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The Purpose and Relevance of Communication Scholarship in Times of Uncertainty

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The latest issue of the *Utah Journal of Communication* demonstrates the wide variety of issues Communication scholars are grappling with in our rapidly changing social environment.

Unfortunately, there are those in private industry and public institutions at the state and federal levels who are threatened by rigorous academic inquiry and find it, at best, inconvenient, and at worst, dangerous to their economic and political agendas. The defunding of critical research grants, the firing of world-class researchers, and the mandatory elimination of entire academic programs throughout the country and in Utah, with the passage of H.B. 265, have thrown the world of higher education and scholarly research into turmoil.

In this time of uncertainty, data aversion, and "alternative facts," producing quality research is vital to the health of democracy. It combats the cacophony of misinformation and disinformation and provides evidence-based arguments for good-faith actors to debate the issues facing our communities, nation, and world. Communication experts are particularly qualified to identify practical and relevant phenomena that can elevate good-faith debate because the study of Communication is not merely academic, but is deeply practical. Importantly, simply producing high-quality research is not enough. The knowledge created through research must be disseminated so that other scholars, students, teachers, and the general public can access and learn from it. For this reason, outlets like the *Utah Journal of Communication* are essential to disseminating evidentiary knowledge.

The upheaval in higher education poses many risks, dangers, and divisions, but also provides opportunities for greater shared understanding, coordination, and growth. Communication scholars can do much to accomplish these positive outcomes. Communication has become the currency of the modern world for good and evil. Through communication, fortunes are made and lost, wars are started and ended, and relationships are built and destroyed. Because of the tremendous creative and destructive power of communication, the study of Communication as a systematic way of understanding a social world of information saturation, political polarization, artificial intelligence, and media fragmentation is more critical now than ever.

From personal interactions to global diplomacy, the contributions of the *Utah Journal of Communication* articles shine a light on the dynamic and pivotal role Communication plays in our lives. Topics addressed in this issue, such as public health, education, technology development, organizational impression management, sports, and politics, touch the lives of nearly every person and carry significant implications for individuals' health, wealth, and happiness. The *Utah Journal of Communication* is a platform for emerging and established researchers to explore such issues. This issue offers thoughtful, well-researched, and timely contributions that encourage us to pause and reflect on how we engage with others, tell our stories, and shape our world through words and symbols.

As you read the articles in this issue, I encourage you to consider the broader implications of their findings. How might they inform your teaching, research, professional practice, or everyday conversations? Communication is not a peripheral concern but the medium through which society is constructed and maintained.

I want to thank the authors, reviewers, and editorial team whose work made this issue possible. Their dedication to thoughtful scholarship and commitment to advancing our understanding of Communication give this journal its continued strength and relevance.

– Dr. Michael K. Ault

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iGrieve: Re-Examining Public Mourning Over the Death of Steve Jobs

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Abstract
This study explores how social media transformed public mourning and eulogistic practices after the death of Apple CEO Steve Jobs in October 2011. While global tributes from leaders and media highlighted his legacy, social media uniquely enabled spontaneous, collective expressions of grief, admiration, and identification from ordinary users. Using concepts of parasocial interaction and hyperpersonal communication, the research reveals how brief, user-generated posts coalesced into a communal eulogy-like narrative, incorporating classical rhetorical strategies such as praise, emotional disclosure, references to the afterlife, and maintenance of interactive bonds. Applying Kunkel and Dennis' (2003) eulogy framework, the study finds that these elements were reinterpreted in a digital context, democratizing participation and expanding the spatial and temporal boundaries of mourning. Social media allowed individuals worldwide to share personal feelings, redefine traditional eulogistic roles, and contribute to collective memory. Despite diminished emphasis on personal credibility or direct acquaintance, the essential purpose of eulogies—offering solace, preserving memory, and fostering communal identity—remained intact. The findings underscore the resilience of epideictic rhetoric as it adapts to interactive, user-driven platforms, illustrating how digital technologies reshape conventional mourning practices and create enduring archives of communal grief and admiration.
Keywords: Social Media Mourning, Parasocial Interaction, Digital Eulogies, Collective Memory, Epideictic Rhetoric, Hyperpersonal Communication

The death of Apple CEO Steve Jobs on October 5, 2011, illustrates how social media has become a central space for public mourning and collective remembrance. While traditional media and world leaders offered tributes, it was social media platforms—particularly Facebook and Twitter—that gave rise to widespread, personalized expressions of grief. These digital platforms enabled spontaneous, global participation in mourning rituals once limited to physical gatherings, reflecting a shift in how grief is experienced and shared in the digital age. Social media fosters parasocial relationships, where individuals feel personally connected to public figures despite no direct interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956). When a celebrity dies, users often express authentic sorrow and share memories online, co-constructing brief messages that resemble eulogies. In doing so, they form virtual communities of mourners, creating a shared narrative across cultural and national boundaries.

Steve Jobs' death exemplifies these dynamics. Celebrated as a visionary who transformed personal computing, music, mobile technology, and media consumption, Jobs became a symbol of innovation and identity. His legacy, tightly woven with Apple's products and branding, made him a parasocial figure in the lives of millions. As tributes from public figures like Bill Gates circulated, ordinary users joined the collective grieving process, turning social media into a space for participatory eulogizing.

Jobs' journey—from Apple's founding in 1976 to his return in 1996 and the subsequent release of the iPod, iPhone, and iPad—positioned him as both a tech icon and cultural figure. His death marked the end of an era and prompted a surge of online mourning that blended emotional disclosure with public memory.

This study analyzes these digital expressions of grief, exploring how online tributes both reflect and reshape traditional eulogistic rhetoric. By examining Facebook comments following Jobs' death, this research reveals how classical rhetorical strategies persist in new media environments, offering insight into the evolving nature of communal mourning and collective memory in the digital age.

Literature Review

This literature review explores how traditional rhetorical concepts, particularly epideictic rhetoric, inform our understanding of eulogies as communal responses to loss. It considers the evolution of eulogistic practices from classical orations to modern, media-saturated contexts, highlighting how collective memory and parasocial interactions shape online mourning rituals. By examining these theoretical frameworks and their interplay with hyperpersonal communication, this review provides insight into the ways communities grieve, remember, and transform their identities in digital environments.

Epideictic Rhetoric & Eulogy

Epideictic rhetoric, one of Aristotle's three rhetorical genres, emphasizes praise and shared values rather than persuasion (Aristotle, trans. McKeon, 1941). It serves a civic role by reinforcing communal identity and affirming collective ethos (Danisch, 2006; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969), uniting communities through the celebration of ideals (Vickers, 1988; Ochs, 1993). Common in ceremonial discourse—such as commencement speeches, public apologies, and media texts—epideictic rhetoric fosters cohesion during pivotal moments (Burke, 1951; Blakely, 2011; Villadsen, 2008; Vivian, 2006).

Eulogies exemplify epideictic rhetoric's communal function. Traditionally influenced by Greek and Roman customs that praised virtue and deeds (Aristotle, trans. McKeon, 1941; Ziolkowski, 1981), eulogies have evolved to address emotional and spiritual needs, affirming the deceased's value and helping communities reorient after loss (Jamieson, 1978; Jamieson & Campbell, 1982; Kent, 2007; Peterson, 1983; Ochs, 1993; Kunkel & Dennis, 2003).

The emergence of mass media expanded eulogistic expression into public spheres. Radio and television introduced "intimacy at a distance," allowing collective grieving for figures like Princess Diana or Ronald Reagan (Horton & Wohl, 1965; Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Goldzwig & Sullivan, 1995; Montgomery, 1999).

Digital platforms further transform these practices. Social media accelerates and democratizes mourning, allowing personal grief to blend with public commemoration in real time. Virtual memorials retain traditional eulogistic functions—such as offering comfort and preserving memory—while enabling broader participation (Roberts & Vidal, 2000; de Vries & Rutherford, 2004; Sanderson & Cheong, 2007).

Despite changing technologies, the core principles of epideictic rhetoric remain intact. Whether expressed in ancient or digital forums, eulogies continue to guide communal reflection, foster unity, and help individuals and societies find meaning in shared experiences of loss.

Collective Memory

Bereavement unfolds within the framework of collective memory, where eulogistic rhetoric helps shape how communities remember the deceased (Weiss, 1997). Collective memory emerges through shared stories, traditions, and images that connect past and present, fostering communal identity (Hudson, 2012). The Internet amplifies these narratives, transcending geographic boundaries and democratizing access to mourning practices (Halbwachs, 1995).

Cultural identity is reinforced through commemorative spaces like memorials and museums (Brown, 2009; Dickinson, 1997; Prosise, 1998; Wilson, 2005). However, these sites also mediate memory, often privileging dominant narratives while marginalizing others (Brown, 2010; Dickinson et al., 2005). Concepts such as counter-memory (Brown, 2010) and vernacular memorials (Lewis & Fraser, 1996), like the AIDS Memorial Quilt, offer alternative representations and challenge institutionalized accounts of history.

Social media accelerates and personalizes these memory-making processes. The shift from static Web 1.0 to interactive Web 2.0 enables users to shape memory as both content producers and consumers, fostering dynamic, real-time participation (Hudson, 2012). While some critique social media for commercializing memory (Garde-Hansen, 2009), others view it as an evolving archive of personal and communal history (Zimmermann, 2009).

This digital transformation also intensifies parasocial relationships—one-sided emotional bonds between audiences and public figures (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These connections are deepened online through direct interaction and immediacy, collapsing perceived distance (Giles, 2002; Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). Upon a public figure's death, parasocial grief manifests in online mourning, shaping communal narratives through user-generated eulogies (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010).

The convergence of collective memory, parasocial interaction, and eulogistic rhetoric within social media provides key insight into evolving mourning rituals. While digital mourning research is still emerging, these intersections reveal how technology reshapes commemoration, identity, and shared emotional experience in contemporary culture.

Parasocial Interaction & Social Media

Parasocial interaction (PSI) describes the one-sided relationships that audiences form with media figures, who are largely unaware of individual viewers (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Initially observed in early radio and television, PSI is marked by a perceived sense of familiarity and interpersonal closeness. Though asymmetrical, these relationships often evoke emotional responses comparable to face-to-face connections (Giles, 2002). Early PSI research focused on television personalities and characters, identifying audience motivations such as admiration, idolization, and even romantic attraction (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Stever, 2009). Viewers developed parasocial bonds with newscasters, soap opera characters, and athletes (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Rubin et al., 1985; Kassing & Sanderson, 2009), with evidence showing children and adolescents are also especially susceptible (Hoffner, 1996).

Though one-sided, PSI can result in real-world consequences. Audiences identify with media figures through shared interests or psychological engagement, often empathizing deeply with their dilemmas (Burke, 1950; Cohan, 2003). This can lead to imitation or modeling behaviors, as fans adopt the attitudes, values, or habits of their parasocial partners (Cohan & Perse, 2003; Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). These relationships may influence purchasing habits, health decisions, and broader behavioral patterns.

Before the advent of the Internet, PSI was largely passive. Fan engagement occurred through controlled channels like letters or fan events, offering limited opportunities for direct interaction. The rise of the Internet transformed this dynamic. Social media allows fans to comment, respond, and engage directly with content, creating the illusion of mutual connection and intensifying relational closeness (Brown et al., 2003).

Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram support collaborative, user-driven dialogue—what Chandler and Munday (2016) call a "virtual meeting place." These spaces allow fans to form "imagined communities" (Williams, 2007), where shared admiration fosters communal bonds. While PSI was once studied mainly in journalism and marketing (Lazaroiu, 2011; Verdegem, 2011), scholars now recognize social media's role in reshaping the depth and immediacy of these connections (Klimmt et al., 2007).

Crucially, PSI now extends beyond traditional celebrities. Online content creators and business leaders can accrue devoted followers. Steve Jobs, for example, became a parasocial figure for millions through his public persona, brand vision, and product influence. After his death, social media facilitated an outpouring of admiration and mourning, demonstrating how digital environments host parasocial expressions of grief.

The death of a parasocial partner has become a growing area of research. Sanderson and Cheong (2010) analyzed social media reactions to Michael Jackson's death, finding that platforms helped fans process loss, validate emotions, and build communal grieving spaces. These online memorials parallel traditional practices like shrines or grave visits, but offer global accessibility and digital permanence. Social media enables fans to post condolences, share stories, and even message the deceased's account. These messages often function as digital eulogies, mirroring epideictic rhetoric's role in praising the deceased and reaffirming community values (Aristotle, trans. McKeon, 1941; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). Eulogies, as a subset of this rhetorical genre, traditionally help communities acknowledge loss, celebrate virtues, and restore collective cohesion (Jamieson, 1978; Jamieson & Campbell, 1982).

As media technologies evolve, so do commemorative practices. Online tributes blend classical rhetorical forms with modern connectivity, allowing widespread, asynchronous participation. Once curated through newspapers or broadcast memorials, today's mourning is fragmented, spontaneous, and participatory—yet still rooted in the desire to honor and remember.

Parasocial connections also shape how communities mourn. When a public figure dies, fans often articulate their grief through social media, using praise, storytelling, and symbolic references to form a communal eulogy. These tributes help mourners affirm their identification with the deceased and with one another, constructing a shared narrative of loss and meaning. In Jobs' case, messages praised his innovation, mourned his absence, and reflected on his influence on users' identities and lifestyles. Scholarship on digital mourning is still emerging, yet the intersection of PSI, epideictic rhetoric, and collective memory offers rich insight. Social media platforms function as living archives where users continuously contribute to memorial narratives. Through comments, hashtags, and digital artifacts, individuals and communities co-create lasting, accessible tributes.

Ultimately, PSI is no longer confined to entertainment or marketing spheres. It now plays a central role in how individuals grieve, build identity, and preserve memory in online environments. As users mourn parasocial figures, they enact familiar rhetorical functions in new digital spaces—blurring lines between personal loss and public commemoration.

Hyperpersonal Communication

Hyperpersonal communication refers to the phenomenon where computer-mediated communication (CMC) generates more intimate and intense relationships than face-to-face (FtF) interactions (Walther, 1996). This occurs through selective self-presentation, asynchronous messaging, and idealization of the communication partner. The lack of visual cues allows users to ask deeper questions earlier and refine their messages, creating idealized impressions and strengthening perceived closeness (Walther, 1996).

Social media platforms intensify these effects by enabling constant surveillance and interaction. Users can monitor posts, comments, and updates in real time, blurring the line between private and public life (Trottier, 2012). Smartphones and other mobile devices facilitate continuous access, fostering a sense of perpetual connectivity that enhances feelings of intimacy (Turkle, 2008). These environments often magnify similarities, minimize differences, and create perceptions of stability and emotional depth.

Although initially focused on interpersonal relationships, the hyperpersonal model also applies to celebrity-fan dynamics (Taylor & Barton, 2011). While hyperpersonal communication typically involves two-way interaction, fans may feel connected to celebrities through carefully curated content on social media. This one-sided intimacy, built on idealized and selective portrayals, fosters deep identification even in the absence of direct engagement.

Fans interpret social media posts as authentic glimpses into celebrities' lives, strengthening emotional bonds. The immediacy and frequency of content updates sustain a sense of closeness, reinforcing the illusion of personal connection. Though parasocial in nature, these interactions often mirror hyperpersonal dynamics.

As digital communication continues to evolve, hyperpersonal effects are likely to shape how individuals understand connection and intimacy—not only in private relationships but also in public interactions with media figures. The convergence of CMC, parasocial interaction, and hyperpersonal dynamics highlights the growing emotional significance of online relationships in contemporary culture.

Research Questions

Parasocial interaction and hyperpersonal communication offer compelling frameworks for understanding how social media has transformed the public's expression of grief, particularly through online eulogies. The widespread admiration for Steve Jobs, the almost cult-like devotion of his followers, and his direct association with the very technologies used to express mourning present a uniquely rich setting for exploring this phenomenon. Accordingly, the following research questions guide this inquiry:

RQ1: How, and to what extent, do online posts expressing grief over Steve Jobs' death reflect traditional elements of the eulogy?
RQ2: What new eulogistic themes or categories emerge in online posts that differ from traditional eulogy forms?

Method

This study employs rhetorical analysis to examine how Facebook users expressed grief following the death of Steve Jobs and how these expressions reflect traditional eulogistic structures adapted for digital platforms. Unlike surveys or experimental designs common in parasocial interaction research (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000), rhetorical analysis allows for interpretation of organic discourse and identification of patterns that reveal how online mourning contributes to collective memory.

Given the breadth of content surrounding Jobs' death, the study focused exclusively on social media platforms—specifically Facebook—rather than traditional news outlets, which tend to reflect curated or professional commentary. Facebook was chosen for its global user base, diverse demographics, and "timeline" structure, which made retrieving historical posts more feasible (Facebook, 2011). Although Twitter featured extensive reactions, archival limitations precluded its use.

Data collection centered on Facebook comments posted during the two weeks following Jobs' death in October 2011. From October 5–11, researchers analyzed 50 comments per day. From October 12–18, all relevant comments were included as post volume declined. While the sample is not exhaustive, it is representative and manageable for identifying rhetorical trends. Following Walther's (2007) guidance, all content was treated as publicly accessible communication.

Kunkel and Dennis' (2003) Integrative Framework for eulogies guided the analysis. The framework includes seven categories: (1) establishing credibility, (2) praising the deceased, (3) self-disclosing emotion, (4) problem-focused coping, (5) emotion-focused coping (e.g., references to the afterlife or a well-lived life), (6) affirming vivid past relationships (e.g., personal insights, acknowledgment of flaws), and (7) continuing interactive bonds (e.g., direct address, present-tense references).

Coding was conducted independently by the primary researcher and a research assistant. Facebook comments—often informal and brief, using emoticons, SMS abbreviations, and nonstandard grammar—required interpretive judgment. Many posts combined multiple rhetorical strategies (e.g., praise and emotional disclosure). After multiple reviews, the team reached consensus, ensuring consistency and reliability in coding.

To contextualize digital responses, traditional eulogies served as interpretive benchmarks. For instance, establishing credibility—a feature of formal eulogies like Earl Spencer's (1997) address for Princess Diana—was rare among Facebook users, who typically lacked direct ties to Jobs. However, praise, emotional expression, and coping strategies were widely observed and paralleled rhetorical moves found in conventional oratory (e.g., Simpson's [2011] eulogy for Jobs or Thatcher's [2004] remarks for Reagan).

This analysis reveals that digital mourners adopted traditional eulogistic structures while reshaping them to suit social media's affordances. The findings underscore how classical rhetorical forms persist—even in fragmented, user-generated content—and how digital mourning continues to fulfill longstanding human needs for remembrance, solace, and communal identity.

Results

A total of 506 Facebook comments posted during the two weeks following Steve Jobs' death were analyzed. These posts were typically brief, informal, and featured a mixture of texting and social media language, as well as non-standard grammar and punctuation. Despite this informality, the comments generally align with Kunkel and Dennis' (2003) integrative framework categories for eulogies. Each category is illustrated below with representative examples. Dates follow each quote to indicate when it was posted.

Continuation of Interactive Bonds: Addressing the Deceased

Addressing the deceased directly was the most prevalent strategy observed. Users frequently spoke to Jobs as if he could hear them, often overlapping with other categories. For example, they praised him ("you are a legend" [Oct. 5]; "you are genius" [Oct. 11]) or disclosed personal emotions ("steve jobs we miss u too much" [Oct. 13]). They shared intentions ("R.I.P im gonna buy the iphone 4s in memory L" [Oct. 12]) and referenced his afterlife ("I wish Lord Buddha keep you well!" [Oct. 14]). Some expressed appreciation for time spent in his era ("I'm so glad I once lived in this era with you" [Oct. 6]) and thanked him for his contributions ("thanks steve…thanks for the talent that you shared" [Oct. 16]). They also spoke intimately, using terms like "my friend" (Oct. 7) or "i love you from my heart" (Oct. 9).

"RIP" or "rest in peace" appeared frequently. Though originally referencing the afterlife, here it often functioned as a phatic expression signaling respect and farewell. The abundance of "RIP" and other direct addresses suggests the online environment fosters a sense of ongoing connection, preserving the deceased's virtual presence and enabling mourners to speak as if Jobs were still accessible.

Self-Disclosure of Emotion

Self-disclosure of emotion was also common, revealing a wide range of grief expressions. Users conveyed sadness through punctuation, capitalization, emoticons, and texting slang: "RIP Steve…!!!" (Oct. 5), "OMG R.I.P. L" (Oct. 5), "im crying .. LLLLL .." (Oct. 6), and "Sad :s" (Oct. 7). Many incorporated Apple's distinctive branding, placing a lowercase "i" before words to show personal loss: "iMiss u" (Oct. 5), "iSad" (Oct. 6).

Disbelief was also evident: "I don't believe his death…… :((((((((((" (Oct. 5); "wahhht? L, how he die?" (Oct. 5). Some expressed personal closeness ("we will miss u" [Oct. 5]) or deep admiration ("My Brother Forever…" [Oct. 14]; "i love you for ever" [Oct. 8]). Others offered lengthy, heartfelt tributes describing their emotional state, such as one person who struggled to accept the loss and wept continuously after hearing the news (Oct. 6).

Some tied their emotions to Apple's future, revealing anxiety about life without Jobs' guidance: "watz gonna happen nw wid launch of iphone 5…?" (Oct. 8) and "am worry that the new CEO of APPLE will let JOBS down!!" (Oct. 16). Typically, these emotional disclosures underscored how personally invested people felt in Jobs' work and his significance in their lives.

Praise for the Deceased

Praise was another central strategy. Many users offered simple accolades: "Legend" (Oct. 5), "A genius. A visionary" (Oct. 6), "god" (Oct. 11), "once king, always king." (Oct. 8). Others were more detailed: "1997 – The King of Rock 'n' roll Elvis Presley, 2009 – The King of Pop Michael Jackson, 2011 – The King of Technology Steve Jobs" (Oct. 6).

Some comments referenced how Jobs' life and innovations affected the commenter personally: "you changed the world, included me" (Oct. 8); "my god . my hero . my ironman" (Oct. 10). Others linked praise to Apple products: "He was a mentor, an inventor, wanted to change the world and he succeeded" (Oct. 6). This theme demonstrates that users readily praised Jobs' character, accomplishments, and the global influence of his work.

Positive Reappraisal: Appreciation of Lessons and Traits Learned from the Deceased

Users sometimes acknowledged lessons learned from Jobs. Comments included: "He tells us how to be creative as a human being" (Oct. 5), "A real monthor [mentor] on how to get things done and never give up" (Oct. 6). Many connected these lessons to Apple's products and Jobs' work ethic, often blending appreciation for his traits with praise for his innovations.

This category expanded to include expressing gratitude for Apple products—an extension of "lessons learned" to encompass what Jobs had taught the world technologically. "you made the best technology ive used" (Oct. 5), "I luv all ur gadgetS Stevie...they were crafted to perfection.." (Oct. 9). Users coined words like "iSad" and "iMiss" to identify with Apple's brand, showing how closely they linked Jobs' legacy with their own experiences. Thanking Jobs frequently emerged: "Thanks for everything!" (Oct. 6). Through these tributes, users indicated that Jobs' lessons, embodied in Apple products, had enriched their lives.

Positive Reappraisal: Appreciation of the Deceased's Good Life

While less common than other strategies, some users emphasized that Jobs lived a remarkable, fulfilling life. "What an amazing life and legacy" (Oct. 7), "My respect to the man who dare to think different" (Oct. 7). Others noted his worldwide impact: "He is an example for those who are not afraid to pursue their dreams" (Oct. 15), "Steve jobs was the most heroic and selfless human being who has ever walked this earth" (Oct. 18). Such comments show that users perceived Jobs' life as meaningful and inspiring, encouraging a perspective that focused not solely on loss but also on achievements and enduring influence.

Affirmation of Past Relationships: Revelation of Private Insights and Unique Relationships

This category was rarely used, but when it occurred, commenters hinted at personal or emotional closeness: "he rescued me 4m bordm n stress by rockn ma world wt hc invent i lv hm" (Oct. 5), "I feel the pain of your family as your departure was due to the 'cinderella cancer' which my mother died from" (Oct. 6).

Some people framed Jobs as a personal influence or even friend: "you changed my life...my great inventor" (Oct. 6), "Rest in paradise my friend!" (Oct. 7), "you were my inspiration;(" (Oct. 8). Another comment described discovering Jobs and being profoundly changed by his words, though never knowing him personally (Oct. 11). These rare but intimate acknowledgments illustrate that some users felt a bond akin to a personal relationship, reinforcing the parasocial nature of these mourning practices.

Positive Reappraisal: Reference to the Afterlife

Though not widely employed, some commenters referenced the afterlife. Often it was broad: "take a bite out of the big apple in the sky" (Oct. 6), "Heaven will enjoy his company..." (Oct. 7), "i wonder if they have ipods in heaven" (Oct. 11). Others introduced religion: "May Allah have mercy on his soul" (Oct. 10), "I wish Lord Buddha keep you well..." (Oct. 14).

While many "RIP" comments did not explicitly invoke an afterlife, some did: "May his soul rest in peace..." (Oct. 5), "I truly from the bottom of my heart wish you rest in peace" (Oct. 6). Some cleverly integrated Apple's brand into afterlife references: "Rest in peace in the 'iCloud' Steve Jobs" (Oct. 16). Users occasionally suggested Jobs would continue to "live on" through his products or in people's hearts (Oct. 5, Oct. 10). Although less prevalent, these references show that afterlife imagery still serves as a comforting rhetorical tool in online mourning.

Continuation of Interactive Bonds: Referring to the Deceased in the Present Tense

While addressing the deceased was common, referring to Jobs as if still alive was less so. Examples include: "I love steve" (Oct. 12), "he is my man" (Oct. 7), "he's amazing" (Oct. 9). These present-tense references implied that Jobs' influence remained ongoing, blurring the distinction between past and present. Although scarce, this strategy maintained an image of Jobs as actively contributing to people's lives.

Problem-Focused Coping: Suggestions for Action

Suggestions for action were rare, but three patterns emerged. First, a direct call for action related to cancer research: “hope that research and funding may happen in the future to help battle the cancer you have fought so bravely” (Oct. 6). Second, implicit suggestions to keep Apple alive: “Keep Apple Alive!” (Oct. 6), “Stop making excuses and work to bring positive change to the world!!!” (Oct. 7). Third, personal vows to honor Jobs by purchasing Apple products: “i’ll continue to buy apple products as my own way of paying tributes to you…” (Oct. 6), “im gonna buy the iphone 4s in memory J” (Oct. 12). These actions did not necessarily align with Jobs’ stated goals or values, but they represent attempts to respond constructively to the loss, maintaining his legacy through tangible acts.

Positive Reappraisal: Appreciation of Time Spent with the Deceased

A few comments expressed gratitude for the “time” spent with Jobs, whether literal or symbolic. Some wrote as if they had lived alongside him: “I’m so glad I once lived in this area with you” (Oct. 6), “Because of him I had a respectable career” (Oct. 10). One particularly detailed comment described discovering Jobs’ Stanford speech, feeling changed by his words, and imagining a friendship through his influence (Oct. 11). Such expressions highlight the parasocial dimension of their relationship with Jobs, as people claim and cherish experiences mediated through technology and media coverage.

Establishing Credibility

Only two attempts explicitly established credibility by referencing personal circumstances that paralleled Jobs’ experiences. One wrote: “Thank you for reminding me to live each day as if it were my last and each day at it’s fullest with the cancer I’ve had” (Oct. 5). Another empathized with the family’s grief due to losing a loved one to the same “cinderella cancer” as Jobs (Oct. 6). Unlike traditional eulogies delivered by close associates, most online commenters had no tangible connection to Jobs. Thus, establishing credibility rarely appeared.

Affirmation of Vivid Past Relationships: Notation of Flaws

Few comments acknowledged flaws or difficulties in Jobs’ life. Two examples: “using some of the tech he had no clue how to develop himself but he understood profoundly how to connect the dots to a new future” (Oct. 6), and “an illegitimate child, sent out for adoption, a college dropout… and he changed the world” (Oct. 7). These references suggest that even shortcomings or humble beginnings enhance the deceased’s enduring legacy and relatability.

Discussion

This research demonstrates how social media platforms, like Facebook, serve as dynamic spaces for collective mourning and parasocial interaction, allowing users to vocalize eulogies and express emotions publicly. Applying Kunkel and Dennis’ (2003) framework to Facebook comments about Steve Jobs revealed that users employ traditional eulogistic strategies—such as praise, emotional disclosure, and references to an afterlife—while also engaging in new post-death practices characteristic of digital environments. Self-disclosure of emotion and continuation of interactive bonds (especially addressing the deceased directly) were most prominent. Rather than relying on personal acquaintance, commenters formed a parasocial bond with Jobs through shared admiration, cultural impact, and his technological legacy, thereby extending the boundaries of conventional mourning and contributing to a collective memory online.

Moreover, social media’s informal and user-driven atmosphere fosters new forms of eulogistic expression that differ from traditional funeral rhetoric in style, tone, and content. The integration of emoticons, informal grammar, and brevity lend an unstructured, personal quality to these online tributes, enabling users—often strangers to the deceased or each other—to empathize and support one another’s grief in ways that reflect and reshape conventional memorializing rituals. Consequently, these digital expressions highlight both the continuity of age-old eulogistic functions and the transformative influence of social media on mourning practices.

The first research question examined whether online eulogies reflect traditional forms of eulogizing. In many respects, they do. Each category from the framework appeared in the online eulogies, with certain strategies being expanded, and the overall practices still offering a place for individuals to share grief, condolences, and emotional responses in the face of death. These findings support Jamieson’s (1978) notion that instinctive adaptations guide eulogizing behavior without the need for formal training. As people joined the digital conversation about Jobs’ death, the core structure and function of the eulogy persisted.

Additionally, the results show that social media provided a meaningful forum for vocalizing personal eulogies and expressing emotion through collective grieving. The data suggest that social media served as a viable gathering place for those mourning Steve Jobs, with comments tending toward eulogistic strategies that do not require direct personal contact. In other words, while certain categories within the framework were less prominent due to the lack of physical familiarity, the essential purpose and integrity of the eulogy tradition remained intact in this online environment.

Continuation of Interactive Bonds

A central theme in the findings was the perceived ongoing existence of the deceased. Referring to Steve Jobs in the present tense or addressing him directly allowed eulogizers to maintain a sense of connection. This was the most prevalent strategy observed, mirroring de Vries and Rutherford's (2004) findings that over half of mourners wrote directly to the deceased rather than about them. Silverman and Klass (1996) suggest that letters to the deceased are key to maintaining bonds unavailable elsewhere, and social media extends this opportunity by enabling public yet personal eulogies to be addressed straight to the deceased. This approach preserved Jobs' presence not only for individual mourners, but for the community as well.

The frequency of this strategy also created overlapping themes. Instead of stating, "He was a genius," commenters would say, "You are a genius," and rather than describing his accomplishments, they told him directly, "You changed the way people see the world." The Internet intensified this effect since Jobs' virtual identity persisted online. His Public Figure page gave users a space where he seemed continually present, enabling them to feel he was not entirely gone. Thus, online platforms supported an active, ongoing bond that transcended his physical absence.

Self-Disclosure of Emotion

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) did not inhibit emotional expression. Instead, it allowed individuals to share their grief and join a collective remembrance. Research suggests that social media can facilitate "mediated death" (Gibson, 2007), letting mourners articulate their sorrow. When people face a loss, turning to CMC can provide an immediate outlet, as noted by Sanderson and Cheong (2010). Early reactions often revealed disbelief and shock—some admitted they were crying or "unable to stop weeping." Over time, as acceptance grew, expressions shifted to acknowledging that Jobs would be missed.

The platform's adaptability let users express emotions uniquely through punctuation, texting language, emoticons, and iconic Apple references (e.g., placing "i" before words). These became natural, effective ways to convey parasocial or hyperpersonal grief. The hyperpersonal model (Walther, 1996) posits that intimacy can be constructed online. Here, mourners communicated complex emotions through unconventional textual cues, showing that online environments can foster genuine empathetic exchanges.

Praise for the Deceased

Praise emerged as a prominent category, reflecting a traditional eulogistic function. Users posted short exclamations like "legendary," "genius," and "awesome," as well as more detailed tributes. Many credited Jobs with changing the world, indicating deep admiration. Facebook's format enabled both brief, powerful words of praise and longer, more nuanced expressions. People's praise—whether concise or elaborate—demonstrated their appreciation for Jobs' contributions and legacy.

Appreciation of Products, Lessons, and Traits Learned from the Deceased

This category expanded to include acknowledgment of the Apple products through which many knew Jobs. Parasocial relationships commonly develop via media exposure to a celebrity, but in this case, the relationship also formed through daily interactions with Apple's technology. Jobs' identity was inseparable from his brand and products; thus, users often thanked him for the innovations that touched their lives.

The extensive references to Apple products—expressed through phrases like "You made the best technology" and personalized coinages like "iCry" or "iSad"—suggest the close integration of Jobs' creations with mourners' own identities. This practice mirrors how fans might quote song lyrics to honor a musician, except here the tribute came through iconic branding. Thanking Jobs or referencing his devices served as a tangible bridge connecting mourners to his legacy, reinforcing their parasocial bond.

Appreciation of the Deceased's Good Life

Some comments emphasized that Jobs lived a remarkable, though shortened, life. Mourners suggested that he served as an example for those unafraid to follow their dreams. In traditional eulogies, acknowledging the deceased's good life helps frame their passing in a constructive light. Online, people repeated this practice, aligning his achievements with broader inspirational themes. Even without direct personal ties, users recognized and affirmed his accomplishments as evidence of a life well lived.

Affirmation of Vivid Past Relationships

Traditionally, affirming vivid past relationships involves personal anecdotes that add depth to the deceased's image. Because most commenters lacked personal contact with Jobs, few could offer unique insights. While "notation of flaws" surfaced only twice, it served the same purpose as in traditional eulogies—humanizing Jobs. For example, mentioning that he did not develop all his tech himself but was helped by others, and that he turned this reliance into a virtue, gave a more nuanced view of his character.

