abby. The blackmail is incredibly damaging to Simon’s mental health and his relationship with his friends. Simon spends the majority of the film doing everything he can to protect his secret, only to be outed by Martin, and ignored by his closest friends.

In the context of *Love, Simon*, coming out is portrayed as an almost impossible thing to do. Simon addresses in the film that he does not know why it’s so hard for him to come out as he knows his liberal family won’t have a problem with it. But far more negative interactions are shown than positive interactions in terms of embracing sexuality. Between the blackmailing, blatant homophobia, and present heteronormativity, it’s clear to see the discomfort Simon feels in this environment. However, while the film is framed with these negative interactions, it does leave the viewers feeling hopeful and fulfilled. Simon sends a letter out to the
student body addressing his sexuality, in which he says, “I am done being scared. I’m done living in a world where I don’t get to be who I am. I deserve a great love story.” (Berlanti, 2018)

V. Conclusion

While these films were selected off of a list generated by IMDb, the questions “was this the most comprehensive list?” must be asked. One aspect that needs to be considered is that attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ individuals and relationships are rapidly changing. A film released as recently as 2012 may no longer represent the attitudes that are prominent in society today. A better study might have been taking the top films advertised with a queer character released in the last two years and analyzing these films instead. The problem with IMDb is it is never explicitly explained why these films were categorized under “coming out,” or how their rankings were determined.

Through watching the top ranked ten films recommended by IMDb, it is clear that there is a wide range in diversity of experiences and reactions regarding characters coming out in film, but not as much as diversity in gender, race, or specific sexual orientation of the characters. Eight of the ten films had characters come out as gay, one of the films had a character that identified as bisexual, and one of the films had a character that the audience can assume to be bisexual. While Black, Indigenous, and people of color were included in the narratives of these films, very few of these characters were LGBTQIA+. Almost all of the LGBTQIA+ individuals in the ten films were male-identifying, with only two female-identifying individuals coming out. Additionally, while sexual orientations such as gay, lesbian, and bisexuality were represented in these ten films, there were no non-binary, asexual, or intersex characters included in any of the narratives. While the films were diverse in reasons why the characters came out, and what the reactions were, there was little diversity in the people portrayed.

While this analysis answered the initial questions posed, many more have appeared. For example, both of the studied films with female identifying characters failed the Vito Russo test. What would a film look like that passed the Vito Russo test while portraying a female identifying character? How would coming-out events look if the character was non-binary, transgender, or pansexual? What would a film look like where characters happen to be different sexualities but have a variety of other defining characteristics? Is this a film that would make sense in 2020, where sexuality and gender identity other than straight and cisgender are still very much a big deal? What are the next steps needed to take to address and change the lack of representation in major studio films when it comes to individuals coming out?

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References


The Role of Social Media in Dating Trends Among Gen Z College Students

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

Abstract

With the advent of social media, Generation Z is experiencing an unprecedented climate of virtually navigated dating experiences. This study examined the role social media has played in how Gen Z students engage in dating and relationships on college campuses. From a survey of 90 college students at eight universities in the U.S., the researcher investigated common dating trends, termination strategies, and perceptions of social media. Key findings revealed a trend toward pursuing casual romantic relationships, a tendency to use “ghosting” to terminate relationships, and an association between ghosting experiences and decreased emotional wellbeing. Overall, social media was not seen as having a positive influence on dating and relationships in Generation Z.

I. Introduction

The emergence of social media has brought about significant changes to many aspects of society on a global scale. As social media has grown in popularity, people across the world are communicating through digital interfaces in new ways that may replace traditional interactions. The average person spent 144 minutes per day on social media in 2019, up from 90 minutes per day in 2012 (Clement, 2020). Media Dependency Theory suggests that a higher dependence of an individual on a form of media is accompanied by a stronger influence of such media on the user’s perceptions and behaviors (Joo & Teng, 2017, p. 36). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that this influx of time spent on social media is perpetuating a further dependency on that media and also fueling trends in user perceptions and behaviors. The power of this theory is profound when looking at the impact social media has on interpersonal communication, particularly within romantic relationships.

Generation Z has a reputation of having an excessive dependence on social media and an unwillingness to commit in romantic relationships, perhaps as a result of growing up with instant gratification, which has translated into instantaneous online communication in their dating lives (Nealon, 2019). A survey by the American Psychological Association found that Gen Z also is the generation most likely to receive mental health treatment, least likely to report being in good mental health, and has high levels of stress related to societal issues, such as mass shootings and the rise of suicide rates (Bethune, 2019).

This study seeks to investigate the role social media plays in the modern dating scene on college campuses among Generation Z students, and to assess how dating trends in this population have shifted...
with the advent of social media, which has made it easier to find and pursue romantic partners online. The purpose of this research is to examine various trends and perceived norms related to social media use and dating behaviors, as well as sentiments around whether social media has had a positive or negative impact on dating and relationships for this generation.

Understanding the behaviors and attitudes that influence how Gen Z engages in the dating scene is important for businesses that profit from dating, such as those in the restaurant, tourism, and online dating industries. This information may also be useful to mental health professionals in understanding the potential consequences of casual dating and excessive social media use on this generation, and how they may lead to further emotional distress in Gen Z patients.

Much of existing research has focused on the role that Facebook plays in dating trends and perceived norms, but that research is somewhat outdated considering Facebook has continuously seen a decline in use among younger populations. The 2018 Infinite Dial report showed that only 29% of users aged 12-34 ranked Facebook as their most commonly used social network, down from 58% of users in this age bracket in 2015 (Marketing Charts, 2019). Therefore, this study seeks to consider the impacts of other social media sites and account for other new developments in social media trends that affect romantic relationships, such as the tendency of younger populations to spend more time online and a growing trend of “ghosting” to terminate relationships.

One important term to define for optimal understanding of this research is ghosting. Ghosting is defined by Merriam-Webster (2020) as “the act or practice of abruptly cutting off all contact with someone (such as a former romantic partner) by no longer accepting or responding to phone calls, instant messages, etc.” This is a relatively new phenomenon popularized by Gen Z and Millennials, which is largely a result of increased use of digital communication and social media to navigate romantic relationships. Other avoidance termination strategies had been used to end relationships prior to the emergence of social media, but social media has since made ghosting a much easier and less confrontational alternative to traditional break-up methods.

II. Literature Review

This literature review focuses on three key categories: the effects of social media use on emotional well-being within intimate relationship structures, the association between social media use and the avoidance of confrontation, and the particular dating trends and behaviors that have emerged as a result of online dating and heavy social media use among Generation Z, a generation raised on social media. Research on these topics provide a cohesive overview of the complex association between social media use and the intricate functions of romantic relationships in the 21st Century, using theories and perspectives from the fields of communication and psychology.

Effects of Social Media Use on Romantic Relationships and Emotions

Social media has sparked a global conversation on its many widely debated positive and negative influences on society. A survey by the American Psychological Association found that 55% of Gen Z feel that social media provides feelings of support, but 45% say it makes them feel judged, and 38% report feeling badly about themselves as a result of social media use (Bethune, 2019). This phenomenon is often studied in the contexts of interpersonal communication and relationship development. A Malaysian study examining behavioral change and social unity as a result of social media use in relationships found that social media is perceived as a tool to communicate with friends and family and a channel to develop stronger relationships. The authors concluded that social media would generally lead to a more cohesive and harmonious society composed of enhanced relationships (Joo & Teng, 2017, p. 42). While there are many positive aspects of social media that help foster relationship development and allow loved ones to maintain healthy levels of communication, there are also negative effects to consider, particularly when it comes to emotional wellbeing and the quality of relationships that are being maintained online.

For example, a 2018 Brigham Young University study found that extensive social media usage is associated with negative impacts on emotional well-being and decreased quality in interpersonal relationships (Christensen, 2018). Survey participants reported negative effects of distraction, irritation, and decreased
quality time spent with significant others in offline settings. Negative effects of social media use on their emotional well-being included depression, frustration and social comparison. Guided by the Uses and Gratifications theory, this study also considered the way social media use and time spent on the Internet affects offline interactions and relationships, finding that participants with heavier social media use reported decreased commitment in relationships, decreased relationship quality offline, and more frequent partner conflicts. Heavy social media users also were found to “have decreased interpersonal competency at initiating offline relationships,” meaning that the more time a person spends online, the harder it is for them to find and succeed in new relationships online (Christensen, 2018, p.9). Further exploring these complexities, clinical psychologist and social media expert Jain (2010) warned social media users of the dangers of overestimating levels of intimacy in online relationships. Often, it is difficult for social media users to accurately assess or interpret acts of intimacy online, which can lead to conflicts and miscommunications in offline relationships.

Conflict and miscommunication are relatively common in any romantic relationship, however, social media brings new opportunities for conflict that were nonexistent for past traditional relationships, such as undesirable uncertainty, jealousy, technological incompatibility, interpersonal electronic surveillance and cyberstalking (Fox, 2016). Additionally, upon the dissolution of a relationship, one partner may or may not choose to “unfriend” the ex-partner; both situations may lead to unwelcome feelings or behaviors. A study investigating the dark side of social networking sites in romantic relationships found that “individuals who monitor their ex-partner’s Facebook page after a breakup reported greater levels of distress and negative feelings, greater longing for the ex-partner, and less emotional recovery from the breakup,” thus exhibiting the negative effects of social media on the termination phase of relationships (p. 86).

With this new territory of attempting to maintain relationships online comes a whole new set of social norms and pressures that can have the power to add significant distress to relationships. A study investigating the role of Facebook in a variety of stages in romantic relationships found that “a normative sociocultural discourse of online expression regarding one’s relationship status exists and that it exerts distal pressure on the partners, competing with what is likely a marginalized interpersonal-level discourse of privacy” (Fox, Osborn & Warber, 2014, p. 530). This, essentially, means that certain societal pressures and norms create conflicts in relationships when partners may not be on the same page or may use social media in different ways. This study was conducted through the lens of relational dialectics theory, which suggests that partners in a romantic relationship must try to “balance the effects of forces acting to simultaneously bring them together and pull them apart,” which occur both internally and externally, between the couple and their social networks (Fox et. al, 2014, p. 528). This research shows that the interference of social media acts as one of these forces that may pull couples apart if their expectations and preferences are not in alignment. In order to succeed at dating in this digital climate, open communication about these preferences is necessary.

**Avoidance Termination Strategies and the Incidence of Ghosting**

One of the most well-known trends in modern dating that has directly resulted from the invention of social media is using ghosting as a way to terminate a relationship. An Elle.com survey found that 26% of women and 33% of men have both ghosted and been ghosted before, and only 23% of women and 36% of men have never experienced ghosting on either end before (Crotty, 2017). This indicates that most young adults who are seeking romantic relationships are familiar with the experience of ghosting, and many have been on both the giving and receiving end of this dating trend. A Huffington Post article attributed the motivation for ghosting to a desire to avoid confrontation, difficult conversations, and hurting someone’s feelings. However, relationship research has shown that in the long run, ghosting often leads to worse confrontations than would have otherwise occurred with an alternative breakup strategy (Borgueta, 2017).

While ghosting may have amplified and popularized the concept of avoidance in relationship termination, it is not a new phenomenon. A study on relationship termination strategies conducted in the 1970s revealed that while adults preferred confrontation as a termination style, adolescents and late adolescents preferred avoidance as a termination style (Baxter & Philpott, 1981). Since college is a time period when students are transitioning between these life stages, it is reasonable to see why avoidance termination styles may continue into the college years. The study also found that avoidance ultimately tends to be more harmful for both the terminator and recipient; the former facing guilt for taking the “coward’s way out of the relationship” and potentially hurting the other’s feelings, and the latter internalizing anger and hurt feelings and being more likely to confront the terminator in a more dramatic or embarrassing fashion than would be the case in an initially confrontational relationship termination (Baxter & Philpott, 1981, p. 4).
Generation Z Dating Trends and Preferences

Along with the rise of social media, a new category of social networking has emerged: online dating. A Google and Qualtrics study on Gen Z dating trends found that for the majority of Gen Z, a generation more racially and ethnically diverse than any other, using dating apps allows them to be diverse in who they date and date outside of where they live (Frantz, 2019). However, while dating apps do provide an easier way to meet potential partners, a study on usage of the popular dating app, Tinder, found that 70% of college students have never actually met any matches in person and 45% of college students report using Tinder merely for “confidence boosting procrastination” (Iqbal, 2020). This research indicated that many college students are not using dating apps to pursue serious relationships, but instead for casual hookups or an occasional confidence boost from a stranger.

When looking at actual behavior of Gen Z versus their actual core preferences for dating behaviors, there appears to be a disconnect. Gen Z is infamously known for engaging in more casual relationships than previous generations, as eloquently explained a Clemson University newspaper editor: “Instead of building longer-term connections with romantic partners, Gen Zers build hundreds of surface-level connections with their numerous followers, creating relationships that are empirically less fulfilling than the more serious relationships undertaken by older generations” (Nealon 2019). However, this may not be something Gen Zers actually want for themselves. A 2018 survey of more than 4,000 college students found that only 14% of students desired relationships consisting of casual sex, defined as “friends with benefits,” and only 11% desired hookups, defined as “sexual encounters with no expectations attached.” However, when asked what they thought their college peers wanted out of relationships, more than half of respondents believed peers desired both of these types of relationships (EVERFI, 2020). This indicates a distortion between individual wants and needs from relationships and external perceptions of cultural expectations in relationships. This disconnect could explain why many Gen Zers complain about the “hookup culture” on college campuses, but generally tend to perpetuate the cycle by engaging in dating behaviors that they think the majority of their peers prefer.

III. Methods

H1: The dependence of college students on social media has led to a culture of relationships that are more casual than previous generations.

H2: Extensive social media usage leads to avoiding confrontation in romantic relationships.

H3: Extensive social media usage leads to lowering self-esteem in romantic relationships

H4: Gen Z college students do not think social media has had a positive impact on dating and relationships in their generation.

Research hypotheses were tested using quantitative methods. A 15-question Google Forms survey was distributed to a non-probability sample of American college students at eight different universities, over the course of seven days. The research participants were selected through convenience and snowball sampling. The survey was sent via group chat texts, GroupMe messages, and posted on Facebook groups to peers and acquaintances of the researcher. An estimated 200 individuals in the target population were reached by the distribution of the survey, with the goal that 100 would submit responses. Given the circumstances of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the evacuation of students from campuses, the survey was distributed electronically. While random sampling would be ideal for a study of this kind, a non-probability convenience sample was chosen given the pandemic and limited time span.

Demographic information was gathered on survey participants, including gender, year in school, and the name of the university attended. Further questions addressed topics directly aimed at testing research hypotheses, such as participants’ time spent on social media use, behaviors and opinions related to dating on college campuses, experiences with social media-related dating trends, and overall sentiments toward social media. The researcher included a disclosure at the beginning of the study that stated that participation in this study was voluntary and that participants could exit the study at any time. The researcher also made it clear that the confidentiality of each participant would be maintained.
IV. Findings

Survey responses were gathered from 90 participants in the target population: 84% (n=76) of respondents were female, while only 16% (n=14) of respondents were male. The majority of respondents (63%, n=57) were seniors in college, with a relatively even distribution among the other three ranks. More than two-thirds of survey participants (69%, n=62) attended Elon University, while 18% (n=16) attended Villanova University, and 13% (n=12) attended a variety of other universities in the United States.

**College Students Are Engaging in More Casual Relationships than Serious Ones**

To test H1, that the dependence of college students on social media has led to a culture of relationships that are more casual than previous generations, the researcher asked participants about the number of times they had engaged in four different types of relationships during their time in college: monogamous long-term relationships, exclusive yet casual and/or short-term relationships, relationships where there was no defined label about the relationship status but involved numerous (2+) intimate encounters, and one-night stands. Figure 1 below shows the number of times participants report being in each type of relationship on a scale ranging from 0 to 6+ times.

![Figure 1. Incidence of Relationship Types Among Participants](image)

Figure 1 displays four relationship types starting with a long-term, serious relationship and getting more casual along the x-axis. As the relationship type becomes more casual, the respondents reported a higher number of experiences. Survey participants reported engaging in more casual relationships than long-term ones. This graph revealed that 44% (n=40) of respondents have never been in a long-term relationship, and only 11% (n=10) have been in more than one long-term relationship, with the maximum number being three. This indicates that many college students are not experiencing long-term relationships, and of those who are, very few are doing so repeatedly.

Further, 79% (n=71) of participants have been in at least one casual, unlabeled relationship, as defined in the third relationship category. 67% (n=60) have had at least one one-night stand, and 39% (n=35) have had 3 or more. Thus, college students have more dating experiences that fall under these two casual categories than the long-term, monogamous category. Of those who are experiencing forms of casual intimacy, they tend to do so repeatedly. These results support the hypothesis that the American college student population is trending toward engaging in casual relationships as opposed to more serious ones.
**Dating apps may be used more commonly for talking and entertainment purposes**

Dating apps on social media may be contributing to this environment of casual dating and intimacy. To test H1 further, Table 1 cross tabulates the number of participants who have gone on dates from dating apps with their frequency of dating app use. This data shows that even though more than half of participants (52%, n=47) reported having used dating apps, the majority of those who are using dating apps (64%, n=30) have never actually gone on a date from one. Just 19% (n=17) of all participants have gone on a date from a dating app.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status of Dating App Use</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Have you ever gone on a date or met someone from a dating app?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not use dating apps</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, but I rarely check it</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, and I check it every now and then</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, and I check it regularly</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have used dating apps in the past, but I no longer do</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7 (64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Respondents Who’ve Used Dating Apps</strong></td>
<td><strong>47</strong></td>
<td><strong>17 (36%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Respondents</strong></td>
<td><strong>90</strong></td>
<td><strong>17 (19%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The concept that dating apps are popular to use, but not popular for actually meeting people, is supported by the fact that many in this population are not focused on finding a serious partner. These findings reflect a previously cited 2020 Tinder usage study which found that 70% of college students have never actually met any matches in person, and 45% of college students report using Tinder merely for “confidence boosting procrastination” (Iqbal, 2020).

**Avoidance termination strategies are common with Gen Z college students**

Many Gen Z college students are using the method of “ghosting” to terminate romantic relationships, rather than using traditional breakup methods. Much of communication between romantic partners now occurs online or via social media, which has facilitated the execution of ghosting to end relationships. To test H2, that social media use leads to a tendency to avoid confrontation in romantic relationships, the researcher asked participants about their experiences with avoidance in relationships. In this study, 69% of participants (n=62) have ghosted someone who they are longer interested in at least once, and 44% of participants (n=40) have ghosted someone two or more times. Similarly, 77% of participants (n=69) have been ghosted by someone who is no longer interested in them, and 43% of participants (n=39) have been ghosted two or more times.

These results show the significant popularity of ghosting in the Gen Z college student population, supporting H2, which associates social media use with a tendency to avoid confrontation in relationships. This data aligns with the Elle.com survey which found that 74% of women and 67% of men had experienced ghosting (Crotty, 2017), indicating that the college student population may not be different from the general population when it comes to the high incidence of ghosting.
**Ghosting is often associated with negative feelings and emotions**

Looking to test H3, which associates social media use with lowering self-esteem, this study investigated emotional reactions to experiences with ghosting. It was found that ghosting is highly associated with negative emotions and feelings. Of those who have been ghosted, 59% (n=43) reported feeling self-conscious, 63% (n=46) reported feeling disappointed, 59% (n=43) reported feeling sad, and 43% (n=31) reported feeling anxious. Only 11% (n=8) of participants reported not being phased emotionally. These findings suggest a significant correlation between ghosting and emotional distress, which could potentially have negative influences on mental health.

Participants were then asked about their preferred alternative termination strategies to ghosting. Of those who had been ghosted by a romantic interest before, 20.5% (n=15) reported being fine with the way their partner had ended things and stated they handled the situation properly. However, 63% of respondents (n=46) wished they had been texted to end things, and 41% (n=30) wished they had a face-to-face conversation to end things.

These findings indicate that the majority of participants would have preferred an alternate termination strategy to ghosting, with the most popular alternative being ending things via texting, followed by ending things in person. Interestingly, this shows that the majority of college-age students are fine with avoiding face-to-face confrontation about a breakup, as long as there is some sort of virtual conversation or acknowledgment. Technology can still be used as an escape for difficult in-person conversations, but Gen Z college students do not want to be ghosted.

**Social media is not seen as a positive influence on dating and relationships**

To test H4, that social media has not positively impacted dating in Gen Z, the researcher asked questions about social media use and effects. Participants were asked to estimate their daily time spent on social media, in addition to whether they think social media has had a positive impact on dating and relationships in their generation. Table 2 below shows a cross tabulation of the answers to these two questions. The researcher wanted to look for a potential link between time spent on social media and perceptions of social media’s overall influence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Daily hours on social media</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>I am not sure</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>10 (25%)</td>
<td>11 (27%)</td>
<td>19 (48%)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>8 (23%)</td>
<td>13 (37%)</td>
<td>14 (40%)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-7</td>
<td>2 (17%)</td>
<td>6 (50%)</td>
<td>4 (33%)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 7</td>
<td>2 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>22 (24%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>31 (35%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>37 (41%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>90 (100%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In regard to H4, it is important to note that only 24% (n=22) of respondents felt social media had a positive impact on dating and relationships for Gen Z, with 35% (n=31) saying they were not sure, and 41% (n=37) saying it did not. The distribution of social media impact perceptions was relatively even across time spent on social media. Social media did tend to be viewed as “negative” up until 5 hours of reported use, then moved to “unsure” up to 7 hours, before moving to “positive” beyond that. It is possible that there is a relationship between more extensive social media use and positive perceptions of social media, but further research would be necessary to investigate this possible correlation.