Likewise, "revelation of private insights and unique relationships" was rare but significant. Individuals who said things like "he rescued me from boredom" or referenced personal struggles mirrored traditional approaches where personal stories highlight the deceased's impact. Using intimate language—"my friend," "my dear"—suggested that some felt a genuinely close parasocial bond. Although most mourners could not offer unique anecdotes, a few expressed the belief they knew him personally, thus internalizing their parasocial connection more deeply.

Reference to an Afterlife
References to the afterlife were less common. Broad statements like "Heaven will enjoy his company" or "Rest in peace in the 'iCloud' Steve Jobs" emerged, but religious discourse remained minimal. Unlike traditional funerals, where a known religious context may guide afterlife references, here Jobs' spiritual affiliation was unclear. Without a shared religious frame, commenters either avoided specifying beliefs or preferred universal, non-religious expressions of continuity.

Cultural and global diversity among his mourners may have also discouraged overt religious references. Users might have hesitated to impose specific religious views in a public online forum. Thus, while afterlife references did appear, they were not central. Some tried to maintain continuity by suggesting he lived on in his products or in people's hearts rather than focusing on a spiritual dimension.

Problem-Focused Coping: Suggestions for Actions
This category appeared infrequently. Occasionally, mourners sought tangible actions: hoping for future cancer research, encouraging others to remember him when using Apple products, or pledging to purchase a product in his memory. While less aligned with traditional eulogies, these comments suggest that some individuals sought a constructive outlet for their grief. By adopting behaviors that honored his memory, they created a sense of purpose and sustained connection.

Appreciation of Time Spent with the Deceased
Time spent with the deceased is closely tied to physical relationships. In an online context, few commenters implied they "spent time" with Jobs. Some expressed gratitude for living in his era or encountering his ideas. Others spoke of "knowing" him through media and products. Although parasocial relationships do not involve direct contact, the hyperpersonal model suggests meaningful interaction can occur virtually. For fans who engaged deeply with Apple's ecosystem, encountering Jobs' speeches, interviews, or product launches may have felt like spending time with him. While these connections were intangible, they allowed some mourners to treat their mediated experiences as genuine interactions. Research hasn't fully explored hyperpersonal communication in parasocial contexts, but this study hints at its plausibility. The sense of having "spent time" with Jobs, even virtually, reinforced the closeness some mourners felt.

Establishing Credibility
Few tried to establish credibility to speak on Jobs' behalf. Traditional eulogists often explain their relationship with the deceased, but online commenters saw no need to justify their right to mourn publicly. One expectation was that users might cite their Apple product use as proof of connection, yet no such claims emerged. Only those who shared a cancer experience attempted this connection. Their similar illness experience gave them a perceived privilege to empathize more deeply with Jobs, thus suggesting credibility is unnecessary unless a mourner seeks a closer, more personal tie.

Conclusion

This study illustrates how social media eulogies mirror the core functions of traditional funeral orations while adapting to the affordances and constraints of digital communication. Unlike conventional eulogies—delivered by a single speaker in formal settings—online tributes to Steve Jobs consisted of brief, user-generated Facebook comments. Although each post often contained only one or two rhetorical strategies (e.g., praise, emotional disclosure, or direct address), collectively they formed a robust, participatory narrative of grief and remembrance.

Rather than diminishing their value, this fragmentation enhanced accessibility and inclusivity. Social media allowed users across the globe to join a spontaneous mourning process, transforming passive audiences into active eulogizers. The immediacy of computer-mediated communication (CMC) encouraged raw, concise expressions of sadness, disbelief, and admiration. These posts were less curated than traditional funeral rhetoric but equally powerful in capturing communal sentiment.

Two rhetorical strategies dominated: emotional disclosure and direct address to Jobs. Many users spoke to him, not just about him, signaling a desire to sustain emotional bonds after death. These expressions, while lacking formal credibility, reflected authentic parasocial identification—where users felt intimately connected to a public figure they never met (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Their connection stemmed not from personal interaction, but from Jobs' cultural significance and the centrality of Apple products in users' lives.

This relationship exemplifies the rise of hyperpersonal parasociality, in which media figures become deeply integrated into users' routines, identities, and values (Walther, 1996). Jobs' omnipresence through media and technology fostered strong emotional ties, making his death feel personal. Social media intensified these connections by enabling public, persistent interaction with his legacy.

Digital mourning also reshapes the boundaries of grief. Unlike time- and place-bound funerals, social platforms enable asynchronous, borderless participation. While this openness invites a wider range of expressions—including occasional inappropriate responses—the overall tone remained respectful and reflective. The collective aim remained intact: to mourn together and preserve memory.

Online tributes also contribute to collective memory. Just as physical memorials serve as lasting reminders, digital posts become an enduring archive of grief, admiration, and shared experience. Themes such as innovation, inspiration, and gratitude were repeatedly voiced, solidifying Jobs' legacy as both cultural icon and personal role model.

Limitations include the exclusive focus on Facebook and the interpretive nature of coding informal, fragmented comments. Future research could examine other platforms, cross-cultural mourning practices, or how emerging technologies like virtual reality might further evolve digital memorialization. Additionally, exploring hyperpersonal parasociality may deepen our understanding of technology-mediated intimacy and community formation.

Ultimately, social media does not replace traditional mourning but expands its reach and form. By enabling widespread participation, emotional authenticity, and communal memory-making, platforms like Facebook illustrate how grief adapts in a hyperconnected world. As technology continues to evolve, so too will the ways we honor those who shape our lives—both publicly and personally.

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Communicating the Quantum World: A News Framing Analysis of Recent Developments in Quantum Technologies

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Abstract
The second quantum revolution has promised to fundamentally alter the world's computing infrastructure. Consequently, it is expected that quantum computing will reshape nearly every social, economic, political, and personal activity. However, public and expert awareness and knowledge of quantum computing is shockingly low. Therefore, the present paper employed news framing as a qualitative method to investigate the current popular discourse surrounding developments in quantum technologies. Results indicated two primary themes regarding the understanding and speed of development intertwined into the coverage of quantum technology. Broad implications are drawn for both the ways in which we communicate quantum technology and future technologies in general.
Keywords: Quantum computation, News Framing, Technology, Communication, Media

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Today, we are in the midst of the second quantum revolution in which theoretical and mechanical developments in quantum technology will be applied to computing hardware and software (Jaeger, 2018). Although Artificial Intelligence (AI) been considered the "next big thing" in technology, quantum computing has quietly and rapidly developed in the background since the 1980s and promises a fundamentally new system of computation that will alter not just computing, but our preconceived notions of physical existence (Calzati & de Kerckhove, 2024; Cuffaro, 2022). Each year governments and tech giants pour billions of dollars into research and development of quantum computers as they race for "quantum supremacy" – the point at which quantum computers outpace the classical computers that run our world (Kaku, 2023). Experts have predicted that at some point in the 2030s the public will see a widespread usability and adoption of quantum computing (Stackpole, 2024). However, public and scholarly awareness and knowledge of quantum computing is shockingly low (Keller, 2023).

Therefore, the present article sought to investigate the popular discourse surrounding quantum computation. As a relatively unacknowledged phenomenon in the social sciences and humanities, a brief description of quantum principles will be provided first along with a review of previous scholarly investigations of the topic. Following the review of the literature, media framing will be employed as a qualitative method for investigating mainstream news coverage of quantum developments. Ultimately, the present article sought to provide further understanding of the ways in which quantum computation is communicated to the public.

Literature Review

An Egregiously Brief Description of Quantum Basics
Put simply, quantum physics, which has been in development for over 125 years, represents a theory of the physical world that challenges the theory of the world that was, and still is, widely accepted under classical Newtonian physics (Jaeger, 2018). Whereas classical Newtonian physics posits a discrete, deterministic, and linear world in which actions were predictable, Quantum physics operates on the principles of superpositioning, entanglement, and wave-particle duality which directly refutes and supersedes Newtonian postulates (Kaku, 2023). In the first quantum revolution, these principles helped create mechanical devices such as MRIs, atomic cocks (GPS), transistors, lasers, and the atomic bomb (Carson, 2024). The second quantum revolution promises to apply quantum principles to computing to provide a new form of computing that will reportedly be faster, more efficient, and able to hand exponentially more data than current classical super computers (Kaku, 2023). Instead of storing information in bits and bytes, quantum computers utilize qubits. Instead of storing information as a 1 or a zero, quantum computers store information as both a one and a zero simultaneously. Information is retrieved not by exact location, but through probabilistic and entangled relations. In quantum systems, information does not even move through traditional transistors, it is able to "tunnel" through energy barriers (Kaku, 2023). Put together, a quantum computer is not just a better form of computing, it is a fundamentally new and different form of computing.

The above paragraph is a wildly brief and incomplete snapshot of the difference between classical and quantum technology. As a theory of the subatomic, quantum physics and mechanics eludes human perception thus escaping human attention and understanding (Logan, 2010). Applications in quantum computing take these difficult theories of the physical world and apply them to digital space. Put analogously, quantum computing seemingly turns our singular world into many and turns computers from digital filing cabinets into continually shifting houses of innumerable mirrors. In sum, quantum concepts change our conceptualizations of and possibilities for technology and society.

Scholarship on Quantum Technology
In the physical sciences, there has been increased attention paid to how physics is communicated both amongst practitioners and to the public (Harmon & Gross, 2023). Once assumed to be immune to communicative exigencies, scientists in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic have paid more attention to the presentation of their ideas and presentation effects on the adoption of ideas and action (Zinkernagel, 2022). At present, there have been a number of efforts to provide a laypersons explanation of quantum concepts, their applications, and potential societal impacts (Jaeger, 2018; Kaku, 2023; Rhode, 2021). However, social scientific and humanistic scholarship on quantum technologies (mechanics, computation, theory, etc.) is limited.

Interestingly, perhaps the most sustained area of inquiry by social scientists and humanist scholars has been in an unexpected location: the overlap of art and physics. For instance, Shlain (1991) investigated how art and physics developed in tandem throughout history. Specifically, Shlain (1991) argued that, despite the lack of attention that physicists pay to artists, and vice versa, scientific developments, such as Newton's gravity, Einstein's spacetime, and Bohr's complementarity all changed the ways in which artists can conceive space, light, and their elements as constituted in art (Popova, 2014; Wilkes, 1991). During roughly the same time period, Gregory Morales, spearheaded the efforts for a "quantum aesthetics" that was inspired by quantum concepts and focused on artistic creation as opposed to scholarly attention (Caro & Murphy, 2002). Scoon (2017) provided a more specific framework for quantum artists to work from and how they might think of the artistic as mimesis of the unknown. Artists and scholars of art, often considered to be at the forefront of technological change, are one area in which the possibilities of quantum technology have been probed.

In addition to art and artists, scholars have also attempted to grapple with the philosophical and social consequences. For instance, Barad (2007) probed specific experiments in quantum physics, such as the double-slit experiment, and argued for fundamental shifts in our epistemological and ontological orientations towards the world – termed by Barad (2007) as onto-epistemology. Kroker and Cook (2023) argued along similar lines stating that a "quantum zone" as a new way of understanding the personal, professional, and political culture(s) of our world. Rosen (2023) might term what is discussed by Kroker and Cook (2023) as "quantum perception", which is a term he uses to describe a form of perceiving the world that pushes away from the tradition objectivist stances and towards a more "ontologically entangled" society based on observations from proprioceptive mode of observation of entangled protons (p. 157). Ultimately, it may be Calzati and de Kerkhove (2024) who most aptly characterized quantum developments by calling the new environment a "quantum ecology" in which changes to epistemological and ontological bases will create an existential crisis for society that necessitates a new paradigm of thought. Gustafson (2025) argued that quantum media technologies will be the next era-defining communication medium and will eclipse both the internet and AI. Gustafson's (2025) argument is undergirded by the notion that AI programs are merely software enabled by already existing technology, whereas quantum computing represents fundamentally new hardware that provides previously unimagined possibilities (Gustafson, 2024). In each of the above works, the monumental shifts that quantum technology may trigger are traced and explored.

However, despite the supposed dawning of the "quantum era" scholars have yet to turn their attention to the specific machinations of the quantum movement. Though we have been alerted via academic scholarship to the seismic changes quantum technologies will bring, we must also focus on the other specific and multifaced discourses regarding quantum technology.

Framing Theory

Media framing – which can be considered synonymous with news framing and framing in general – is one of the most employed theoretical frameworks in communication studies and has a long a storied history in the service of communication scholarship (de Vreese, 2005). Though closely related to receiver-oriented agenda-setting research, framing analysis, originally coined by Goffman (1974), is an approach that is sender-oriented and focuses on how the message is designed and presented to the viewer. Put simply by Blaney (2021),

> *news framing works from the assumption that within an issue of any salience, indeed at the level of a particular story on a given issue, some characteristics of the issue will be addressed while others are ignored (p. 9).*

In essence, by focusing attention on particular components of a message, the viewers are directed to and learn about different components of the story and the phenomenon in general. Thus, the way in which media frames a particular idea, artifact, and/or event can shape how individuals think about the idea, artifact, and/or event.

There is no dearth of research regarding framing of technological advancement in general. From the specific figureheads, such as Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, or Elon Musk, who push forward technological innovations and organizations, to specific technologies themselves, such as social media, the internet, or AI, there are libraries of research studies. However, to date, there exists no formal media framing study of people, organizations, or quantum technologies – whether computation, mechanics, theory, etc. – themselves. As such, the present article sought to answer the following question:

RQ1: How are quantum technologies framed by mainstream news sources?

Method

Selected Texts

In order to answer RQ1, the author collected articles written in the high-circulation newspapers that were geographically dispersed across the United States. Despite the diminished presence of the physical newspaper, the selection of such outlets was justified on the grounds that mainstream newspapers are intended to bring important ideas in a minimally biased format to the general population. Trade and industry publications were excluded for their potential economic and/or ideological bias – though this should be investigated in future research. Thus, the newspapers sampled included The New York Times, USA Today, The Washington Post, The Chicago Tribune, and The Los Angeles Times. Articles were collected from January 1, 2024, to January 28, 2025. Articles were identified by searching the news archives using "quantum" as the primary search term. Due to the scarcity of articles treating developments in quantum technology substantially, the following analysis relied on several key exemplar articles that arose from the archive searches. In line with previous educational and psychological research, exemplars can be extremely helpful when a phenomenon is rare given exemplars, as Bronk (2012) stated, exhibited "a particular characteristic in a highly developed manner" (p. 1). Thus, exemplar articles were selected based on the degree of attempted or actual development of and sustained attention to quantum principles.

Analytic Procedures

To systematize framing analysis of the selected texts, descriptive coding followed by theming of the data, as outlined by Saldana (2013) was employed. In short, descriptive coding was used for assigning basic labels to data as identified in the specific elements of the varying components of a news article, such as the headline, image, lead, and general article content. Coding notes were recorded in a handwritten research journal.

From the specific descriptive codes, the author went on to identify thematic links between the specific descriptive codes. As stated by Saldana (2013), “a theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, or analytic reflection” (p. 14). In essence, the author moved from small chunks of data, such as single images or words, towards larger connections between data points and themes the data may be indicative of.

Results

Frame 1: Pop Quanta

As mentioned, the initial search returned many articles that were tagged with the term “quantum”. However, as is the case with most open-ended searches, many of the results were not necessarily pertaining to specific developments and ideas surrounding quantum computation, physics, or mechanics. Still, any article tagged with the “quantum” keyword shed light on understanding of the broader phenomenon. As such, the first frame highlights the degree to which actual quantum happenings are overshadowed by general and broad popular culture usage.

For example, one of the most prominent results of the initial search highlighted American singer Tinashe’s release of an album titled, Quantum Baby, on August 16, 2024. According to James (2024) of the Los Angeles Times, Tinashe’s album name “shows her as an artist who is most comfortable with the unknown, with the things that don’t make sense”. Tinashe is quoted as saying the title fits the album because

> *There’s so much contradiction within the music on “Quantum Baby” that mimics quantum theory. This energy toggling between vulnerability and also a nastiness, an “I don’t give a f—” spirit (James, 2024).*

Here, readers learn about quantum theory through the singer’s point-of-view. Ultimately it is an introduction to quantum physics through popular culture. The introduction highlights “contradiction”, “energy”, and “things that don’t make sense”. The sentiment of these codes pointed toward the general ethos of quantum physics but does not teach readers anything specific about the terms or their meaning in quantum physics. Moreover, Tinashe’s use of the term “mimic” is compelling insofar that the definition of mimicry is imitation for entertainment or ridicule, but not education (“Mimic,” 2025). While some popular culture artifacts are intentionally designed and efficacious for science education purposes, others, such as Tinashe’s album, have no intention nor inclination towards educational purposes. However, inviting individuals to engage with scientific concepts is difficult, but popular culture has been proven as a bridge to incite interest from audiences in many contexts (Dietrich et. al, 2021). Therefore, Quantum Baby may help to stoke awareness for quantum ideas – or at the very least the term itself – by bringing them into a realm where they did not exist before, even if little is learned about the concepts.

Additional commentary on the album in The Washington Post, simply noted that “Tinashe can’t match her own freak on quantum baby” and did not bring up anything related to quantum concepts (Kelly, 2024). As such, the album name intentionally invoked the quantum world and intended to have a quantum “feel” to it, but the significance of such inclusion was ignored in some outlets. Reporters may have ignored the inclusion of quantum concepts due to the perceived lack of relevance of the concepts to the reception of album. Only the track, “No simulation”, in which Tinashe lyrics grapple with truth, reality, going deeper to find meaning, and what’s next, does the listener become pushed towards the difficulties of the quantum world, but goes no further (Tinashe, 2024). Additionally, perceived information-related effects of the album could have been undercut by the perceived efficacy of the performer as a knowledgeable source on the subject, which research has suggested affects whether scientific information is taken seriously (Chen & Song, 2017). While it is more likely that the album does not substantially treat any quantum topics or that reporters viewed other elements of the album as more enticing for readers, coverage that does not engage with the scientific elements of a message alludes to how a layperson’s interpretation or adaptation of quantum concepts is, at present, only treated at the surface level if at all.

In addition to Tinashe’s album release, other popular culture references peppered the initial results. The sci-fi television show, Quantum Leap, appeared in several instances. The film, The Universal Theory, about a WWII conspiracy involving a physicist surfaced as well (Loayza, 2024). In each, there was scant discussion of any specific quantum concepts. This is important insofar as an individual’s first impression of quantum theory may come from popular culture. Kirby (2019), in their study of Hollywood filmmaking, found that cinematic science, even if lacking in depth, often adeptly communicates “cultures of science” to lay audiences. Thus, the scarcity of meaningful discussion of quantum principles in popular culture artifacts is in line with previous research on films, such as Oppenheimer (2023), which have tended to eschew the discussion of the scientific principles instead highlighting personal lives or the political context within which events occur (Faux, 2024; Monk, 2024; Stevenson, 2023). In short, media artifacts may or may not intend to be explicitly inspired by or centered around quantum physics, but may still inform the viewer of general predispositions towards the area. Ultimately, it was revealed pop culture references are intended and reported on primarily for entertainment purposes despite being attached to the "quantum" keyword.

Frame 2: Inching Forward

Another frame that arose was that of the slowness of progress on quantum development, termed "inching forward". This frame was surprising due to prevailing public sentiment that technology in general is, and has been, moving forward at an alarmingly fast rate. However, the notion that quantum computing is developing slowly was prevalent.

Perhaps most emblematic of this frame, an article written in The New York Times was titled "Quantum Computing Inches Closer to Reality after another Google Breakthrough" (Metz, 2024). Touting new developments in Google's quantum computer that would take "the most powerful supercomputers" over "10 septillion years" years to complete, Metz (2024) referred to quantum computing as an "experimental technology" and stated, quoting a Harvard Physics Professor, that even though it was never envisioned as a practical possibility it has exited the arena of science fiction and become a reality. Similarly, Neils (2024) reported for USA Today that Google has come up with a new chip that helps to mitigate some of the challenges posed by quantum computing. Neils (2024) goes on to highlight that qubits are "error-prone" and that scientists have been working to reduce and correct errors in quantum computing since the 1990s. For The Chicago Tribune, McPoppin (2024) reported on the creation of the "one of world's first commercially useful quantum computers in Chicago – despite huge obstacles" and noted the "huge" engineering problems yet to be solved. Discourse regarding the economic investment element of quantum technology mirrored such concerns. For instance, a USA Today was titled "Interested in quantum computing investments?" and went on to discuss the "considerable momentum" in quantum stocks while noting that they are going to be "long-term opportunity" (Spatacco, 2025). Thus, readers are shown that confidence in the quantum technology markets is still tentative, both in engineering and economic terms.

Additionally, the reader is presented with references to the people behind the physics itself as indicative of this speed or lack thereof. Specifically, a number of articles referencing dead scientists – such as Werner Herzog, Albert Einstein, Peter Higgs, and Tsung-Dao Lee – and their contributions to ongoing discussions were referenced (Loeb-McClain, 2025; Wilkinson, 2024). Interestingly, when introduced to the individuals behind the quantum development, readers are primarily shown scientists of a century past whose life's work has still not been fully actualized at the time of their passing. Coverage of deceased scientists working on quantum physics appeared to exacerbate the felt distance from initial breakthroughs of the first revolution due to the age of the scientists, date of discoveries, and the old photos accompanying them. Additionally, by highlighting the time elapsed since the most prominent breakthroughs, the supposedly impending second revolution may be felt as farther off into the future.

The "inching forward" theme contradicts tech industry professionals predictions, as stated in the introduction. Moreover, the massive investments made in quantum computing may indicate a chasm between coverage and actuality. Historically, periods of interest in technology ebb and flow with funding and felt distance from actuality. For instance, Artificial Intelligence (AI) went through many "winters" of diminished attention (Werner, 2024). AI received intense attention and health funding in the 1950s-1970s, only to be put on the backburner in the 1970s, then regained interest in the early 1980s, only to be abandoned again in late 1980s. Interest would be return, and public attention would begin, in the late 1990s when it was felt practical applications were possible from theoretical discussions (Werner, 2024). Thus, because there is no lack of funding to quantum technology at the moment, the tentative coverage of quantum technology could be considered due to inconceivability of practical applications for quantum technology.

In sum, the above collection of articles referenced in this frame highlighted important milestones and inventions in quantum computing technology, while tempering excitement with statement of substantial theoretical and material challenges. Despite massive breakthroughs in quantum technology, reportage content tends to be cautious in proclaiming "quantum supremacy" that the tech companies and technologists have called for. Put in historical context, the tension between perceived and actual progress of quantum computing, mirrored other technological developments in which progress is perceived as slow right up until it appears as rapturous.

Discussion and Limitations

There are several important takeaways to be discerned from the above results. First, popular culture continues to be a vehicle through which laypersons are introduced to scientific concepts. American singer Tinashe is just one example, but there are other mentions in films, shows, songs, etc. For many, this may be their only introduction to anything quantum. At a time when mentions, acknowledgement, and understanding of anything in the quantum realm is scarce, continued attention to popular culture artifacts may provide a key to understanding how quantum ideas and technologies are portrayed to individuals as those very ideas and technologies become mechanically feasible within society. However, it is also important to understand that popular culture artifacts are primarily designed for entertainment purposes and as a consequence will likely not do more than scratch the surface of meaningful comprehension. As such, scholars must pay sustained, critical attention to the mimicry or coopting of quantum concepts in popular culture to identify how individuals may understand, or misunderstand, quantum concepts.

Second, quantum technology is portrayed as “inching forward” and being plagued with problems in general discourse. Readers are shown slow contemporary progress, unfinished work of trailblazing scientists, and unsure economic analyses. Yet, a cursory review of select scholarship and specialist discourse shows an increased faith, excitement, and sureness in a fast-approaching quantum era. Here there is a contradictory image presented: Is quantum still a long way away or is it around the corner? If the former, there is plenty of time to ignore. If the latter, then a sense of urgency in understanding – much like what was brought with ChaptGPT in 2022 and the ensuant AI wave – may be felt more intensely. By describing quantum developments as inching forward, readers are encouraged to delay grappling with the opportunities and consequences which, as learned from other avenues, are promised to be quite expansive.

While the above discussion of the implications of the analysis, it is important to note the present article does have a few key limitations to consider. First, the use of traditional newspapers leaves out innumerable other trade, tech, economic, and other niche publications that may have more insightful and informed commentary. Second, the relatively small sample size and preference of recency of articles excluded several major breakthroughs in quantum technologies that, despite being a number of years ago, garnered significant and more sustained attention for quantum technology than was seen during the sampling period. Elongating this sampling period further into the past would offer a more comprehensive view of media framing of the phenomenon. Third, and lastly, further effects-based research on media framing of quantum technology would provide a clearer picture of individual knowledge, perceptions, and potential actions regarding quantum images and policy in the future.

Conclusion

In sum, the present article represented a brief and initial investigation into media framing of quantum technology. By analyzing traditional news outlets, the analysis provided a snapshot of recent media framing of quantum technology intended for a general audience that highlighted the popular culture mimicry of concepts while emphasizing the slowness and difficulty of the progression of quantum developments. The implications of this analysis highlighted how imperfect references in popular culture and contradictory information on future predictions necessitate sustained attention in order provide a more cohesive and extensive body of knowledge not just on the communication of quantum technology, but on the public’s understanding of quantum technology in general.

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Does Gender-Concordance Matter When Discussing Sexual Health with Physicians?

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Abstract
Sexual health is an integral component of overall health and well-being. However, both physicians and patients admit to not broaching this topic with one another during regular visits. Prior research has uncovered various barriers to openly discussing sexual health during a medical encounter. Present study aims to understand if physician's biological sex or gender matters when discussing sexual health with the patient. Using snowball sampling, 221 participants were recruited for the study. The participants completed an online survey with open-ended questions regarding their preferences of their primary care physician's sex/gender when discussing sexual health and the reasons for these preferences. The responses were then coded and thematically organized. The majority of participants noted that they prefer same-gender physician. Five different themes emerged for reasons to want a same-gender physician: comfort, similarity, emotional support, non-judgmental demeanor, and identification of health concerns. While only a handful of respondents reported wanting cross-gender physicians, professional behavior was a theme best suited for those responses. Findings suggest that most individuals prefer same-gender physician while discussing sexual health and cited feeling comfortable as the main reason for this choice. By having a physician that meets a patient's preference, it might enable patients to openly start sexual health discussions.
Keywords: sexual health, patient-physician communication, gender, uncertainty reduction

Sexual health is often deemed as a taboo topic in the United States. In many cases, conversations about sexual health are avoided in educational settings, with parental figures and even with healthcare providers (Haboubi & Lincoln, 2003). Sexual health is an important aspect of every individual's life, and it is important to include topics of sexual health in general medical discourse (Williams & Wimberly, 2006). Ideally, in healthcare setting physicians and patients should be able to discuss any concerns about sexual health openly. Unfortunately, that is far from reality. Both men and women face a host of sexual health problems (Bittleston et al., 2024), which go unaddressed due to several barriers that impede open sexual health discussion (Haboubi & Lincoln, 2003). Physicians and patients alike are apprehensive broaching sexual health issues in a clinical setting. Due to this apprehension, patients suffer in silence. It is of paramount importance to understand the factors that may facilitate an open discussion among patients and physicians about sexual health. Talking about sexual health could not only improve an individual's sexual health but also improve general health of the population (World

Health Organization, 2010).

Discussing sexual health with a healthcare professional openly can help patients who suffer in silence or ignore problematic symptoms altogether. For instance, in 2022 alone, there were more than 2.5 million cases of chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis in the United States (CDC, 2022). Scholars note that the true numbers as much higher because many individuals do not seek medical attention for these infections (CDC, 2021). Yet another sexual health topic that often goes unmentioned is sexual dysfunction. Sexual dysfunction can include but is not limited to premature ejaculation, erectile dysfunction, unable to achieve orgasm, painful sexual intercourse etc. (Lewis et al., 2010). In a study by Clark and Williams (2014), participants agreed that primary care physicians should discuss sexual dysfunctions with their patients; however, they were divided on who should broach this topic.

Physicians are guilty of not initiating these sensitive topics either. While many physicians are given basic training in tackling sexual health issues and most of them believe that is an important topic to discuss, a whopping 86% admit to avoiding the topic of sexual health with patients altogether (Ho & Fernandez, 2006). In another study, 92% of physicians reported that they have never instigated the topic (Corona et al., 2006). Reasons for this apprehension for both parties have been studied extensively, but ways to mitigate this barrier still remains relatively understudied.

Literature Review

Physicians' Perspective

In general, individuals avoid discussing sexual related topics and unfortunately that holds the same for healthcare setting. Amongst several barriers, physicians lack of training in sexual health is one topic that emerges frequently in literature. Only 50% of medical schools in the United States require students to take sexual medicine courses, leaving a gap in understanding sexual health issues among patients and confidence to deal with said issues (Beebe et al., 2021). Due to this deficit, primary care physicians would rather defer such discussions to a specialist.

Embarrassment was another commonly cited reason among physicians for not broaching topics of sexual health. Around 39% of the physicians in a study stated they worried about embarrassing a patient (Temple-Smith et al., 1999). Besides the aforementioned reasons, physicians have also noted lack of privacy (Av et al., 2020), and conservative sexual beliefs (Tsimtsiou et al., 2006) as potential barriers to discussing sexual health.

Patients' Perspective

Patients, on the other hand, are apprehensive to begin sexual health discussion for different reasons. Zimmaro and colleagues (2020) stated that patients can present "self-centered" barriers where they do not know how to start the conversation or feel uncomfortable with the idea of talking about sexual health. In addition to these barriers, patients cite reasons such as feelings of anxiety, guilt and embarrassment when discussing sexual health with their physicians (Hitchcock & Wilson, 1992). Patients may also think that discussing sexual problems with healthcare providers will not result in resolution. This is especially common among older males who experience erectile dysfunction (Gott et al., 2004). To further complicate matters, male patients might feel increased apprehension due to a perceived overlap between sexual functioning and masculinity (Komlenac et al., 2018).

While some barriers might be different for patients and physicians, one reason cited by both parties is common—the gender of the other party. Physicians have noted apprehension to broach sexual health topics when the patient is of a different gender (Gott et al., 2004). In the same vein, past studies have highlighted similar uneasiness when it comes to discussing sexual health with a physician of a different gender among patients (Kiss, 2004). There could be several factors but differing communication styles, which is learned from early childhood could be at play here (Hall et al., 1994).

Gendered Differences in Communication Style

Since early childhood, individuals are taught to behave a certain way based on the assumptions of the child's gender. Society might see kindly to a male child's rough-housing, but quickly admonish a female child's attempt to get dirty. These early instances also influence individuals' communication styles as one in socialized into a gendered speech community. Gendered speech community is the notion that a group of individuals have certain rules of communication and interpretation speech based on their gender (Mukhanovna, 2022). For instance, women are often times encouraged to smile more and give more response cues while listening to others, while men are expected to reserve emotions in various circumstances. An individual's biological sex is often times a segue into socialization into certain gendered speech communities. In the case of cisgender persons, a young boy may be socialized to have more masculine speech, whereas a young girl could be expected to exhibit more feminine speech. These gendered communication patterns have been widely studied in the realm of romantic relationships and friendships; however, there is a lacuna of research that looks at gendered differences in communication and its effects in healthcare setting (Bertakis, 2009).

A few studies have discerned communication styles of female and male physicians. For example, female physicians were seen to hold longer visits, made more positive and partnership statement (such as, "we can beat cancer together"), asked more questions and smiled and nodded more. Males and females were seen to tackle some subjects similarly like social conversation, technical support, or emotional support (Hall et al., 1994). In a meta-analysis by Roter and colleagues (2002), it was uncovered that female physicians showed more active partnership behaviors, positive talk, and emotionally focused talk compared to their male counterparts. Overall, they concluded that female physicians provided more "patient-centered care" (p. 763). As such, female physicians may be socialized from early age to exhibit softer side of communication, which is decoded as patient-centered in the healthcare setting.

It is also important to note that being a part of gendered speech communities not only influences a physician's communication style, but also the patient's interpretation of the said communication. The extant literature about patient's preference of physician's gender is differing. A study by Schmittdiel and colleagues (2000) studied the effects of same-gender and cross-gender physician-patient dyad on satisfaction after a visit about preventive care. They found that patients who interacted with the opposite-gender physician were more satisfied with their visit. However, participants articulated that during "sensitive visits" they would like to meet with a same-gender physician. In the case of gynecologist-obstetrician visits, patients have stated an explicit preference for a same-gender physicians (Janssen & Lagro-Janssen, 2012).

Past studies have presented controversial findings about the importance of gender concordance of patient-physician in the healthcare setting. However, the common thread presented here is that patients seemingly have a preference for physicians, especially when it comes to conversations regarding sexual health. As patient-physician relationship is unlike any other professional relationship (Levinson et al., 1984), discussion is warranted about the gender concordance of physicians and patients in healthcare setting, especially for sexual health discussions.

As listed in previous section, both physicians as well as patients are apprehensive when it comes to sexual health dialogues in healthcare setting. While previous studies have inconsistent results, one thing is clear—the topic of sexual health is important. Exploring the reasons of subdued sexual health discussions is lacking attention from the scholarly community. The goal of this qualitative study; therefore, is to investigate the importance of a physician's gender in inhibiting or facilitating an open discussion about sexual health from the patient's perspective. Guided by the literature and the theoretical framework, the present study explores some reasons why patients might prefer to talk to cross-gender or same-gender physicians regarding sexual health.

Methods

Participants

The sample analyzed included 139 women (62.9%) and 82 men (37.1%) between the ages of 18 and 81 years (M = 29.20 SD = 13.83). The majority (95.9%) of the sample identified as heterosexual (2.3% as lesbian/gay; 0.8% as bisexual). The sample was predominantly Caucasian (68.2%), followed by Asian (15.5%), African American (7.2%), Hispanic (3.4%), and those who identified as multi-racial (3.1%).