Participants were also asked to debate social media’s positive and negative influences in an open-ended question. Table 3 below summarizes the common trends and sentiments noted by 73 respondents about the positive and negative impacts of social media on dating and relationships in Gen Z, providing key insights directly from the mouths of the target audience.
Table 3. Commonly Reported Impacts of Social Media on Dating in Gen Z

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Impacts</th>
<th>Negative Impacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helps in general with keeping in touch regularly</td>
<td>Makes it easier to line up back-up choices for when a relationship doesn’t work out:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “Too much quantity, not enough quality. The convenience of dating apps has dehumanized dating.” - Response 88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gives people the confidence to “shoot their shot”</td>
<td>Makes it easier to end relationships without doing it face-to-face, thus avoiding emotional confrontation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with lower risk than making a move in person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gives people the opportunity to meet others they</td>
<td>Creates unrealistic expectations and standards in relationships, along with pressure to compare your relationship to others: “Relationship Goals”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wouldn’t normally meet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps with maintaining long-term relationships</td>
<td>Allows people to hide behind a screen and not show their real personality. Often “talking” to someone online leads to disappointment when they act differently in person or the connection isn’t there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes it easier to get to know someone without</td>
<td>Creates a lack of real-life connections and causes people to live less in the moment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>committing right away</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allows people to avoid expressing direct intentions; people can be “sneaky” and talk to multiple people at once</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can cause confusion and mixed signals in the initiation of relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Has exaggerated the “hook-up culture” on college campuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can evoke mental strife &amp; insecurities when a partner is not responding or might be with someone else</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Common sentiments were that social media allows people to be more connected, keep in touch, and talk to people who they never would otherwise meet. Many participants reasoned that the beginning phase of relationships is simplified by social media, which makes it easier to pursue romantic interests and get to know one another quickly. However, social media also creates many issues around jealousy and trust and makes it easy for people to talk to numerous romantic prospects at once, which can lead to shallower connections. Several participants mentioned the phenomenon of “hiding behind a keyboard,” making it difficult to tell someone’s true personality or intentions. Participants also attributed social media to perpetuating unrealistic “relationship goals,” creating pressure to present relationships in certain ways and misleading followers about what a true relationship entails. It was also commonly expressed that Gen Z has a collective fear of commitment, likely due to the ease of finding and pursuing multiple romantic interests online or “lining up” new prospects in the event that a relationship does not work out.
V. Conclusion

This study provides meaningful insights regarding the culture of dating on modern day college campuses. The analyses of common trends and perceptions reported by members of this target population show that social media has significantly influenced the way this age group approaches dating and relationships, creating a unique set of norms unknown to previous generations.

Many college students are experiencing casual dating and other types of relationships more often than traditional, long-term, and monogamous ones. Dating apps are commonly used within this population, but relatively few people are actually going on dates or meeting romantic interests in-person. It was also found that ghosting has become a popular method of relationship termination, largely due to the ease with which social media allows users to cut off communication, in addition to a tendency in this population to avoid confrontation. Ghosting also seems to be significantly associated with negative emotions, such as self-consciousness, anxiety and sadness, which could have implications on mental health in this population.

Overall, social media was not viewed as having positive influences on dating and relationships in Generation Z. The majority ultimately either felt unsure, or staunchly felt the negative outweighed the positive. This research will be helpful as society progresses in order to maximize social media’s communication-related benefits and minimize its damage done to interpersonal relationship management and mental health outcomes.

The majority of respondents in this study were female (84%) and seniors in college (63%). Future research would benefit from a more even distribution of gender and age, in order to more accurately generalize these findings to the American college student population. As mentioned earlier, there was an apparent correlation between harmful social media behaviors in dating, such as ghosting or stringing along multiple interests at once, and negative effects on mental health. Investigating these claims further might provide helpful knowledge about this relationship and have meaningful implications for mental health professionals.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Elon University communications professor Dr. Byung Lee, my mentor, whose feedback and guidance was instrumental in the development, execution and revision of this research. I am also grateful for the many opportunities provided to me by the Elon University School of Communications that were crucial to my professional development, including this high honor of achieving publication in a distinguished academic journal.

References


An Analysis of the Political Affiliations and Professions of Sunday Talk Show Guests Between the Obama and Trump Administrations

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Journalism
Elon University

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

Abstract

The Sunday morning talk shows have long been a platform for high-quality journalism and analysis of the week’s top political headlines. This research will compare guests between the first two years of Barack Obama’s presidency and the first two years of Donald Trump’s presidency. A quantitative content analysis of television transcripts was used to identify changes in both the political affiliations and profession of the guests who appeared on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” CBS’s “Face the Nation,” ABC’s “This Week” and “Fox News Sunday” between the two administrations. Findings indicated that the dominant political viewpoint of guests differed by show during the Obama administration, while all shows hosted more Republicans than Democrats during the Trump administration. Furthermore, U.S. Senators and TV/Radio journalists were cumulatively the most frequent guests on the programs.

I. Introduction

Sunday morning political talk shows have been around since 1947, when NBC’s “Meet the Press” brought on politicians and newsmakers to be questioned by members of the press. The show’s format would evolve over the next 70 years, and give rise to fellow Sunday morning competitors including ABC’s “This Week,” CBS’s “Face the Nation” and “Fox News Sunday.” Since the mid-twentieth century, the overall media landscape significantly changed with the rise of cable news, social media and the consumption of online content. There is more political opinion in the news media today than ever before, with viewers becoming confused on what sources they can trust for political news (Guskin, 2018). Despite all of the “noise” in the news business, the network Sunday morning shows have always branded themselves as an unbiased source covering the week’s political headlines.

However, these programs have had to adapt to a changing media environment as President Donald Trump has consistently attacked the news media, while also abruptly changing the news cycle through tweets and unannounced statements. This new style of governance has forced the Sunday news shows to quickly adapt to the Friday news dumps. This has forced broadcast networks to book and rebook guests at the last minute in order to get the most relevant people on the air. On top of this, Trump and his administration have made several attempts to limit the amount of Democrats that appear on both network and cable television (Stelter, 2019; Johnson, 2019).

Keywords: television news, politics, content analysis, talk shows, journalism
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While the number of Sunday programs has increased over time, the general format has not. In an effort to see how the party of the president affects the people welcomed on to the Sunday talk shows, this study will examine the political ideology and professions of the guests who appeared. Specifically, this research will compare guests on the Sunday shows during President Barack Obama’s first two years in office and those appearing during President Trump’s first two years. This research will examine the sources and content of the four major Sunday shows using transcripts provided by networks. This data will be supplemented with outside research on the political affiliations of those who appear on the Sunday programs. The goals of this study are to expand knowledge about political biases and routines of those working in the news industry. This research will inform Americans of potential bias in broadcast news programs as they constantly work to compete with growing partisan cable news competitors.

II. Literature Review

Since NBC’s “Meet the Press” began over 70 years ago, guests have always been invited on the program to discuss their career or the ongoing issues facing the country. When finding guests for the Sunday shows, producers may make upwards of 100 calls to a list of thirty prospective guests. “We all hate sharing guests,” one producer is quoted saying (Cox, 2002, p. 32). The entire process is very fluid with guests saying they can attend one day, and cancelling the next due to personal or professional reasons. Often times the White House will only offer select members of the administration to appear on the shows. “If the booking process is a card game, the White House is top dealer. The administration’s senior officials are among the most sought-after guests for the Sunday talk circuit” (Cox, 2002, p. 32). The goal of the Sunday morning programs is to make news, which results in high ratings and future “high-quality guests” (Cox, 2002, p. 34).

An analysis of the Sunday morning talk show programs – including CBS’s “Face the Nation,” NBC’s “Meet the Press,” and ABC’s “This Week” – found that policy experts and administration officials were the highest-rated guests (Baum, 2017). It would be fair to assume that these were guests that were highly sought after for producers. This dynamic would explain why there would be more Democratic guests on the Sunday talk shows during a Democratic presidential administration. In contrast to the highest-rated guests, judiciary, state/local officials and private sector citizens brought the lowest ratings (Baum, 2017).

However, the Sunday shows have been systematic in their way of handling guests. While examining more than 4,200 “Meet the Press” appearances, Baitinger (2015) found that there were significantly fewer women who appeared on the Sunday talk shows than men. This is not reserved to one party: Democratic and Republican women were both less likely to make an appearance on the major Sunday morning programs. This study placed the blame on the fact that there are fewer women in positions of power (Baitinger, 2015). In addition, white males continue to make up a majority of the guests on these programs, but more African American guests have appeared recently than in the 1980s. Ethnic diversity began to improve as the 21st century rolled around, with the Sunday talk shows beginning to encourage more representative guests and panels for discussions (Baum, 2017).

While administration officials are desired as guests for the Sunday talk shows, congressional representatives often frequent these programs as federal policymakers. However, the members of Congress who were hosted on the Sunday shows did not hold average beliefs that aligned with their party as a whole. Congressional guests that were interviewed on “Meet the Press” between the years 1947 and 2004 tended to have more extreme views compared to the typical Democrat and Republican (Harmon & Foley, 2007). In addition, it was the same handful of congressmen that were invited on the shows, and many of them had leadership titles. It was also concluded that Democrats outnumbered Republicans before 1995, but then for the next ten years, more Republican members of Congress appeared on the program. Senators were also found to have appeared more frequently than House members (Harmon & Foley, 2007).

Political bias in news

Most of time, the bias embedded into the television network reporting is never blatantly stated, but rather it is shown through selective reporting of stories and information. In one study that looked at ABC, CBS, NBC and the news program “Special Report” on Fox News, one researcher examined when and how the newscasts mentioned both President Bill Clinton’s and President George W. Bush’s approval ratings. The results found that ABC, CBS and NBC would all favor good news for Clinton and bad news for Bush,
based off of the polls they decided to air in their newscast. Fox News was the reverse, airing more favorable numbers for Bush and negative numbers for Clinton (Groeling, 2008).

While the mention of presidential approval would occur while an individual is already in office, there is also detected media bias on the campaign trail. When looking at the race for the White House in 2000, 2004 and 2008, researchers Diddi, Fico and Zeldes (2014) looked at news transcripts from the three broadcast evening programs. They defined systemic bias in an election by studying which candidate was presented first on the program, which candidate got more airtime, whether video of the candidates’ campaign activities appeared and whether there were sound bites from partisans. When looking at the networks in general, all networks favored Senator John McCain over Obama in the 2008 election. CBS and NBC favored Democrats in 2000, and ABC and CBS favored Democrats in 2004. ABC favored Republicans in 2000 and NBC did so in 2004. In the end, it seemed that there was no consistent pattern of systematic bias across the networks (Diddi et al., 2014).

**Effects of political framing**

Political biases can be evident in a news broadcast, but they can also have a great effect on its audience. This is seen in numerous studies looking at political framing, which packages material in a certain manner that can lead to certain perceptions. “Frames in the news may affect our perception of issues and generate specific evaluations about politics. By means of activation of certain constructs, news can encourage particular ‘trains of thought’ which citizens may make use of in subsequent judgments” (de Vreese, 2004, p. 36). Using the frames of conflict or economic consequence, context can be as important as news facts presented in a story. Viewers’ thoughts are often built off of frames presented to them in television news stories (de Vreese, 2004).

These results are similarly seen in studies looking to measure the effect of repetitive frames on the viewer. Repetitive frames lead to stronger and more persistent ideologies compared to a single exposure (Lecheler et al., 2015). The consequences of single-framed exposure providing only one perspective can create a misinformed view on a political actor or developing political scandal. One such study tested individuals using both a positive and negative frame on a story about elderly care in the Netherlands. Positive framing repetition had little to no effect on the political opinions across time. However, there was receptive exposure to negative news frames, which significantly changed political opinions over time (Lecheler et al., 2015).

**Research Questions**

Given the prior research related to the Sunday talk show guests and the effect it has on viewers, it may be that these programs’ guests and biases will reflect the party in control of the executive branch of the White House. Thus, this study asks:

**RQ1:** Did the political affiliation of guests on the broadcast Sunday talk shows change between the first two years of the Obama and the first two years of the Trump administrations?

**RQ2:** Did the type of guests being invited to speak on the Sunday talk show programs change between the two presidencies?

The Sunday broadcast talk shows have been a place for Americans to receive straightforward news about what has happened in the previous week of politics. This study seeks to find if this tradition has been kept during the modern era of politics, given Trump’s brash nature of criticizing the media and political insiders.

**III. Methods**

This study employed a content analysis of 192 television transcripts of four Sunday morning show programs using resources such as the network’s websites as well as third-party transcript services. This study chose to look at the four broadcast Sunday talk shows: “Meet the Press,” “This Week,” “Face the Nation” and “Fox News Sunday.” While several cable channels and media groups also have their own Sunday morning programs, their reach and reputation for impartiality are not as strong as these broadcast programs.
Each program has its own format, but all of them typically begin with newsworthy guests on the show before bringing in either a panel of partisan spokespeople, journalists, or a combination of both. This was true for all the Sunday shows except for CBS in 2009 and 2010. While all the other networks had a one-hour Sunday morning political program, “Face the Nation” with Bob Schieffer had a 30-minute broadcast. During those same years, ABC’s “This Week” was hosted by a combination of George Stephanopoulos, Jake Tapper and Christiane Amanpour. NBC’s “Meet the Press” was hosted by David Gregory, and “Fox News Sunday” was hosted by Chris Wallace. In 2017, “Face the Nation” was anchored by John Dickerson before Margaret Brennan took over in February 2018. George Stephanopoulos and Martha Raddatz shared moderating duties of “This Week” during the Trump era. At “Meet the Press,” Chuck Todd was the host from 2017 to 2018, and the reign of Chris Wallace continued on “Fox News Sunday.”

The first two years of both administrations were studied because one party controlled the House, Senate and Presidency – the Democrats in 2009 and 2010, and the Republicans in 2017 and 2018. For each Sunday program, a sample of 24 shows were collected during the first two years of the Obama administration, and an additional 24 were collected during the first two years of the Trump administration. The sample was collected systematically, pulling the transcripts from the fourth Sunday of every month. In the case that a Sunday show was cancelled for the fourth Sunday, samplers would pull data from the third Sunday of the month. Over the course of this study, this was only documented once, with “Meet the Press” cancelling its July 23, 2017 program.

During 2009 and 2010, both CBS and NBC had readily available transcripts of their respective programs on their website. Transcripts from “Fox News Sunday” and ABC’s “This Week” during this period were found on third-party transcript services NewsBank and LexusUni. Between 2017 and 2018, all transcripts were able to be obtained through the respective network’s website.

When analyzing a transcript, a single coder would scan for all the different individuals who were interviewed on the program. For the purposes of this study, individuals who were featured in soundbites or who filed news reports for the program did not count as a guest. Journalists who would respond to a series of questions from the moderator would count as a guest on the show. For guests that did appear, the date, the program they appeared on, their name, their job category and their political leanings were all coded into a Google Sheet. The spreadsheets were separated by the yearly tabs of 2009, 2010, 2017 and 2018. Guests would be assigned one of 41 job categories based off of several factors, including how the program introduced them and their previous career experience based on additional research. This was similarly done when seeking a guest’s political affiliation. Guests would be assigned a label of Republican, Democrat, Independent or N/A. The N/A category was typically reserved for journalists and general citizens. Background research of these guests included previous work history and previous media interviews to discover common talking points and tones. This was done for every appearance to ensure that there were no major career changes after their prior appearance on a Sunday program. Examples of categories included terms such as U.S. Senator, administration official, television journalist, among others.

IV. Findings

All of the data were calculated in percentages in order to accurately analyze the proportion of guests on each program, given that CBS’s “Face The Nation” was the only 30-minute Sunday program during the Obama administration. For the first two years of the Obama and Trump administrations, this study examined a total of 533 and 737 guest appearances, respectively, from the four programs. Between the two administrations, all Sunday programs hosted more guests in the Trump administration, except “Fox News Sunday,” as seen in Table 1.
Table 1: Total guests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NBC’s “Meet the Press”</th>
<th>CBS’s “Face the Nation”</th>
<th>ABC’s “This Week”</th>
<th>“Fox News Sunday”</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obama Administration</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>81*</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump Administration</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>1,268</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Party affiliation among guests of the four major talk shows during the Obama administration can be found in Figure 1. Both NBC’s “Meet the Press” and CBS’s “Face the Nation” hosted more Democrats than Republicans during the Obama administration. For “This Week” and “Fox News Sunday,” this was reversed with Republicans appearing more frequently than Democrats during the Obama administration. Interestingly, the most frequent guests on ABC’s “This Week” were those who had no party affiliation. People who affiliated as Independent made up a very small portion of the total guests on the Sunday programs.

As seen in Figure 2, during the first two years of the Trump presidency, all of the shows clearly had more Republican guests than Democrats. Furthermore, during the Trump administration, all shows saw an increased number of people who classified themselves as Independents. It should also be noted that the difference in proportion between Republican and Democrat guests also increased in every show. Notably, “Fox News Sunday” went from having 10% more Republican guests than Democrat guests during the first two years of the Obama administration, to 26% more Republicans during the first two years of the Trump Administration.
In terms of the professions of guests, U.S. Senators seemed to be the favorite appearing on all of the Sunday shows a total of 191 times between the two administrations, as seen in Figure 4. The next most frequent guests were TV/Radio journalists other than the host (168), followed by partisan personalities (117).

Figure 2.

When the first two years of both presidents are combined, Figure 3 shows that overall, the Sunday shows featured more Republican guests than Democrats. CBS's “Face the Nation” and ABC’s “This Week” actually featured more non-affiliated guests than those from a single party.

Figure 3.
There also were interesting differences in the types of guests who appeared on the Sunday talk shows between the first two years of the Obama administration and the first two years of the Trump administration. As seen in Figure 5, between the two presidencies, the proportion of state governors and radio journalists declined during the Trump presidency, while the number of policy experts, activists, digital journalists, strategists and print journalists increased during the period. Cumulatively, the number of overall non-partisan journalists also saw a significant increase, making up 29% of all the guests on the Sunday talk shows during the first two years of the Trump administration.
Figure 5.

Each Sunday show also saw a significant difference in guests between the two administrations. During the Trump administration, “Meet the Press” and “This Week” had more strategists appear on the program, with the former having more partisan personalities and the latter seeing more television journalists and lawyers on. This is while “Face the Nation” and “Fox News Sunday” had fewer U.S. Senators as guests, with the latter also seeing a drop in the number of partisan journalists and radio journalists.

V. Discussion

This research set out to find the types of people appearing on the Sunday TV talk shows and the changes noted between the first two years of the Obama and Trump presidencies. In an age where political parties and ideals have become so divisive, it is important that objective news organizations continue to try to offer opinion from both sides of the aisle. Since Obama is a Democrat and Trump is a Republican, it would be assumed that there may be a slight difference of people invited on to the programs between the two administrations. In addition, it should be noted that the Presidency and control of the House and Senate were both under one party rule during the first two years of the Obama and Trump administrations. Even though this was the case for Obama’s first two years in office, only two programs NBC’s “Meet the Press” and CBS’s “Face the Nation” favored the president’s party in terms of guests. Also, during this period, there was only a marginal gap between the proportion of Democrat and Republican guests on the programs. Instead of having a proportional difference of 4% and 10% between Democrats and Republicans during Obama’s first two years in office, this difference increased to between 8% and 26% during the Trump administration. When compiling the affiliations of guests between the first two years of the Obama and Trump administrations, NBC “Meet the Press” seems to be the most balanced by far, with 32% of their guests being Democrat and 34% of their guests being Republican.

There are several potential reasons for why the number of Republican guests outnumbered the number of Democratic guests by such a large margin during Trump’s administration. As previously noted, Trump’s brash style would often change the news cycle at the last minute, and often force bookers of the Sunday shows to cancel and re-book guests at the last minute. Partisans would argue that Trump would make numerous decisions on a whim. This includes the fact that Trump had more turnover among top officials during his first two years as president than any other president in the modern political era (Dunn Tenpas, 2020). Republican officials could have appeared on the Sunday shows in higher frequency in an effort to try and defend the president’s actions.
The political affiliation of guests between the first two years of the Obama and Trump administrations was strikingly different. When combined, there is a general favorability for Republican guests, but the proportion of Republican guests grew significantly larger during the Trump administration.

In terms of guest appearances, there were several differences between the two administrations. Some of these can be attributed to the advancement of technology, while others can be attributed to a guest’s relevance to the news cycle. For example, the significant increase in digital journalists, such as those from Axios and FiveThirtyEight, appearing on the Sunday talk shows can be attributed to technological advancements. The decline of radio news may be why the number of appearances by radio journalists also decreased during this time. However, the number of print journalists appearing on the Sunday shows increased significantly between the Obama and Trump administrations. While this seems contrary to what is often heard about the “dying” newspaper industry, these publications are still proactively breaking stories coming out of Washington. In fact, their robust reporting has led to higher online traffic and subscriber growth (Spross, 2017). Another noticeable difference between the two administrations is the diminished presence of governors as talk show guests after Trump’s election. With such a large focus on Trump’s role in the federal government, it could be argued that the Sunday shows have devoted less time to state issues. It is interesting to note there are more lawyers on the programs since Trump’s election, to discuss the legality of actions in Washington. There are also more of the president’s personal friends who discuss Trump’s governing style and thought process.

As this research has shown, Fox News is more conservative with the types of guests they feature. Interestingly, there was increased appearances by cabinet secretaries and administration officials that appeared on “Fox News Sunday” during the Trump administration compared to the Obama administration. Early on in his presidency, Obama took Fox News head on, claiming the channel was just an outlet for Republican talking points. At one point, the Obama administration offered officials to all the Sunday shows, except Fox News Sunday (Folkenflik, 2009).

VI. Conclusion

This study aimed to learn more about the evolving role of the Sunday TV shows in the age of increased partisan politics in media. Specifically, this study looks at the political biases and sources of information that these Sunday talk shows are providing to their viewers. This study concludes that cumulatively the Sunday shows hosted more Republican guests during the two administrations. In addition, this study found that there were more guests to provide insight during the first two years of the Trump presidency compared to the Obama presidency. This was seen through the increased appearances of journalists covering the federal government as well as the increased presences of personal friends of the president on the programs. This came at the sacrifice of the appearance of governors and several other key political players.

Just like any study, there are a few limitations that could be further investigated. This study did not take in to account airtime given to each guest. For example, some guests were invited on for the entire program, while others only received a minute of speaking time. Furthermore, this study takes a look at the guests who ultimately appeared on the program. It does not have any data to conclude what potential guests each program contacted for an appearance. Finally, a further study could potentially align appearances of certain individuals with domestic and world events occurring that would provide sound reason and expertise for inviting them on the program.

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References


Abstract

Frequent and repeated exposure to media can influence perceptions of reality. Therefore, film portrayals that are incorrect and stigmatizing can contribute to the public’s unfavorable opinion of mentally ill individuals. This study focuses on the portrayal of dissociative identity disorder (DID) in films from the last 25 years. Through a content analysis, the author coded eight films to determine the prevalence of inaccurate stereotypes associated with DID and mental illnesses. The findings of this study suggest that misconceptions about violence, criminal behavior, extreme alternate identities, and treatment-related incompetence were frequently portrayed. Furthermore, disparagement was common, in which it was customary for other characters to ridicule the DID character. The recurrent use of negative stereotypes in the selected films suggest that the public may continue to have negative opinions about people suffering from DID.

I. Introduction

In 2018, U.S. adults spent an average of three hours and 44 minutes watching television each day (Statista, 2019). From the hours spent consuming TV, it is apparent that the images flashing across the screen can have a significant influence on people’s perception of reality, evidenced by the principles of cultivation theory (Vogel et al., 2008). The central hypothesis of this theory is that the more time people spend watching television, the more likely they are to perceive the real world as a reflection of the one depicted on the screen (Stacks et al., 2015).

Television has perpetuated many stereotypes that people have come to view as accurate representations of society (Diefenbach & West, 2007). However, the film and TV industries have continually shown a shaky and inaccurate version of mental health that individuals in society may have accepted to be true and correct (Vogel et al., 2008).