Procedure

An online survey was completed by 221 participants. The participants answered questions about sex/gender preferences of physicians while discussing sexual health concerns. The protocol for the present study was approved by Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. Initial set of participants were recruited from an undergraduate course at a large public university located in Northeastern United States. The study employed a form of snowball sampling (e.g., Quick, 2009), where students in a communication course were asked to recruit up to four participants in order to receive extra credit toward the course. Recruiting students were encouraged to approach potential study participants from diverse demographic backgrounds and did so using a recruitment message provided to them by the research team.

Individuals who were willing to participate were directed to an online survey consisting of a battery of questions regarding sexual health discussion preferences. Participants were asked to list their contact name, phone number, and referent's name as a quality control measure. The author contacted the participants via phone to ensure that a student had not completed the survey on their behalf. Later, any identifying information was deleted to maintain anonymity of the participants. Once the identifying information was removed, the author presented the data to research assistants for coding and analysis.

For the present study, the participants were asked to specify the gender/sex of the primary care physician with whom they would like to discuss sexual health. Next, they were also asked to describe in detail the specific reason for their choice. Both these questions were open-ended; thus, participants could answer to their liking.

Two coders reviewed the participant responses separately to generate broad themes. These themes were generated by systematically combing through all participant responses. The coders selected quotes that exemplified a certain theme. Following individual review of the responses, the coders reviewed each other's themes, summaries and quotes. If any inconsistencies were present, the coders reviewed the response till there was an agreement to reclassify the said response. For the next step, the coders narrowed down the themes further and collapsed different categories into one large theme to make the findings parsimonious. This resulted in an emergence of patters and explanations of certain gender preference of the physician over another.

Results

This study attempted to understand if a preference for gender/sex of the physician exists while discussing sexual health in a clinical setting. The participants were asked if they had a gender-preference and if yes, then why. Participants' responses were coded to understand the specific sex/gender preference of physicians while discussing sexual health. The majority of the participants (90.9%) noted that they would be more comfortable discussing sexual health with a same-gender physician. Around 3.7% expressed that they would prefer a cross-gender physician and finally around 5.5% of the respondents said they had no preference.

Participants were also asked to explain why they held the specific preference. Five themes emerged after data analysis for the same-gender group: (1) comfort, (2) similarity, (3) emotional support, (4) non-judgmental demeanor, and (5) identification of health concerns. By the same token, one super theme emerged for the cross-gender group: professional behavior. Below, the themes are explained in detail with exemplary quotes.

Same-Gender Preference

A rather large number of participants (n = 199) noted that they would rather speak to a same-gender physician than cross-gender physician about sexual health concerns. As the responses were coded, five themes emerged noted below.

Theme 1: Comfort. Comfort was the most frequently cited reason for same-gender preference of physicians. Some participants simply stated that talking to the same gender physician would yield more comfort. For instance, a female participant (18 years) simply stated "I guess it make me feel more comfortable." However, few participants went in depth to explain why they would feel more comfortable discussing sexual health with a same-gender physician.

Patients regard physicians as unfamiliar persons. Discussing sexual health with an unfamiliar person of cross-gender could be uncomfortable. The following statement captures this sentiment: "It makes the conversation with a complete stranger less awkward" (female, 19). Additionally, having the same-sex physician may help facilitate a conversation about sexual health. A male participant, 21, stated, "I would be able to discuss certain topics."

Physical examination by cross-gender physician was also regarded as uncomfortable. Participants mentioned that it would be preferred if a same sex physician conducted the physical examination. For example, a female participant, 52, wrote that she has "had both male and female [gynecologists] and [I] feel that the females are more understanding of my specific issues. I am also more comfortable having a female physically examine my 'female' parts." A male participant, 20, stated, "I feel it would be awkward talking about my sexual health in front of a woman and having her check what the problem is."

Theme 2: Similarity. When asked about reasons for preference of a same-gender physician, many participants alluded to the notion that physical similarity can lead to more comfort and can help physicians relate to the problem better. Participants also mentioned that it would be generally easy to strike a conversation about sexual health with a physician of the same gender. One participant underlined this theme by writing, "Just seems easier to talk to someone with the same 'equipment'" (male, 25), implying that same-sex physician would better understand biological issues pertaining to sexual health.

Most participants mentioned that physicians will be able to understand the problem better because they are "in the same shoes" as the participants. A female participant, 59, mentioned, "I [will] feel more comfortable with someone who 'knows what it's like.' The same sex physician would understand hormone fluctuations, [menopause] symptoms first hand [and] not from a textbook."

As per the participants, same-gender/sex physician would not only understand the biological aspects but also understand the social pressures associated with belonging to a particular sex. The following statement captures the sentiment of this subject, “A female doctor might understand my personal feelings about weight and stress better” (female, 20).

Theme 3: Emotional Support. Emotional support was another theme observed. Participants have explicitly stated that same-gender physicians lend more emotional support and might understand the patients better. A male participant, 25, explained, “Perhaps because someone of the same sex can have empathy. There is desire for understanding. What better way to feel you’re understood than by someone with the same type of reproductive organs?” Another female participant, 25, resonated the same sentiment. She wrote, “I feel more comfortable speaking to another woman because I feel she will be more understanding knowledgeable and empathetic because of her own sex.”

T*heme 4:* Non-Judgmental Demeanor. As sexual health is a sensitive topic, participants have expressed the need for physicians to be nonjudgmental. Many participants attributed nonjudgmental behavior to same-gender physicians. A male participant, 20, highlighted this feeling by stating, “I would be more comfortable discussing my sexual activities with a male doctor instead of female doctor. I would feel like the female would be judging me.” Another female participant (18) shared the same sentiment: “If I were to discuss sexual [matters], I would just feel more comfortable talking to a woman since I think I would feel less judged than by talking with a male.”

Theme 5: Identification of Health Concerns. The last theme for preference for same-gender physicians is about identification of health concerns. A few participants believe that if the physician is the same-gender as the patient, it is easier for the physicians to identify the symptoms. For instance, a male participant, 21, stated, “I feel like a male physician would know more about things about guys and can give me the right answers.” A female participant, 81, echoed the same by saying, “It is easier to talk with the [doctor] who is of my sex and there should be more understanding of my concerns.”

Cross-Gender Preference

Just a handful of participants (n = 8) expressed that they would prefer a cross-sex physician. The participants’ responses can be best described under the theme “professional behavior.”

Theme: Professional Behavior. Participants noted that physicians of the cross-sex/gender might conduct themselves in a professional manner without getting too personal about sexual health issues. This theme primarily deals with physician’s behavior and demeanor.

A small number of male participants expressed that they feel that female physicians are better at communicating in the healthcare setting; thus, they prefer talking to a female physician regarding sexual health. The following quote captures this emotion: “I feel better for it to be a woman because females generally are better at expressing bad information or good information” (male, 22).

Few participants articulated that talking to a cross-gender physician might bring in a different perspective. An individual of the same sex may not to be able to present an array of perspectives; hence few individuals turn to a physician of the opposite sex. A female participant, 23, expressed, “At times [it is] helpful to get the perspective of someone of the opposite sex.”

Discussion

The present study asks a simple yet important question that can foster better sexual health communication between patients and primary care physicians by investigating the importance of gender of the physician when discussing sexual health. In particular, participants were asked to indicate if they prefer same-gender or cross-gender physician. While the study at hand evidenced that majority of participants favor same-gender physician, there is scholarly contention regarding this topic. For instance, Schmittdiel et al., (2000) found that patients were more satisfied with opposite-gender physicians in a preventive care setting, whereas Janssen and Largo-Janssen (2012) noted that women prefer seeing female gynecologist and report higher levels of satisfaction after such interactions compared to male gynecologists. After taking a hard look at the matter, it is evident that the context of patient-physician interaction is the key.

The findings of this study fall within the broad framework of Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The main tenant of this theory is that individuals feel uncertain during an initial interaction and they employ various strategies to reduce this uncertainty. URT’s prediction that similarity fosters liking which in turn increases disclosure (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) can be found under Theme 2 in same-gender preference. Prior research on this topic states that patients are already sensitive about the perceived social distance between themselves and the physicians. This is characterized by the use of filler words, long pauses or not discussing a health issue altogether (Sheer & Cline, 1995). Perceived social distance coupled with dissimilarity in basic physiological aspects can make discussing sexual health with physicians a tough task

(Fuzzel et al., 2016). Respondents in this study have highlighted that due to the fact that same-gender physicians share similar experiences or social proclivities; they are more comfortable sharing information with them. Moreover, this extends to physical comfort where participants insist that same-sex physician touch them during routine sexual health examination. In fact, few participants articulated that they feel more comfortable discussing sexual health with same-gender physicians because of similarity between the patients and physicians.

Two themes, emotional support and non-judgmental demeanor, can be justified using one of URT's axioms as well. URT states that non-verbal affiliative expressiveness or in other words "warmth" plays an integral factor to decreasing uncertainty in situations (Knobloch & McAninch, 2015). A simple nod or an appropriate eye contact can put a person at ease. However, appropriate non-verbal cues are subjective and can be difficult to discern based on context. As previously mentioned, children are often times socialized into gender-based speech communities, and one of the aspects of belonging to a certain speech community is the ability to decode certain non-verbal cues. What may seem as a kind gesture to a person belonging to one speech community, might be interpreted as a hostile gesture in another. For instance, after breaking news about a health ailment, a female physician might say "you may want to bring your partner to the next appointment." This can be interpreted as providing support or creating equality by female patients, but male patients could deem this communication as an act of a non-confident physician because of the use of words "may want to bring," which is a tentative style of speaking. In the present context, same-gender dyads who have similar speech patterns maybe a better match to talk about sensitive issues such as sexual health.

While the majority of the participants articulated their preference for same-gender physicians, a small number of participants stated they would like cross-gender physicians. Their responses were coded into one theme, namely professional behavior. Participants articulated that a variety of perspectives and answers regarding sexual health could be beneficial. A few participants preferred non-prying behavior, limited judgment and being touched by opposite-sex physician. Further, it is important to note that a handful of male participants stated that they would prefer a female physician because they can communicate better. This preference has been noted repeatedly in the gynecology/obstetrics department, but not in family medicine. Calling back to gendered speech community, we see that feminine speech is characterized by showing support and maintaining relationships (Wood & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2019). Healthcare providers can take note of this response, as feminine speech style may work for individuals who are not open to sexual health discussions with their physicians.

Finally, all participants regardless of their preference of physician's gender echoed the idea of openly discussing sexual health with physicians. While gender of the physician was one of the several barriers discussed in this patient-centered study, physicians should not be inhibited to broach the topic of sexual health. Immediate attention should be given to the topic of sexual health as many patients suffer in silence, waiting for physicians to broach the topic (Corona et al., 2006).

The present study provides one piece of the puzzle when it comes to discussing sexual health in a healthcare setting. The findings of this study have implications for clinical-setting—not just for physicians but for any individual who comes in contact with the patient including the appointment scheduler. In a larger hospital setting, patients are often offered an appointment with the next available physician. Keeping the findings of this study in mind, patients should be given options patients should be given options to choose their physician. Rather than just listing ambiguous names of the next available physician, the scheduler should be sensitive to the patient's preferences. The appointment scheduler can state the name and other identifying factors (gender, languages spoken etc.) while listing the available physicians. Furthermore, many patients pick their physician based on their insurance network. Insurance companies web portals should clearly state the sex/gender of the doctor for the patients to see. By taking such measures, healthcare professionals can eliminate the guessing game, and let the patients be in charge of whom they are picking as their physician based on their gender preference.

Conclusion

Several factors should be considered when looking at the results of this study. As this study was conducted in United States, the findings of this study may not be extended to different cultures and countries around the world. Studies could use minority groups and patients from various cultures as their population and compare the results to the present study. Future research could also look into role of ethnicity concordance while talking about sexual health. Various ethnicities may have different predispositions towards gender preferences. While this study uses a robust snowball sample yielding responses from individuals of various ages and backgrounds, it should be kept in mind that the sample could have certain biases. For instance, the sampling was initiated from undergraduate students at a large public university resulting in a particular leaning in certain demographics (i.e. education, race, income). As this study uses qualitative data, future researchers are cautioned not be broadly generalize its findings. Next, the present study only takes into account preferences of patients. Studies in the future should also look at physician's preferences for treating same-sex/gender or cross-sex/gender patients.

To conclude, sexual health is a part of overall health and well-being. Patients and providers have listed various reasons for not discussing sexual health with each other. However, previous research has ignored something as simple as the other party's gender as a facilitator or inhibitor of open sexual health discussion. The present study asked individuals with diverse demographics to express their desire to talk to same-gender or cross-gender physician. Majority of the respondents felt that same-gender physician was a better option while discussing sexual health. Various themes like comfort, similarity, emotional support, non-judgmental demeanor, and identification of health concerns emerged after coding for their responses. Using URT, it can be justified that similarity, even if it is gender or biological sex, reduces uncertainty and in turn fosters open conversations. Future studies should look at the influence of other demographics factors such as ethnicity on sexual health discussions.

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“You know what that tastes like? Like a company that doesn’t support genocide:” Thematic analysis of TikTok users’ boycott of Starbucks Coffee during the Israel–Hamas conflict

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Abstract
As the Israel–Hamas conflict raged in the Gaza Strip, the world saw numbers of individuals and corporations offer competing support to the two sides. As the conflict spanned over a year, more individuals took to social media to spread messages decrying the war and the companies that were identified as purportedly supporting Israel. In this study, we conducted a thematic analysis of boycott messages targeting Starbucks on TikTok, examining how protesters crafted content to persuade viewers to join the campaign against the coffee giant. The results of our analysis indicated a creation of messages rooted in rhetoric that placed the content creators and those who support them in a position of moral superiority to anyone who did not agree with their message or did not comply with the implied demand to stop patronizing Starbucks. This echoes the work of Dalakas et al. (2022) in the categorization of boycott messages and the work of Zulli and Zulli (2022) in finding reinforcement with mimetic replication of content and the establishment of “imitation publics.” This work also explored the implications of social media boycotting messages and the power of viral content to influence behavior and financially affect businesses.
Keywords: Social media activism, Starbucks boycott, Outrage culture, Imitation publics, Thematic analysis

Soon after the commencement of the Israel-Hamas conflict, individuals took to social media in response to reported corporate stances on the war, specifically those from companies purporting to support Israel. Although many companies issued statements about the conflict, none faced as much backlash and subsequent protest as Starbucks. Calls for an immediate boycott emerged, with critics alleging that Starbucks' perceived support for Israel equated to endorsing genocide against Palestinians. The boycott movement snowballed, spreading through social media platforms and traditional media outlets within days. TikTok, a social media platform that hosts 1.5 billion monthly users (Singh, 2025), became one of the primary spaces where people voiced their concerns and directed their ire at Starbucks. At the height of the boycott, Starbucks reported a loss of 11 billion dollars (Smilguis, 2023), prompting the coffee giant to engage in a goodwill campaign to win back its customers, as well as the ousting of the chief executive, Laxman Narasimhan, in August, 2024 (Woolfson, 2024).

Though certainly not novel, the act of boycotting took on a new feature through TikTok, allowing users to spread their disgust with Starbucks internationally. Protesters leveraged TikTok's popularity, with each post amplifying the unified boycott message to a broader audience. Here, we explore the behaviors included by protesters in the boycott TikToks and the themes that emerged from an analysis of these short video posts.

Literature Review

Social Media and Social Movements

Social media has long served as a tool for social movements due to its accessibility, extensive reach, and ability to connect diverse communities. These platforms provide a "salience of connectivity" (Mundt et al., 2018, p.11) and a unique opportunity for people with similar views, experiences, and cultures to discuss and disseminate thoughts, ideas, and criticisms freely. Social media also entices users with the possibility of going "viral," in which any post can potentially "gain unimaginable popularity and attention and break through time, spatial, and geographical boundaries globally" (Bebić & Volarevic, 2018, p. 44-45). However, scholars have also examined the limitations of social media as a platform for political communication and activism. Widespread social media activism campaigns that have seen tangible results in the past include the #BlackLivesMatter and the #MeToo campaigns. #BlackLivesMatter found its foothold during the Ferguson protests of 2014 and after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020. The #MeToo campaign of 2017 encouraged survivors of sexual harassment and assault to share their stories to increase solidarity and support. This campaign led to the public downfall of figures like Harvey Weinstein, legislative changes addressing workplace harassment, and increased awareness of gender-based violence.

The occurrence of simplifications, extreme points of view, and moral rages (Bouvier & Machin, 2021) can result in the spread of misinformation and abandonment of critical thinking, as well as creating disproportionate levels of indignance. People "bring in their own understanding of history and culture to direct their anger at an authority they deem responsible for the crisis" (Sharma, 2023, p. 40), even if this understanding and/or blame is misplaced. Sharma discussed the role of emotion in online activism in a study focusing on India's 2020 migrant crisis, finding that digital moral outrage and collective guilt were significant in garnering collective action on Twitter. High emotion has been suggested to affect—even skew—the outcome of a social media movement. Additionally, "online activism has been variably described as 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism,'" (Bhatia & Ross, 2022, p. 119); that is, it has been criticized as a front for true activism, presenting the opportunity for people to say a lot but do little.

Social Movements on TikTok

Lee and Abidin (2023) described TikTok as "a locus of contestation for social (in)justice and politics" (p. 2). They explored the aspects of TikTok that make it so useful and appealing in this area, including its "unique tools for creativity" and "playful meme culture" (p. 3). The platform's broad participatory affordances and the ease—as well as risk—of public shaming, are also discussed as notable features that allow users to congregate around themes or movements. "Many users have found meaningful ways to engage with the platform and its cultures by leading and participating in a variety of activist initiatives for global awareness, social change, and civic politics" (Lee & Abidin, 2023, p. 1).

Virtue Signaling

According to James Bartholomew, virtue signaling, a term introduced in 2015, is the open expression of moral values or positions to improve one's self-image or social status rather than advancing any real cause or issue (Bartholomew, 2015). It is a development widely seen nowadays within the territory of social media, where individuals use platforms to demonstrate their loyalty to some moral values or beliefs in public. The prevalence of virtue signaling in online discourse prompts concerns about its genuineness and impact, overshadowing the diversity of its manifestations. Because of its ease in voicing support with no real commitment or action required, it has also earned the name "slacktivism" for its low-effort activities online rather than being actively engaged or putting in significant effort (Muslic, 2017).

A boycott is a unique version of consumer activism and collective endeavor that is directed toward changing corporate conduct or enunciating political disapproval. The "playful meme culture" of TikTok, as noted by Lee and Abidin (2023, p. 3), and public humiliation dynamics of the platform, provide a ground for a boycotting event. Nevertheless, the way users employ these platform features to disseminate the boycott messages is unexplored. In addition, virtue signaling on social media is the main reason why hope about activities related to boycotters is tarnished and their influence in real life questioned. Although virtue signaling can push some issues to the forefront of the public opinion agenda, there are doubts about whether it leads to anything other than simple low-energy "slacktivism." Here, exploring how users of TikTok communicate boycott messages provides insight into the level of involvement and the possibility of the platform as an agent of change. Answering this question will deepen the understanding of contemporary consumer activism, the interaction between virtual discussion and on-the-ground activism, and the special characteristics of TikTok that influence these activities.

RQ1: How are content creators using TikTok videos and their text captions to send messages about boycotts on TikTok?

Method

Sample

This study used purposive sampling (Miles et al., 2014) by the researchers for 100 of the most popular TikTok videos (TikToks) using the hashtag "#boycottstarbucks" that were posted between October 2023 and March 2024. Some TikToks appeared multiple times in the top 100 list due to reposting by other users. These duplicates were removed from the sample and replaced with less popular posts further down the list.

Thematic Analysis

Four themes were identified by classifying boycott behavior posts on the TikTok video platform. These existing categories were *Informational, Stand for Justice, Holier than Thou, and In the Trenches*. Each category increased in emotional attachment to the message and the more direct actions taken in the TikToks. Informational TikToks directly conveyed information about the context of the situation and represented both sides of the conflict. *Stand for Justice* featured people feeling conflicted about their decision to ultimately give up Starbucks purchasing in all forms. *Holier than Thou* showed people actively bragging about their boycott behavior and belonging to the boycott efforts with pride. Some videos would also condemn and shame others not participating in the boycott. *In the Trenches* showed imagery of protests and overt acts of disruption to others beyond individual boycotting behavior. These TikToks also showed organized acts of defiance and protest, either with a group of people or alone.

Two coders reviewed and categorized each TikTok video into one of four themes. To measure intercoder reliability, Cohen's Kappa test was conducted. The test results indicated substantial reliability among the coders (k = 0.78; see Viera & Garrett, 2005).

Results

Of the 100 videos sampled, 60 of the posts were sorted into the third category: *Holier than Thou*. These videos were characterized by text, speech, and/or visuals that depicted the poster espousing their moral superiority because they supported the cause of the boycott and used the video to shame viewers who were not participating in the effort. Videos in this category also emphasized belonging to an exclusive in-group of boycotters through language featuring inclusive terms, such as "we." An example of one of these TikToks was the video – titular to this work – that sparked a viral sound inspiring many similar posts: a woman drinking an iced coffee with the dialogue, "You know what that tastes like? Like a company that doesn't support genocide" (ericasbookshelf, 2023).

The *Informational* section was the second most prominent of the four, classified by creators who explained the Starbucks boycott, its reasoning, and/or its consequences for the company with the smallest amount of emotion. However, of essential note is some bias or agenda was detected in all of these TikToks; a finding that will be discussed in more depth later. A video from this category, which could be argued as the most objective of the group, was posted by a woman explaining the reasoning behind the Starbucks boycott, specifically regarding their stance on the Israel-Hamas conflict (feliciaforthewin, 2023).

The *Stand for Justice* category was the most contested of the four, having the least intercoder agreement. These videos were characterized by discomfort at the loss of Starbucks and/or a tone of exasperation or annoyance at the brand. They were recognized to be an obvious statement about the creator and their actions, but unlike the *Holier than Thou* category, these creators did not focus on shaming others who were not boycotting. One video placed in this category by both coders features a girl filming her boycotting experience at the airport as she looks for a coffee shop other than Starbucks. She expresses distress at the fact that she wants to buy Starbucks, but still refuses to go, even stating that she plans to never purchase from the company again due to their actions (lovelylivingtravel, 2024).

Only nine of the videos fit into the *In the Trenches* category, which depicted scenes of people posting signs describing Starbucks as a supporter of murder and genocide, individual content creators going to Starbucks stores yelling at people spending money there, and large protest rallies outside of various Starbucks locations with bullhorns and chants to deter people from patronizing the location. This pro-boycott behavior could also fit in the *Holier than Thou* category. Still, we felt this was a step further into the emotional and active severity of the content creator's actions in public settings rather than their purchasing behavior. These videos were also unique because they featured direct actions taken in the real world to advance or support the boycott. One post in this section showed a college student who had set up a coffee bar in his dorm room to try and persuade other students not to go to Starbucks (calvintanny, 2023).

While classifying the TikToks, both coders agreed upon a subcategory often appearing as an undertone, regardless of the post's assorted category. These videos made it a point to express their belonging to the collective identity of the boycotting effort and/or the support of the Palestinian people. This theme came to be referred to as Solidarity. Though the word "we" is constantly used in these videos, the majority of them were filmed by a single person. The aforementioned "solidarity," as well as the audience being addressed, are imagined, fostered, and perpetuated by the unifying social environment of TikTok's platform. There is no other physical person present; there is only hope that those identifying with the group will be on the other side of the screen. It is never made fully clear what behaviors constitute full participation, and this solidarity is expressed in different ways. One example of this occurrence, classified by both coders to be part of the *Holier than Thou* category, features a man discussing the role of class solidarity in making change and urging people to become part of the collective by boycotting Starbucks (trapwitch, 2023). Though there could be a moral superiority component to the videos in the *Holier than Thou* category, examples like this emphasize the multiple needs these posts fulfill, such as emotional and social solidarity for the cause.

Overall, the results of this thematic analysis highlight the reactions of TikTok creators involved in the Starbucks boycott through a categorization of each post into one of four categories: *Holier than Thou*, Informative, *Stand for Justice*, and *In the Trenches*. Findings concluded that most videos fell into the *Holier than Thou* section, and few were classified as *In the Trenches*. Almost every video was emotionally charged in some capacity, even those in the *Informational* group with a perceived exclusively factual and educational motivation. This theme, coupled with other patterns in the videos, exhibits the communicative abilities of the medium and the democratized messages of the boycott discourse.

Discussion

Outside of the research questions for this study, another pattern emerged in the analysis of the TikToks: replication. The repeating pattern included instances of the embedded sound "You know what that tastes like? Like a company that doesn't support genocide" (ericasbookshelf, 2023), and the content creator's presentation style was almost always in the same format of being in the frame as a digital bust talking to the viewer. Zulli and Zulli (2022) stated the mimetic properties of TikTok as a platform are built into the user interface, and the use of popularized sounds underpin the videos created. If a content creator wants to be included in the list of videos of a popular sound category, they have to use that audio in some way in their post. The more the sound is used, the more the related videos will appear in the algorithmically-led feed for TikTok users. Every video on the platform has the sound used listed at the bottom with the encouragement to "use this sound" to make another original post, contributing to the popularity of the sound-linked videos. It is important to note that TikTok was originally called Musical.ly and built on the practice of lip-synching to specific sounds, again reinforcing the memetic qualities of the platform.

Expanding on the memetic qualities, we saw greater support for the idea of "imitation publics," as coined by Zulli and Zulli (2022). They state that these imitation publics are "a collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication" (p. 1882), making the users feel like they are a part of the in-group. The "we" spoken about so much in the video sample of this study may be referring to this "imitation public" created through the boycott videos.

With most videos falling into the *Holier than Thou* and *Informational* categories, *Stand for Justice* and *In the Trenches* had fewer than one-sixth of the videos. We suppose these differences stem from the TikTok platform versus a text-based platform like Twitter. With Twitter, a user just needs to think about what they want to say, type, and then post, whereas, with TikTok, a user needs to think about what they need to say, prepare themselves or the content to be posted, film sometimes multiple times, trim and edit in some cases, then post. The extra effort needed by the TikTok post versus the Twitter post necessitates greater motivation, possibly by emotions like outrage. This additional personal connection to the created content may be why there is an emotional undercurrent to nearly all the videos examined. *Stand for Justice* may have been fewer because it was defined as showing some conflict of the decision in a polarizing issue, which could open them up to criticism on either side or the user would have little motivation to share their internal conflict because it wasn’t that difficult of a decision for them or there wasn’t enough emotional impetus. Another finding from Dalakas et al. (2022) that our research supported was that consumers were often driven to engage in activism by psychological needs rather than concrete outcome-focused goals (p. 3).

It is important to note the practical implications this research presents for corporations. By understanding how people respond to perceived injustices committed by companies, brands can help ensure that, in the case that they find themselves “in the eye of the storm” (Dalakas et al., 2022, p. 1), they can steer themselves out of the line of fire. This research supports the idea that TikTok presents a unique opportunity to spread a message in viral capacity through the tool of replicable “sounds.” Furthermore, the fact that most of the analyzed TikToks fell into the *Holier than Thou* category suggests that emotion plays an especially prominent role in modern social movements and boycott behaviors, especially the spiral known as outrage culture.

The capability of platforms such as TikTok to sustain messages like boycott calls presents a possible threat to corporations, as shown by the Starbucks boycott. Based on our findings, we recommend that brands craft responses tailored to the enraged or otherwise emotional audience. Knowing emotional responses usually cannot be combated with defense or logic, but with validation and alternative paths to expressing that emotion, a targeted company might find a way to redirect the reaction toward another source. In the case of the Starbucks boycott, the brand might consider providing information on where interested parties can donate to the victims or otherwise offer real-life solutions to appease and refocus boycotters. This tactic also can help society on a larger scale.

Conclusion

At the outset, we sought to explore the use of TikTok to produce boycotting messages in a campaign to call out Starbucks for ostensibly supporting a genocide. Through the viral nature of social media, users and influencers reproduced a call to avoid supporting Starbucks, one that was heard far and wide. Based on an analysis of these short video messages, we found the majority of producers took a negatively valenced “holier than thou” approach to encouraging viewers to boycott Starbucks. This finding makes sense, given the tendency for TikTok to encourage mirroring and replication of user-generated content. These findings represent an initial exploration of this social media movement and, therefore, must be taken with consideration of inherent shortcomings.

Some limitations in collection and analysis mitigated this study’s results. One limitation includes using a single platform to examine the phenomenon of video posting on social media. Though a wider variety of social media posts may have garnered more variety in posting behaviors and content, the memetic quality of TikTok as a platform (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) contributes to a specific form of content creation. The TikToks were also collected three months after the initial incitement of the boycott call. This allowed more time for people to elaborate on the original posting of other TikTok users and build a variation of more personalized content and reasoning that might not have existed at the beginning of the boycott (though this also provided us with a broader array of content to analyze). This research only looked at one boycott movement, which, while allowing for a deeper examination of the topic, does limit its generalizability to similar situations. In addition, this study could not look at direct behavior change in the Starbucks customers at large who viewed these TikToks. It is only through the assumed correlation of the timelines of the beginning of the boycott efforts in late 2023, and the 11 billion dollars in reported market loss in less than a month (Smiligus, 2023), that we assume the boycott message was successful. Nonetheless, intervening factors, such as unionization struggles and a volatile stock market, also likely influenced that figure. Finally, the presence of more than two coders might have improved the dependability of the study’s intercoder reliability rate.

This study has supported a better understanding of boycott behavior, the potential of TikTok to form and perpetuate social movements, and the communicative patterns of people engaging in a collective identity. Future research could explore other social movements on TikTok to see how the findings match the discoveries highlighted in this paper. It would also be worthwhile to see if similar movements have expanded to additional social media platforms with video-sharing capabilities, such as Snapchat and Instagram.

Finally, future research should compare the types of boycott messages generated on different social media platforms to determine how the platform influences the spread and temperature of a given message. Returning to the present study, the findings offer a glimpse into the real power of boycott messages to influence behavior across large numbers of people and, more importantly, the actual consequences that befall companies deemed to have committed a social faux pas.

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Leveraging Parasocial Relationships for Crisis Management: Tim Ballard's Use of Social Media

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Abstract
This study examines the role of parasocial relationships—one-sided bonds between media figures and audiences—in crisis management, using Tim Ballard of Operation Underground Railroad as a case study. Amid allegations of misconduct, Ballard's use of Instagram was analyzed through parasocial interaction theory. A rhetorical analysis of comments on his posts revealed that most were supportive or defensive, highlighting the strength of parasocial bonds in maintaining public image. The findings emphasize the power of narrative control and emotional appeal in crisis situations and underscore the importance of critical media literacy in understanding media influence.
Keywords: parasocial relationships, crisis management, Tim Ballard, social media, public perception, narrative persuasion, media literacy.

Tim Ballard, former CEO and founder of Operation Underground Railroad (O.U.R.), an organization dedicated to rescuing children from sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, has recently faced allegations of sexual misconduct and misuse of organizational funds (Operation Underground Railroad, n.d.; Winn, 2023). Despite these allegations, Ballard remains a significant figure in conservative circles, especially following the release of the film "Sound of Freedom," which is based on his experiences (Helmore, 2023). This study examines how Ballard's use of parasocial interactions, particularly through Instagram, has influenced public perception and maintained his image amidst controversy.

Utilizing parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), this study conducts a qualitative rhetorical analysis of Ballard's Instagram posts and the public's responses to them. The research explores the dynamics of these one-sided relationships and how Ballard's strategic use of social media impacts his credibility and the public's trust. By analyzing comments and themes, the study aims to understand the manipulation of parasocial relationships for personal advantage and the broader implications for public figures leveraging such interactions during crises (Ballard, 2023; Horton & Wohl, 1956). This research contributes to the discourse on media, celebrity behavior, and consumer trust, highlighting the ethical considerations of such mediated relationships.

Literature Review

Tim Ballard, founder of O.U.R., became a prominent figure in the fight against child trafficking, with his work dramatized in the film "Sound of Freedom" (Helmore, 2023; Jessen, 2024). However, serious allegations have tarnished his reputation, raising ethical concerns. This study will analyze Ballard's use of social media to maintain his public image, focusing on how his Instagram activity influences his credibility and the public's trust (Jessen, 2024). Through a qualitative rhetorical analysis of his posts and public comments, the study seeks to understand the manipulation of parasocial relationships during personal and professional scandals, contributing to the discourse on media, celebrity behavior, and consumer trust.

Tim Ballard

Tim Ballard, the founder of Operation Underground Railroad (O.U.R.), gained prominence as a leading figure in the global fight against child trafficking. His organization, dedicated to rescuing children from sex trafficking, received widespread acclaim for its daring operations and high-profile successes. The film "Sound of Freedom," which dramatized Ballard's efforts, further elevated his status as a hero in the anti-trafficking movement, captivating audiences and raising significant funds and awareness for the cause (Helmore, 2023).

O.U.R.'s operations often involved undercover missions where Ballard and his team posed as potential clients to rescue victims and apprehend traffickers. These dramatic rescue operations, combined with effective storytelling and media coverage, helped build Ballard's reputation as a fearless crusader for justice (Jessen, 2024). The film "Sound of Freedom" grossed over $100 million at the box office, portraying Ballard's work in a heroic light (Helmore, 2023).

Ballard's reputation took a significant hit with a series of allegations and lawsuits. In October 2023, a lawsuit in Utah accused Ballard of sexually assaulting several women under the guise of conducting rescue operations, using a tactic known as the "couples ruse" to coerce women into sexual acts (Branigin & Scribner, 2023). The plaintiffs alleged that Ballard exploited his authority and the mission's context for personal gratification. Claims were also made that O.U.R. and its board members were aware of Ballard's misconduct but failed to act, raising questions about the organization's ethical standards and internal controls (Helmore, 2023).

In response, Ballard vehemently denied any wrongdoing, asserting that the "couples ruse" was a legitimate tactic for safety and effectiveness. He claimed the evidence against him was improperly obtained, framing the allegations as part of a smear campaign (Beal-Cvetko, 2023). O.U.R. also denied the allegations, stating that their operations were conducted ethically and that the lawsuits did not reflect their standard practices. Despite these denials, the public scandal has severely damaged Ballard's reputation and O.U.R.'s credibility, highlighting the need for rigorous oversight and accountability within non-profit organizations (Branigin & Scribner, 2023).