One mental illness presented in modern-day films is dissociative identity disorder (DID), a rather misunderstood condition that is characterized by a person having at least two distinct personality identities or states. DID affects between one and two percent of the U.S. population (The Recovery Village, 2020a), but mental illnesses overall affect about 46 million U.S. adults (National Institute of Mental Health, 2019). Many people cannot differentiate one mental illness from another, and even cultural differences can impact the understanding of what is a mental illness and what is not, as “what might be normal in one society may be a cause for concern in another” (Mayo Clinic, 2019, p. 6).
Hollywood has increasingly portrayed mental illnesses on screen, and DID in particular, by producing films depicting various stereotypes and myths associated with this condition (Trifonova, 2010). Considering this disorder is not understood by most of the population, the inaccurate portrayal of DID in these films could influence the public opinion on dissociative identity disorder. This study analyzed the content of these movies to determine the prevalence of DID stereotypes in these films. This content analysis gives an insight into the portrayal of mental health in the film industry, and the accuracy of DID movies in particular.

II. Literature Review

**Dissociative Identity Disorder and Film**

Dissociative identity disorder (DID) has been previously referred to as multiple personality disorder (Cleveland Clinic, 2016). According to the American Psychiatric Association, DID is often related to overwhelming experiences, severe childhood abuse and/or traumatic history. DID is a subgroup of dissociative disorders, which are mental illnesses that involve problems or breakdowns of memory, identity, perception, consciousness, emotion, and behavior (Cleveland Clinic, 2016; American Psychiatric Association, n.d.). When disruptions in these mental functions occur, dissociative symptoms can arise and could potentially interfere with a person’s overall functioning (Cleveland Clinic, 2016).

DID is characterized by the presence of two or more distinct identities, or personality states (Snyder, 2017). These identities repeatedly take control of the individual and they are often accompanied by changes or alterations in affect, behavior, consciousness, cognition, memory, perception, and/or sensory-motor functioning (Snyder, 2017). Oftentimes, people suffering from DID are not conscious of the existence of their alternate personality states (Snyder, 2017). Other criteria for the diagnosis of DID includes ongoing and recurrent gaps in memory about everyday events and personal information, as well as the disturbance causing significant anxiety in the individual (APA, n.d.).

A history of trauma is a key feature to this mental illness because about 90 percent of individuals suffering from DID had experienced severe abuse in their past (Cleveland Clinic, 2016). Research has shown that DID is more common in women because they experience childhood abuse more frequently than men (Snyder, 2017; The Recovery Village, 2020a). DID is so prevalent in individuals who have experienced abuse, violence or trauma because dissociation is often used as a coping mechanism to help people manage their distressing memories (The Recovery Village, 2020a). When people use dissociation to block the horrors about their past experiences, they are able to function at a relatively healthy level (Cleveland Clinic, 2016).

Hollywood has long had a fascination with mental illnesses (Dolphin, 2014), and DID is no exception. Multiple personality disorder was first introduced to the big screen in 1920, with the release of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Since then, there have been almost 75 films featuring a character suffering from DID symptoms (IMDb, n.d.). Hollywood has become proficient at using “doubling” and multiple personalities to create a new genre of films shaped around multiple realities or identities (Trifonova, 2010).

**Mental Health Misconceptions in Film and Television**

In 1957, Jum Nunnally began one of the first scientific investigations of mental health issues in the media (Diefenbach & West, 2007). Since then, multiple studies have been published about this connection. The findings in these studies have been mostly consistent, in which the media’s portrayal of mental illnesses tend to be false and negative (Diefenbach & West, 2007). Furthermore, the people suffering from mental health issues tend to be characterized as violent and aggressive (Diefenbach & West, 2007).

In one such 2016 study, about 9 percent of film and television characters experienced a mental health condition, and the portrayals of these mentally ill individuals were often negative and exaggerated (Vogel et al., 2008). Mentally ill characters are often depicted as perpetrators of crime: 46 percent of film characters and 25 percent of television characters used violence against others (Smith et al., 2019). The fallacious notion that individuals suffering from mental illnesses are dangerous criminals is often reinforced by the media (Smith et al., 2019).

There has been research conducted about the interactions between mentally ill characters and other characters in film and television. One study found that almost 48 percent of mentally ill characters in film and
about 40 percent of characters in television were belittled by other characters (Smith et al., 2019). Some types of ridicule included “name calling, dehumanizing phrases, and stigmatizing behavior” (Smith et al., 2019, p. 2). The public’s media exposure to this disparagement towards mentally ill characters has corresponded to the overall decrease in tolerance toward the mentally ill (Vogel et al., 2008).

Research has found that very few DID patients commit acts of crime (Peisley, 2017) or act violently or aggressively towards others (The Recovery Village, 2020b), yet stereotypes and misconceptions about the disorder often appear in film. As one example, an evil alter-identity is the often a premise in a DID movie, but that is not supported by research conducted on this disorder (The Recovery Village, 2020b). Other misconceptions include the idea that DID and schizophrenia are the same, that the public understands that DID films are exaggerated and sensationalized, and that the alternate identities are obvious and extreme (The Recovery Village, 2020b; Peisley, 2017).

**Public Opinion and Mental Illnesses**

Public stigma of mental illness has been a widespread issue throughout U.S. history. In a 2002 poll, about 82 percent of Americans perceived a stigma attached to mental illnesses—a 5 percent increase from a 1978 poll (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2015). In that same year, nearly half of the population reported that they would feel uncomfortable living next door to someone with a mental illness, and two-thirds of parents said they would not be comfortable having a mentally ill individual work in the school where their children attended (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2015).

The vast majority of the population prefers to be socially distant from the mentally ill (Parcesepe & Cabassa, 2013). Adults with mental health issues are perceived by many to be dangerous and incompetent. Additionally, the mentally ill were perceived by others to be less competent when it came to making “treatment-related and financial decisions” (Parcesepe & Cabassa, 2013, p. 10), and those suffering from schizophrenia and drug abuse disorders were recognized as the least competent of all individuals with a mental illness.

The public’s stigma associated with mental health is further validated by George Domino’s study of the impact of a mental health film on college students (Diefenbach & West, 2007). Domino administered attitude questionnaires to the subjects prior to the film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, as well as after the viewing of the movie. For the subjects who watched the film, attitudes toward mental health conditions shifted in a negative direction, while the control group’s attitudes stayed about the same (Domino, 1983).

Dissociative identity disorder is a relatively new mental disorder: It was only recognized as a mental illness in the publication of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) in 1980 (Peisley, 2017). Therefore, the public does not have a thorough understanding of the disorder and, most often, they have learned most of their knowledge from television and films. Many believe that movies like *Split* have some truth to the symptoms portrayed, even though they are most often false representations of the illness (Peisley, 2017). Therefore, a stigma is often created about this disorder, and this stigma is further perpetuated by television and movies.

While there are quite a number of movies showcasing DID, there are few academic studies examining the portrayal of DID in films (Trifonova, 2010). Therefore, this article contributes to fill this gap by studying the portrayal of DID in modern films and the presence of negative stereotypes, or lack thereof. This study analyzed eight films that included characters who have DID to determine how these characters and their mental illnesses were presented. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** In what ways was DID portrayed accurately in the movies under study, according to the DSM-5 criteria for DID?

**RQ2:** In what ways was DID portrayed inaccurately in the movies under study, by using stereotypes and exaggerations? What were the stereotypes and exaggerations most used in these movies?
III. Methods

This study analyzes the content of eight films, produced in the last 25 years, that feature at least one character who exhibits dissociative identity disorder (DID). Content analyses study the content of different materials and analyze the salience of words, themes, and concepts from a set of texts (Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, n.d.), and this interpretive method includes the analysis of films.

The eight films analyzed in this research project were chosen from IMDb, an online database. The website allows people to refine their movie search based on certain keywords, such as dissociative identity disorder and mental illness. After filtering the options by choosing both of these categories, a refined list of 35 movies was displayed. For this analysis, the sample of eight films was selected from that initial list of 35 movies based on their popularity and relevance, because the researcher wanted to end up with modern, current movies that were most likely to be watched by the public today, and hence, might have influence on the public’s opinion of DID.

From the refined search, the eight most popular films on IMDb released within the last 25 years were chosen for this study. The movies selected were Fight Club, Hereditary, Glass, Split, Primal Fear, Identity, The Hours, and Secret Window. Although Glass is a sequel to Split and therefore includes the same DID character, the researcher chose to keep the film in the sample.

To determine the accuracy of DID in the chosen films, each character suffering from this mental illness was evaluated using the DSM-5 criteria for DID. To be diagnosed with DID, an individual must have two or more distinct identities or personality states, amnesia or gaps in memory, and significant distress about this disorder. Additionally, the mental illness cannot be due to cultural or religious practices and the symptoms cannot be associated with the physiological effects of substance use or a medical condition (APA, n.d.).

After recording the rating and genre of the film, each movie was evaluated for five categories: whether the character with DID exhibited violent/aggressive behavior or not, whether the character with DID exhibited criminal behavior or not, whether extreme alternate identities were presented or not, whether the theme of treatment-related and financial incompetence was presented or not, and whether DID was mistaken for schizophrenia or not in the film.

While most of these stereotypes were described in the literature about the misconceptions related to the disorder itself, financial incompetence and treatment-related incompetence were associated with the literature about the perceptions people have about those suffering from a mental illness like DID. Therefore, it was incorporated as a category for this study. In addition, any type of degrading or belittling statements were recorded because academic research has found that mentally ill characters are often mocked by other characters in films (Smith et al., 2019). Therefore, all stigmatizing behaviors showcased by other characters were documented in an effort to discern if there was any discrimination toward the mentally ill in these movies.

Before coding each movie, each stereotype was described. Violence and aggression occurred anytime the DID character intended to physically harm another person who did not wish to be harmed or deliberately harmed him or herself (Rutherfors et al., 2007). Additionally, the researcher included any aggressive actions the character inflicted on his or her surroundings, such as breaking or throwing an object. Criminal behavior was defined as any type of law-breaking conduct or any behavior that required police intervention. Any drastic states or that were obvious to the casual observer as being extreme or opposite from the character’s personality were defined as extreme alternate identities (Peisley, 2017). The character’s incompetence was defined as his or her inability to successfully manage his or her finances and treatments for DID. Furthermore, work-related incompetence would fall within the financial category and treatment-related incompetence would incorporate any attempts by the character to kill his or her alternate identities. DID being mistaken for schizophrenia was defined as the use of any other terms, such as schizophrenia, hallucinations, or delusions, in reference to the character suffering from DID.

Lastly, it was necessary to define any type of stigmatizing behavior and disparagement that could appear in the films. There are 17 terms that are often used to negatively refer to characters with a mental health condition, and these selected words were documented if mentioned by other characters to refer to these individuals with DID (Smith et al., 2019). These words include the following: crazy, creep, different, freak, idiot, monster, nitwit, nutjob, nuts, problem, psycho, ruined, scumbag, silly, sociopath, unstable, and weird (Smith et al., 2019).
Intracoder reliability was measured for this research to ensure consistency in the categorization of content. The researcher coded two of the eight films (25 percent of the sample) using the categories of analysis, and then she coded these two movies again on a different day to discern how much the second coding matched the results of the first coding. The overall intracoder reliability after coding *Fight Club* and *Hereditary* twice was 90.5 percent.

**IV. Findings**

RQ1 asked in what ways DID was portrayed accurately in the chosen movies. Table 1 shows the results regarding whether the characters from the selected films met all of the DSM-5 criteria for DID.