Parasocial Interaction Theory

Parasocial interaction theory refers to the reaction of a media user to another individual (usually with some degree of fame) in media where the media user views the celebrity as a close friend (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial theory was developed to attempt to explain the imaginary relationships between individuals and those who are distant (such as celebrities on social media) from the audience, and do not reciprocate communication (Stever, 2017). There is no real interaction happening between individuals, rather the communication is one-sided, is not reciprocated, and the relationship is essentially imagined by the other person (Horton & Wohl, 1956). While the social interactions are similar to in-person interactions, the response of a social partner is little to none in parasocial interactions (Stever, 2017). These interactions develop into a parasocial relationship as the person engaging in the parasocial interaction feels as if there is a reciprocated relationship with gradual relationship growth and thus builds rapport with the other person (Whang & Im, 2020). Such relationships are initiated or strengthened when the celebrity seemingly communicates in familiar ways with media users through the computer (Dibble et al., 2015), which is most often done through various social media today. In discussing similarities between parasocial interaction and social interaction, researcher David C. Giles (2002) stated:

> *"It seems likely that, once we have made a person judgment about a media figure, or attributed person characteristics to that figure (e.g., an anthropomorphized cartoon animal), then we will subsequently respond to that figure "as if" it occupies our physical space, thereby becoming incorporated into our social network. If this is the case, then we might expect to identify similar psychological processes underpinning the course of parasocial relationships to those found in face-to-face relationships." (pp. 283-284)*

Parasocial interactions begin when a public figure acknowledges the presence of the audience in their interaction, incorporates a more natural, conversational style such as in informal in-person gatherings, and physically and verbally acknowledges their audience (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Strauss, 1958). According to Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2011), users' parasocial interaction experience is "characterized by a felt reciprocity with a TV performer that comprises a sense of mutual awareness, attention, and adjustment" (p. 1107). Also apparent is that cues given by a media figure such as eye-gazing or body language interactions can increase the parasocial experiences wherein the user infers and uses intuition to take part in the parasocial interaction experience (Cummins & Cui, 2014; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011) Parasocial relationships can be used for the benefit of the individual celebrity or for companies or organizations who use the celebrity in their marketing.

Parasocial relationships are characterized by the concern, time, and energy audiences dedicate toward media figures, which develops into an intimate awareness of the public figure (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Tukachinsky & Eyal, 2018). "...[R]esearchers have observed that people are more likely to socially disclose personal information, display interpersonal empathy, and show decreases in social rejection-related cognitive impairments after being primed with their favorite media figure" (Knowles, 2007, as cited in Riles & Adams, 2020, pp. 792-793). Strong interest in media figures--whether spurned by adoration or dislike--could be a large part of parasocial relationships due to long-lasting interest being a necessary factor in the experience for continued investment needed to achieve such relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956, as cited inRiles & Adams, 2020). By establishing credibility with viewers, celebrities can achieve success in securing endorsement contracts which in turn help companies sell products because of the famous person's recommendation/approval of the product (Ledbetter & Redd, 2016).

Theorizing on parasocial interaction, a celebrity's persuasive message can increase business through parasocial narratives which decreases the likelihood of the audience finding counterarguments (Clementson & Beatty, 2023). "Several studies have revealed that strong consumer-brand relationships can mitigate the detrimental impacts of negative information or transgressions (Kim et al., 2014; Sinha & Lu, 2015, as cited in Aw & Labrecque, 2022, p. 390). When celebrities or the organizations endorsed by celebrities make missteps, parasocial relationships can be used to influence users' perceptions. Brands can use persuasive communication to minimize negative impacts by somewhat controlling the reactions of consumers or fans (Aw & Labrecque, 2022). Just as people tend to be protective and defend loved ones in their lives, the same can be true in computer mediated relationships. "...[P]eople often find themselves caring about mediated figures (e.g., celebrities, athletes, fictional characters, etc.), and even developing long-term socioemotional bonds with them, as if the mediated other were an acquaintance, a friend, or a loved one" (Pimienta, 2023, p. 4). With the strong bond of parasocial relationships, media users may be willing to overlook controversies their celebrities are involved in.

Because of parasocial relationships, celebrities are seen as credible to media users, and thus can enhance sales when the celebrity endorses a product (Burnasheva & Suh, 2020). Social media influencers can have a similar impact. While not traditional celebrities, influencers' parasocial relationships and interactions with their followers are paramount in order to create reputational capital and endorsement effectiveness, which is less vital for traditional celebrities (Hess et al., 2022). Additionally, a perceived weak parasocial relationship or interaction has less impact on the success of an endorsement of a celebrity than it does for social media influencers (Hess et al., 2022). Celebrities can be used in brand repair when their fan-established credibility is used in persuasive ways within parasocial interactions to mitigate negative consequences, or conversely, brands or organizations may sever ties with a celebrity to save their reputation when the individual acts negatively.

The credibility of a celebrity often increases the more parasocial interactions occur (Madison et al., 2019) whether through television programming or social media. While celebrity endorsers gain credibility through achievements and can create more positive impacts with their reputational capital while endorsing brands, the same may not be said with social media influencers (Hess et al., 2022). Studies have examined the credibility of a source when determining the celebrity's impact on how effective their persuasive messages are (Manchanda et al., 2021). Whether a celebrity has established high levels of credibility or not can have a huge effect on public perceptions. When a media figure misbehaves, this can damage parasocial relationships (Tukachinsky, 2019). In fact, Tukachinsky (2019) stated that college students found that social or moral misbehavior of their beloved media figures would damage how they felt about that person, and such relationship damage would be even greater than if such misbehavior occurred in real life friendships. This suggests that the persuasiveness or credibility of the celebrity would be damaged, leading to negative attitudes about the celebrity and/or any brands they endorsed (Tukachinsky, 2019). Actions or behaviors of celebrities or social media influencers can damage parasocial interactions and relationships and have a potential impact on any organizations or companies they work with.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilizing parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) to explore the dynamics of relationships that audiences form with media figures. Focusing on Tim Ballard amidst allegations of misconduct and misuse of funds from Operation Underground Railroad, the research analyzed his Instagram activity. The data collection involved selecting relevant Instagram posts addressing the allegations, extracting the first 25 comments from each, and categorizing them based on their nature—supportive, defensive, showing signs of betrayal, or directly addressing the allegations.

The sample included comments from eight of Ballard's posts made after the allegations surfaced, amounting to 200 comments in total. These comments were placed in a spreadsheet for coding, with each category assigned a specific color. This process allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the comments to understand how Ballard's parasocial relationships were impacted by the allegations and his subsequent Instagram statements. The rhetorical analysis aimed to identify common themes and patterns, providing insights into the public's perception and trust in Ballard.

The study considered assumptions, limitations, and delimitations to ensure rigorous analysis. While the sample size provided a representative trend, analyzing all comments or comparing pre- and post-allegation comments could yield more comprehensive insights. The study did not include replies to comments, which might show public discourse among audience members. Despite these limitations, the sample was adequate to explain the parasocial interactions and relationships Ballard has cultivated.

Ethical assurances were maintained as the Instagram posts and comments are public. User anonymity was preserved by not including specific usernames. Potential researcher biases were acknowledged but deemed not particularly relevant to the study's problem or purpose. The analysis revealed that despite serious allegations, Ballard's followers remained largely supportive or defensive, highlighting the resilience of parasocial relationships and their impact on public perception.

Results

This study aimed to examine the impact of Tim Ballard's Instagram dialogue on his parasocial relationships following allegations of misconduct. The qualitative analysis focused on understanding how Ballard's interactions and rhetoric influenced his followers' perceptions and trust. Data was collected from the first 25 comments on eight of Ballard's Instagram posts, categorized into supportive, defensive, directly addressing allegations, and attacks. The analysis revealed that most comments were supportive or defensive, indicating that Ballard's followers largely resonated with his narrative and persuasive tactics, which included emotional and religious appeals. This suggests that Ballard effectively leveraged his parasocial relationships to mitigate the negative effects of the allegations and maintain public support. The findings align with existing research on parasocial relationships and crisis management, highlighting the power of narrative persuasion in shaping public perception and the resilience of parasocial bonds even amid controversy.

Ballard's Instagram Posts

This study comprises comments left on eight of Tim Ballard's Instagram posts. To understand the context wherein the comments were made, it is important to know the messages in Ballard's posts. After the allegations were first made against him, Ballard posted on his public Instagram account on September 20, 2023 with a caption thanking his followers for being supportive during this difficult time (Ballard, 2023a). In the video post, Ballard begins by talking about Abraham Lincoln and the difficulty he was having during the Emancipation Proclamation stating that he was being lied about and all the pressure on Lincoln. Ballard compares himself to Lincoln due to the "…false allegation from sources that we have not been able to determine yet…" (Ballard, 2023a). He further goes on to proclaim his allegiance to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, talks about his efforts to rescue children and fight child trafficking, and that there are evil pedophiles/traffickers who have allies in the government, media, corporations, and public institutions who will lie about him and destroy his good name (Ballard, 2023a). He again doubles down purporting his commitment to his religion and claims the timing of the allegations is directly tied to his interest in running for the US Senate (Ballard, 2023a). This persuasive commentary on social media is used to defend himself publicly and lean on ideals that will gain sympathy from supporters by using rhetoric that manipulates followers.

September 24, 2023, Ballard again went to social media to disclose his tactic, the "couples ruse," which is at the center of several allegations (Ballard, 2023b). The couples ruse involves Ballard and a female operative working to convince traffickers they are a couple-- husband and wife or boyfriend and girlfriend. Ballard then states that he wants to give these women time to tell their own story and tells viewers to listen to their testimonies over the next several days and tells listeners to "...thank God for them for rescuing these children" (Ballard, 2023b). By revealing the couples ruse tactic, it creates a sense of transparency and a defense against the allegations of how it could be plausible the actions did occur, but under well-intentioned reasons: to save children from sex trafficking.

Ballard's next post included in the study was purported as a message from him and his wife, Katherine (Ballard, 2023c). In his video, he stated his wife wanted him to make the message because that they are under attack and the work they are doing to rescue abused children is under attack by false accusations because this is what happens when "...you're fighting against evil..." (Ballard, 2023c). Ballard tells the audience that he is faithful to his wife and to his God, but that everyone can think what they want, but that is the truth. He then pivots the conversation to focus on doing good through doing service for others stating that when you are in the service of others you are in the service of God (Ballard, 2023c). Ballard's video claims the attacks are happening due to evil trying to thwart the good he is doing and then redirects the conversation to encourage everyone to go out and perform acts of service.

The actual video shared in his September 27, 2023 post does not directly address the accusations as it was filmed prior to the allegations coming to light. His speech is about child sex trafficking and child exploitation material and how they are working to stop that and protect children (Ballard, 2023d). However, the caption included with his post states, "Just a few days after I delivered this speech, a flood of false allegations made their way to the front pages of many news outlets across the country" (Ballard, 2023d). While the two messages are incongruent, because Ballard posted them in conjunction with each other, it would seem he is telling his audience about how he is out working to save children while false allegations are being levied against him.

Ballard's next post (February 23, 2024) is a picture of his family instead of a video (Ballard, 2024a). The caption included with the image is thanking his followers for their support and kind words and messages (Ballard, 2024a). In context, though the allegations are not discussed, this message is showing his large family of 11 along with his gratitude and thanks for the love shown to them, which could be considered a persuasive message as Ballard had been asking for financial help to support his family. Giving thanks while showing his family could convince others to give financially to support him and his family.

Ballard's next two posts include clips from episodes of a docuseries being produced on his behalf, "UNFOUNDED - The TRUTH and the BALLARD Case" (Ballard, 2024b; Ballard, 2024c). The highlighted film encourages the audience to donate to the Ballard Family Legal Defense Fund (New docuseries about Tim, 2024). In the February 27, 2024 post, Ballard again thanked his supporters for the kind words and prayers and encouraged them to watch episode one of the docuseries (Ballard, 2024b). The preview of the docuseries addresses the allegations and denies them by supplying reasons why it could not have happened--one woman he had never met and had never been in the same room with him and two others were being inappropriate and were promptly dismissed (Ballard, 2024b). Ballard states that he cannot allow these accusers to attack his cause and hurt his family (Ballard, 2024b).

The next post with a preview of episode one occurred on March 3, 2024. First, in the caption of the post, Ballard expressed being humbled by the producers of the videos and again thanked supporters and encouraged watching the docuseries (Ballard, 2024c). This clip, however, focuses more on Ballard's wife, Katherine, who suggests that the women came forward because Ballard is a public figure (Ballard, 2024c). She then contends that the hardest part for her is that the accusers sued her project under O.U.R. and that it has affected adoption of children and prospective families, but that there is no money there, so it just stopped the project entirely (Ballard, 2024c). Her persuasive commentary includes asking how the children hurt the accusers and how sad the ending of the program is to her (Ballard, 2024c). Both of these posts use persuasive commentary to outright deny the allegations and bolster the good he has done, alluding to how he is a victim of evil attacks against him. Besides the docuseries introduced in these posts, the clips shared are rhetoric aimed at praising Ballard and defaming the accusers.

The final post included in the qualitative content analysis is from June 28, 2024. This post is specific to the allegations given Ballard's caption, "An update regarding the recent allegations #unfounded" (Ballard, 2024d). In his video address, Ballard calls the allegations a "media circus" which has been an attack on him and his work (Ballard, 2024d). Before stating that there have been two times when things went to court which were dismissed by the judge, he said "it's affecting children" (Ballard, 2024d). He continues to deny the allegations and then claims the accusers are stealing money from child rescue operations and his livelihood and that the audience's support is needed (Ballard, 2024d). Ballard brings up accolades he received in Mexico due to his effort, followed by mentioning again the lies and the media circus in a ploy to take money from his foundation and family. He once more asks for the audience's support for the kids and to "please, please, please" donate to the Ballard Family Legal Fund to keep his family afloat so they can continue to "save God's children" (Ballard, 2024d). The rhetoric in this post comprises outright calling the accusations lies purported by the media circus, discounting the validity of the claims since some have already been dismissed by a judge, and claiming the accusers are stealing money from the foundations and the children as well as his family's well-being.

Analysis

The analysis of Tim Ballard's Instagram posts and the subsequent audience comments was conducted to understand the impact of parasocial relationships on public perception amid allegations of misconduct. Comments were categorized into four distinct groups: supportive, defensive, directly addressing the allegations, and attacks. This section delves into the nature of these comments, providing examples from Ballard's posts and examining how his rhetoric and persuasive tactics influenced follower responses. By analyzing these interactions, the study aims to shed light on the role of parasocial relationships in shaping public opinion and maintaining support for public figures during crises.

Supportive

When a public figure is accused of misconduct, audience members impacted by parasocial relationships often feel compelled to offer words of support to the celebrity. As a public figure, Ballard is often lauded as a hero whom people look up to and respect. This is evident in the comments on his Instagram posts. One commenter stated on Ballard's (2023a) September 20, 2023 post:

> *"Thank you for being faithful!!!! Thank you, thank you, thank you!! Please stay strong and continue to fight the good fight. I'm with you, brother, fighting along side you. Please don't be discouraged! GOD IS WITH US! We love you! You are a good man" (Ballard, 2023a).*

This comment came shortly after the allegations and Ballard's first post acknowledging there was something amiss. The words show support, even to the extent of the commenter saying they are fighting alongside Ballard, along with God being with them. The statement further states that Ballard is a good man and thanks him for being faithful. This is a clear example of a supportive statement.

Another statement from a follower that was supportive in nature is in response to the September 27, 2023 post: "I'm with you Tim!!! I don't not believe any of these allegations! Continue doing good. We need you to" (Ballard, 2023d). Demonstrating unwavering support for Ballard, this commenter denounces the allegations and tells Ballard that he is needed and to keep doing good. From the final post in this study, another Ballard supporter stated, "Why do you think the devil is trying so hard to get you out? Keep going, No one can do what you do. There will always be a target on your back when you are fighting against evil" (Ballard, 2024d). Again, this comment is supportive and alludes to the reason the allegations are occurring is because the devil is trying to stop the good Ballard is doing.

Ballard has curated his parasocial relationships and his status as a public figure to elicit public support despite such egregious allegations against him. This is evident in the comments made on his posts on Instagram, the majority of which are in the supportive category as analyzed in this study. The statements are not only offering verbal support for Ballard, but also claiming support by standing alongside him and that a higher power is on his side as well to fight against evil.

Defensive

Another type of comment seen on Ballard's post which is similar to supportive, is defensive. These comments occur when the commentary goes beyond supportive and the audience member comes to the defense of the accused. The first example for a defensive comment is from September 26, 2023 (Ballard, 2023c):

> *"Mind blowing to me what people believe. All you are doing is trying to bring awareness to trafficking children and saving them and the trolls just keep coming out because the world here has it way too easy!!!! Everyone is like read the facts.. but yet they are buying into all the media crap.. typical now a days. So sorry you and your family are going through this."*

The comment is defensive in nature as it claims all Ballard is trying to do is save children and that he is being "trolled" by the accusers and media. Another claim being made is that people are not reading the facts evident by them believing the allegations against Ballard. This statement is more than just supportive because it was working to defend Ballard against the allegations and provide reasons why there are allegations that do not include fault.

The next example stems from Ballard's February 27, 2024 post. In particular, this defensive post displays attacking the accusers, as a defensive tactic in Ballard's behalf (Ballard, 2024b):

> *"You are amazing and anyone that is accusing you and suing you should be completely ashamed of themselves. Isn't it interesting how as soon as your movie came out and it was a huge success all of a sudden these people start suing you? It's obvious they just want money. And they should be completely ashamed of themselves for doing such a horrible act. Furthermore, to take away from the extraordinary work you have done, and for all the children you have saved is completely evil. These people that are suing you are evil."*

The claims in this comment are that the lawsuits began after his movie came out and was successful, further stating that the accusers should be ashamed of themselves and those who are suing are evil. It also points toward the accusations lessening the work Ballard has done in saving children.

A third example of defensiveness is in a comment in the most recent post in this study. "People just want to hate you especially if you're a conservative or Christian" (Ballard, 2024d). This form of defense is dismissing the allegations because they are simply a result of Ballard's political and/or religious affiliations rather than an actual wrongdoing. It alludes to the accusations not being possible, but are merely alleged by people who may not be Christian or conservative.

Parasocial relationships can be influenced to the point that fans on the internet may not only support a public figure who has been accused of misdeeds, but may also even come to their defense due to a disbelief that their idol could have committed such an offense. The examples presented here show a distinct defensive tactic in support of Ballard, dismissing the possibility that he did anything untoward and is just trying to save children.

Directly Addressing the Allegations

On the opposite side from more supportive or defensive comments which boost the accused's image, is directly addressing the allegations. This occurs when commenters seemingly refute the persuasive commentary and reiterate the alleged misdeeds by the celebrity. Often, these comments seem more in opposition to the public figure.

"Why did you step down from OUR if these allegations are false? Why are we just now hearing about the details of how it works with female operatives? Why quit if that's all it was?" (Ballard, 2023b). The first example of directly addressing allegations brings up the allegations and challenges Ballard stating that if the allegations are false, then why did he step down as CEO and not explain the couples ruse previously. Analyzing the comment, it seems that the commenter more or less believes the victims over Ballard, disregarding Ballard's persuasive tactic in denying allegations against him.

The next example is from Ballard's February 27, 2024 post (Ballard, 2024b):

> *"Sorry but this just sounds like an excuse. Anyone who tries to blame victims as opposed to just stating their innocence is typically a red flag. Additionally, the sad truth is that a person can be capable of all of the above. Why not just let justice play out if they're indeed innocent? Making a propaganda video just doesn't sit right with me."*

The commenter in this case calls out Ballard's statement as making an excuse/propaganda video, further denouncing victim blaming. The follower does acknowledge that a public figure can do good while also committing misdeeds and suggests seeing how justice naturally occurs. The comment directly addresses the allegations and gives persuasive reasoning about Ballard's tactics.

A third example of directly addressing allegations is from the last post from Ballard's Instagram (2024d) included in this study:

> *"You still have several pending criminal investigations going on and 5 women suing for sexual abuse. This particular case that was dropped was for the young woman who was injured during training. Don't be fooled by this guys."*

Responding to Ballard's post about certain cases being dropped, this commenter states that there are additional cases still being investigated from several other accusers of sexual abuse. The commenter implores others to not be duped by Ballard's rhetoric.

Despite any previous or current parasocial relationship formed with Ballard, these commenters who directly address the allegations are not dissuaded from believing the accusations against Ballard simply because of his defenses he gave denying the allegations. If anything, they may have feelings of betrayal due to once idolizing the public persona.

Attacks

Similar in opposition like directly addressing allegations, attacks are comments that seemingly lash out at the accused public figure and directly attack the character or statements made. These attacks are contrary to the celebrities' carefully curated public persona and seek to damage their credibility.

After disclosing the O.U.R. enlisted tactic of the couples ruse, one commenter on Ballard's post (Ballard, 2023b) stated:

> *"Ooof...so the women who were employed with OUR and excited to help save children were evil when they were uncomfortable giving Tim blow jobs he claimed would help efforts? No legit official will say that's necessary but guess who did and enjoyed it? Tim. Men with good intentions can fall. Don't at me...I know a victim and nothing you can say will make me not believe this credible person."*

Attacking Ballard and his couples ruse tactic in defense of the victims, this individual came in with a strong statement against Ballard noting that well-intentioned men can also do wrong. This is a clear example of attack.

The next example comes from Ballard's post wherein he shared a message from himself and his wife, Katherine (Ballard, 2023c). "Soooo why were you excommunicated then? There are very specific and limited reasons why the church excommunicates members… Also, howwwww can you lie so brazenly?! It's sociopathic, Tim" (Ballard, 2023c) is another example of an attack. The commenter specifically references Ballard's proclaimed religion and the reports that he had been excommunicated from his faith, and then directly calls him a liar and a sociopath. This is an attack as it makes specific comments pertaining to Ballard's character.

A third example in this study of attack is from the June 28, 2024 post where Ballard is stating some of the lawsuits had been dropped by the judge. The commenter states (Ballard, 2024d):

> *"Conman, these women are attacking his character not his bank account or some child rescue operation. Tim is a Salesman and hype man. For years I've wanted to believe he had pure motives. I don't believe it now. Have heard and read too much."*

The comment is an attack on Ballard's character evidenced by calling him a conman, a salesman, and a hype man. It further goes on to say they once believed he had pure motives, but no longer believes that to be true after learning more about him.

Research Question 1: How are Tim Ballard's parasocial relationships/interactions impacted by his rhetoric/persuasive tactics?

The findings indicate that Tim Ballard's parasocial relationships and interactions are significantly influenced by his persuasive tactics and rhetoric on social media. The analysis categorized the responses into four groups: supportive, defensive, directly addressing allegations, and attacks. Out of 200 comments, 85 were supportive, expressing admiration and encouragement for Ballard, suggesting that his followers largely resonate with his messaging. Additionally, 52 comments were defensive, where followers not only supported Ballard but also actively defended him against the allegations, often by dismissing the accusations or attacking the accusers. This defense suggests a deeper level of engagement and belief in Ballard's narrative among his followers. The research aligns with existing studies on parasocial relationships, which often describe these connections as one-sided, where followers feel a strong bond with public figures despite little to no real interaction. The findings are consistent with the theoretical framework suggesting that public figures can leverage their parasocial relationships to influence public perception, even in the face of negative allegations.

Research Question 2: How does Ballard rely on these parasocial relationships/interactions to further his own cause and deny the allegations against him?

The findings suggest that Ballard effectively relies on his parasocial relationships to deny allegations and further his cause. With 137 out of 200 comments being supportive or defensive, it is evident that a significant portion of his audience not only believes in his innocence but also actively participates in promoting his narrative. Ballard's posts, which often include emotional appeals and religious undertones, resonate with his followers, leading them to rally around him in times of crisis. The theoretical framework suggests that public figures can use their influence to sway public opinion, especially when they maintain a consistent narrative. Ballard's narrative, which emphasizes his moral integrity, religious commitment, and the perceived injustice of the accusations, is reinforced by his followers' comments. This indicates a reciprocal relationship where Ballard's persuasive tactics bolster his followers' loyalty, and their support, in turn, reinforces his public stance. The findings are consistent with theories on narrative persuasion, where individuals are more likely to be persuaded by narratives that align with their pre-existing beliefs and values.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand how parasocial relationships with public figures influence public perception, particularly during allegations of misconduct. By analyzing Tim Ballard's Instagram posts and the audience's comments, the research provides deeper insights into how parasocial interactions can be leveraged to maintain public support amid controversy. The analysis categorized the comments into four groups: supportive, defensive, directly addressing the allegations, and attacks. The majority of comments were either supportive of Ballard or defensive, indicating a strong parasocial bond that influences public perception.

The results revealed that out of 200 comments, 85 were supportive, 52 were defensive, 25 directly addressed the allegations, and 22 were attacks on Ballard. This distribution shows that most comments were positive, reflecting a benefit from the parasocial relationship between Ballard and his audience. The commentary mirrored much of Ballard's persuasive messages, suggesting that his parasocial interactions have been largely successful in maintaining support among his followers, even amid serious allegations. These findings align with existing theories on parasocial relationships, which describe these connections as one-sided but emotionally significant for followers.

The study's findings highlight that Tim Ballard's rhetoric and persuasive tactics significantly shape his parasocial relationships with followers on social media. The analysis showed that most comments were supportive or defensive, indicating that his followers are deeply influenced by his narrative and are inclined to support him despite allegations. This strong parasocial bond, where followers feel a profound, one-sided connection with Ballard, is consistent with existing theories on parasocial relationships. These theories suggest that public figures can leverage these relationships to maintain public support, even in times of crisis.

Several factors might have influenced the interpretation of these results. For instance, the nature of social media platforms, which often amplify supportive voices due to algorithmic biases, may skew the perceived level of support. Additionally, the phenomenon of selective exposure, where individuals engage primarily with content aligning with their pre-existing beliefs, might reinforce supportive and defensive comments. Ballard's use of emotional and moral appeals in his posts likely further solidified the supportive stance among his followers.

The study demonstrates that Ballard effectively utilizes his parasocial relationships to deny allegations and promote his cause. The predominance of supportive and defensive comments indicates that his followers are not only inclined to believe his narrative but are also willing to actively defend him. This suggests that Ballard's followers are deeply invested in his public persona and are likely influenced by his consistent narrative of moral integrity and religious commitment. This observation supports the theoretical framework that posits public figures can leverage their influence to shape public perception, particularly in crisis situations.

The findings align with existing theories on narrative persuasion and crisis management. The strong presence of supportive and defensive responses from followers indicates that Ballard's consistent narrative has been effective in maintaining his public image despite the allegations. However, the presence of a minority of comments that directly addressed the allegations or attacked Ballard suggests that not all followers were persuaded by his narrative. This divergence may be attributed to varying personal values, levels of investment in the parasocial relationship, or exposure to counter-narratives.

This study examined the nuanced dynamics of parasocial relationships, particularly how they affect public perception when a public figure is embroiled in controversy. The focus was on Tim Ballard, a prominent figure known for his anti-trafficking work, who faced allegations of misconduct. By analyzing the nature of comments on Ballard's Instagram posts following the allegations, the research sought to understand the role of his social media rhetoric in influencing his followers' reactions. The problem addressed was the apparent contradiction between Ballard's public persona as a moral leader and the private allegations against him. This study is crucial as it highlights the complexities of public perception management in the digital age, where social media plays a pivotal role in shaping narratives.

The findings revealed a significant predominance of supportive and defensive comments, suggesting that Ballard's followers were highly influenced by his narrative and rhetorical strategies. This underscores the concept that parasocial relationships, where audiences develop a one-sided bond with public figures, can significantly impact how individuals interpret and react to news and allegations. The study demonstrated that even in the face of serious accusations, these relationships can lead followers to dismiss or downplay negative information, prioritizing their pre-existing beliefs and emotional connections over contradictory evidence. This aligns with the theoretical framework and previous research in media psychology, which posits that parasocial relationships can create a strong bias in favor of the public figure.

Conclusion

This study highlights the powerful role of parasocial relationships in shaping public perception, especially during crises involving public figures. By analyzing comments on Tim Ballard's Instagram posts following allegations of misconduct, the research demonstrated how Ballard's followers were influenced by his narrative and rhetorical strategies. Despite serious accusations, a significant portion of the comments were supportive or defensive, illustrating how parasocial relationships can lead followers to dismiss negative information and prioritize their emotional connections. This finding underscores the complexity of public perception management in the digital age, where social media significantly influences narratives.

The implications of these findings are substantial for both media professionals and the public. For media professionals, the study emphasizes the importance of ethical reporting and critical engagement with public figures' narratives, particularly in the context of serious allegations. For the public, the research highlights the necessity of critical media literacy to recognize potential biases in their perceptions, especially when they feel a strong connection to a public figure. Understanding the dynamics of parasocial relationships and narrative persuasion can inform more effective communication strategies, particularly in areas like public health, where trusted figures play a crucial role in disseminating information.

In conclusion, this research provides a foundational understanding of how public figures can use social media to manage crises and influence public opinion through parasocial relationships. The study calls for further research into the dynamics of these relationships and their impact on public discourse. Additionally, it stresses the need for enhanced media literacy to help the public navigate the complexities of information in the digital age. As public figures increasingly rely on social media to shape their public image, understanding the influence of parasocial relationships becomes ever more critical. This study sets the stage for future investigations into the intersection of media, public perception, and crisis management.

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From Hesitation to Help-Seeking: The Role of Faculty Communication and Expectancy Violations in Shaping Student Disclosure

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Abstract
This study investigates how college students' expectations of faculty communication, shaped by positive and negative expectancy violations, influence their willingness to disclose personal or academic challenges. Using Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) as a framework, the research highlights how faculty behaviors, including empathy, accessibility, and responsiveness, can create supportive environments that foster trust and open communication. Data from a qualitative survey of undergraduate students reveal the critical role of past interactions, perceptions of faculty approachability, and emotional calculus in disclosure decisions. The findings offer theoretical contributions to EVT by illustrating its application in educational contexts and practical implications for fostering faculty-student relationships that enhance student well-being and academic success. This study provides actionable insights for educators and administrators seeking to reduce student stress and promote engagement through effective communication strategies.
Keywords: Expectancy Violation Theory, Faculty-Student Communication, Student Stress, Disclosure

In 2022, the American College Health Association (ACHA) conducted its ACHA-National College Health Assessment (NCHA) survey on college students' habits and behaviors. The survey revealed concerning levels of stress, with 79.4% of the 54,204 undergraduates surveyed experiencing moderate to high stress in the past month (American College Health Association, 2022, p. 14). Similarly, a March 2023 Gallup Poll of 2,430 bachelor's degree students found that 66% felt stressed and 51% felt worry during much of the previous day (Hrynowski & Marken, 2023).

Chronic stress among college students has wide-ranging consequences, impacting psychological, physical, and social well-being (Aloia & McTigue, 2019). Studies link academic stress to mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and physical health problems such as illness and diminished self-esteem (Chiauzzi et al., 2008; Hudd et al., 2000; Macgeorge et al., 2005). Stress also affects retention, correlating with increased dropout rates and poor academic performance (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). Notably, 43.7% of the respondents on the NCHA survey identified their stress as a meaningful "impediment to academic performance" (American College Health Association, 2022, p. 6).

Fortunately, strong student-faculty relationships can mitigate these effects, improving academic achievement, satisfaction, persistence, and personal development (Cuseo, 2018; Guzzardo et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019; Trolian & Parker III, 2017). Social support from family, peers, and faculty is also proven to buffer the effects of stress (Bland et al., 2012; Chao, 2012; Maymon & Hall, 2021; Maymon et al., 2019; Reeve et al., 2013). However, little is known about what influences students' decisions to confide in faculty, particularly when experiencing high stress. While students often seek help from family and friends, they are less likely to approach faculty (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Thompson, 2008).

Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) (Burgoon, 1978; 1993) offers a framework for understanding how students might navigate these decisions. EVT posits that individuals assess and react to unexpected communication behaviors based both on their expectations and the perceived valence of any violations to those expectations. In student-faculty interactions, such deviations—positive or negative—can influence perceptions of faculty as approachable, trustworthy, or supportive when students consider reaching out in times of distress.

This study applies EVT to explore how students' expectations of faculty communication, along with the outcomes of faculty behavior, affect their decisions to disclose struggles or stress. Understanding these expectancy violations could provide both theoretical insights and practical strategies for creating supportive environments that encourage disclosure, retention, and success challenges.

College Student Stress and Faculty Relationships

College student stress is an increasing concern in higher education, with surveys showing rising distress levels among students (Chiauzzi et al., 2008). Chronic stress negatively impacts academic performance, increases dropout rates, and causes significant mental and physical health challenges (Aloia & McTigue, 2019; Dusselier et al., 2005; Macgeorge et al., 2005). Understanding factors influencing student stress—and how faculty can mitigate it—has become a central focus of research.

Social support is vital for reducing stress and enhancing well-being. Support—especially that from family and friends -- is linked to lower stress and better mental health (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023; McLean et al., 2022). Faculty are uniquely positioned to provide both academic and emotional support in addition to these sources, directly influencing stress levels for students . Research highlights the importance of faculty relationships in reducing stress, increasing motivation, and fostering success. Key aspects of faculty-student interactions—like supportive environments, inclusivity, and engagement beyond teaching—alleviate pressures and encourage student growth (Guzzardo et al., 2021). Strong faculty-student rapport, characterized by mutual understanding and open communication, also improves motivation, participation, and satisfaction (Frisby & Myers, 2008).

Effective faculty/student communication is equally critical. Frey and Lane (2021) show that mismatched communication styles can increase stress, while responsive faculty reduce stress and support learning. Myers et al. (2000) note that friendly, attentive communication fosters engagement and a supportive environment. Faculty openness further encourages students to disclose struggles, helping create a positive atmosphere (Meluch et al., 2022). Overall, meaningful faculty-student interactions—shaped by rapport, effective communication, and openness—are essential for reducing stress and fostering a positive learning experience.