**Table 1: Films that met the DSM-5 criteria for Dissociative Identity Disorder**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Films</th>
<th>Two or more distinct identities</th>
<th>Amnesia or gaps in memory</th>
<th>Person is distressed by the disorder</th>
<th>Not part of culture or religion*</th>
<th>Not due to substance/condition¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Fight Club</em></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hereditary</em></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Glass</em></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Split</em></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Primal Fear</em></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Identity</em></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Hours</em></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Secret Window</em></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Six out of eight of the films successfully met all the DSM-5 requirements for DID. For Hereditary and The Hours, it was apparent that none of the characters suffered from this disorder, even though these were films described as having at least one character with DID (according to the database IMDb, used to select the movies for this study, as explained in the Methods section). While it appeared as if some of the characters in these two movies had a mental health condition, there were no specific indicators or symptoms of DID. Notwithstanding, this study continued to record any stereotypes present in these movies.

RQ2 asked in what ways was DID portrayed inaccurately in the movies through the use of stereotypes and exaggerations. In the following sections, this study outlines how often these misconceptions (violent behavior, criminal behavior, extreme alternate identities, incompetence, and DID being mistaken for schizophrenia) were portrayed throughout the films.

**Rating, Genre, Violence and Criminal Behavior**

The most popular genre that the eight films fell under was drama, followed by mystery and thriller. Other genres included horror, sci-fi, crime, and romance. All of the films were either rated PG-13 or R, due to the level of language, violence, drug use, and nudity shown in them.

After recording the rating and genre(s) of the eight films, all occurrences of violent and criminal behavior shown during the entire film were tallied, as indicated in Table 2.

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* Within some cultures or religions, it may be common for individuals to dissociate from themselves and undergo experiences of possession (APA, n.d.). These types of spiritual practices are considered normal and should not be treated as a dissociative disorder.

¹ Signs of DID may resemble symptoms of an underlying medical condition or the physiological effects of substance use, like loss of memory and blackouts (McKee & Brahm, 2016; Domingo & Zhang, 2019). Therefore, it is important to verify that the symptoms are not the direct result of substance abuse or a medical condition.
Table 2: Violent and criminal behavior in eight different films

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Films</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Genres</th>
<th>Instances of violent behavior</th>
<th>Instances of criminal behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fight Club</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hereditary</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>Drama, Horror, Mystery</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass</td>
<td>PG-13</td>
<td>Drama, Sci-Fi, Thriller</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Split</td>
<td>PG-13</td>
<td>Horror, Thriller</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primal Fear</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>Crime, Drama, Mystery</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>Mystery, Thriller</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hours</td>
<td>PG-13</td>
<td>Drama, Romance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret Window</td>
<td>PG-13</td>
<td>Drama, Mystery, Thriller</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8.25</td>
<td>5.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In almost every film, instances of violent behavior were depicted more frequently than criminal behavior. Every character suffering from DID acted violently at least four times, either toward themselves, others, or the space around themselves. Almost every DID character, except for one, deliberately and physically harmed at least one other character. In The Hours, none of the characters hurt another individual; only one of the main characters attempted to harm herself. In Fight Club, Hereditary, Identity, The Hours, and Secret Window, the five characters intentionally harmed themselves either by burning, punching, stabbing, shooting, choking, or drowning. Additionally, three of the characters from Fight Club, Hereditary, and Secret Window inflicted damage on the space or objects around them. Examples of these aggressive actions included smashing cars, kicking tables, breaking artwork, and throwing objects at a wall.

Criminal behavior occurred less frequently than violence, with an average of less than six occurrences per film. Six out of the eight characters participated in at least three criminal activities during the duration of the movie. The characters in Hereditary and The Hours did not break any laws or behave in any way that required police intervention. In regard to the other six films, the most popular crime committed was murder: five of the six characters killed at least two other individuals. In addition to murder, Kevin’s character, from Split, kidnapped three girls and consumed one of them; Aaron’s character, from Primal Fear, attempted to flee and escape from the police; and Mort’s character, from Secret Window, committed arson and covered up the bodies of a murder. In Fight Club, the character did not kill anyone, but he committed the most various types of crimes than any other character. For example, he stole a car, trespassed on private property, launched an underground fight club, robbed various businesses, vandalized cars, blackmailed his boss, and planted bombs and blew up several buildings.

**Extreme Alternate Identities, Financial Incompetence, and Treatment-Related Incompetence**

As shown in Table 3, most of the characters from the eight films possessed extreme alternate identities and experienced financial or treatment-related incompetence.
Table 3: Extreme alternative identities and instances of incompetence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Films</th>
<th>Extreme alternate identities</th>
<th>Instances of incompetence</th>
<th>Financial Incompetence</th>
<th>Treatment Incompetence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fight Club</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hereditary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Split</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primal Fear</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hours</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret Window</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the identities that were physically presented by the character during the films were recorded. Therefore, even though Kevin—from Split and Glass—possessed 24 distinct alternate states, this study only documented the identities that were shown in the films. Three-quarters of the characters suffered from at least one extreme alternate identity that was recognized as extremely different from the character’s personality. Additionally, some of the side characters in these films were able to notice when an alternate identity presented himself or herself in the character. For example, in Glass, Split, Primal Fear, and Identity, at least one other character was able to quickly identify the change in personality in the DID character. In the films that had the DID character suffer from more than one alternate identity (Glass, Split, and Identity), another character could specifically recognize and name which identity had presented itself from his or her characteristics.

While some of the films chose to have the same actor portray each identity, in the other movies, the states were illustrated as a completely different character. In Fight Club, Identity, and Secret Window, the alternate states were played by other actors and often, the character did not realize until the end of the film that this “person” was in fact an alternate identity.

Six out of eight characters had instances in which they were deemed incompetent because they were unable to successfully manage their finances or treatments. Only one of the characters was financially inept, which was shown in Fight Club when the Narrator was sent home from work by his boss, and he quit his job to focus on managing the fight club.

Treatment-related incompetence was a far more common trait depicted in these films. For example, the Narrator from Fight Club shot himself in the head to kill his alternate identity; Kevin from Split killed his therapist and thus, stopped seeking treatment for his disorder; Kevin from Glass escaped from the mental institution; Aaron from Primal Fear never sought treatment for his blackouts; Malcolm from Identity killed 10 of his alternate identities and killed his doctor who was treating him; and Virginia from The Hours did not follow her doctor’s orders regarding her mental health.

**Dissociative Identity Disorder Being Mistaken for Schizophrenia**

There were few findings related to DID being mistaken for schizophrenia. Only two of the eight films had any mention of schizophrenia, hallucinations, or delusions. In the last scene of Fight Club, when the Narrator tried to understand how it was possible for him to visually see his alternate identity (Tyler) but was unable to shoot him, Tyler made a remark about it being a hallucination. Similarly, in Glass, the doctor in the film tried to explain to the main characters, including Kevin, that their beliefs that they were supernatural were a type of delusion. Besides these two movies, there was no reference to schizophrenia-related symptoms in the other films.

**Stigmatizing Behavior and Disparagement**

Almost every film had some type of stigmatizing behavior or disparagement about the character suffering from DID. As shown in Table 4, seven out of the eight films presented belittling remarks about the mentally ill character.
Table 4: Instances of stigmatizing behavior or disparagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Films</th>
<th>Stigmatizing terms/words</th>
<th>Terms/Words used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fight Club</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nutcase, crazy, psycho, freak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hereditary</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Idiot, crazy, crazy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Split</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Monstrous, unstable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primal Fear</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Crazy, psychopath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Scumbag, crazy, monster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hours</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Monster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret Window</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Crazy, crazy, nutjob, nut, nuts, weird</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While there were no terms of belittlement about Kevin in Glass, there was some stigmatizing behavior toward him in Split. Out of the eight films, there were 21 degrading words spoken by other characters toward/about the DID character or his or her alternate states. The most common word used to ridicule DID characters was “crazy,” which was mentioned seven times throughout all the films. While “monstrous” and “nutcase” were not words included in the study’s initial list of disparagement terms, they were still cataloged since they were variations of the terms “monster,” “nutjob,” and “nuts.”

In addition to the findings previously mentioned, it is worth noticing that, in half of the selected films, the DID character was completely overtaken by one of his or her extreme alternate identities. In Hereditary, Split, Identity, and Secret Window, the films conclude with one of the violent, aggressive alternate states obtaining absolute control over the character and forcing the original personality out.

V. Conclusion

This study sought to determine if dissociative identity disorder is accurately portrayed in modern films. Furthermore, this research attempted to identify the prevalence of negative DID stereotypes and misconceptions in these films. Based on the results of the content analysis, it is apparent that most of the misconceptions about mental illnesses and DID were portrayed in the majority of the selected films.

This content analysis showed that most of the characters met the DSM-5 criteria for DID. However, the characters from Hereditary and The Hours did not meet all of the requirements for a positive diagnosis of DID. Therefore, according to the DSM-5 criteria for DID, these movies did not accurately portray this mental illness.

While three-quarters of the selected films had a character who successfully met the DSM-5 criteria for DID, these movies commonly depicted exaggerated stereotypes and misconceptions about this disorder. Every film had scenes involving the DID character acting out violently or aggressively, and the majority of films included some kind of criminal behavior exhibited by the character with DID. Additionally, three-quarters of the characters had extreme alternate identities and were incompetent in some way, further indicating that these films inaccurately portrayed this disorder through the use of all four of these stereotypes.

Although characters’ incompetency was common in these films, there was a substantial difference between financial-related and treatment-related incompetency. If the film decided to show the character as inept, oftentimes it was displayed through their treatment of DID, rather than their finances. Therefore, financial incompetence was not a noteworthy stereotype displayed in these films. Furthermore, the misconception of DID being confused as schizophrenia was not prevalent in these films either. Only two films used words associated with schizophrenia and thus, this stereotype was not substantially significant in this content analysis.

Almost all of the films had some kind of stigmatizing behavior displayed from one character toward the DID character. This type of disparagement often was shown through name calling. Hence, the belittlement identified in this study’s findings is consistent with previous research about how film and television characters ridicule other mentally ill characters (Smith et al., 2019).
While most of the selected films are accurate in the criteria needed for a person to have dissociative identity disorder, the results from this study indicate that inaccurate, exaggerated stereotypes of mental illnesses are still common. The findings of this content analysis support the notion that films tend to portray mental illnesses negatively and that they stigmatize and condemn those suffering from DID (Diefenbach & West, 2007; Smith et al., 2019). Furthermore, they contribute to the misperception already present in public opinion that DID individuals are incompetent, violent criminals who have extreme alternate identities (Peisley, 2017; Parcesepe & Cabassa, 2013).

**Limitations and further research**

As mentioned in the findings, two of the selected films did not have any characters suffering from DID and thus, they were not particularly relevant to this study. Therefore, if this research was replicated in the future, it would be beneficial to conduct a more thorough search of DID films to ensure the characters present all symptoms of the disorder. Also, a larger sample of films could help provide more detailed results on trends and patterns in the portrayal of DID.

While this content analysis studied films over the last 25 years, there was no research completed about how stereotypes of DID may have changed over time. Therefore, a future avenue of research could be to investigate how DID and mental health misconceptions have changed over the years. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore any differences in the portrayal of this mental illness in films when DID was previously called multiple personality disorder.

**Acknowledgements**

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Framing of Online News Coverage of the Coronavirus in the United States

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

Abstract

In early 2020, the World Health Organization declared an international public health emergency due to the coronavirus outbreak. Due to the novelty and quick spread of the coronavirus, people turned to news outlets for information regarding the severity and suggested safety measures. This study analyzed themes in news coverage of COVID-19 in the United States using framing theory. The research studied the styles and changes in framing from January 1, 2020 to the United States’ declaration of a state of emergency on March 13, 2020. The content analysis included 90 online articles from The New York Times, Fox News and CNN, which are among the most popular news sources for Americans. The study concluded that coronavirus news coverage focused on reporting the number of cases and deaths, the economic impact, and the actions governments took to prevent its spread. This study suggests that early coverage of a pandemic is more focused on the facts and immediate effects of the disease rather than the individual and personal stories of people dealing with the pandemic.

I. Introduction

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an international public health emergency as a result of an outbreak of the novel coronavirus, also known as COVID-19 (CDC, 2020). The coronavirus causes a respiratory disease that results in symptoms similar to those of the flu. The epicenter of the initial COVID-19 outbreak was in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. Experts suspect the virus was spread from a live animal to a human in an exotic food market. Because of the new and fast-changing nature of the disease, the “complete medical picture” of the disease remains unknown. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), those most negatively affected by the disease are the elderly and those with pre-existing health problems.

The coronavirus quickly spread, leading the WHO to classify it as a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (Chappell, 2020). A pandemic is defined as an “epidemic that has spread over several countries and continents” (CDC, 2012). According to the CDC (2020), “pandemics happen when a new virus emerges to infect people and can spread between people sustainably.” The first case of the coronavirus in the United States was confirmed on January 21, 2020 in Washington state (Caryn Rabin, 2020). Following this announcement, the first death as a result of the disease was confirmed on February 29, when a 50-year-old man with underlying health issues died (Reuters, 2020).

Keywords: coronavirus, pandemic, news coverage, content analysis, framing theory
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Due to the novelty and quick spread of the coronavirus, people are turning to news outlets for information regarding the severity and suggested safety measures. This research will study how framing of U.S. news coverage about the coronavirus changed from its original outbreak in January 2020 — following the first reported case to the WHO of a “pneumonia of unknown cause” on December 31, 2019 — to the declaration of a state of emergency in the United States on March 13, 2020.

II. Literature Review

The framing of international events in the news has been subject to much research over the years. This literature review will examine studies surrounding the effect of framing in news coverage, the way international events are framed by the news media, and the framing of infectious diseases. There is little scholarship about the frames used by news organizations when discussing infectious disease outbreaks.

Framing theory in news

Researchers have conducted studies focusing on the way news events are covered, recognizing the effect news has on individuals’ perception of an event, a country, or a person. According to Brown and Barker (2006), people depend on the news to become informed about events, particularly international events, where audiences cannot acquire first-hand information from personal sources.

Framing is a way of organizing a story or idea in order to provide meaning to it in such a way that unfolding events have a connection to each other (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). As a result, frames are created when news organizations give prominence to an issue by choosing to cover it and by highlighting “a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The way a news organization covers an event is important because of its influence on the framing effect (Druckman, 2001). The framing effect occurs when media “suggest a particular meaning or interpretation of an issue” (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p. 20). Because of this, the way an event is framed will affect the way a population thinks of and sees not only the event but also the people involved in it.

Common frames of international events

The effect of framing theory in the news is particularly relevant when looking at international coverage. Researchers have conducted countless studies to analyze the way in which news organizations frame international events, conflicts, and stories. As noted above, the way a story is framed will influence the perceptions of the public on that story. Framing of international news stories creates “recognized and legitimized frames … that are a fundamental part of the social construction of reality” (Elena, 2016, p. 122).

Framing of international content often depends on the host nation of the news organization. In order to make a news story relevant and interesting to their audience, “journalists and news media package and present information in a way that is understandable and meaningful to the audience through framing” (Tanikawa, 2017, p. 115). This is particularly the case for international events because audiences need more context to understand the event.

One way journalists do this is through the use of a “culture link” or “culture peg.” Tanikawa (2017) defines a culture peg as a choice that provides “readers with cultural elements they can easily identify as something arising from that culture,” and a culture link as a story including “elements of the culture or person(s) from the reader’s home country” (p. 116). For example, when comparing how the Iraq War was covered in both the United States and Sweden, Brown and Barker (2006) found that, particularly in the United States, a focus on the country’s influence in the war was prominent in its coverage. However, stories focusing on Iraqi civilians dominated 11% of Swedish content and only 4.5% of American content. Similarly, when analyzing the way five countries framed the earthquake in Haiti, researchers found that news coverage “illustrated the involvement of the home country” rather than primarily depicting Haiti as “devastated and miserable” (Jia et al., 2011, p. 17).

Even though there are established news values for journalists, such as “timeliness, proximity, consequence for the audience, prominence, human interest, usualness, and conflict,” culture still influences the way in which these values are packaged in news stories (Brown & Barker, 2006, p. 10). Because of this,
focusing on cultural influences in news coverage can skew foreign news reporting (Tanikawa, 2017).

Not only does culture influence international coverage, but so do other factors including geographical distance, normative deviance of an event, relevance to the host country and potential social change. In terms of the way the earthquake in Haiti was framed, researchers found that “the further the distance between the two countries, the shorter the news coverage” (Jia et al., 2011, p. 13). Similarly, the influence of the host country in the event directly affected the coverage. The more financial aid a country gave to Haiti, the longer the news coverage and the more likely a story described “the suffering and pains of the earthquake victims, as well as to portray them as a stigmatized group marked with poverty, anxiety, shame, and isolation” (p. 15).

The political stance of a nation on an event can also influence the story’s framing. For example, the themes “Bush’s diplomatic failure” and “U.S. — Arrogant superpower” in the framing of the Iraq war appeared in Swedish media 4.2% of the time and in U.S. media 0.7% of the time (Brown & Barker, 2006). This is likely because of the political stance of the United States in the war and the overwhelming public support for it in the United States versus Sweden. Similarly, in a study on the framing of the fall of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, Martin Elena found that CNN over-represented the influence of the United States on the conflict. However, CNN was not entirely influenced by the United States’ government. After the United States’ government stopped using the term “coup” to refer to the event, CNN continued to use it in its reporting (2016).

Based on multiple research studies and analysis, it is clear that many factors influence the way an international news event is framed. Whether it is a culture link or the political influence of a host country on an international situation, comprehending the framing of a news story is key. Research shows that the way in which people perceive events, particularly international ones, are largely influenced by the media. Because of this, the framing of international events can skew public perceptions.

Coverage on international infectious disease outbreaks

While a multitude of studies have been conducted on the framing of international events such as political conflict, war, or natural disasters, the framing of health issues such as infectious diseases or pandemics is not as common. News reports on infectious diseases, pandemics, and epidemics are crucial as “media reports can play a significant role in the construction of public health issues” (Shih, Wijaya, & Brossard, 2009, p. 1). Health concerns, particularly with pandemics, are often accompanied by urgency and uncertainty of information. Because of this, individuals rely heavily on the news to receive information about infectious diseases (Lee, 2014).

As a result of the importance of news coverage on health issues, particularly relating to infectious diseases, analyzing the way in which these stories are framed is crucial. The influence news organizations have on the information that is disseminated in regard to epidemics and pandemics makes researching what the media cover a priority. In order to understand the way the public comprehends the risks, solutions, and severity of infectious diseases, the framing of these events needs to be understood.

In a study about the framing of mad cow disease, the West Nile virus, and the avian flu, researchers found two frames were predominantly used to cover all three infectious diseases. Based on prior research, it is known that journalists tend to focus on events rather than issues “when reporting on risk issues” for example, by reporting on the number of casualties (Shih, Wijaya, & Brossard, 2008, p. 143). The two most prominent frames in the coverage of these three infectious diseases were action and consequence. The action frame refers to the actions taken in regard to the disease, usually in reference to governmental decisions, and the consequence frame refers to coverage focusing on the number of deaths or the number of individuals infected. Not only were these the most prominent frames used, but the amount of coverage an infectious disease received was also largely influenced by the “number of infected cases and the type of governmental actions taken” (Shih, et. al, 2008, p. 156).

In addition to researching the framing of coverage on infectious diseases, Tsung-Jen Shih and Dominique Brossard (2009) conducted a separate study looking at the sourcing of these events. According to this study, the findings reflect an emphasis on “institutional and administrative sources when covering these public health issues” (Shih & Brossard, 2009, p. 16). Not only is the framing of the coverage based on action, but so are the sources. However, even though consequence is another prominent frame in the coverage of infectious diseases, according to the study, journalists do not source “people who were most affected” by
infectious diseases (p. 17). The focus on the number of cases and the government actions taken makes it so that stories about specific people who have been affected or the “human interest” side of the coverage is not as prevalent.

**Research Goals/Questions**

One of the most recent pandemic outbreaks internationally has been the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, outbreak. The epicenter of the outbreak was in Wuhan, Hubei Province in China and the first cases were detected in December (Cheung, 2020). The International Health Regulations Emergency Committee of the WHO declared COVID-19 an outbreak and a “public health emergency of international concern” on January 30, 2020 (CDC, 2020). COVID-19 has since been confirmed in all six of the WHO’s regions (CDC, 2020). As of May 5, 2020, more than 243,401 people have died as a result of the disease and 3,517,345 people have been infected (Cheung, 2020). According to the WHO, COVID-19 produces flu-like symptoms and 80% of those infected recover from the disease (WHO, 2020).

Because of the international and fast-spreading nature of COVID-19, news organizations have been a main driving force for disseminating information about the disease. Due to the novelty of COVID-19, no concrete research studies have been conducted to analyze the framing methods of news coverage of this specific illness. This research study will conduct a content analysis of the changing frames in coverage of COVID-19 from its detection to its eventual spread to the United States.

**RQ 1:** What were the main frames used in American news coverage of the coronavirus?

**RQ 2:** How did American news framing change from the coronavirus being an international versus national concern?

### III. Methods

This research study was conducted using a content analysis of online news articles about the coronavirus. According to the Pew Research Center (2019), a majority of adults in the United States get “at least some news online.” As a result, the content analysis focused on online news only. The outlets studied were CNN, Fox News, and *The New York Times*. According to a Digital News Report conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and the University of Oxford (2019), these outlets are among the top five most used online news sources in the United States.

The unit of analysis was an article including the headline; however, photos and captions were omitted from the coding. The time frame selected for the content analysis was between January 1, 2020 — which is when cases of the coronavirus in China began being reported in the United States — and March 13, 2020, when the United States declared a state of emergency. Using this time frame as a guide, the keyword “coronavirus” was used in the search engine of each outlet to select the articles that would be coded. In addition, the subtopics that were selected were “U.S.” and “International” news stories. Once the search was narrowed down, 30 articles were randomly selected from each outlet. Because of the overall number of articles, every fifth article from *The New York Times* and Fox was selected, and every seventh article for CNN was selected. A total of 90 articles were coded. It is notable that there were more articles from CNN about the coronavirus than from Fox or *The New York Times*. In addition, the volume of articles increased as the time frame did, meaning few articles were written in January, and as a result the majority of articles coded were written at the end of February and in March.

The study was conducted using an inductive qualitative coding method. This form of coding relies on the researcher creating categories as the content analysis is in progress. Rather than arranging content into predisposed categories, researchers form these categories throughout the analysis. The process of inductive qualitative coding often begins with an in-depth reading of the text. From here, the researcher identifies themes and categories apparent in the text and sorts the content into these categories. Unlike in most quantitative studies, not all text must be coded, and the same portions of text can fall under multiple themes when relying on inductive qualitative coding.