College Students and Instructor Disclosure

Research on student disclosure of academic or personal challenges has highlighted several key factors influencing whether students seek faculty support. While students tend to turn to peers for minor issues, Thompson (2008) found that they are more likely to approach faculty for assistance with significant academic concerns, underscoring the critical role faculty play in addressing stressors that can impact student well-being. Miller Henningsen et al. (2019) further explored the dynamics of disclosure, revealing that students' privacy orientations—whether they tend to keep information private or are more open to sharing—greatly influence their willingness to share academic challenges with faculty. This suggests that faculty can encourage disclosure by creating a safe, trustworthy environment that respects students' privacy. Zengaro et al. (2022) expanded by examining how relational closeness between students and instructors influences disclosure decisions, particularly regarding personal health information. They found that students were more likely to disclose sensitive issues when they felt a strong connection with their instructors. Yet, concerns about potential risks—such as how disclosure might impact grades or how instructors might respond—remained significant barriers. Together, these studies emphasize the importance of fostering a supportive, approachable classroom environment where students feel both trusted and safe to seek help.

Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT)

Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) explains how individuals react to violations of their communication expectations, focusing on how unexpected behaviors—whether positive or negative—affect relationships (Dainton & Zelley, 2022). Originally focused on physical space (Burgoon, 1978), EVT has been expanded to include emotional and psychological violations, making it an useful framework for understanding faculty-student interactions.

The core concepts of Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT)—expectancy, communicator reward valence, and violation valence—are central to understanding reactions to unexpected communication behaviors. Expectancy refers to the behaviors an individual anticipates based on prior experiences or social norms. Communicator reward valence evaluates the perceived value of the communicator, influenced by factors like past interactions and likability. Violation valence assesses whether a deviation from expectations is seen as positive or negative, depending on the context. Together, these concepts shape how individuals respond to unexpected behaviors, either by reciprocating or compensating for them.

In the context of student stress, EVT suggests that students form expectations based on prior experiences. When faculty communication deviates from these expectations, it can either reduce or increase stress. For instance, a supportive response may create a positive violation, fostering trust and reducing stress, while a dismissive or harsh response may increase stress and disengagement. Given EVT's implications for communication, faculty may be able to use positive violations strategically to encourage open communication, reduce stress, and promote academic success. This leads to our research question:

RQ1: How do students' expectations of faculty interactions, shaped by past experiences with positive or negative violations, influence their decisions to reach out to faculty members when facing personal or academic challenges?

Method

To explore how students' expectations of faculty communication, along with their perceptions of faculty behavior, influence their decisions to disclose struggles or stress, a survey was administered to a sample of college students. The survey focused on college student stress and communication. Participants were recruited using network and snowball sampling (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 2007) with the assistance of the second author's Communication 3150 (Communication Research Methods) undergraduate students during the Spring 2024 semester. Initial invitations were sent via email to students within the researchers' and 3150 classmates' networks, who were then asked to forward the invitation to others. Eligibility criteria required participants to be at least 18 years old and currently enrolled in a college or university. Participation was voluntary, with no compensation provided.

The data for this study were drawn from a broader survey on college student stress and communication. This particular study focuses on students' responses to open-ended questions about students' choices to share personal stresses or struggles with faculty, reasons for sharing, and both positive and negative experiences when they chose to share.

A total of 254 students completed the survey, with a mean age of 23.4 years (sd = 6.37). The sample included 164 females (64.6%), 82 males (32.3%), and 8 students (3.2%) identifying as nonbinary or with another gender identity. In terms of academic standing, 11.4% were freshmen, 19.7% sophomores, 31.5% juniors, 33.9% seniors, and 3.5% graduate students. Regarding enrollment status, 77.5% were full-time students (enrolled in 12 or more credit hours), while 22.5% were part-time. Approximately 25.2% identified as first-generation college students.

To analyze the data, the research team began by reviewing all responses to the open-ended questions to familiarize themselves with the data. First-level codes were identified to capture significant responses, and these were organized into initial categories. After discussing these initial codes, the team refined and reorganized them into broader themes and subthemes during a secondary coding phase (Creswell, 2007; Lindlof, 1995; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Themes were identified based on keyword repetition, the recurrence of meaning, and the forcefulness of responses (Owen, 1984). The themes were further refined and named through additional data checks. Expectancy Violation Theory was chosen as a lens to help clarify and elaborate on emergent themes by the research team during data analysis because the theory provided additional insight into the stories students were sharing. Finally, representative examples were selected to illustrate each theme.

Results

The analysis revealed three interconnected themes highlighting how students' expectations of faculty interactions, shaped by prior positive or negative expectancy violations, influenced their willingness to seek support. These themes include: memory of prior violations, communicator reward valence, and violation valence in decision-making.

Memory of Prior Violations

Students consistently referenced past experiences with faculty as a critical factor shaping their expectations for future interactions. Positive expectancy violations—such as unexpected empathy or personalized support—fostered trust and openness. One participant shared, "I was struggling with a family emergency, and my professor didn't just extend the deadline but checked in with me the next week. That's not something I expected, and it made me feel like I could go to them for anything." This example highlights how a single supportive interaction can establish a foundation for future communication.

In contrast, negative violations—such as dismissive or rigid responses—left lasting impressions that diminished students' confidence in faculty as sources of support. A participant recounted, "I once asked for an extension because I was sick, and the professor just said, 'You should have planned better.' Now I hesitate before asking for help because I don't want to be judged." This memory underscores how negative interactions can discourage help-seeking behavior long-term. Another student noted, "I will say that like a reason why I don't like to talk to teachers about things is because of like past experiences. I've had teachers get mad at me for trying to like work with them. So, it kind of makes it harder to work with them now." This theme demonstrates that students' decisions to seek faculty support are deeply rooted in their memories of prior interactions, which continue to influence their perceptions and behaviors over time.

Communicator Reward Valence

Students assessed faculty approachability based on communicator reward valence, or the perceived ability of faculty to meet emotional, relational, or academic needs. Faculty who exhibited warmth, enthusiasm, and responsiveness were perceived as having high reward valence. One participant noted, "When you can tell a teacher loves their job," emphasizing how visible enthusiasm fosters approachability. Another student highlighted, "how welcoming they feel," showing how initial impressions can affirm or violate students' expectations.

Specific behaviors further reinforced reward valence. Students valued faculty who made themselves available and responsive. As one participant remarked, "If their contact information is available," or when faculty "stick around after class long enough for you to talk to them," these behaviors signaled approachability. Conversely, perceptions of low reward valence discouraged students from seeking support. One student explained, "If I know they will not respond or will not care, then there is no point to reach out." Another shared, "I have had a very unfriendly and unapproachable professor, and it made me scared to reach out to her even when I desperately needed her help."

Examples of negative faculty behavior further illuminated the impact of low reward valence. A student recounted an interaction with a professor who required students to schedule Zoom meetings but then failed to be attentive: "He didn't answer any of my questions and ended our meeting without warning," leaving the student feeling unheard and dismissed. These perceptions strongly influenced students' willingness to engage, reinforcing the importance of faculty's perceived availability and responsiveness.

Violation Valence in Decision-Making

The decision to reach out to faculty during personal or academic challenges was shaped by students' assessment of violation valence—the perceived positivity or negativity of potential interactions. Anticipation of positive violations often motivated students to overcome hesitations. As one participant noted, "I don't like asking for help, but I thought, 'Maybe they'll surprise me and be nice about it.'" This highlights how hope for a supportive response can drive help-seeking behaviors.

Emotional calculations emerged as a critical process in students' decision-making, involving the weighing of emotional risks (e.g., rejection, judgment) against potential rewards (e.g., understanding, assistance). Students who anticipated negative violations often avoided seeking help. For example, one participant shared, "I didn't ask for help because I thought they'd just see me as another student who couldn't keep up." Another recounted, "I sent her [a professor] a message asking for basic help that any reasonable teacher would give. She refused and told me I wasn't working hard enough on her class." This violation of expectations discouraged further communication.

Negative feedback—whether accurate or not—also influenced students' willingness to engage. One student explained, "Gives more negative feedback than positive feedback. ... It makes me shut down and feel like I can no longer reach out to them when I'm stressed or worried." Another remarked, "I will always ask for help one time, but if a professor shuns me for asking a stupid question or refers me elsewhere because I seem bothersome, I won't reach out. I will reach out continuously if I can sense that they are compassionate and willing to see me succeed." These reflections underscore how students evaluate faculty interactions to determine future engagement.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide meaningful insights into how students' expectations of faculty communication, shaped by expectancy violations, influence their willingness to disclose personal or academic challenges. By examining students' memories of prior violations, perceptions of communicator reward valence, and emotional calculus in decision-making, this study extends the applicability of Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) to faculty-student interactions in higher education.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to EVT literature by highlighting the significant role of expectancy violations in academic contexts, specifically how students interpret positive and negative violations through a lens of trust and emotional safety. Positive violations—such as unexpected empathy or personalized support—foster rapport and create an environment conducive to disclosure. For example, participants' descriptions of unanticipated faculty support during stressful periods illustrate how positive violations can increase students' trust in faculty and willingness to seek help. Conversely, negative violations—such as dismissive responses or rigid policies—leave lasting impressions that diminish students' confidence in faculty as sources of support. These results echo findings in the literature that faculty behaviors significantly impact students' emotional well-being and academic outcomes (e.g. Cuseo, 2018; Trolian & Parker III, 2017).

Additionally, this study emphasizes the interplay between communicator reward valence and violation valence in shaping communication outcomes. Students' willingness to disclose challenges was influenced not only by the nature of expectancy violations but also by their perceptions of faculty approachability, warmth, and responsiveness. This nuance aligns with prior research on the importance of rapport and effective communication in fostering supportive faculty-student relationships (Frisby & Myers, 2008; Guzzardo et al., 2021). By demonstrating how faculty behaviors can either mitigate or amplify the effects of expectancy violations, the findings expand EVT's applicability to complex interpersonal dynamics in educational settings.

Practical Implications

The findings underscore the importance of faculty behaviors in shaping students' decisions to seek support, providing actionable insights for higher education institutions:

1. Faculty Development: Training programs can emphasize the value of fostering positive expectancy violations through proactive communication strategies. Faculty can be encouraged to demonstrate empathy, check in with students during high-stress periods, and adopt flexible policies that support student well-being. These practices not only reduce stress but also enhance trust and rapport.
2. Clarity and Accessibility: Clear communication about availability and preferred methods of contact is essential. As students in this study highlighted, ambiguity about faculty availability can deter outreach, while transparency fosters a sense of approachability.
3. Rapport-Building: Small but meaningful actions, such as learning students' names, providing timely feedback, and maintaining an open-door policy, can significantly improve students' perceptions of faculty approachability. These behaviors reduce the perceived risks associated with disclosure, encouraging students to seek help when needed.
4. Institutional Policies: Institutions should prioritize initiatives that support faculty-student interactions, such as manageable class sizes, peer mentoring programs, and policies that integrate engagement goals into performance evaluations. These systemic changes can complement individual faculty

efforts to create supportive environments.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The reliance on a network and snowball sampling method limits the generalizability of the findings. Network (or snowball) sampling relies on participants recruiting others within their social or professional circles. Since this particular sample was primarily recruited by the second author's undergraduate communication research methods course during Fall 2024, the sample may overrepresent undergraduate students at four-year, mountain west regional comprehensive universities and under-represent students from other types of backgrounds. While these findings are useful as an initial point of conversation, future research should continue to gather more diverse and representative samples across institutions and disciplines.

Cultural and individual differences, such as communication apprehension or personality traits, also warrant further investigation. Understanding how these factors influence perceptions of expectancy violations could provide a more nuanced view of faculty-student interactions. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the long-term effects of faculty behaviors on students' disclosure decisions and academic outcomes would deepen the understanding of these dynamics. Finally, while Expectancy Violation Theory emerged as fruitful lens for analyzing student experiences with faculty-student interactions, alternative theoretical lenses—such as Social Support Theory or Communication Privacy Management—could also offer meaningful insights into students' disclosure decisions. Future research might explore these perspectives to further enrich our understanding of the dynamics at play.

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The Populist Politician's Playbook: A Qualitative Study of Senator Mike Lee's Facebook Posts

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Abstract
This study examines how Utah Senator Mike Lee employs agenda-setting strategies on Facebook to cultivate a populist political identity. Using a qualitative content analysis of 2,250 social media posts from 2010, 2016, and 2022, the research explores how Lee crafts his messages to resonate with a local constituency that values constitutional originalism and distrusts federal authority. Guided by agenda-setting theory—particularly the attribute agenda-setting framework—the study identifies three key themes: citizen testimonials, critiques of federal policy, and appeals to constitutional knowledge. These themes reveal how Lee's rhetoric aligns with populist strategies, including personalization, audience-specific digital literacy, and the framing of elite opposition. The findings suggest that social media enables politicians like Lee to bypass traditional media, reinforce voter trust, and adapt messages in response to public sentiment. This case contributes to a broader understanding of how local populist politicians leverage social media to maintain political relevance and power.
Keywords: populism, agenda-setting theory, social media, political communication, Mike Lee

Mike Lee, a senator from Utah, entered office in 2010 with a clear policy agenda that he had articulated during his campaign: "As your Senator I will work tirelessly, every day, to fight for the values we hold dear" (Lee, 2010c). He gained office during the height of the "Tea Party" movement, which emphasized limited government, fiscal conservatism, and a return to constitutional principles (Zernike, 2010). Before his election, Lee had built a strong legal background, clerking for Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, serving as an assistant U.S. attorney, and working as general counsel to the Utah governor. He earned both his bachelor's degree in political science and Juris Doctorate from Brigham Young University (Mike Lee for Senate, n.d.).

Lee's rise to political prominence coincided with growing public frustration following the 2008 financial crisis. Many Americans felt abandoned by political elites after the federal government bailed out major banks, leaving everyday citizens to endure the consequences of the recession. In Utah, this discontent manifested as support for candidates like Lee, who vowed to rein in government spending and uphold the Constitution. His grassroots appeal helped him defeat longtime Senator Bob Bennett in the Republican primary and secure a general election victory with 61% of the vote (Deseret News, 2010).

Lee's campaign and political messaging demonstrate characteristics of populism, a political style that frames society as divided between a virtuous, ordinary public and a corrupt elite (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Urbinati, 2019). As a populist, Lee presents himself as a representative of the "common man," directly engaging with Utahns who feel unheard by establishment figures. His rhetoric emphasizes fiscal responsibility, distrust of federal overreach, and fidelity to constitutional principles—all of which resonate deeply with conservative voters in his state.

Understanding the communicative strategies of populist politicians like Lee is critical to grasping how certain political issues gain traction among voters. This study explores how agenda-setting theory applies not just to mass media but also to individual political actors using social media. Agenda-setting theory posits that media outlets do not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about, by highlighting specific issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the era of social media, this theory has evolved to encompass the way politicians themselves can shape public discourse through direct communication channels.

Social media has transformed the way citizens engage with politics. Traditional gatekeeping structures, such as newspapers and television news, no longer serve as the primary mode of political communication for many Americans. Instead, platforms like Facebook allow politicians to communicate directly with constituents, bypassing journalistic filters and fostering a sense of personal connection (Naser, 2020). For populist politicians, this direct communication reinforces their image as authentic representatives of the people, unmediated by elite institutions.

Senator Lee's use of Facebook illustrates this dynamic. His social media presence is not aimed at gaining national attention but at cultivating a local following. This localized focus makes him an ideal subject for analyzing how politicians craft and adapt messages to resonate with their constituencies over time. Lee's posts are strategically curated to align with his audience's values, highlight his accessibility, and portray him as an everyday Utahn who shares their concerns.

Tripodi (2022) describes the "populist politician's playbook" as consisting of three strategies: knowing the audience, engaging with the audience's form of digital literacy, and delivering messages that the audience wants to hear. Lee exemplifies all three. He hosts in-person town halls, maintains a consistent online presence, and tailors his messaging to Utah's conservative base. His ability to connect with voters both online and offline strengthens his populist brand and reinforces his political longevity.

This study analyzes Mike Lee's Facebook posts during his first campaign in 2010, his reelection in 2016, and his most recent campaign in 2022 to trace how his messages have evolved over time. By applying the framework of agenda-setting theory—specifically the attribute agenda-setting model—this research investigates how Lee highlights certain issues and frames them to resonate with his audience. His case offers a valuable lens through which to understand the broader phenomenon of populist communication in local and national politics.

Literature Review

Knowing how a populist politician's playbook works can help researchers study how certain issues become more pressing for voters. By researching agenda-setting theory and how it applies to the individual politician, this study will help show how social media has become a tool to spread the agenda set by people, the media, and politicians.

Agenda-setting theory attempts to explain the transfer of issue salience through mass media messages (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In essence, the media sets the agenda for the public to think about certain issues. Since that time, multiple studies have been conducted about the effects of this theory. Other studies into this theory have looked at the attributes that cause a change in issue salience, or the psychology of the theory (McCombs, 2005). However, new media has appeared and researchers are questioning if the theory still applies. This new media includes blogs, social media, and forums. Anything that the internet touches can be turned into a mass media channel. Those researchers have found that the theory still can be defended even though the technology may have changed.

Agenda-setting Theory in Social Media

Choosing entertainment over the news, and having fewer chances of unwittingly picking up on a news story, has caused audiences to be fragmented (Prior, 2007). People are no longer being exposed to political information inadvertently like a quick news headline during commercials while watching television. Being able to choose what entertainment channels each individual enjoys has made political participation among voters decrease over the years. Most people are content to be entertained rather than look into the issues deeply. This makes it difficult for the media to influence what issues voters need to be made aware of.

However, social media has taken on the role of influence in people's lives. It has a way of shaping opinions and influencing the public agenda. In Feezell's (2018) study, she demonstrates through her research that social media has taken over that agenda-setting role. Participants were asked about what they saw as political issues. During the study's timeframe, participants were exposed to certain political issues and then asked at the end of the study about those issues. Those issues increased in importance for the members of this study. Social media distributed news stories in the group's social media feed. While some didn't click on the news story, the political issue did become more important.

Another recent study showed that a public agenda feeds the media agenda, the media agenda feeds the political agenda, and the political agenda feeds the public agenda (Gilardi et al., 2022). The researchers looked at three different ways in which social media influenced these agendas. The first was the traditional media agenda that the original theory was constructed on. Second was how political parties use social media to adjust the issue salience. Lastly, how politicians use social media to move their issues up in importance. The scholars concluded that agenda-setting is a complex relationship between all three. Each group was able to influence the other, even the traditional media so many thoughts were being reduced to obscurity. Social media has become a counterbalance to other forms of media and a great deal of study is needed to find how agenda-setting influences the political agenda.

Though traditional agenda-setting effects might disappear, agenda-setting in the social media space will remain enduring for the foreseeable future. It has become a place unlike any in history to influence the outcome of politics and communities. Multiple studies have researched this new phenomenon and its impacts on agenda-setting theory (Ritter, 2020; Russell-Neuman et al., 2014; Shafi, 2017). All have come to similar conclusions that traditional media is being phased out and social media is now taking on the role as the tool to set the public agenda.

Agenda-setting Theory in a Populist Movement

Though social media has become a boon to the public and politicians to set the public agenda, one particular political group has taken advantage of these tools. The populist politician can appear more authentic and thus more trustworthy. The populist movement started to become popular around the financial crisis (Zernike, 2010). At the same time, social media started to become popular because smartphones became ubiquitous (Pew Research Center, 2019). In so doing, this has helped spread the ideas that were once considered not appropriate for political communication (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Even the discussion of populism brings up derogatory opinions from the media. Yet with the research into populism and social media (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018), it has been found that populist politicians appear authentic in their message. This discovery, coupled with changing minds toward this political style (Calhoun, 1988), has brought about an interesting dynamic in the communication world, a change in agenda-setting authority.

In their research, Enli and Rosenberg (2018) found that traditional media makes politicians less trustworthy than if they spread their message in social media or opinion pieces. The younger voters are also in a paradox where they trust politicians more on social media than those in traditional media but also are skeptical of politicians using social media. The paradox was explained as young voters are more skeptical because of the polarization in politics but that is a future study. Their study concluded that politicians appear more authentic when using social media. Media trust and political trust are highly interrelated and a populist movement gains followers because of this trust in the medium they use.

One researcher studied how the 'alt-right' and 'alt-left' populist groups use 'hyperpartisan news' to, in essence, set the public agenda on issues they are concerned about (Rae, 2021). This study demonstrated that legacy media no longer holds the authority to set the public agenda. Populist politicians use hyperpartisan news articles as proof of what issues are more important. They also attack traditional news companies as not being authentic or attempting to hide the truth. Issues that didn't seem important have increased in importance over the last few years. Understanding how the media landscape is continuing to change can help researchers with future studies.

Research Questions

Knowing how a populist politician's playbook works can help researchers study how certain issues become more pressing for voters. By researching this through agenda-setting theory and how that applies to the individual politician, this study will help show how social media has become a tool to spread the agenda set by people, the media, and politicians. Social media has changed the way people consume news. Interacting with politicians is more direct and not necessarily only through broadcast journalism. There are now individuals who can capture the attention of millions of viewers and change the agenda quickly. This study will perform qualitative research on the following questions:

RQ1: What were Mike Lee's original messages during his first term?

RQ2: How has Mike Lee's messages changed since being in office based on the public setting the agenda?

Method

This study employed a qualitative content analysis of public Facebook posts made by Senator Mike Lee to explore how he uses social media to communicate and prioritize political issues. The goal was to understand how a populist politician leverages social media to align with voter sentiment and shape public discourse through agenda-setting strategies.

The study is grounded in agenda-setting theory, which posits that media influences the public by telling them what to think about, rather than what to think (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Specifically, this research uses the attribute agenda-setting model, which distinguishes between two levels of salience: objects (the issues themselves) and attributes (the characteristics or framing of those issues) (McCombs, 2005; Weaver et al., 2004). This framework provides a lens to examine not just which topics Lee emphasizes, but how he frames them to resonate with his audience.

For example, the object may be "taxation," while the attribute could be framed as "reducing crime" rather than "increasing law enforcement funding," a distinction known to influence public response (Luntz, 2007). Applying this two-level framework allowed the researcher to identify how Lee crafted his messages to appeal to specific values held by Utah voters.

The dataset consisted of 2,250 public posts from Senator Lee's official campaign Facebook page, collected during three key election cycles: January–November 2010, January–November 2016, and January–November 2022. These periods represent Lee's initial campaign, his first reelection, and his most recent campaign, offering a longitudinal view of how his communication evolved.

Posts were first coded based on the object level—what issue was being discussed. Coding categories were derived from the 2016 Republican Party Platform (Republican National Committee, 2016), including themes such as economic policy, federal land use, constitutional rights, and healthcare. These object categories were validated by comparing them to Lee's voting record using The Heritage Foundation scorecard (Heritage Action for America, n.d.), ensuring alignment between public messaging and legislative behavior.

After object-level coding, posts were analyzed for attributes—how those issues were framed. These attributes were grouped thematically, focusing on linguistic and rhetorical strategies Lee used to emphasize particular aspects of each issue. While external validation of attribute coding was limited, Google Trends (Google, n.d.) was used to observe whether certain issue framings gained traction among Utah users, offering modest support for interpretation.

Although triangulation was used to strengthen object-level coding, attribute coding posed more challenges due to the subjective nature of interpretation. The use of the Republican Platform as the basis for coding may have also introduced partisan bias, limiting the scope to conservative terminology and perspectives. Furthermore, the study only analyzed Facebook, which may not capture the full spectrum of Senator Lee's communication strategy across other platforms or media.

Nonetheless, the depth and volume of posts provide rich insight into how Lee has tailored his messages over time. The application of attribute agenda-setting theory helps illuminate how populist politicians influence public perception—not only by emphasizing certain issues but by strategically framing them to match constituent values and fears (McCombs, 2005).

Analysis

The social media posts that were reviewed show consistency in how Senator Lee uses Facebook to communicate with voters. Three main themes emerged from Mike Lee's posts: testimonials, harmful federal government policies, and constitutional knowledge. Each of these themes assists in gaining more insights into a populist politician's playbook in knowing the audience, engaging with the audience's form of digital literacy, and giving that audience what they want to hear (Tripodi, 2022).

The first major theme is the testimonials given, either by other people or by Mike Lee himself. These are people in the state who have met Mike Lee and are giving their opinions on various topics that Senator Lee has done as a Senator or in his life. These are mainly from voters who are not well known. For example, Terry Findley wanted people to know why Mike Lee had their vote:

> *He believes in the Constitution. He knows the Constitution better than any individual in Congress, and to me, that's the single most important issue that we have right now is getting leaders that understand the Constitution. - Terry Findley. (Lee, 2022c)*

This shows that similar testimonials are usually about Mike Lee following the Constitution during his later campaigns. Having people who are not in politics and appear to be leading everyday lives shows that Mike Lee cares about those people. Other testimonials include Mike Lee showing images of him interacting with several people listening to him. Showing that he cares about the everyday citizens in Utah goes a long way. Then he can post the following, "The people of San Juan County have a voice! It is clear they do not want the Bears Ears monument" (Lee, 2016b).

The second theme that stands out is the near-constant posts about harmful federal policies. Utah voters see the federal government in a bad light and something not to be trusted (Pignanelli & Webb, 2019). This theme demonstrates that speaking ill of the federal government helps a candidate to gain popularity. In a social media post, Mike Lee stated "It seems the farther away from D.C., the more federal government owns more land, making a financial dent to rural counties. Tell me, how do you see Utah's federal-owned land being managed going forward" (Lee, 2016a). The social media post demonstrates that Senator Lee is keeping the public agenda about federal land in Utah top of mind for the voters. It is one thing that is fearful for people in Utah who, as mentioned previously, don't trust the federal government to manage things from so far away. This example exhibits another policy considered to be harmful:

> *My critics say I vote no and hold bills too often. But I vote no and hold bills because I understand that Washington has a spending problem. Government is too big, too expensive, and doing too many things it was never intended to do, and we see inflation as a natural result of that. We must establish a future that avoids crippling debt and allows our grandchildren to thrive. (Lee, 2022b)*

Finances are important to people in Utah (McCann, 2018; Pignanelli & Webb, 2023). Seeing how the federal government continues to make, what voters in Utah consider, bad policy around taxpayer money sets the public agenda for Mike Lee.

The last theme is Mike Lee's constitutional knowledge. The senator prides himself on his knowledge of the United States Constitution. This theme is established throughout the social media posts. One of the earlier posts states "Speaking on freedom and the Constitution at UVU" (Lee, 2010b). As well as asking children to write an essay about the Constitution for a contest (Lee, 2010a). Mike Lee (2022a) believes that all Americans should know the Constitution like him but without bragging:

> *It's absolutely essential that every American read, comprehend, understand, and apply the Constitution. I carry a copy everywhere I go to remind me of the promises I made to protect and defend it. When we restrict government through the Constitution, we unlock unlimited human potential. We allow American families to do what they do best: to work hard, provide for their families, and thrive. (2022a)*

By continually being a politician who speaks about the United States Constitution, he has shown that he understands what needs to be done at the federal level. Continuing discussions about the Constitution help solidify this view that Mike Lee is a politician defending the Constitution.

Discussion

This research has identified the three themes extracted from Mike Lee's social media posts: testimonials, harmful federal government policies, and constitutional knowledge. Studying these themes can help clarify what populist politicians utilize to gain support. Though "populism" doesn't have a direct definition, it has been conceptualized as a political style that is open for further discussion (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). These themes help with this discussion as well as lead to the populist playbook about knowing the audience, engaging with the audience's form of digital literacy, and giving that audience what they want to hear.

In the first theme, the testimonials from others and showing Mike Lee listening to voters is a key finding. This demonstrates that a politician cares about what the voters want. Having these particular social media posts allows others to see that they can speak to the senator. This is used by other populist politicians to get to know their audience better. Being able to know the audience helps establish credibility as a politician of the people. The comments on the posts allow Mike Lee to tailor his message to the audience as well. Being able to discuss in real-time with constituents the issues they feel they have. Senator Lee gets to know his audience through social media.

Mike Lee's strategy revolves around engaging the audience with the digital literacy they are comfortable utilizing. Facebook has been a great source of information as a newer medium in 2010. The senator has used this same medium for over 12 years. Most older generations use Facebook (or Instagram) while younger generations do not use it as frequently (Sheldon et al., 2021). This shows that Mike Lee is engaging with an older audience through a comfortable form of literacy that older generations are expecting. He is not trying to use the newer platforms that younger voters use. The targeted audience is on the platform that Mike Lee uses.

After hearing more about the issues and policies of the Utah voters, Mike Lee's message became part of his policy agenda. He cannot only tailor it but also expand the message to include other issues. However, this research was not able to find that he did expand his message. It appears that Senator Lee does change his message based on the social media posts studied. The original posts for his first campaign were short and to the point. He did have messages that were categorized but it was difficult to validate that the posts were codified correctly. He has been consistent on the themes provided but the message does change based on the public agenda in Utah. Giving people what they want to hear has been a part of Mike Lee's strategy.

At a broader level, the way Mike Lee sets his agenda based on knowing the audience, engaging with the audience's form of digital literacy, and giving that audience what they want to hear may seem like what other politicians do to stay in office. However, there is something else that populist do to take advantage of their position. Senator Lee demonstrates this in his social media posts by calling Democrat and Republican opponents part of the elite. Mike Lee makes himself seem to be an average person who is trying to fight against rich politicians.

In the examples given during the analysis, there are subtle hints demonstrating this. The quote about holding up bills is a subtle indication that Mike Lee knows how to do finances. The other one about his knowledge of the constitution is a way to put the family, which is important to people in Utah, into his post. The senator even attempts to use religious imagery known to the people of Utah (Romboy, 2020). The way that the senator puts in subtle hints is the main way that he runs as a populist. He is a man of the people and will most likely be elected repeatedly unless he fails to listen to the people, engage with them on their platform, or not give them what they want to hear.

Mike Lee is interesting to study as a politician who appears to support the public agenda and does not attempt to influence too much of what Utah voters think are important issues. His message does change, influenced by the public agenda. The agenda-setting theory does hold up by showing how important issues influence politicians, even populist politicians. This research shows that to be a populist politician isn't persuading people to see your point of view but to change your message to what the people want.

Conclusion

This study offers a detailed examination of how Senator Mike Lee employs populist rhetoric through social media, particularly Facebook, to align his messaging with the concerns of his Utah constituency. By analyzing over 2,000 posts across three election cycles, the research highlights Lee's strategic use of agenda-setting—specifically attribute agenda-setting—to elevate issues that resonate with voters and frame them in ways that emphasize his constitutional knowledge, critique of federal overreach, and personal connection to citizens. These patterns are emblematic of the populist playbook, where the politician positions themselves as an advocate for the "common man" and leverages social media to bypass traditional gatekeepers.

The findings reinforce the relevance of agenda-setting theory in today's digital communication landscape. Lee's ability to shift public attention toward key issues and frame them favorably demonstrates that social media functions as more than a campaign tool—it is a mechanism for shaping public discourse. The study confirms that the objects (issues) and attributes (framing) selected by politicians can significantly influence voter perception. Lee's consistent focus on federal land management, fiscal conservatism, and constitutional fidelity—coupled with testimonials and emotionally resonant messaging—reveals how targeted, localized communication can build long-term political support.

Furthermore, this research contributes to the growing body of literature that examines the intersection of populism and digital media. While previous studies have focused on high-profile national populists, this project demonstrates that local politicians like Mike Lee also deploy populist strategies effectively through sustained, strategic messaging. Lee's selective engagement with digital platforms familiar to his older, more conservative voter base—such as Facebook—further underscores the importance of digital literacy in shaping political communication. His success illustrates how populism is not necessarily about radical or inflammatory rhetoric but about aligning with public sentiment and presenting oneself as an accessible, values-driven leader.

Future research should expand beyond Facebook to include platforms like Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube, as well as examine how Lee and similar politicians respond to controversies or shifting political climates. Comparative studies of other state-level populist figures could help develop a broader understanding of how localized populism functions across different demographics and regions. Ultimately, this study reaffirms that in the age of social media, political success increasingly depends on the ability to listen, engage, and adapt to the public's evolving agenda—a skill Senator Mike Lee has effectively harnessed throughout his career.

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Rhetorical Analysis of the NBA after Jontay Porter's Lifetime Ban

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Abstract
The National Basketball Association (NBA) faced a major crisis communication challenge following Jontay Porter's involvement in game-fixing and betting on his own team, the Toronto Raptors. Given the league's commitment to maintaining integrity and fair competition, the NBA swiftly imposed a lifetime ban on Porter. This study applies Image Repair Theory (IRT) to analyze the crisis communication strategies used by NBA Commissioner Adam Silver, Raptors President Masai Ujiri, and Porter himself. Through qualitative rhetorical analysis, the research examines official statements, media coverage, and social media reactions. Findings suggest that Silver employed corrective action, Ujiri shifted from denial to mortification, and Porter ultimately accepted responsibility through mortification. Fan responses were divided, with some criticizing the NBA's ties to sports betting companies. This study provides insights into effective crisis communication in professional sports.
Keywords: Image Repair Theory, crisis communication, NBA, sports betting, Jontay Porter

The National Basketball Association (NBA) faced a significant crisis communication challenge following revelations that Jontay Porter engaged in game-fixing and betting on his own team, the Toronto Raptors. Given that the integrity of competition is fundamental to professional sports, the NBA had to respond swiftly and decisively to restore public trust and reinforce its commitment to fair play. This paper examines how Image Repair Theory (IRT), a widely recognized framework in crisis communication, has been used in similar cases to mitigate reputational damage.

Understanding how leagues and organizations implement IRT strategies following player misconduct is essential in evaluating effective crisis management approaches. This study employs qualitative research methods, focusing on rhetorical analysis to assess how the NBA, Commissioner Adam Silver, Raptors President Masai Ujiri, and social media users framed their responses to the scandal. Qualitative research, which emphasizes interpretation and thematic analysis, allows for an in-depth exploration of how these stakeholders navigated the crisis and shaped public perception (Matz, 2021).

By analyzing official statements, media coverage, and fan reactions, this study aims to determine which IRT strategies were employed, how effectively they addressed the controversy, and what lessons can be drawn for future crisis communication in professional sports. Through this analysis, the research will contribute to a broader understanding of how sports organizations handle reputation-threatening incidents and the role of strategic communication in maintaining institutional credibility.

Literature Review

Image repair theory (IRT) provides a crucial framework for analyzing the NBA's response to the Jontay Porter betting scandal. Billings (2017) identified two key findings in athlete image repair: mortification (apology) is generally the most successful strategy, often resulting in positive media coverage, improved public perception, or higher image scale scores, while strategies aimed at reducing the offensiveness of an act tend to be ineffective. This study employs rhetorical analysis and content analysis to assess the effectiveness of IRT in the NBA's handling of the scandal. By examining the league's response alongside media and fan rhetoric, this research offers valuable insights for sports managers, teams, leagues, and athletes in managing crisis communication.

Benoit's (1995) five image repair strategies—denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification—serve as analytical constructs for assessing the NBA's crisis communication following Porter's scandal. Understanding these strategies and their effectiveness in past cases provides context for evaluating the NBA's response.

Denial is the first step in Benoit's IRT, in which the accused either denies the offensive act or shifts blame to another party (Benoit, 2011). Lance Armstrong's doping scandal exemplifies the denial strategy; he initially remained silent before outright rejecting the allegations despite mounting evidence (Hambrick, Frederick, & Sanderson, 2015). Blame-shifting also occurs at the organizational level. For instance, Benoit (1995) noted that if the public perceives another party as responsible, an organization can mitigate reputational damage. A relevant sports example is the Philadelphia Eagles' contract dispute with Terrell Owens. Owens' new agent, known for aggressive negotiations, was partly blamed for the controversy, illustrating an attempt to deflect responsibility (Rivas Cruz, 2019).

The second strategy, evading responsibility, allows the accused to justify their actions without assuming full accountability. Benoit (1997) outlines four variations: provocation (claiming the act was a response to external factors), defeasibility (claiming lack of control or knowledge), accident (framing the act as unintentional), and good intentions. A notable example is Tennessee Titans player Taylor Lewan, who tested positive for performance-enhancing drugs and argued he was unaware of the banned substance in his supplements. Lewan even took a polygraph test to support his claim (Moraitis, 2021). In such cases, athletes attempt to absolve themselves of guilt while acknowledging the act itself.

Reducing offensiveness involves shifting focus away from the offensive act or minimizing its severity. This category includes bolstering (highlighting positive attributes), minimization (downplaying harm), differentiation (comparing the act to something worse), transcendence (framing the act within a broader, less damaging context), attacking accusers, and compensation (offering restitution). Owens employed bolstering by emphasizing his dedication, reminding the public he played the 2004 Super Bowl on an injured leg to justify his contract demands (Brazeal, 2007). Minimization strategies are evident when athletes attempt to downplay controversial remarks. For example, Owens dismissed his criticism of Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb and coach Andy Reid as insignificant (Rivas Cruz, 2019). Attacking accusers can also serve as a defense mechanism, shifting scrutiny onto critics to undermine their credibility.

Corrective action is one of the most effective strategies in IRT, as it demonstrates tangible steps toward improvement and rectification. Benoit and Drew (1997) found that pairing mortification with corrective action leads to the most favorable audience response. A prominent case is Michael Vick's response to his dogfighting scandal. Vick initially remained silent but later expressed remorse and took steps to rehabilitate his image, including enrolling in a PETA course (Thompson, 2007). Meyer (2007) noted that Vick's measured public statements and subsequent actions reinforced his sincerity, which ultimately facilitated his rehabilitation in the public eye. Corrective action reassures stakeholders that the accused is actively working to prevent future transgressions.

Mortification, the final strategy in Benoit's framework, involves admitting guilt and seeking forgiveness. A successful mortification strategy requires complete responsibility and an expression of sincere remorse (Benoit, 1995). Without these elements, apologies often fail to restore credibility. Brazeal (2007) analyzed Owens' apology following his contract dispute, concluding that his reluctance to fully admit guilt undermined his sincerity. This underscores the importance of a carefully constructed apology in sports crisis communication. As Brazeal (2007) noted, mortification is most effective when coupled with corrective action, as audiences are more likely to forgive when clear steps toward reform are evident.

The literature on IRT in sports communication highlights the need for strategic responses to crises. When analyzing the NBA's handling of the Jontay Porter betting scandal, this study will address the following research questions:

RQ1: Which image repair strategies did Jontay Porter use in his official statement following the betting scandal?

RQ2: Which image repair strategies did the Toronto Raptors use in their official statement following the betting scandal?
RQ3: Which image repair strategies did Adam Silver and the NBA use in their official statement following the betting scandal?

By examining these responses through the lens of IRT, this research will contribute to understanding how professional sports organizations and athletes navigate reputational crises. The findings will offer insights into best practices for crisis communication in sports, emphasizing the importance of transparency, accountability, and strategic messaging in mitigating damage to individual and organizational reputations.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the crisis communication strategies used by key stakeholders in response to the Jontay Porter betting scandal. The research focuses on rhetorical analysis, which allows for a nuanced interpretation of language, framing, and strategic messaging in public statements (Greenhalgh & Coombs, 2023). By analyzing the responses of Jontay Porter, Toronto Raptors President Masai Ujiri, and NBA Commissioner Adam Silver, this study seeks to determine which image repair strategies were utilized and how effectively they addressed the controversy.

The first step in the analysis involves examining official statements from all three parties following the NBA's private investigation into allegations that Porter altered his performance to influence betting outcomes. Porter initially remained silent but later released a statement through his attorney before pleading guilty in court, where he expressed remorse for his actions. Ujiri, representing the Toronto Raptors, acknowledged the situation with shock and disappointment, while Silver had the most at stake, as he was responsible for protecting the league's reputation and ensuring the integrity of professional basketball.

To evaluate the effectiveness of these responses, the study applies Benoit's Image Repair Theory (IRT), specifically analyzing the presence of denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Compton & Compton, 2015). By categorizing statements within this framework, the research identifies patterns in crisis communication and determines the success of each response.

A crucial component of this study is the rhetorical analysis of media coverage and social media discourse. Press conferences, interviews, and public statements will be examined to assess whether the NBA's crisis response aligned with effective reputation management practices. Additionally, sports journalists' narratives will be analyzed to determine how the NBA's messaging influenced media framing of the scandal.

Social media provides another key dimension to this research. Although direct access to comprehensive fan sentiment analysis is limited, qualitative data will be collected from public comments and social media discussions on NBA and Raptors' official accounts. Analyzing reposts, replies, and fan engagement trends will offer insight into how audiences perceived and responded to the league's communication strategy. This approach is informed by fan identification theory, which helps explain how audience loyalty and emotional investment influence reactions to sports-related crises (Greenhalgh & Coombs, 2023).

Through this multi-layered qualitative analysis, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how crisis communication strategies function in professional sports. By assessing the NBA's response through Image Repair Theory and rhetorical analysis, the research will offer valuable insights into effective public relations practices and reputation management within major sports organizations.

Content & Discussion

Analyzing the statements from Masai Ujiri, Adam Silver, and Jontay Porter, multiple types of Image Repair Theory (IRT) were used by each party involved. The varying degrees of responsibility required different crisis communication strategies to navigate the scandal effectively. Adam Silver, as the NBA Commissioner, had the most at stake in terms of damage control, as the league's integrity and credibility were directly challenged. Ujiri, as the president of the Toronto Raptors, responded with shock and limited commentary, emphasizing his lack of prior knowledge. Porter, the central figure in the controversy, largely remained silent until his guilty plea, at which point he employed mortification by taking responsibility and apologizing.

Beyond these official responses, fan reactions played a crucial role in shaping the public discourse surrounding the scandal. Some fans pointed out the hypocrisy of the NBA profiting from gambling sponsorships while issuing severe punishments for players who violate gambling rules. Others engaged in humor and memes, reflecting a desensitization to sports scandals in modern digital culture.

Adam Silver's Corrective Action and the NBA's Response

As Commissioner of the NBA, Adam Silver bore the greatest responsibility in managing the fallout from the betting scandal. The NBA has long emphasized fair competition, and sports betting threatens the league's credibility by introducing potential game manipulation. If fans or sponsors lose faith in the fairness of NBA games, the league could face serious reputational and financial consequences. Therefore, Silver had to ensure the situation was handled swiftly and decisively.

Silver's approach aligned with corrective action, one of the five primary strategies in Benoit's (1995) Image Repair Theory. Corrective action requires organizations or individuals to take measures to fix a crisis and prevent future occurrences. By issuing a lifetime ban on Porter, Silver reinforced the league's zero-tolerance stance on betting violations. During the NBA Board of Governors Press Conference, Silver framed Porter's actions as one of the worst offenses possible in professional basketball: "It's a cardinal sin of what he's accused of in the NBA" (Vorkunov, 2024).

Silver's strong language underscored the seriousness of the situation. By labeling gambling misconduct as a "cardinal sin," he positioned the NBA as an institution that upholds strict ethical standards. This rhetorical approach reassured fans, sponsors, and stakeholders that the NBA was committed to protecting the integrity of the game.

However, Silver also faced significant backlash for the NBA's deep involvement in the gambling industry. The league has numerous partnerships with sportsbooks, and advertisements for betting companies appear during NBA broadcasts, on social media, and in arenas. Critics argued that the NBA actively profits from sports betting, creating an environment where players may feel more tempted to participate.

Silver defended the league's gambling partnerships, arguing that legalizing and regulating sports betting allows for better monitoring and detection of illicit activities. In a recent interview, he explained, "I think, as I said at the time, with the advent of the internet, widely available sports betting online … that we had to deal directly with technology and recognize that if we don't legalize sports betting, people are going to find ways to do it illegally" (Reynolds, 2024).

Silver's proactive approach reflects a strategic effort to manage the risks associated with sports betting. By integrating betting companies into the league's infrastructure, the NBA gains access to data that can help detect suspicious gambling activity among players and officials.

Silver also took further corrective action by requesting that betting companies remove prop bets on two-way and 10-day contract players. Since these short-term and lower-salaried players are more vulnerable to financial struggles, they may be more likely to engage in betting-related misconduct. This decision—later adopted by multiple sportsbooks—demonstrates Silver's commitment to minimizing opportunities for betting violations (Maloney, 2024).

Masai Ujiri's Reaction: Denial and Mortification

Toronto Raptors President Masai Ujiri had a relatively limited role in handling the scandal, as the NBA took full control of the investigation. However, as the leader of Porter's team at the time, his response still mattered in shaping public perception. Ujiri's immediate reaction was one of shock and disbelief, demonstrating elements of denial, another key component of IRT. Denial is often used to distance individuals or organizations from blame, and in Ujiri's case, his statements reflected his lack of awareness regarding Porter's gambling activities.

In an interview, Ujiri stated, "You don't want this for the kid, you don't want this for our team, and we don't want this for our league, that's for sure. My first reaction is obviously surprise because none of us, I don't think anybody, saw this coming" (Li, 2024).

His emphasis on surprise suggests that the Raptors organization had no prior knowledge of Porter's gambling activities. By framing Porter as a "kid" rather than a deliberate rule-breaker, Ujiri softened the perception of Porter's wrongdoing. This aligns with mortification, another IRT strategy that involves expressing remorse and showing empathy toward the accused. Ultimately, Ujiri's response was short and restrained, reflecting his lack of direct involvement in the league's disciplinary process.

Jontay Porter's Silence and Mortification

Throughout the investigation process, Jontay Porter remained silent, which may have been a legal strategy advised by his attorney. In high-profile cases, public statements made before the conclusion of an investigation can often worsen legal and reputational consequences. However, once Porter pleaded guilty, he fully embraced mortification by admitting fault and expressing regret. In his statement to the court, he said, "I know what I did was wrong, unlawful, and I am deeply sorry" (Peltz, 2024).

This apology aligns with Benoit's (1995) mortification strategy, which involves acknowledging wrongdoing and seeking forgiveness. Given the severity of his actions, Porter had no viable defense—his best option was to fully accept responsibility. However, his late admission of guilt may have diminished the sincerity of his remorse in the eyes of fans and analysts.

Fan Reactions: Hypocrisy, Humor, and Social Media Backlash

Perhaps the most unpredictable aspect of the scandal was the fan response. While some NBA fans supported Porter's punishment, others accused the league of hypocrisy, given its financial ties to sports betting companies. A viral comment from a Reddit user encapsulated this sentiment: "Investigating him while having them as corporate sponsors is exceedingly hypocritical" (Joseph, 2024).

Others took a more humorous approach, flooding social media with memes mocking Porter's actions. Many fans resurfaced old tweets from Porter and his family members, using them as fodder for jokes. This reaction reflects the modern digital culture, where scandals often become entertainment rather than serious ethical debates.

Conclusion & Analysis

The Jontay Porter betting scandal serves as a significant case study in the application of Image Repair Theory (IRT) within professional sports, highlighting the responses of key stakeholders—NBA Commissioner Adam Silver, Toronto Raptors President Masai Ujiri, and Porter himself. Each party acted in accordance with expectations, following the crisis communication strategies most aligned with their roles. The NBA, as an organization committed to maintaining the integrity of its games, had little choice but to conduct a thorough investigation and issue a severe punishment. Porter's actions—betting on games, deliberately underperforming to influence the outcome, and providing inside information—represented a clear violation of league policy and ethical sportsmanship. The lifetime ban imposed on him reflects the league's zero-tolerance approach toward gambling misconduct.

Silver's swift and decisive action aligns with the corrective action strategy from Benoit's IRT model. Corrective action involves demonstrating efforts to rectify the wrongdoing and prevent future occurrences. By banning Porter permanently, Silver reinforced the NBA's commitment to fair competition and sent a strong message to current and future players about the consequences of engaging in gambling-related misconduct. The commissioner also defended the league's partnership with betting companies, arguing that legalizing and regulating sports gambling allows for better monitoring and detection of illicit betting activities among players. While some critics argue that the NBA's embrace of sports betting makes gambling more accessible to athletes, Silver maintains that strict enforcement mechanisms mitigate this risk. His decision to work with sportsbooks to remove prop bets on two-way and 10-day contract players further exemplifies corrective action by reducing potential vulnerabilities in the system.

Ujiri's response, though limited, followed a predictable pattern of initial denial followed by mortification. Given that the investigation was under the NBA's jurisdiction, the Raptors' organization had little influence over the situation. Ujiri's immediate reaction of disbelief is characteristic of denial, as he expressed shock that such an event occurred within his team. However, his later comments about Porter being a "good kid" suggest a degree of mortification, an acknowledgment that Porter's actions were regrettable but perhaps not entirely reflective of his character. This form of mortification may have been an attempt to soften the perception of the scandal while maintaining the Raptors' reputation.

Porter, on the other hand, remained silent throughout the investigation, likely on the advice of legal counsel. His eventual admission of guilt and expression of remorse during his court proceedings marked his adoption of the mortification strategy. He explicitly acknowledged his wrongdoing, stating, "I know what I did was wrong, unlawful, and I am deeply sorry" (Peltz, 2024). While his silence during the investigation might have fueled speculation and public scrutiny, his later admission aligns with Benoit's assertion that mortification—when coupled with corrective action—can be one of the most effective image repair strategies. However, in this case, given the severity of his actions, no amount of mortification could have prevented his lifetime ban from the NBA.

The reaction from fans adds an interesting layer to the discourse surrounding sports gambling. While some NBA fans engaged in humor and memes about the situation, others—particularly Raptors fans—expressed frustration with the league's stance. Many pointed out the perceived hypocrisy of the NBA punishing players for betting while simultaneously profiting from gambling sponsorships and advertisements. The widespread presence of sports betting promotions during NBA broadcasts and digital platforms has led some to argue that the league is complicit in creating an environment where gambling is normalized. From this perspective, Porter's actions, while clearly against the rules, were partly facilitated by the league's increasing alignment with betting companies. This raises ethical questions about the role of professional sports organizations in promoting responsible gambling practices while ensuring that their athletes do not succumb to gambling-related temptations.

Looking beyond the NBA, this incident aligns with a broader trend of sports leagues cracking down on player betting violations. The National Football League (NFL) has dealt with multiple suspensions and bans for gambling-related offenses, particularly during the 2023 season. Notably, Indianapolis Colts defensive back Isaiah Rodgers Sr. was suspended indefinitely and subsequently released by his team after being found guilty of placing bets on NFL games. However, unlike Porter, Rodgers was later reinstated by the league and signed by the Philadelphia Eagles. This contrast highlights differences in how professional leagues enforce gambling policies and the factors that influence their disciplinary decisions. Similarly, Detroit Lions wide receiver Jameson Williams was suspended for eight games for placing bets while inside a team facility, despite not betting on NFL games. His case underscores the strict enforcement of betting regulations even when athletes wager on other sports.

These instances suggest that professional leagues are becoming increasingly vigilant in identifying and addressing gambling violations. The use of technology, data analytics, and partnerships with sportsbooks has enhanced their ability to detect suspicious betting patterns and player involvement. However, the challenge remains in balancing the financial benefits of legalized sports betting with the ethical responsibility of preventing gambling-related scandals. The NBA, NFL, and other leagues must continue refining their policies, ensuring that athletes receive adequate education on gambling regulations while maintaining a clear and consistent approach to enforcement.

Future research on this topic could explore how different sports leagues handle gambling violations and whether their disciplinary measures align with public perception and legal frameworks. Additionally, examining the effectiveness of gambling education programs for athletes could provide insights into preventive strategies. Given the increasing integration of sports betting into mainstream sports culture, it is crucial to assess whether current policies effectively deter gambling-related misconduct or if adjustments are needed to address emerging challenges.

In conclusion, the Jontay Porter betting scandal serves as a cautionary tale about the risks of gambling within professional sports. Each party involved—Silver, Ujiri, and Porter—responded in ways consistent with their respective roles, following various strategies outlined in Benoit's Image Repair Theory. Silver's corrective action reinforced the league's commitment to integrity, Ujiri's response reflected initial denial followed by mortification, and Porter's eventual admission of guilt aligned with the mortification strategy. Meanwhile, fan reactions ranged from humor to criticism of the NBA's relationship with betting companies. As sports betting continues to expand, professional leagues must remain proactive in enforcing regulations while addressing concerns about the accessibility and influence of gambling. The broader conversation surrounding sports gambling will likely persist as more athletes face disciplinary action, making this an essential area of study for sports communication and ethics.

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Full Court Bias: Media Relations and the Gendered Framing of College Basketball in Utah

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Abstract
This study investigates gender disparities in institutional media coverage of NCAA Division I men's and women's basketball programs at six public universities in Utah. Using feminist theory and the depiction and reception framework, 48 press releases—previews and recaps—were analyzed to identify differences in article length, narrative depth, multimedia inclusion, and promotional content. Results revealed that, while some universities favored men's basketball in both quantity and quality of coverage, others prioritized women's teams or showed more balanced approaches. Even where word count was equal or higher for women's teams, qualitative differences such as coach quotes and multimedia assets often skewed in favor of men's coverage. These findings highlight inconsistencies in how universities represent gender through internal communication and suggest that institutional media practices may unintentionally reinforce broader societal inequities in sport. The study calls for increased scrutiny of athletic communication strategies to promote more equitable representation of women's sports.
Keywords: gender equity, sports media, NCAA basketball, feminist theory, institutional communication

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Sports are deeply woven into modern society, shaping personal development and cultural identity from an early age (Banschick, 2012). Collegiate athletics, governed by the NCAA, represent a crucial stage in this journey—not only for athletes but also for professionals in administration, coaching, and media relations (Coombs, 2024). While athletic performance often takes center stage, less attention is paid to how institutions communicate about their programs, particularly regarding gender equity. Media relations departments, responsible for crafting official narratives, play a vital yet often overlooked role in influencing public perception of collegiate sports.

Despite progress in women's athletics, gender disparities in sports media remain pervasive. Female athletes are still frequently portrayed through lenses of appearance or personality rather than performance, reinforcing stereotypes and diminishing their legitimacy (Carpenter & Acosta, 2004; Shultz, 2016). These inequities may extend beyond mainstream media into internal university communications. This study examines how NCAA Division I, state-funded universities in Utah—specifically Southern Utah, Utah, Utah State, Utah Valley, Utah Tech, and Weber State—represent men's and women's basketball through official press releases. Using feminist theory and the depiction and reception framework, the research explores whether institutional media relations practices uphold or challenge existing gender inequalities in collegiate sports coverage.

Literature Review

While limited research specifically examines how athletic media relations departments cover men's versus women's sports, broader scholarship provides vital context regarding disparities in sports media coverage, institutional priorities, and gender representation.

The Power and Priorities of the NCAA

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) governs more than 1,100 colleges and universities, 100 athletic conferences, and 40 affiliated organizations (NCAA, 2019). It operates across three divisions, with Division I programs receiving the most visibility, funding, and media attention (NCAA, 2018). Financial incentives strongly influence the NCAA's operations. In 2016, the NCAA extended its contract with CBS/Turner for March Madness broadcasting rights through 2032, adding $8.8 billion to an existing $10.8 billion deal (Sherman, 2016). Likewise, Power Five conferences receive enormous payouts from college football's postseason, with the Big Ten alone earning over $130 million in one season (Dosh, 2017).

These disparities extend to individual sports. Gaines and Nudelman (2017) reported that football programs in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) generate an average of $31.9 million in annual revenue, followed by men's basketball at $8.2 million. Women's basketball ranked fourth, generating just $1.8 million—less than men's ice hockey and slightly more than men's baseball. The lowest-earning sports were all women's programs, such as volleyball, soccer, lacrosse, and softball. These figures reflect systemic resource imbalances that influence both media coverage and institutional support.

Title IX and Gender Equity in Athletics

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 mandates that no individual in a federally funded educational program be excluded or discriminated against based on sex (Coombs, 2021). In athletics, this translates to equal opportunities to participate, equitable scholarship distribution, and access to comparable resources like coaching, facilities, and travel (Carpenter & Acosta, 2004). However, Title IX does not mandate equal visibility. While women may receive equal opportunities to compete, the media attention they receive—both from external outlets and their own institutions—remains inconsistent. The ongoing disparity in media coverage and fan engagement reinforces the dominance of men's athletics and raises questions about how deeply institutions commit to the spirit of gender equity.

Feminist Theory: Depiction and Reception

Feminist theory provides a useful lens to examine gendered communication in sports. The depiction and reception framework argues that individuals internalize ideas about gender through repeated media exposure. If men are routinely portrayed as stronger, more competitive, and more deserving of attention, these narratives become ingrained over time (Miller, 2002). These patterns are especially visible in sports media, which has historically framed male athletes as heroic and female athletes as secondary.

Feminist sport studies have gained prominence in communication research. Hovden and Pfister (2006) emphasized the importance of feminist scholarship in exposing and challenging the hierarchies embedded in sports media. Even legal mandates like Title IX have been misrepresented or misunderstood in coverage. Hardin et al. (2007) found that many journalists failed to grasp the law's implications, often reinforcing outdated gender norms in their reporting.

Bruce (2016) noted that today's female athletes navigate conflicting expectations—striving to be seen as legitimate competitors while also being expected to adhere to traditional standards of femininity. Internationally, some progress is evident. In Israel, a government department was created to advance women in sport (Galily, Kaufman, & Tamir, 2015). During the 2010 FIFA World Cup, more women assumed leadership roles, signaling efforts to challenge male hegemony in global sports (Clark, 2011).

Media Coverage of Women's Sports

Scholars have long documented the underrepresentation of women in sports media. Reid and Soley (1979) analyzed Sports Illustrated content from 1956 to 1976 and found no significant increase in women's sports coverage, despite rising female participation. More recent research confirms this trend. Women athletes are still frequently portrayed through lenses of attractiveness, emotion, or personal life rather than athletic performance (Shultz, 2016).

A study of Sports Illustrated by Brandt and Carstens (2005) revealed that their recurring "Beauty of Sport" feature often highlighted women's appearance and personality over athletic merit. This portrayal reinforces harmful stereotypes and undercuts efforts to position women as serious athletes. These issues extend beyond sports; for example, Finnish Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi faced similar framing, being simultaneously expected to appear both competent and traditionally feminine in media portrayals (Huovinen & Weselius, 2015).

Such coverage shapes not only public perception but also athlete behavior. Brandt and Carstens (2005), citing prior research, noted that women often switch sports, withdraw from programs, or underperform to meet societal expectations. These patterns illustrate how deeply media narratives can influence athletic identity and participation.

Research Questions

As Kian, Mondello, and Vincent (2009) noted, sports are a cultural cornerstone in American life, and media coverage significantly shapes perceptions of gender, institutional value, and athletic legitimacy. While much research has focused on external media, less attention has been given to how universities themselves frame gender through internal channels like media relations. This study uses a feminist theoretical framework—specifically the depiction and reception model—to examine how NCAA Division I, state-funded universities in Utah portray men's and women's basketball teams through official press releases. By analyzing institutional narratives, the research explores how gender is constructed by the very departments tasked with promoting student-athletes. To guide this investigation, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: To what extent are men's college basketball teams being covered in the state of Utah as compared to women's basketball teams?
RQ2: What major differences, if any, exist in the coverage of men's and women's college basketball by media relations departments in the state of Utah?
RQ3: Do men's college basketball teams receive more attention than women's teams from their own media relations departments in the state of Utah?

The findings of this study aim to shed light on the role of internal media in perpetuating—or challenging—gender inequities within collegiate sports.

Method

This study examined 48 press releases from the media relations departments of six NCAA Division I, state-funded universities in Utah: Southern Utah, Utah Tech, University of Utah, Utah State, Utah Valley, and Weber State. Private institutions such as Brigham Young University and Westminster were excluded. Each university provided four press releases for men's basketball and four for women's, consisting of two game previews and two recaps. To ensure fairness in comparison, the releases were selected from parallel matchups whenever possible.

The analysis focused on article length, structural elements, inclusion of direct quotes, and presence of promotional content. Word count served as a baseline for evaluating the level of coverage, while additional content such as multimedia or marketing tie-ins helped assess promotional emphasis. This approach aimed to identify patterns in how institutional media relations departments may differentially frame men's and women's basketball programs.

Results and Analysis

The primary goal of this study was to examine potential disparities in coverage between men's and women's basketball programs by NCAA Division I media relations departments in the state of Utah. While every institution surveyed exhibited some level of imbalance, the degree and form of disparity varied notably.
University of Utah

Among the five institutions analyzed, the University of Utah displayed the most pronounced gap in coverage between men's and women's basketball. The average word count for press releases covering the men's team (the Runnin' Utes) was 1,024 words, more than double the 492-word average for the women's team. Structurally, both men's and women's releases shared a uniform layout—broken into sections rather than written in standard Associated Press (AP) format—but differences in content were clear.

Both of the men's recaps featured direct post-game quotes, lending the articles more depth and perceived importance. In contrast, only one of the women's recaps included comments from the head coach. This selective inclusion of quotes subtly reinforces the idea that men's games warrant more post-game analysis and commentary.

Interestingly, the women's previews did include promotional efforts, specifically color-themed giveaways ("Red Out" and "White Out"), where fans received free admission for wearing the designated color. This indicates some attempt to boost engagement with the women's program. However, the men's promotional content appeared more robust and financially backed. One men's preview highlighted the distribution of 11x17 posters and 5,000 branded light sticks, suggesting a greater investment in production and fan experience. Additionally, both men's recaps featured embedded tweets and video content, demonstrating a deliberate and immediate multimedia push following the contests. Neither women's recap showed similar attention to digital media presentation.

Utah Valley University

Utah Valley University (UVU) displayed the second-largest gap in average word count. The Wolverine men's basketball team's press releases averaged 733 words, while the women's team averaged 500 words per release. The men's coverage not only had a higher word count but also included more descriptive game narratives. Curiously, the number of quotes skewed in favor of the women's team in this case: two of the women's releases included direct quotes compared to just one on the men's side. While this finding partially offsets the disparity in length, it does not fully compensate for the reduced depth and breadth of content overall.

Southern Utah University

Southern Utah University (SUU) showed a more modest but still present disparity in coverage. The average word count for men's basketball press releases was 761 words, while the women's releases averaged 600 words. The difference, though not as dramatic as at Utah or UVU, still suggests more comprehensive reporting on men's games.

The inclusion of quotes further illustrates this imbalance. Every men's release included direct commentary from the head coach, while only one women's release featured a quote. The routine use of coach statements in the men's coverage suggests a more intentional effort to humanize and contextualize those events, contributing to the perceived importance of the men's team.

Utah Tech University

Although Utah Tech University was not included in the primary analysis due to its transitional status from Division II to Division I at the time of the study, a preliminary review of its media coverage reveals patterns consistent with those observed at other institutions. Press releases for the men's basketball team at Utah Tech averaged 672 words, while those for the women's team averaged just 498 words—a disparity of 174 words. While not as stark as the gap seen at the University of Utah, this difference still suggests a tendency to provide more extensive narrative space and detail for the men's team. Similar to trends noted at Southern Utah and Utah Valley, the men's articles at Utah Tech tended to include more statistical breakdowns and game context, while the women's coverage was generally shorter and less robust. These findings further support the broader theme of gendered discrepancies in media relations content, even at institutions undergoing structural and divisional transitions.

Weber State University

Weber State University (WSU) deviated significantly from the prevailing trend. The women's basketball team received longer and arguably more detailed press coverage than the men's team. On average, the women's press releases totaled 613 words, compared to just 390 words for the men's. This suggests that, at least at Weber State, media relations departments may be making a deliberate effort to balance—or even reverse—the typical gender gap in institutional coverage.

Despite the positive disparity in word count, other aspects of coverage remained limited. Only one release from each team included a quote, and only one of the men's press releases featured embedded video content. This points to a general lack of supplementary storytelling across both programs, even where word count may favor the women's team.

Utah State University

Utah State also ran counter to the broader pattern. In this case, the women's basketball team was covered more extensively than the men's team. The average word count for women's basketball press releases was 744 words, while men's basketball releases averaged just 406 words. The formatting was consistent across teams, with game previews broken into sections and game recaps presented in a traditional AP style.

Notably, none of the press releases analyzed from Utah State—regardless of gender—featured quotes, embedded video, or promotional content. This uniform lack of depth could suggest a more minimalist approach to media relations overall or reflect resource limitations within the department (Appendix 1). Still, the relative emphasis placed on the women's team in terms of length may indicate an institutional effort to provide more equitable coverage.

Conclusion

This study examined gender disparities in internal media coverage of NCAA Division I men's and women's basketball programs at six public universities in Utah. By analyzing press releases from athletic media relations departments, the research aimed to uncover how institutional communication practices may reflect or reinforce gender-based inequalities. Grounded in feminist theory and the depiction and reception framework, the study highlights discrepancies in coverage and offers a critical lens through which to evaluate institutional commitment to equity. Ultimately, it serves as both a diagnostic tool and a call to action for universities seeking to promote fair and balanced sports representation.

RQ1: To What Extent Are Men's Basketball Teams Being Covered in the State of Utah Compared to Women's Teams?

The answer to this question is institution-specific rather than uniform across the state. While some universities, such as the University of Utah, Southern Utah, and Utah Valley, exhibited significantly longer and more robust coverage for men's basketball, others—namely Utah State and Weber State—offered more comprehensive coverage for their women's teams in terms of word count. The findings reveal that media relations coverage practices vary greatly by institution, and there is no consistent statewide trend that prioritizes one gender over another across the board. This suggests that disparities in coverage may be more reflective of individual department practices and staffing than a collective cultural norm across Utah's collegiate athletic landscape.

RQ2: What Major Differences, If Any, Exist in the Coverage of Men's and Women's Basketball by Media Relations Departments?

Significant differences were observed not only in the length of press releases but also in their content and presentation. In departments where men's basketball received more attention, coverage tended to include more post-game quotes, promotional tie-ins, and multimedia elements such as embedded tweets and video recaps. These components not only enrich the storytelling but also enhance fan engagement and elevate the public image of the team. In contrast, women's basketball coverage often lacked these supplementary materials and focused more narrowly on the game's final score or basic statistical summaries. While institutions like Weber State and Utah State challenged this norm in terms of article length, they still mirrored broader patterns of minimal enhancement in women's sports storytelling. These differences, though sometimes subtle, reinforce systemic disparities in institutional prioritization and media representation.

RQ3: Do Men's Basketball Teams Receive More Attention Than Women's Teams From Their Own Media Relations Departments?

The data revealed a more nuanced answer than initially anticipated. While the original hypothesis suggested that men's teams would universally receive more attention, the results of this study disprove that assumption. In fact, Utah State and Weber State both provided longer press releases for women's basketball teams, indicating that some institutions are making deliberate efforts to reverse or balance traditional disparities. However, this is not true for all universities. In departments like Utah and Utah Valley, men's basketball clearly received more detailed and frequent coverage, suggesting that institutional values and departmental workflows still, in many cases, skew in favor of men's athletics. The presence of such variability reinforces the need for further examination into the internal decision-making processes and resource allocation within media relations departments.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study offers a valuable snapshot of gender representation in collegiate sports media, several limitations must be acknowledged. The most significant is the small sample size—only four press releases (two previews and two recaps) per team per institution were analyzed. This limited dataset does not reflect the full breadth of media coverage across an entire basketball season, making it difficult to generalize findings or identify long-term trends.

Additionally, the study did not control for variables such as opponent quality, game importance, or timing within the season, all of which may influence the depth or quality of press coverage. The analysis of promotional content and multimedia features was also limited and qualitative in nature. A more comprehensive, season-long dataset would offer greater clarity on institutional patterns and editorial decision-making.

The study focused solely on basketball programs at public universities within one state. Expanding the research to include additional sports, private institutions (such as BYU), or universities in other states would broaden the scope and strengthen the comparative value of the findings.