According to David Thomas (2003), this method of coding has three main benefits to it. First, it condenses a lot of text into a summary format. Second, it establishes links between the research objectives
and the findings, and finally, it helps develop a theory from the data. Each article was read, and themes were coded as they emerged from the text. A maximum of eight keywords in the article were coded for each story. As the coding continued, themes were sometimes repeated, and the same keyword was used. From there, the 17 most popular keywords were selected, and data was analyzed using those.

IV. Findings

This section describes the results from 90 articles about the coronavirus from The New York Times, Fox, and CNN spanning a time frame of January 1 to March 13, 2020. After coding all articles, the 17 themes shown in Table 1 were the most common throughout the three news organizations and across the time frame. Table 1 shows the distribution of themes across all 90 articles without dividing the results by news organization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government response (U.S.)</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government response (Intl.)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SARS/MERS/Ebola</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare system/Lack of supplies</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarantine/Lockdown</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel/Planes/Cruises</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public health emergency</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xenophobia/Racism</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing/Vaccine</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic impact</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal effect/Specific cases</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little threat</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases &amp; deaths</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results on Table 1 show that the distribution between stories focusing on the virus internationally versus in the United States were fairly similar, 56% of stories included a focus on the virus internationally, and 48% focused on the virus nationally. It is important to note that some articles discussed both the United States and other countries prominently which is why the numbers do not add up to 100%. The content analysis also showed that 19% of the articles focused on China as a main theme.

In addition to the region of the world, there were two main themes that were coded across the time frame and outlets. The main theme displayed in 78% of the articles was the number of cases and deaths of the disease. This included overall global numbers as well as the number of cases in particular countries, states or cities. The next most prevalent theme was a discussion about governmental responses to the virus. Mentions of both international and national responses to the virus by government were combined, and a total of 53% of the articles included this theme.

Among the other themes, specific cases or stories about individuals in particular were only found in 20% of the articles. Discussions about quarantines and lockdowns as well as the canceling of events was...
seen in 50% of the articles. Only 6% of articles mentioned cases of xenophobia and racism as a result of
the virus. Similarly, 6% of articles described only a “little threat” relating to the virus and only 8% of articles
characterized it as a public health emergency.

Table 2: Results of theme analysis by news outlet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>The New York Times</th>
<th>Fox</th>
<th>CNN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>10 33%</td>
<td>20 67%</td>
<td>20 67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>19 63%</td>
<td>13 43%</td>
<td>11 37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>4 13%</td>
<td>4 13%</td>
<td>9 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government response (U.S.)</td>
<td>10 33%</td>
<td>6 20%</td>
<td>6 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government response (Intl.)</td>
<td>4 13%</td>
<td>9 30%</td>
<td>13 43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SARS/MERS/Ebola</td>
<td>5 17%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
<td>7 23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare system/Lack of supplies</td>
<td>16 53%</td>
<td>5 17%</td>
<td>9 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarantine/Lockdown</td>
<td>9 30%</td>
<td>14 47%</td>
<td>22 73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel/Planes/Cruises</td>
<td>13 43%</td>
<td>9 30%</td>
<td>17 57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public health emergency</td>
<td>5 17%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
<td>2 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xenophobia/Racism</td>
<td>1 3%</td>
<td>1 3%</td>
<td>3 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing/Vaccine</td>
<td>8 27%</td>
<td>3 10%</td>
<td>7 23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic impact</td>
<td>6 20%</td>
<td>3 10%</td>
<td>2 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal effect/Specific cases</td>
<td>9 30%</td>
<td>2 7%</td>
<td>7 23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>2 7%</td>
<td>8 27%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little threat</td>
<td>2 7%</td>
<td>3 10%</td>
<td>0 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases &amp; deaths</td>
<td>24 80%</td>
<td>22 73%</td>
<td>24 80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results in Table 2 show the distribution of themes by news organization. The most prevalent
theme was the number of cases and deaths, mentioned by The New York Times and CNN in 80% of each
outlet’s articles, with Fox including it in 73% of its articles. Mentions of government responses were also
prevalent in all three news outlets, with CNN mentioning the theme in 63% of articles, Fox 50% and The New
York Times 46%. The distribution of articles focusing on a specific case or person’s story was more varied.
Only two articles, 7%, followed this theme for Fox while The New York Times had 30% and CNN had 17%.
CNN also discussed xenophobia and racism in three articles while the other two outlets only did so in one
article.

The characterization of the disease across the different news outlets also varied. The coronavirus
was described as a public health emergency in 17% of The New York Times articles and 7% of CNN articles,
while Fox did not characterize it as such in any of the articles analyzed. However, Fox characterized the virus
as being only a small threat in 10% of the articles, The New York Times did so in 7% of articles, while CNN
never described it in that manner.

Another differentiation among the news organizations was the emphasis on articles about the United
States versus other countries. The New York Times focused mainly on the United States with 63% of articles. However, CNN had 67% of articles discuss international angles, with 37% being about the United States. Similarly, for Fox the distribution was 67% of articles about international topics and 43% about the United States. While both CNN and Fox had the same number of articles discussing international themes, CNN focused on China in 30% of all articles, while Fox, and The New York Times only mentioned the country in 13% of articles.

An analysis of the shift in themes across the time frame of January 1, 2020 to March 13, 2020
was also conducted. As mentioned in the methodology section, the distribution of articles from each news
organization during the three months varied. Two articles written in January, 16 in February, and 12 in March
were analyzed for The New York Times, while the Fox sample had one article in January, four in February
and 25 in March. Finally, CNN’s sample had four articles in January, 16 in February and 10 in March. This variation was taken into account when looking at the distribution and changes in the most common themes based on the month and the outlet.

The main shift occurred in the distribution between the international and the U.S. theme. For both The New York Times and CNN, as the months progressed the volume of articles written about the United States increased. However, for Fox, while most of the articles analyzed were written in March, there were more international stories than U.S. stories overall. Another important key theme that became more prominent as the months progressed was coverage about a particular case or person. For both The New York Times and Fox the majority of personal stories were told in March. However, for CNN this number was greatest in February when six of the 16 articles analyzed focused on a specific case.

V. Discussion

The study aimed to understand the way U.S. news coverage of the coronavirus pandemic shifted. In order to better analyze the results of the content analysis of 90 articles from three different news outlets, previous studies on the news coverage of epidemics and pandemics will be used as a point of comparison.

As discussed in the literature review, journalists covering infectious diseases tend to “concentrate their attention on substantive aspects of epidemic hazards” (Shih, Wijaya, & Brossard, 2008). In this study, the dominant frames in the coverage of the epidemics were action and consequence. Action refers to news coverage focusing on actions taken to prevent the spread of the disease, and consequence refers to the economic impact of the disease as well as the number of cases and deaths.

Similar to the results found in the aforementioned study, and in response to RQ1, the main themes in the coverage of the coronavirus were also under the consequence and action frames. The consequence frame was the most prevalent across the three news outlets and over the period of time. In looking at the results of the content analysis, 78% of articles discussed the number of cases and deaths, 12% discussed the negative economic impacts resulting from the pandemic and 33% mentioned the consequences on the healthcare system and a lack of supplies. The emphasis on the consequence frame shows that coverage of the coronavirus is focused on the overarching effects of the disease on society as opposed to the disease itself and the ways it affects individuals. This can be attributed to individuals seeking out news content about infectious diseases to learn about the decisions their governments are making to combat the spread of the disease.

Of the 17 themes that were most prevalent across all articles, four focused largely on the action frame. Discussions about governmental actions to combat the coronavirus, including enacting quarantines and lockdowns as well as increasing testing and working to develop a vaccine, were included in many of the articles analyzed. More than half the articles addressed actions governments around the world were taking in response to the coronavirus, including quarantines, lockdowns and the canceling of gatherings and events.

Past research also discusses the media’s tendency to focus on events as opposed to issues in reporting on diseases. This study found this was also the case in the coverage of the coronavirus. Only 18% of articles focused on personal stories and particular cases. Instead, articles tended to focus on governmental responses, actions taken to prevent the spread of the virus, and the overall number of cases and deaths. In a time of crisis, it is likely that audiences are seeking for information to help them combat the crisis as opposed to stories about particular people.

There are a few important notes in terms of the articles focusing on individual stories. The New York Times had the most stories about particular cases with nine out of the 30 articles analyzed. Of those nine, six of the articles were about people in the United States, and seven of those articles were written in March when the number of cases in the United States began to increase. In CNN’s case, five articles focused on individual stories, but only two of the five focused on Americans while the other three were about individuals internationally. Fox only had two articles focusing on particular people, who both were American. While the research did not focus on this topic, it should be noted that many of Fox’s articles were taken from The Associated Press, as opposed to original reporting, which could influence the lower number in individual issue stories.
With regard to the two research questions posed at the beginning of the study, there were shifts in framing from the original outbreak of the coronavirus to the declaration of a state of emergency in the United States. However, the main frames and themes remained consistent throughout the coverage of the disease and across the three news outlets analyzed. The first shift that was immediately apparent was the volume of articles and the country the articles focused on. As can be expected, because the three news outlets are based in the United States, the volume of coverage on the coronavirus increased as the virus became more of a risk to Americans. In addition, the articles began focusing on international issues and became more U.S.-centric as the declaration of a state of emergency approached. The majority of the articles focusing on countries internationally discussed the coronavirus in Asia and Europe. However, while Fox had a large volume of stories with international themes – 67% falling under this category – many of the organization’s stories focused on countries in the Middle East, particularly Iran. Most of these stories discussed religious events being canceled. This was different from what the other two news organizations covered in terms of international stories.

A focus on the virus’s consequences and governmental actions remained relatively consistent throughout the coverage, but stories about particular issues became more common as the virus entered the United States. This is consistent with previous studies focusing on news coverage of international events. Often, the host nation frames international stories in a way that makes them relevant or interesting to the audience. Because of this, international stories discussed the number of deaths of Americans in those nations, or specific cases about Americans.

Another shift in the coverage of the coronavirus was mentions of previous viruses and epidemics. At the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak there were more mentions of infectious diseases like SARS and MERS, but as the outbreak progressed, comparisons to other diseases became less common. In total, 13% of the articles analyzed mentioned SARS, MERS, or Ebola. This decline in mentions of other diseases as the outbreak progressed is not unexpected. As knowledge of the coronavirus grew and governments began taking action, comparison to previous epidemics became less relevant.

V. Conclusion

This study sought to analyze the framing and themes of news coverage of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States. A content analysis of 90 articles showed that the framing of the coronavirus was similar to those in previous studies of infectious disease epidemics. The two main frames focused on consequence and action. News organizations often focus on reporting the number of cases and deaths, economic impact, and actions governments take to prevent the spread of the disease. In accordance with the previous research, articles focusing on an individual story or case were less prevalent than those discussing the coronavirus from a broader perspective. In terms of changes over the time frame, more personal stories were written as the virus spread in the United States, while mentions of other infectious diseases as a point of comparison became less common as time went on.

The major limitation to this study comes from the ever-changing nature of the coronavirus. Because the pandemic was ongoing when the study was conducted, and there was a lot of uncertainty surrounding knowledge of the virus and ways of preventing its spread, news articles were constantly being written and updated. Ideally, a similar study could be replicated once the pandemic ends in order to gain a more accurate representation of the news framing of the disease. A larger base of content to analyze over a longer period of time would yield a more complete understanding of the themes used by news organizations when reporting on the disease.

This research lays a foundation for following studies to be conducted surrounding news coverage of this pandemic. Future research could compare the difference in coverage of the coronavirus across different nations or could analyze framing of the coronavirus with other infectious disease epidemics or pandemics in history.
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