This is an evolving study that will continue to grow with additional data and analytical depth. Future research should examine a full season's worth of releases, incorporate quantitative coding of promotional and multimedia features, and consider resource allocation within media relations departments. Interviews with staff may also offer insights into the processes behind content creation. Ultimately, this research serves as a foundation for ongoing inquiry into equity, representation, and institutional responsibility in collegiate sports communication.

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Rhetoric on the Ropes: Analyzing Jim Mora and Mike Ditka's Press Conference Rants

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Abstract
This study explores the rhetorical strategies used in post-loss press conference rants by NFL coaches Jim Mora and Mike Ditka. Using grounded theory and rhetorical analysis, the research identifies five primary communication categories across four iconic rants: deprecation, emotional expression, statistical analysis, deflection, and audience interactivity. Findings indicate that deprecation (both self and team) and emotional expression were the most frequently used rhetorical techniques, revealing a heavy reliance on pathos. Statistical analysis and deflection were employed more sparingly, while audience interactivity added a layer of direct engagement—often combative. The study discusses the potential implications of these strategies on team cohesion, media perception, and public image. It also proposes that coaching style may influence rhetorical choices in press conferences. This analysis offers a framework for understanding emotional leadership communication in sports and opens avenues for future research on the effectiveness and impact of public rants in athletic contexts.
Keywords: Image repair, grounded theory, sports communication, press conferences, emotional expression

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Rhetoric on the Ropes: Analyzing Jim Mora and Mike Ditka's Press Conference Rants
Over the past century, the National Football League (NFL) has experienced significant growth and expansion, solidifying football's role as a central focus in American culture. In 2018 alone, 46 of the top 50 most-watched telecasts in the United States were NFL games (Gulizia & Willis, 2019, para. 37). With this heightened visibility comes increased scrutiny—not only of the players but also of the coaches who lead them. Among the most notable figures in this realm is the late Dennis Green, a trailblazing innovator and the second African American head coach in NFL history. Green guided the Minnesota Vikings through a dominant era in the 1990s, including a remarkable 15-1 season in 1998 during which the team set a then-record for points scored (Chadiha, 2023). Posthumously, he was honored as the third head coach inducted into the Vikings Ring of Honor.

Despite his many contributions to the sport, Green is perhaps most publicly remembered for a passionate post-game press conference during his tenure with the Arizona Cardinals. After a devastating 24–23 loss to the undefeated Chicago Bears—a game in which his 1–4 team had led 20–0 at halftime—Green delivered an impassioned and now-iconic rant, exclaiming, “They are who we thought they were!” and “If you want to crown them, then crown their ass!” (Mill, 2017; Nesbitt, 2020; Dubin, 2016). This outburst has since become a defining moment in Green's legacy, earning a place among the top coaching rants in NFL history (Friedman, 2014; Mill, 2017; Nesbitt, 2020). Green belongs to a larger cohort of NFL coaches known—sometimes infamously—for emotionally charged post-game press conferences. These intense and unscripted moments offer a compelling opportunity to analyze the communicative strategies coaches use under pressure.

Two coaches who consistently appear on rankings of the most notable coaching rants are Jim Mora and Mike Ditka. Both men enjoyed successful careers and are celebrated not only for their accomplishments on the field but also for their vivid and memorable rhetoric off it. Mora is best known for two press conference tirades—"Playoffs?" and "Diddly poo"—delivered during his time with the New Orleans Saints and Indianapolis Colts. He led the Saints to their first winning seasons and orchestrated a dramatic turnaround for the Colts, earning the NFL Coach of the Year award in 1987 and later securing a place in the New Orleans Saints Hall of Fame (New Orleans Saints, n.d.). Similarly, Ditka's emotionally charged rants—"What do you care?" and "Wrong guy for this job"—alongside a heated exchange with a fan during a press conference, reflect a career marked by intense public expression. Ditka's accolades include being the first individual to win an NFL championship as a player, assistant coach, and head coach (Pro Football Hall of Fame, n.d.).

The public expression of frustration by coaches such as Mora and Ditka invites further scholarly examination into how leaders in high-pressure environments communicate failure, process emotion, and attempt to maintain authority. By analyzing the rhetorical and emotional strategies embedded in these rants, researchers can begin to identify patterns of post-loss communication and evaluate their potential implications for team dynamics, media narratives, and stakeholder perceptions.

Literature Review

While a variety of communication theories could both be applied to the themes and rhetoric of press conference rants, grounded theory provides an objective outlook through which data can be analyzed. In The Discovery of Grounded Theory, sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss suggested "systematically discovering and interpreting empirical data to generate theory, in contrast to testing or verifying theory derived from a priori assumptions" (Matin et al., 2018, para. 1). Regardless of its origin in sociology, this method of research has been popularized across the realm of social sciences since its inception, with much conflict regarding its widespread use. While Glaser proposes strict adherence to the initial outline of grounded theory, Strauss and other researchers have explored alternative ways the theory can be used, abiding to the spirit of grounded theory and not its exact framework (Khan, 2014).

Despite the contention regarding its use, grounded theory offers an important lens through which data can be analyzed as it is collected through the processes of theoretical sampling and coding. Through theoretical sampling, researchers collect and analyze data, which is then used to determine the focus of further data collection (Lawrence & Tar, 2013). This provides a way to explore the emerging framework during data collection to refine further data collection (Lawrence & Tar, 2013). The process of coding, which occurs during and after data collection, includes open coding, involving "line by line coding where concepts and key phrases are identified and highlighted and moved into subcategories, then categories" (Noble & Mitchell, 2016, para. 13), axial coding, where relationships between these categories are investigated, and selective coding, which solidifies core categories and begins formation of the grounded theory (Noble & Mitchell, 2016). The theory produced by this research strategy should be free of preconceptions (Glaser & Strauss, 2014) and come to a conclusion unaffected by previous researcher notions.

The use of the grounded theory method can be particularly effective in less saturated fields of research, such as the study of communication in sport. Since existing theories in communication may not always fit this less studied topical area, the grounded theory approach can help avoid the bias of existing theories on data analysis (Coombs, 2022). That being said, if the data collected on emotional outbursts aligns with an existing perspective on communication, the conclusion drawn as a result will reflect this, rather than forming an unnecessary new grounded theory.

Press Conferences in Athletics

While press conferences are a common source of study in the field of communication, particularly when it comes to image repair, the analysis of outraged rants in these press conferences is a less common focal point. This study specifically focuses on analyzing themes used in highly expressive and emotional communication following losses. However, the existing body of communication research on press conferences in sports offers a groundwork for more focused and specific studies like this.

In a study analyzing leadership messaging styles following loss and team performance in the NFL, Katkade and Gutter (2023) observed that the relationship between content of post-loss press conferences and future team success was weak. They suggested that "coach press conferences provide little information about a team's response to a loss" (p. 12). If these post-game communications have little to no impact over team success, what purpose do they serve and why do coaches feel a need to participate in them? According to post-loss press conference research by Ostrowsky and Stein (2020), the engagement of athletes in image repair shows that athletes feel a threat to their image or "hero" status immediately following a loss. Regardless of the varying repair strategies these individuals used in their post-game communication, athletes consistently felt the need to recover their image following failure, even if they didn't commit any deviant behavior.

In comparison to a typical press conference, however, post-game rants present an interesting dilemma to what would typically be an attempt at image repair. While providing respectful sport courtesy to the opposing team after a loss is commonly used as the first brick toward repairing public image (Dumitriu, 2011), these rants jump directly to vivid expression of frustration. Despite the seemingly ineffective nature of these outbursts on public image, communication literature supports that the abrasively negative content of these press conferences could actually have a positive impact by protecting speakers from further reputational damage (Speer, 2019).

Self-deprecation, a process that occurs regularly in post-loss rants, may appear to depreciate the image of an individual coach or their entire team. In reality, self-deprecatory meta-comments can inoculate the communicator from criticism, as they shape the receiver's expectations and discourage further criticism than the communicator's initial comment (Speer, 2019). In addition, Wolfe and Shepherd (2015) found that coaches using negative content in a press conference will be more effective in taking an "all-or-nothing" approach. "When it comes to negative emotions, being either emotionless or highly emotional are superior strategies as compared with adopting a more moderate approach which might be considered "wishy-washy" and therefore less effective" (para. 56). The communication literature illustrates that themes in press conference outbursts could potentially be damaging or beneficial to individual and team reputation depending on how the messages are targeted.

The existing literature on grounded theory and sports communication provides a strong foundation for analyzing the rhetorical structure of emotionally charged coaching rants. Grounded theory, with its emphasis on inductive, data-driven analysis, is particularly well-suited for exploring less saturated topics like post-loss communication in professional sports. While much research on press conferences has focused on leadership messaging and image repair, the specific phenomenon of impassioned outbursts remains underexamined. Traditional post-game statements typically aim to preserve image through measured responses, but coaching rants often abandon these conventions in favor of vivid emotional expression, including self-deprecation and overt frustration. Despite their apparent volatility, such rants may serve strategic purposes, such as inoculating the speaker against further criticism or enhancing perceptions of authenticity. Given this gap in the literature, the current study seeks to explore the rhetorical patterns found in press conference rants by posing two research questions:

RQ1: What are the present communication strategies in Jim Mora's press conference rants?
RQ2: What are the present communication strategies in Mike Ditka's press conference rants?

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing both grounded theory and thematic analysis to examine the rhetoric and thematic structures of press conference rants. Grounded theory provides a systematic methodology for developing theories directly from data through iterative analysis, while rhetorical analysis offers a structured approach to understanding the persuasive elements and communicative strategies used in these rants.

Grounded theory, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is a qualitative research method designed to construct theories through systematic data collection and analysis rather than testing pre-existing theoretical frameworks. This method is particularly useful for exploring emergent themes in under-examined fields (Coombs, 2022), such as the communication dynamics in sports press conferences. The application of grounded theory in this study follows the procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998), including theoretical sampling, coding, and constant comparison. Theoretical sampling involves collecting and analyzing data iteratively to refine research focus based on emerging themes (Lawrence & Tar, 2013).

Data were coded using a three-step process: (1) open coding, in which key phrases and concepts were identified and categorized (Noble & Mitchell, 2016), (2) axial coding, where relationships between categories were explored, and (3) selective coding, which synthesized the core themes into a coherent theoretical framework. By employing this approach, the study ensures that conclusions are derived inductively from the data rather than being influenced by pre-existing theoretical biases (Glaser & Strauss, 2014).

A thematic rhetorical analysis was employed to examine the language, symbolic gestures, and communicative strategies used in press conference rants. This approach focuses on how language and discourse shape audience perception, influence credibility, and frame the intended message (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The study applies rhetorical criticism to assess elements such as ethos (credibility), pathos (emotional appeal), and logos (logical argumentation) within press conference discourse (Foss, 2018). To conduct this analysis, transcripts and video recordings of selected press conferences were collected from publicly available sources via YouTube. The analysis follows a multi-step process: (1) identifying rhetorical strategies used by coaches or players, (2) examining the impact of these strategies on audience reception, and (3) interpreting how these rhetorical elements contribute to broader themes of leadership, accountability, and emotional expression in sports communication (Dumitriu, 2011). The effectiveness of the rhetoric was assessed based on audience reactions, media coverage, and recurring themes in public discourse.

The integration of grounded theory and rhetorical analysis provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the communicative strategies employed in press conference rants. Grounded theory facilitated the emergence of theoretical insights from the data, while rhetorical analysis contextualized these findings within established communication frameworks. Constant comparative analysis was applied throughout the study to ensure that evolving themes were grounded in the data and interpreted within their rhetorical contexts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Since the study utilizes publicly available data, there are no direct ethical concerns related to participant confidentiality. However, care was taken to ensure accurate representation of press conference discourse, and interpretations were supported with multiple data sources to avoid misrepresentation or bias. The integration of these qualitative methods ensures that the study remains both empirically grounded and theoretically insightful, offering new perspectives on sports communication and leadership discourse.

Results

The evaluation of Jim Mora and Mike Ditka's press conference rants revealed multiple rhetorical techniques used with varying frequency. 17 rhetorical strategies were identified in the four rants during open coding. These strategies were separated into five encompassing categories during axial coding: (1) deprecation, wherein the speakers insulted, demeaned, or otherwise discredited the efforts of the team or themself as an individual, (2) emotional expression, in which the coaches both aggressively and passively detailed their frustration, shame, and concern, (3) statistical analysis, illustrated by Mora and Ditka's use of specific in-game instances or statistics that contributed to their failure, (4) deflection, where coaches attempted to avoid the situation by shifting focus or using complete ignorance, and finally (5) audience interactivity, in which coaches directly addressed their listeners by both unifying and combative methods.

Deprecation

The most prominent theme in all four press conference rants, deprecation, was further separated into two distinctive subcategories: team deprecation and self deprecation. These subcategories were combined due to the fact that all instances of deprecation in the data include specific directing of post-game ranting towards individuals or the team as a whole. For example, instances of team deprecation were visible when Mora stated, "It's absolutely pitiful to perform like that," in his 'Playoffs?' rant or when Ditka stated, "We don't make any plays," in his 'Wrong guy for this job' rant. Since the statements refer to the failure of the collective group, including staff and players, they fall into the team subcategory. Team deprecation further includes athlete deprecation, in which the coach insults athletes rather than the entire organizational unit, such as when Mora said, "The players did a horrible job," in his 'Playoffs?' rant. Meanwhile, self deprecation includes comments directed at the speaker themself or the coaching in general, like when Mora stated "Coaching—we all—coaching did a horrible job," in his 'Diddly Poo' rant or when Ditka said, "I'm probably the wrong guy for this job." Both forms of deprecation were regularly evident in at least one rant from each coach.

Emotional Expression

The category of emotional expression proved to be equally as prominent as deprecation. It encompasses a range of statements and expletives that share the commonality of a pathos-focused rhetorical approach. However, rather than being focused towards a direct target like the comments in the deprecation category, these remarks instead serve to display the coach's emotional state to press conference viewers. Examples include a variety of negative emotions like frustration, such as when Mora said, "It sucked. It stunk," in his 'Diddly Poo' rant, shame, such as when Mora said, "I'm totally embarrassed and totally ashamed," in the same rant, and concern for the future, such as when Ditka responded, "I don't know," after being asked if he planned to return the next year in his 'Wrong guy for this job' press conference. Also added to this category due to being used primarily as a means of emotional expression was instances of profanity, such as when Mora said, "The second half, we just got our ass totally kicked. We couldn't do diddly poo offensively," in his 'Diddly Poo' rant. Instances like these that use profanity and insult the team were counted under both the deprecation and emotional expression categories.

Statistical Analysis
The category of statistical analysis relies heavily on the rhetorical method of logos and was used less often by the coaches. However, this technique was particularly distinct due to the use of factual analysis in place of exclusively emotion-based outburst. Ditka used this strategy when he stated, "We turned the ball over seven times or six times in the game," in his 'Wrong guy for this job' rant and Mora used this strategy when he said, "When you turn the ball over five times, four interceptions, one for a touchdown, three others in field position to set up touchdowns—you ain't gonna beat anybody I just talked about," in the 'Playoffs?' press conference. Statistical analysis was used in only three of the four press conference rants.

Deflection
Rather than the atypical rant-based rhetoric referenced in the aforementioned categories, the methods of deflection used by both coaches fall more classically in line with efforts of image repair. Deflection includes techniques of shifting focus to team positives or opponent success as well as avoidance of specific topics or questions. An example of highlighting team positives is when Mora stated, "I'll start off by saying this: do not blame that game on the defense," in his 'Playoffs?' rant, and an example of blaming opponent success is illustrated by the quote, "Every time they got the ball, they went down and got points," in his 'Diddly Poo' press conference. When using the process of avoidance, the two coaches were less veiled in their deflection of uncomfortable topics, such as when Ditka said, "I have no thoughts about it," in response to a question or when he choicefully ignores a following inquiry regarding his status with team management in his 'Wrong guy for this job' rant.

Audience Interactivity
The final category involves the coaches' use of audience interactivity, which included calls for acknowledgement from viewers, such as the use of return questions like, "What's the difference?" in Ditka's 'Wrong guy for this job' rant, initiating questioning, such as Ditka's repeated use of the word "Next" to call for questions in his 'What do you care?' rant, and combativeness, such as when Ditka said, "It's nobody's concern but ours. Nobody's," in the same rant. One interesting combination of strategies was Ditka's repeated use of initiating questions immediately followed by combativeness.

Discussion

The data revealed five distinct rhetorical devices used by coaches in their press conference rants: deprecation, emotional expression, statistical analysis, deflection, and audience interactivity. The results of this study provide insight into the potential implications of press conference ranting as well as extensive avenues for further research. Due to the prominence of deprecation and emotional expression in all four of the rants, the conclusion can be drawn that these pathos-rooted rhetorical techniques are the most commonly used by Mike Ditka and Jim Mora in their rants. Statistical analysis, deflection, and audience interactivity serve as secondary techniques to support the coach in their use of deprecation and emotional expression to rant.

Deprecation
The category of deprecation emerged as one of the most prominent rhetorical strategies employed in the press conference rants of both Jim Mora and Mike Ditka. This theme includes both team deprecation, in which coaches criticize their players or the team as a whole, and self-deprecation, where the speaker turns blame inward by highlighting personal shortcomings or leadership failures. The frequent use of these rhetorical moves raises significant questions about their broader implications, particularly concerning team morale, public perception, and the mental health of athletes and staff. Research suggests that repeated negative messaging directed toward oneself or others in high-stress environments may contribute to deteriorating interpersonal relationships, hinder team cohesion, and potentially reinforce a culture of blame rather than growth (Speer, 2019).

Despite these risks, deprecation may also serve a strategic communicative function. In emotionally charged situations—especially following a loss—coaches may use deprecatory language as a defensive rhetorical mechanism to preempt external criticism. According to Speer (2019), self-deprecating comments can inoculate a speaker from further reputational harm by demonstrating a level of self-awareness and accountability. When a coach openly acknowledges failure, either on their part or the team's, it may neutralize the audience's impulse to assign blame, redirecting the conversation toward constructive discourse or, alternatively, serving as a cathartic release. In this sense, deprecation becomes not just an emotional expression but a deliberate rhetorical strategy employed to manage public scrutiny.

The differing emphases on team versus self-deprecation between the two coaches offer insight into their distinct communication and leadership styles. Mike Ditka's rants frequently featured self-critical remarks, including statements like, "I'm probably the wrong guy for this job," suggesting a personalized sense of responsibility and perhaps a perfectionist or individualistic leadership style. In contrast, Jim Mora's rants more often targeted the team or players broadly, with comments such as, "The players did a horrible job," reflecting a more collectivist or externalized attribution of blame. This divergence may be rooted in deeper coaching philosophies, with Ditka potentially embracing a more internally focused model of leadership that centers accountability on the head coach, while Mora's approach may reflect a model that emphasizes team-wide responsibility and collective performance evaluation.

This difference in deprecatory focus invites future research to explore whether these patterns are consistent across broader samples of coaches and how these rhetorical choices influence media narratives, fan reactions, and team dynamics. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate the relationship between coaching styles and the use of deprecation—particularly whether collectivist or authoritarian leadership correlates with team-focused criticism, while individualistic or servant leadership styles align with self-directed remarks. Further examination could also assess the long-term impacts of deprecation on athletes' perceptions of leadership, team culture, and psychological safety.

Ultimately, while deprecation may appear destructive on the surface, its rhetorical value and strategic purpose warrant deeper investigation. Understanding when and how such language is used can provide meaningful insights into emotional leadership communication, the pressures of high-stakes performance, and the complex interplay between public accountability and private team culture in professional sports.

Statistical Analysis

Among the rhetorical strategies identified in the press conference rants of Jim Mora and Mike Ditka, statistical analysis was notably underutilized. This technique, grounded in logos or logical appeal, involves referencing quantitative data—such as turnovers, scoring margins, or specific game incidents—to substantiate claims and explain performance outcomes. In contrast to the emotionally driven content rooted in deprecation and frustration, statistical analysis offers a more structured and rational narrative that could help clarify the causes of failure while reinforcing the speaker's credibility. However, in the rants analyzed, both coaches relied heavily on pathos-based appeals, with statistical references appearing sporadically and often embedded within emotionally charged statements. This imbalance suggests a missed opportunity to strengthen arguments with objective data that might resonate with both the media and fans.

The limited use of statistical analysis may be attributed to the emotional intensity and spontaneity of these press conferences, during which coaches may prioritize venting frustration over delivering a carefully structured explanation. Nevertheless, integrating more statistical content could enhance the rhetorical effectiveness of post-loss communication by grounding emotional expression in fact. For instance, when Ditka stated, "We turned the ball over seven times," or when Mora detailed specific turnovers and field position issues, they briefly shifted from emotional outbursts to measured analysis. These moments introduced an important contrast—demonstrating that even within a passionate rant, logic can reinforce the speaker's argument and provide tangible reasons for failure.

However, the effectiveness of statistical analysis depends not only on its presence but also on how it is framed. If used to single out individual athletes or deflect responsibility, statistics can quickly become a tool for scapegoating, which may undermine team cohesion and damage the athlete-coach relationship. To avoid this, any inclusion of statistics in a press conference rant must be collectivistically framed, emphasizing team-wide accountability and organizational shortcomings rather than individual blame. Statements such as "we gave up five turnovers as a team" or "we failed to convert on third downs collectively" can communicate necessary critiques without isolating players or creating division within the team. This approach aligns with research suggesting that effective leadership communication balances accountability with support, particularly in high-pressure public settings.

Moreover, expanding the role of statistical analysis in press conference rants could serve as a credibility-enhancing strategy, offering coaches a means to maintain authority while softening the emotional intensity of their messages. This could be especially useful in managing media narratives, where factual clarity can offset potential backlash from emotionally charged remarks. As such, future research could examine how the strategic use of statistics influences audience reception, media framing, and stakeholder trust in the aftermath of team failure.

Although statistical analysis was minimally employed in the rants examined, it holds significant potential as a rhetorical tool for balancing emotion with reason. When used appropriately and collectivistically, it can enhance message coherence, protect athlete well-being, and support more constructive public dialogue following disappointing performances.

Audience Interactivity

Audience interactivity emerged as a distinct rhetorical category within the press conference rants of Jim Mora and Mike Ditka, characterized by direct engagement with reporters through rhetorical questions, conversational prompts, and reactive responses. While both coaches employed this strategy, Mike Ditka demonstrated a notably higher frequency of combative interactivity, particularly during moments of heightened frustration. His repeated use of dismissive language—such as "What do you care?"—and rhetorical deflection was often paired with initiating questions like "Next," creating a paradoxical engagement pattern. This tension between inviting dialogue and shutting it down suggests a rhetorical strategy aimed at asserting control over the press environment.

Ditka's heavy reliance on self-deprecation may have contributed to his confrontational tone, as he may have perceived himself as the primary target of criticism, prompting a defensive response toward the media. This behavior may function as an effort to reclaim authority in a moment of reputational vulnerability. Rather than conceding control, Ditka repositions himself as the dominant voice in the room, using interactivity not to collaborate with the audience but to frame the narrative on his terms.

In contrast, Mora's use of audience interactivity was less aggressive and more restrained. While he engaged with reporters, he did so in a less combative manner, suggesting a different communicative approach, possibly influenced by personality or coaching philosophy. This contrast highlights how individual coaching styles impact rhetorical choices during press conferences, especially under emotional strain.

Future research should explore the impact of audience interactivity on media framing, fan perception, and team morale. It remains unclear whether combative rhetoric is perceived as passion and authenticity or as hostility and defensiveness. Conversely, more unifying or cooperative responses might foster public goodwill and maintain team cohesion. Understanding the rhetorical effects of different interactivity styles can provide coaches and public relations professionals with better strategies for managing post-loss communication while preserving reputational integrity and team unity.

Conclusion

This study explored the rhetorical strategies employed in post-loss press conference rants by NFL coaches Jim Mora and Mike Ditka through a dual application of grounded theory and rhetorical analysis. By identifying five major rhetorical categories—deprecation, emotional expression, statistical analysis, deflection, and audience interactivity—the study reveals that Mora and Ditka's rants were driven primarily by pathos, with both coaches relying heavily on emotionally charged language to express frustration and disappointment. Deprecation, particularly in the forms of team-directed and self-directed criticism, emerged as the most dominant strategy, followed closely by emotional expression. Although these methods present potential risks for team cohesion and public perception, they may also serve strategic functions, including inoculating the speaker from further criticism and reinforcing a sense of authenticity.

While statistical analysis and deflection were used less frequently, they played important supporting roles. Statistical references offered a rare but valuable appeal to logic, grounding emotional rhetoric in factual evidence. Deflection, meanwhile, allowed coaches to redirect attention or manage the tone of the press conference when faced with uncomfortable questions. Audience interactivity further shaped the press conference environment, with Ditka displaying a notably combative style and Mora employing more measured responses. These contrasting approaches underscore the influence of individual coaching styles on rhetorical choices, suggesting that public communication is shaped not only by situational emotion but also by deeper leadership philosophies.

The study's methodological integration of grounded theory and rhetorical criticism proved effective in capturing the complexity of press conference communication. It allowed for the emergence of new theoretical insights while situating those findings within established rhetorical frameworks. However, limitations such as the small sample size and the focus on only two coaches restrict the generalizability of the conclusions. Future research should broaden the scope by analyzing a more diverse set of coaches and sports contexts, and by assessing audience reception of various rhetorical styles through media content analysis or fan response data.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of emotional leadership communication in sports. It highlights the need for strategic communication training for coaches, particularly in moments of high tension, and offers a foundation for further study into how public emotional expression influences reputation, team morale, and stakeholder trust.

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Remote Control: Coordinating Collaborative Writing in Online Courses

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Abstract
This Great Idea for Teaching (GIFT) activity presents a collaborative writing simulation designed for online communication courses, particularly those focused on technical or professional writing. Inspired by a real-world workplace miscommunication, the activity replicates the challenges of remote teamwork by assigning students to small groups tasked with revising flawed communication templates. Each student is responsible for one document—such as a press release, email, or radio pitch—requiring them to coordinate messaging, correct inconsistencies, and collaborate asynchronously. The assignment fosters essential communication skills, including document design, editing, brand consistency, and internal coordination. It also offers opportunities for debriefing and reflection on professional habits such as accountability and direction-following. Designed to mirror authentic workplace dynamics, this activity is flexible, scalable, and aligned with the guidelines set forth by Barton and Coombs (2023) for effective GIFT submissions. Ultimately, it prepares students to succeed in modern digital workplaces where clarity, collaboration, and communication are key.
Keywords: collaborative writing, online learning, remote teamwork, asynchronous instruction

Courses
- Online Technical Writing
- Professional Writing
- Organizational Communication
- Public Relations Writing
- Communication for the Workplace

Learning Objectives
- By completing this activity, students will:
- Practice writing and revising professional documents with attention to clarity, tone, and consistency.
- Collaborate in a simulated remote team environment.
- Identify and resolve discrepancies across communication materials.
- Demonstrate understanding of message coordination and brand consistency.
- Apply critical thinking and direction-following in high-stakes writing situations.

Remote Control: Coordinating Collaborative Writing in Online Courses

Team-based assignments are a staple of communication and writing pedagogy, yet they often pose unique challenges in online learning environments where real-time interaction and accountability are more difficult to manage. While face-to-face students can spontaneously collaborate and communicate, remote learners are more likely to face communication gaps, disjointed messaging, and confusion over roles and responsibilities. These complications reflect the growing reality of modern professional environments, where remote and hybrid teams have become the norm. For instructors in technical or professional writing courses, this shift presents both a pedagogical challenge and an opportunity to simulate real-world collaborative dynamics.

This Great Idea for Teaching (GIFT) activity was developed in response to a real workplace scenario where a failure to align communication across a remote team led to the public release of conflicting and inaccurate materials. The consequences of that misalignment—sent to an audience of over 2,500—highlighted just how critical internal coordination is to successful external communication. The activity described in this article translates that experience into a structured, classroom-tested assignment that mirrors professional collaboration within an asynchronous or remote learning environment. Designed originally for an online technical writing course, this simulation challenges students to work in small teams to revise flawed communication materials, align their messaging, and produce a cohesive campaign despite working remotely and asynchronously.

The structure of this article follows the guidelines outlined by Barton and Coombs (2023) in their Concise Guide for Preparing GIFT Articles, which emphasizes a clear, replicable format to share effective classroom-tested teaching strategies. By aligning with their framework, this GIFT seeks to contribute meaningfully to the collective knowledge of communication educators, offering a practical and flexible activity that prepares students for the collaborative demands of today's professional writing environments.

Theoretical Rationale

This activity is grounded in Organizational Communication theory, especially systems theory and the concept of interdependence within team-based communication networks (Miller, 2015; Shimizu et al., 2022). In remote teams, the lack of physical proximity intensifies the challenge of achieving message coherence (Allen et al., 2015; Vasudevan et al., 2023). The simulation offers students a microcosm of professional scenarios where multiple stakeholders contribute to a campaign, often leading to misalignment in messaging. It also emphasizes technical writing principles such as usability, accuracy, and document design, crucial for creating a cohesive user experience across platforms. Peer editing has been found to enhance the learners' ability to evaluate their own work (Henshaw, 2023). Online learning environments would seem to be ideally suited to providing students with a socially, culturally, and technologically complex learning environment. To fully capitalize on the potential of this environment for the development of layered literacies, however, students must learn effective teamwork skills (Staggers et al., 2008).

Activity Description

In this activity, students are placed into small groups consisting of up to five members. Each group simulates a remote workplace team tasked with coordinating a unified communication campaign. To mirror real-world professional writing environments, each student is assigned responsibility for one specific deliverable. Examples include:

- Webpage content
- Press release
- Advertising flyer
- Radio pitch (script + audio)
- Email announcement

The instructor provides each student with a flawed template containing a range of issues, including spelling and grammatical errors, poor formatting, conflicting event details such as date, time, and location, and inconsistent branding. These intentionally flawed templates serve as the foundation for each student's revision work and provide a realistic challenge requiring careful editing, collaborative decision-making, and message alignment across all documents.

Instructor Preparation

- Create flawed templates for each deliverable (Word or PowerPoint format).
- Draft an announcement post in the LMS discussion board with brand colors, event name, date/time/location, and cause or organization supported.
- Create a Canvas discussion board titled Collaborative Workplace Team Discussion.
- Create a Canvas assignment titled Collaborative Workplace Team Assignment
- Rubric Development

Collaborative Workplace Team Assignment Rubric

Criteria	Ratings				Pts.
Structure & Organization	**10 pts** **Excellent** Organization is logical; structure enhances clarity and delivery of main ideas	**7 pts** **Good** Structure is logical; main points are supported by organization	**3 pts** **Needs Improvement** Somewhat disorganized, bt structure does not detract from understanding of main points	**0 pts** **Unacceptable** Disorganized and illogical structure hinders understanding	10 pts
Cohesiveness	**10 pts** **Excellent** It is clear the group worked together to create documents that represent the same event.	**7 pts** **Good** Most instances of incongruent information were located and fixed within the document	**3 pts** **Needs Improvement** Some group collaboration occurred, but the document contains many instances of incongruent information.	**0 pts** **Unacceptable** Author or group did not collaborate on event details and assignment feels disjointed from others submitted within the group.	10 pts
Mechanics	**10 pts** **Excellent** No or very few instances of incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage of standard English grammar	**7 pts** **Good** Few instances of incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage of standard English grammar	**3 pts** **Needs Improvement** Several instances of incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage of standard English grammar	**0 pts** **Unacceptable** Incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and use of standard English grammar hinders understanding	10 pts
					Total Points: 30

Collaborative Workplace Team Discussion Rubric

Criteria	Ratings				Pts.
Timeliness	**10 pts** **Excellent** Logged into Canvas early in the week to begin role distribution	**7 pts** **Good** Participated in the discussion by midweek.	**3 pts** **Needs Improvement** Logged in right before the final deadline and gave minimal participation	**0 pts** **Unacceptable** Did not contribute prior to the deadline.	10 pts
Professional Communication	**10 pts** **Excellent** Communication was clear, direct, professional, and kind.	**7 pts** **Good** Communication was often clear, direct, professional, and kind.	**3 pts** **Needs Improvement** Communication was occasionally clear, direct, professional, and kind.	**0 pts** **Unacceptable** Communication was nonexistent, or inappropriate	10 pts
Teamwork	**10 pts** **Excellent** Consistently demonstrated flexibility, leading, following and adaptability	**7 pts** **Good** Frequently demonstrated flexibility, leading, following and adaptability	**3 pts** **Needs Improvement** Occasionally demonstrated flexibility, leading, following and adaptability	**0 pts** **Unacceptable** Did not engage with team or did so in an individualistic manner	10 pts
					Total Points: 30

Student Instructions

Students begin by using the discussion board to assign roles and discuss a strategy for producing consistent documents. The instructor monitors discussion participation as part of the grade. Each student is responsible for revising only their assigned document, collaborating with peers to align key information, proofreading peer work, and submitting their final version individually. Students are also encouraged to meet via Zoom to share documents before the due date.

Materials Needed

- LMS discussion board
- Document templates (.docx/.pptx)
- Assignment submission area in LMS
- Audio recording tool (for radio pitch)

Debriefing

Following the completion of the assignment, instructors are encouraged to facilitate a class debrief or assign a written reflection focused on the importance of internal communication. This reflective component allows students to process their experiences and draw connections between their classroom collaboration and real-world professional practices. Prompting questions might include:

- What challenges did you face coordinating details?
- How did it feel to rely on others for document consistency?
- What tools or habits would improve future remote collaboration?

Student reflections often reveal several recurring insights. Many express surprise at the frequency of conflicting details between group members' drafts, even after the group had agreed on basic event information. Others acknowledge the realization that strong individual work is not enough to ensure project success without clear communication and alignment among the team. Some students share feelings of frustration stemming from late participation or a lack of proofreading by their peers, especially when it compromises the cohesion of the final deliverables.

These debriefs frequently lead to meaningful discussions about professional expectations, shared accountability, and the critical role of clear and timely communication in collaborative environments. The activity thus serves not only as a writing exercise but also as a practical lesson in workplace dynamics and remote team functionality.

Appraisal

This activity offers several notable strengths. It provides a realistic simulation of modern remote work environments, giving students a valuable opportunity to experience challenges commonly faced in professional, distributed teams. The assignment effectively integrates writing, editing, and collaboration, allowing students to develop essential communication competencies. Additionally, its flexible structure makes it suitable for various delivery methods, including online, hybrid, and face-to-face formats.

Despite its strengths, the activity also presents some limitations. It relies heavily on consistent student participation throughout the week, which can be difficult to ensure in asynchronous or fully online courses. Some students may exceed the scope of the assignment by attempting to complete multiple documents rather than focusing on their assigned task, which can undermine the learning objective of following instructions precisely. Conversely, others may wait until the last minute to participate, claiming work already completed by peers and failing to contribute to collaborative editing or decision-making. These behaviors can negatively affect the group dynamic and overall cohesion, but can also provide effective teaching moments for individual students.

To mitigate these challenges, instructors should emphasize that part of the assignment's purpose is to practice direction-following and equitable participation. Students who overwork or under-collaborate should receive appropriate feedback, and grading rubrics should evaluate both the quality of the final product and the student's demonstrated collaboration. Encouraging the use of tools such as Google Docs or shared cloud-based folders can help students visualize inconsistencies, share progress, and work toward document consistency in real time.

This assignment is also adaptable in several ways. Instructors can easily modify it for in-person instruction by printing flawed documents and organizing live group collaboration. The core concept can be applied to a variety of scenarios, such as a company launch, crisis communication response, or nonprofit gala. Furthermore, instructors may tailor the assignment to reflect industry-specific audiences, providing students with practice relevant to their intended career paths. For courses based in design, it could also be replicated on a larger scale as an end of semester project where the students do not begin with templates. It could serve as a pre-assessment and post-assessment to the course to analyze student growth in both collaborative writing/editing as well as teamwork skills.

Conclusion

This learning activity equips students with the practical skills and professional mindset needed to navigate collaborative writing in remote environments. By simulating a high-stakes workplace scenario with flawed templates and distributed team roles, the activity challenges students to move beyond individual excellence toward collective coherence. It reinforces not only core writing and editing competencies but also fosters habits of communication, accountability, and adaptability that are essential in today's digital workforce. When implemented with clear expectations and reflective follow-up, this assignment offers a replicable, flexible model for teaching collaborative writing that mirrors the demands of real-world communication contexts.

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Collaborative Workplace Rubric

Criteria	Ratings				Pts
Structure & Organization	**7 pts** **Excellent** Organization is logical; structure enhances clarity and delivery of main ideas	**4.67 pts** **Good** Structure is logical; main points are supported by organization	**2.33 pts** **Needs Improvement** Somewhat disorganized, but structure does not detract from understanding of main points	**0 pts** **Unacceptable** Disorganized and illogical structure hinders understanding	7 pts
Cohesiveness	**7 pts** **Excellent** It is clear the group worked together to create documents that represent the same event.	**5.25 pts** **Good** Most instances of incongruent information were located and fixed within the document.	**3.5 pts** **Needs Improvement** Some group collaboration occurred, but document contains many instances of incongruent information.	**0 pts** **Unacceptable** Author or group did not collaborate on event details and assignment feels disjointed from others submitted within the group.	7 pts
Mechanics	**6 pts** **Excellent** No or very few instances of incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage of standard English grammar	**4.5 pts** **Good** Few instances of incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage of standard English grammar	**3 pts** **Needs Improvement** Several instances of incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage of standard English grammar	**0 pts** **Unacceptable** Incorrect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and use of standard English grammar hinders understanding	6 pts
					Total Points: 20

Looking Out the Window: Framing Different Verbal Styles

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Abstract
Taken-for-granted concepts, like low/high-context communication, direct/indirect verbal styles, and self-enhancement/humbling styles, in an intercultural communication class can present challenges for students to understand and recognize in their communication patterns. By interrupting the typical teaching and learning routines in a communication studies course by writing and analyzing poetry, it becomes possible to move students to see their internalized cultural frames while learning course concepts through this unfamiliar approach. Poetry provides students with a window through which they observe their communication patterns, exposing them in ways they often do not suspect. Additionally, the novelty of poetic writing helps the students engage in sentipensante pedagogy, a full sensory active learning process. In doing so, the students enhance their learning of these significant intercultural communication concepts while developing a deep awareness of their communication patterns.
Keywords: verbal styles; poetry; intercultural communication; sentipensante pedagogy

Course
- Intercultural Communication

Learning Objectives
- Students will define the low-context and high-context interaction patterns, the direct and indirect verbal styles, and the self-enhancement and self-humbling verbal styles.
- Students will identify multiple examples of low-context and high-context interaction patterns, direct and indirect verbal styles, and self-enhancement and self-humbling verbal styles in their work and that of their peers.
- Students will develop connections with one another as they engage the concepts through the writing and sharing of poetry.

Introduction and rationale

Language is the taken-for-granted aspect of our cultural lives that "frames our perceptions and interpretations of everyday events" (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 112). Ting-Toomey and Chung (2022) argue that people's "mannerism of speaking frames how a message should be interpreted or understood on a continuum" (p. 152). To aid students' understanding of the communication patterns that serve as a framework for the different verbal styles, this activity tasks students with writing a poem about what they see when looking through the frame of a window. After writing and sharing their poems with colleagues, the students analyze their creative writing to reveal taken-for-granted aspects of their verbal communication styles. As Morgan, Lange, and Buswick (2010) contend, "poetry and expressive writing are useful for encouraging critical thinking, serving as a way for students to synthesize course content, and building classroom rapport" (p. 26), all of which are objectives of this intercultural communication activity. By analyzing these poems, students better understand the low-context and high-context interaction patterns, direct and indirect verbal styles, self-enhancement and self-humbling verbal styles, and their connections.

Materials and Preparation

Students must first become acquainted with the course concepts. Assign a reading on verbal communication to prepare them. We use and recommend Ting-Toomey and Chung's (2022) textbook chapter, "What is the Connection Between Verbal Communication and Culture?" Each student will need notebook paper and a pen or pencil to complete the activity. Although we designed this activity for a 75-minute class, condensing it into a 50-minute class is feasible.

Procedures

At the beginning of class, divide the students into pairs. Instruct them to take ten minutes to define each of the following key terms with their assigned partner; each student should write out their answers to use later in the activity. We encourage the students to write out the textbook definitions and then work together to translate them into their own words. In a fifty-minute class, provide the definitions on a worksheet (included in the Appendix) that the students translate together for five to six minutes. Ting-Toomey and Chung's (2022) definitions are as follows:

1. Low-Context/High-Context Interaction Patterns
   a) In low-context communication (LCC), "the emphasis is on how intention or meaning is expressed through explicit verbal messages" (p. 151).
   b) In high-context communication (HCC), "the emphasis is on how intention or meaning is conveyed through the embedded contexts (e.g., social roles or positions, relationship types, intergroup history) and nonverbal channels (e.g., pauses, silence, tone of voice) of the verbal message" (p. 151).
2. Direct/Indirect Verbal Styles
   a) In the direct verbal style, "statements tend to reveal the speaker's intentions with clarity and are enunciated with a forthright tone of voice" (p. 152).
   b) In the indirect verbal style, "statements tend to camouflage the speaker's actual intentions and are carried out with a softer tone" (p. 152).
3. Self-Enhancement/Self-Humbling Styles
   a) The self-enhancement style "emphasizes the importance of drawing attention to or exaggerating one's credentials, outstanding accomplishments, and special abilities" (p. 156).
   b) The self-humbling style "emphasizes the importance of downplaying oneself via modest talk, restraint, hesitation, and the use of self-deprecating messages concerning one's performance or achievements" (p. 156).

After the students have defined the terms together, reconvene the class. Ask them if they have questions about the definitions or if there are terms they struggled with and would like to discuss as a class. Ensure the students are comfortable with the terms before proceeding to the next step.

Instruct the students to flip over their sheets of paper and write a poem about what they see out a window (space is provided on the worksheet for the condensed class). To get the students up and out of the classroom, we recommend instructing the students to use any window in the building (or nearby buildings if necessary). The key is that they must look outside through the frame of a window; this activity cannot be completed outside. We define a poem loosely for the students by saying it must be three stanzas in length, and each stanza should have at least three lines for a total of nine lines. The more they write, the better, as the next step of the activity will be easier with more substance. We discuss what a stanza is and that just because they are writing poetry does not mean the lines have to rhyme. We encourage them to write in complete sentences. Since each student must write a poem, we gently remind them that other classes are in session and they must write quietly, not together. Give them 10-15 minutes (12-13 minutes in a fifty-minute class) to write their poems and instruct them to return to the classroom at a particular time. The instructor should walk around the building as students write to answer questions and peek at what they are looking at outside.

Once all the students return to the classroom, have them read through their poems and answer the following reflection questions (for the condensed class, the questions are included on the worksheet):

1. Did you take a high-context or low-context interaction pattern?
2. Did you take a direct or indirect verbal style?
3. Did you take a self-enhancement or self-humbling style?

Give students ten minutes to write out their answers and provide an explanation for each. We encourage them to point to specific instances where the pattern or style is present in their poem. If they believe they used both, we tell them to provide an example of each and to identify where the shift occurred in their writing. They sometimes ask for help as they struggle with the self-enhancement or self-humbling style; it is more difficult to determine, and they are concerned about identifying it incorrectly. We instruct them to make an educated guess based on their poem for now and tell them they will have the opportunity to discuss it with their partner in the next step of the activity.

After answering the reflection questions, instruct the students to share their poems with their assigned partners. Each student should read their poem to their partner, and their partner should answer the reflection questions about the poem. The author should refrain from identifying their patterns/styles until their partner has done so, preventing the partner from simply agreeing with the author. Have the author compare their answers with those of their partner. For this step, we have them discuss rather than write out their answers. Poetry sharing should take about ten minutes (five minutes per student). For a fifty-minute class, this step should be given about six minutes (three minutes per student). The three pairs of key terms are included on the worksheet so the students can quickly circle their responses. Additionally, after comparing their answers, each student should record their partner's answers on their worksheet.

After each pair shares their poems, answers the questions, and compares their answers, reconvene the class. Ask the students if anyone is interested in sharing their poems and have a few volunteers read theirs to the class. After each, ask the students to answer the reflection questions. Then, ask the author to share their answers to the questions to compare. Engaging in this whole class discussion exposes the students to more examples than just their own and their partners. Condensing this activity into a shorter class will likely require cutting this step.

Lastly, have the students take home their poem and notes (completed worksheet for the condensed class) to use to complete a one-page, single-spaced reflection in which they address the following prompts (at least one paragraph per prompt):

1. Address how your understanding of the key terms evolved through this activity.
2. Address how this activity affected your awareness of your cultural frames.
3. Address how your partner's evaluation of your poem's expression of the key terms reinforced or challenged your own, contributing to your understanding of those terms and your cultural frames.

Have the students turn in this assignment at the beginning of the next class. A short debrief of the reflection is effective as students gain further insights into the key terms and cultural frames after engaging in this reflective assignment.

Debrief

At the end of the class when the activity is completed, ask the students why you had them write a poem about what they saw out the window. In this discussion, they usually reveal that several chose to look out the same window, yet they wrote about different things. Have the students discuss why. After allowing students some time to discuss, explain how the window frame shapes what we can see and how we can see it. The window frame is a concrete example of an abstract term: a cultural frame. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2022) describe culture as "a complex frame of reference that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, meanings, and symbols shared by varying degrees with interacting members of a community" (p. 26). When communicating, we must recognize that we use different cultural frames, which often results in miscommunication; we expect others to communicate using the same cultural frames. This activity demonstrates that although we might look through the same window frame when writing poetry, we often see/focus on different things, resulting in various poems. For example, if there are limited windows in your building, multiple students likely look out the same window when writing. One student might focus on the people outside, another on nature, and another on the weather. In this activity, the window frame is a physical example of a cultural frame. We must consider how our cultural frames impact communication across cultures to bridge differences.

Appraisal

As noted above, poetry is an effective tool to incorporate into the higher education classroom. Poetry is identified as a practice of sentipensante (sensing/thinking) pedagogy, "a culturally-validating, deep learning experience that addresses the harmonic balance and interconnection between intellectual, social, emotional, and inner-life skill development" (Rendón, 2023, p. 2). As an "illuminative knowledge" tool, poetry engages the "body, mind, and sensory processes" (Rendón, 2023, p. 2). This activity is effective in getting students moving around and out of the classroom; it is an example of getting students involved in what Smith (2015) calls "active learning" (p. 223). This activity also creates an element of curiosity because they do not know why they are writing a poem until the end of the class. Significantly, this activity requires a certain level of trust between the instructor and students; the instructor demonstrates that they trust the students to leave the classroom, complete the assigned task, and return within the allotted time. Lastly, this activity is rooted in dependence because the students rely on one another to create examples of the course content––the verbal styles––without even recognizing it (Smith, 2015). This activity recognizes how "first-hand experiences are related to subjective ways of knowing which engage a learner's own mind, activate the senses, and allow learners to connect with the world around them" (Rendón, 2023, p. 2). By answering the reflection questions about their poems, their partner's poems, and their classmates' poems, the students have multiple opportunities to apply the key terms of this day's content. This activity stands out to them on quiz/exam day, with many sharing that they remember these concepts because of this activity. As such, this activity reaches its objectives in a timely, creative, and engaging manner.

Conclusion

At the end of the class, we always ask our students if this activity was helpful. Despite their original lack of enthusiasm for writing poetry in a communication class, the students enjoy this activity and find it advantageous to learn the course concepts. They often share that their identifications of their patterns/styles surprised them; they thought they were one type of communicator, but their writing revealed the opposite. This difficulty in identifying their verbal pattern/styles is not surprising since "poetry forces you to find meaning in ambiguity" because it "accommodates multiple meanings" (Morgan et al., 2010, p. 2). Despite this challenge, students often reveal they enjoy this activity, describing writing about nature as therapeutic and calming, allowing them to slow down and take in what is happening outside. This activity demonstrates the benefits of using poetry to promote "students' emotional well-being" while simultaneously developing "skills such as creativity and critical thinking" to "reach course learning outcomes" (Marjorana & VanDeusen, 2022, p. 27). We strategically plan this activity to occur around midterms to give them a reprieve from the stress of the academic semester while still being productive and engaging in the learning process. In sum, the benefits of this intercultural communication activity support the notion that education should "develop not only our intellectual capacities, but our ability to be creative and reflective, as well as to work with and understand other people" (Rendón, 2023, p. 28). Students walk away with a better understanding of their verbal styles and the influence culture has on them, which aids them in becoming better and more flexible intercultural communicators.

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Appendices and handouts can be found online and downloaded at www.ujoc.org.

The Focus Group Introduction: Learning About Research Methods While Learning About One Another

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Abstract
Designed for research methods courses or other courses that incorporate content about research or group communication, the Focus Group Introduction offers a meaningful introductory activity. By having students work together to design and facilitate a focus group in which the goal is to learn about one another, the activity is designed to build an inclusive learning community while allowing students to preview, experience, and reflect on important course content.
Keywords: focus groups, research methods, introduction, GIFTS, icebreaker

Courses
- Communication Research Methods
- Small Group Communication
- Other courses that include a research component

Objectives
By participating in the Focus Group Introduction, students should be able to:
- describe the purpose of focus group research;
- construct a simple focus group questioning route;
- apply speaking and listening skills in a focus group setting;
- respectfully consider diverse perspectives shared by others in a focus group.

Rationale

The Focus Group Introduction is designed to build inclusivity while allowing students to preview, experience, and reflect on important content from the course. Although focus groups are widely used in communication research, many students have not participated in a focus group (Fife, 2005). There is also limited prior literature on teaching focus group methodology in the communication classroom. Existing literature on teaching focus groups has focused on the experience of conducting focus groups rather than their planning (e.g., Fife, 2005) or mentioned them briefly within the context of a semester-long focus on using experiential learning to teach research methods (e.g., Cvancara, 2017). The Focus Group Introduction activity adds to the literature by providing detailed instructions for an activity that teaches focus group planning and development of a questioning route.

By involving students in the work of planning and executing a focus group, the Focus Group Introduction also employs principles of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015), which has been shown to improve learning outcomes (Burch et al., 2019). Specifically, it allows students to experience the first three phases of the learning cycle (Kolb, 2015): "concrete experience," "reflective observation," and "abstract conceptualization" (p. 51). Students are then prepared to engage in their own "active experimentation" (the fourth step in the learning cycle; Kolb, 2015, p. 51) and continue to move through the learning spiral, using insights gained from the experience as they learn and apply research principles later in the course.

Finally, because the content of the focus group is designed to get to know the students (rather than using an existing guide on another topic, e.g., Fife, 2005), the Focus Group Introduction encourages students to get to know one another, adding to a small body of literature on meaningful introductory activities in communication that can build community (e.g., Levin, 2021; Vartabedian & Klinger, 2019). Zakrajsek and Nilson (2023) recommend that instructors "implement introductions on the first day of class" (p. 101) as a means of building an inclusive classroom climate. Nunn (2019) also recommends building "'get-to-know-you' activities" (p. 31) into the early weeks of class to help first-year and first-generation students build their social support networks. This activity provides a novel option for a meaningful introductory activity that builds inclusivity while previewing course content.

Description of the Activity

Advance Preparation

Create and print written reflection templates for each student with the following prompts and space for responses:

1. List two things you learned about focus group research through this activity.
2. List two things you learned about your classmates through this activity.
3. How do the things you learned connect to [the course topic]?

Alternatively, prepare a method through which students can write and submit reflections electronically.

Introducing the Activity

Share the goal of the activity with students: the focus group introduction is designed to allow students to get to know each other while previewing content from the course. Explain that focus group research is a research method used to gain insights into the beliefs and experiences of a group of individuals and understand group processes. Highlight that focus group research is used in academic research, market research, and the nonprofit sector (Krueger & Casey, 2015) and that these skills will transfer to a variety of professional settings. It may be helpful to show a brief video explaining or demonstrating a focus group (e.g., TED-Ed, 2017) to increase student comfort with the activity. Explain that in this activity, students will work together to plan and conduct a focus group. One person in the focus group will serve as a moderator, one will serve as assistant moderator, and the others will serve as participants. Finally, mention that in a research setting, a researcher would explain the procedure to participants, seek informed consent from participants before the focus group, and gain permission to record the focus group.

Planning the Focus Group

Introduce students to some of the steps involved in focus group research according to Krueger and Casey (2015; e.g., planning, developing questions; selecting and recruiting participants; moderating, etc.). Acknowledge that the mock preparation will be greatly condensed for the purposes of this activity. For the class activity, preparation will involve only developing the questioning route:

1. Have students generate a list of things they would like to know about one another. This corresponds to the first step of brainstorming identified by Krueger and Casey (2015). Typical responses include where others are from, hobbies, and future goals.
2. Then, work with students to put the topics/questions into the order in which they will be asked. Introduce students to sequencing advice from Krueger and Casey (2015): identify the most important topics or questions for your research purpose and then work backward to identify questions that lead naturally into those key questions. The typical sequence of questions used in focus group research involves beginning with an introductory question that is non-threatening and easy for everyone to answer, moving to a general question more closely related to your main topic but still easy to answer, asking key questions after the group has built rapport and better understands the context, and bringing the focus group to a close by asking a question that provides a sense of closure.
3. Guide students through the next step of carefully phrasing the questions. Looking at each proposed topic, work as a group to come up with phrasing that is open-ended (i.e., cannot be answered with a yes/no or one-word response) and simple (i.e., "the

shortest way to clearly ask a question," Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 66).
4. Write down the final phrasing and order of the questioning route for the moderator.

Conducting the Focus Group
Ask for a volunteer moderator to lead the conversation and an assistant moderator to take notes. Emphasize that it often takes practice to become an effective moderator, and brief the moderator, assistant moderator, and the class on the following guidelines. A moderator typically welcomes participants, provides an overview of the topic and ground rules, and then begins the questioning route. Throughout the focus group, the moderator remains respectful, open, and non-judgmental; encourages participants to have a conversation with one another; invites those who have not participated to share; and redirects the conversation when needed. Turn the focus group over to the moderator, who begins by asking the opening question and follows the questioning route. The instructor should remain observant and actively monitor for challenges, responding to questions about focus group moderation or offering reminders, if needed.

Debrief

With approximately 15 minutes remaining in the class meeting, pause the focus group and explain how a focus group would typically end. Options offered by Krueger and Casey (2015) include thanking participants and providing them with any incentives, summarizing main points from the conversation and inviting corrections or additions, or closing the conversation by inviting participants to share anything that might have been missed in the earlier conversation. Explain that recorded data from a focus group is typically transcribed and is often analyzed using qualitative approaches such as grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) or thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Then, invite students to share their insights from the focus group in a group discussion, using the following questions as a starting point:
1. What was it like for you to serve in your role? What did you observe?
2. What surprised you? How might these surprises inform your future interactions with others?
3. How might you apply skills and insights you gained from the focus group activity in your future professional or academic work?

Following the group discussion, invite students to complete an individual written reflection using the reflection template referenced previously. If there is not enough time for in-class written reflection, the reflection can be completed as homework or at the beginning of the next class meeting.

In the class discussion, student moderators typically note that they experienced challenges implementing the questioning route or making sure that everyone was involved in the conversation. They often express surprise about learning of similarities they share with other classmates. In written reflections, one student noted, "I learned that some folks are quick to speak and others hold back." In thinking about how the activity connected to the course topic of research methods, another student wrote, "I believe it is two-fold in that you can [1] learn to formulate questions and [2] observe the responses to such questions to gather results."

Appraisal

The activity is most well-suited for longer class periods (75 minutes or more) and smaller groups (approximately 15 students). If needed for a shorter class period, the activity could be split into two phases: preparation in one meeting and conducting and debriefing in the second meeting. For larger classes (more than 15 students), the class could work together as a group to plan the focus group and then split into smaller teams of approximately 8-12 to conduct the focus groups before coming back together for debriefing and reflection. For online or hybrid classes that include a synchronous element, a videoconferencing platform could be used to facilitate an online focus group. As with larger classes, the instructor could work with the whole class to plan the focus group, use virtual breakout rooms to allow small groups of four to six students to conduct the focus group conversations, and then bring students back together for debriefing and reflection. The activity is not well-suited to asynchronous classes. The Focus Group Introduction can be adapted to many contexts and offers a meaningful introduction to the topic of communication research methods while contributing to the development of a welcoming classroom environment.

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Do We Know It When We See It? Ecopornography, Feminist Theory, and Ecopedagogy

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Abstract
Ecopornography remains undertheorized and retains its original meaning as a synonym for greenwashing. This paper conceptualizes ecopornography to enhance its pedagogical and analytic usefulness in ecocriticism. After a review of the literature on ecopornography, the paper adopts an ecofeminist frame and draws on feminist conceptualizations of pornography to clarify and develop ecopornography as a tool for critical analysis. In addition to clarifying what qualities make an environmental message ecoporn, different types of ecoporn messages are identified via an analogy to "hardcore" and "softcore" human pornography, expanding the concept's range and conceptual coherence.
Keywords: Ecopornography, ecofeminism, feminist theory, ecocriticism, ecopedagogy

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He watched the news. Same as yesterday.... Nothing new except the commercials full of sly art and eco-porn. Scenes of the Louisiana bayous, strange birds in slow-motion flight, cypress trees bearded with Spanish moss. Above the primeval scene the voice of Power spoke, reeking with sincerity, in praise of itself, the Exxon Oil Company—its tidiness, its fastidious care for all things wild, its concern for human needs.
-The Monkey Wrench Gang, Edward Abbey (1975, p. 217)

Greenpeace and Audubon calendar photos, advertisements for fossil fuel companies featuring pleasing images of nature, Sierra Club coffee table books, and "green" product marketing are some of the commonly referenced examples of ecopornography, a vague but nevertheless evocative and memorable label for misleading representations of wildlife, landscapes, and ecosystems seemingly unaffected by industrialization's exploitation and degradation of the natural world. While these and other examples are usefully understood as ecoporn, the genre has been defined more by example than conceptually, and in most cases has been used without a foundation in its source domain—human pornography—and without grounding in some of the most developed critical understandings of human pornography: feminist theory.

This paper advances the conceptualization of ecopornography with the primary purpose of enhancing its pedagogical and analytic usefulness in ecocriticism. Despite its over 50-year history and its intuitive usefulness for describing and criticizing a range of environmental messages, the concept remains undertheorized and retains its original meaning as a synonym for greenwashing. After a critical review of the literature on ecopornography, the paper adopts an ecofeminist frame and draws on feminist conceptualizations of pornography in order to develop and clarify ecopornography as a tool for critical analysis, with particular attention to pedagogical applications. In addition to clarifying what qualities make an environmental message ecoporn (or not), different forms of ecoporn are identified via an analogy to "softcore" versus "hardcore" human pornography.

Ecopornography: A Critical Literature Review

The term ecopornography appears to have been coined shortly before the first Earth Day in 1970, though by whom is unclear[1]. Among academics who have researched the concept of ecoporn in order to develop and apply it (D'Amico, 2013; Lindholt, 2009; Welling, 2009), the consensus is that one of the term's early and most influential appearances was adman-turned-activist Jerry Mander's 1972 essay "EcoPornography: One Year and Nearly a Billion Dollars Later Advertising Owns Ecology" in the professional magazine *Communication Arts*. Regardless of its origin, use of the term began to spread, including in Ed Abbey's (1975) *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, where it is applied to a television advertisement for Exxon (see epigraph).

Mander's 1972 essay argues that corporations have co-opted ecology, redefining it to help promote the endless pursuit of profit, whatever the human and environmental costs. Focusing exclusively on print advertisements by the energy industry, particularly electric utilities, Mander finds them to mislead, even lie, ultimately diverting attention from fundamental problems with technology toward the belief that technology can solve environmental problems. The term "ecopornography" is only mentioned once in the essay beyond the title (Mander, p. 47); Mander's definition seems to be image-promoting texts by environmentally destructive corporations that are composed of "diversionary, false and deadening information" (p. 47) used to claim that corporations, their industries, and their technologies are environmentally friendly. Based on Mander's portfolio of examples, a frequent trait is the use of photographs or other images of clean, healthy nature. The inclusion of ads that use pictures of nature's beauty have led to a view of ecoporn (like porn) as a masking of "sordid agendas with illusions of beauty and perfection" (Welling, 2009, pp. 54-55). Overall, given Mander's largely implicit definition of ecopornography, characterizing it as a synonym of "greenwashing" seems legitimate (though that term was coined over a decade later), and that is still its most common definition in public discourse (see, e.g., Anon., 2021; Turner, 2008). In short, "ecoporn" often functions more as a clever adman's tagline than as a conceptual linkage between human pornography and certain kinds of representations of nature.

A second essay on ecopornography is novelist Lydia Millet's (2004) "Die, Baby Harp Seal!" Millet's focus is not on corporate greenwashing, but images circulated by environmental organizations such as Audubon and the Nature Conservancy featuring beautiful, unspoiled landscapes and cute, cuddly animals, which she calls "pinups." As that linguistic choice signals, Millet's take on ecopornography is distinguished from Mander's less by the switch from energy companies to mainstream environmental organizations and more by direct comparisons between human pornography and ecopornography. Drawing from her time as a copy editor for Hustler magazine, Millet makes direct parallels between the environmental organizations' pictures of cuddly mother-and-baby pairs of hugging animals and Hustler's photographs of two intertwined naked women, arguing that both are pornographic: "They offer to the viewer the illusions of control, ownership, and subjugation; they tell us to take comfort: they will always be there, ideal, unblemished, available. They offer gratification without social cost, satiate by providing objects for fantasy" (p. 147). Of the "scenic and sublime" landscape photographs Millet writes, "Tarted up into perfectly circumscribed simulations of the wild, these props of mainstream environmentalism serve as surrogates for real engagement with wilderness the way porn models serve as surrogates for real women" (p. 147). Millet's overall critique is that these idealized images of nature convince people that there is a nature apart from humans that is whole and healthy, thereby promoting disengagement from efforts to address environmental crises (Welling, 2009). As D'Amico (2013) characterizes Millet's argument, "the landscapes, the animals, and the models are equally objects of desire for the viewer: submissive, subjugated, gratifying—a voyeur's delight" (p. 171). Millet's proposed alternative is "a hardball-playing, fast-moving engagement with the realities of anthropogenic devastation that doesn't shrink from the rude, the vicious, or the unsightly" (p. 149).

A third non-academic essay is by environmental communication scholar Mark Meisner. The shortest of the three, Meisner's (2010) "Blinded by Ecoporn" parallels Millet in focusing on "beautiful scenes of pristine landscapes, robust ecosystems, and healthy wildlife" such as those found in calendars and coffee table books from Greenpeace and the Sierra Club. Also like Millet, Meisner makes direct (if less detailed) parallels between these images and conventional pornography: “Like photos in an ‘adult’ magazine, they stimulate desire but misrepresent reality and fail to reflect real-world relationships” (p. 7). Ecoporn is deceptive and helps us deceive ourselves: “The natural world is not pristine. Landscapes are not devoid of human influence. Animals are not all healthy and fit” (Meisner, p. 7). Not only is Meisner’s take on ecoporn similar to Millet’s, so is his proposed alternative for pro-environmental messages: honest and explicit depictions of what humans have done to animals and ecosystems.

The authors of these three essays written for educated but general audiences primarily conceptualized ecoporn through definition by example: identifying specific instances of ecoporn and explaining their problematic function. While both Millet (2004) and Meisner (2010) move beyond Mander (1972) by drawing parallels between the negative functions of human pornography and those of ecoporn, they do not provide precise conceptual definitions and systematic identifications of what exactly makes pretty images of nature function as ecoporn. While that is understandable given their genres and audiences, they nevertheless leave students and ecocritics with something akin to Justice Potter Stewart’s “definition” of hardcore pornography in his concurring opinion for the 1964 Supreme Court case Jacobellis v. Ohio: “I know it when I see it.”

2009 offered two in-depth academic investigations of ecopornography as an ecocritical concept, and they remain the only in-depth, scholarly publications that treat ecopornography as more than a synonym for greenwashing and that take the parallels to human pornography seriously. Paul Lindholt’s (2009) analysis of the Bureau of Reclamation’s commissioned paintings featuring dams and reservoirs as a form of ecopornography was the opening essay in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Ecocriticism* and drew substantially from a book chapter by Bart Welling (2009) titled “Ecoporn: On the Limits of Visualizing the Nonhuman.”

Lindholt’s (2009) analysis of the Bureau of Reclamation paintings offers two characteristics of ecopornography based on the analogy to human pornography. First, objectification: “straight porn and ecoporn both tend to objectify for aesthetic pleasure, for audience approval, or for commercial gain” (Lindholt, p. 15). Second, staging: “like human porn, ecoporn traffics in staged intimacies or ecstasies. In the visual media, it may deploy provocative lighting, tricks with perspective, and close-up shots to enhance and tantalize” (p. 15). Negative uses of the label “porn” (including ecoporn and the pornographies of meat, poverty, and war) “imply degrees of titillation and exploitation” (Lindholt, p. 15).

Welling’s (2009) chapter begins by encapsulating my motivation for writing this paper: “Ecoporn (as trope, as mode of representation, and as ethical problem) has received surprisingly little sustained theoretical attention” (pp. 53-54). Welling’s work addresses this paucity in a way that is grounded in what was lacking in other musings on ecoporn: feminist conceptualizations and critiques of pornography. Ecopornographic images, writes Welling, “work to conceal both the material circumstances of their creation by humans and whatever impact humans may have had on the landforms and animals they depict” (p. 57). Welling focuses on the invisible, implied male viewer of a passive and exploitable female object, leading to a critical definition of pornography as “voyeuristic representations of sexual violence against women” (p. 59). “Ecoporn places the viewer in the role of the ‘male surveyor,’ the all-seeing male subject to Nature’s unseeing, aestheticized female object,” thereby “denying…agency…to nonhuman life forms” (Welling, p. 58). Just as porn objectifies its female subjects to provide pleasure and, even more importantly, support for the master identify of the hetero-patriarchal viewer, ecoporn objectifies its nonhuman subjects to provide pleasure to and support for the master identify of the supranatural human (cf. Adams, 2004; Gaard, 1997; Plumwood, 1993; Rogers & Schutten, 2004).

While Welling’s work offers a significant advancement in the conceptualization of ecoporn, and did so from (eco)feminist perspectives, it is still somewhat lacking for practical pedagogical, analytical, and ecocritical purposes. Before finding Lindholt’s (2009) and Welling’s (2009) work, I had begun teaching a course focused on ecocriticism of environmental arts/media. I found Meisner’s (2010) essay, then Millet’s (2004), both of which are readily digestible by the first and second year undergraduates who populate the course, but as I continued to teach the course I realized that those essays, while effective in conveying a sense of what ecoporn is and why it is problematic, did not offer a lot more than Potter’s “I know it when I see it” standard.

Conceptualizing Ecoporn as an Analytic Tool

Over the course of five iterations of the ecocriticism class, I developed a systematic conceptualization of ecoporn in order to provide students a workable critical framework to determine whether and, if so, how a particular photograph, ad, painting, poem, song, music video, or the like operated as ecoporn. The feminist literature on pornography (e.g., Adams, 2004; Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988; Griffin, 1981) informed what I developed, as did the general ecofeminist literature (e.g., Adams, 2003; Gaard, 1997; Griffin, 1978; Merchant, 1980; Plumwood, 1993; Warren, 2000). My approach was not to start with the typical examples of ecoporn (greenwashing corporate ads and photographs from environmental organizations) and then conceptualize inductively, but to start with ecofeminism generally and feminist understandings of pornography specifically, conceptualize ecoporn with that basis, then look at examples of both "classic" ecoporn as well as other types suggested by the (eco)feminist development of the concept. I present this material here in a similar order and manner as I do in my classes.

Ecofeminism

I begin with the overarching framework of ecofeminism, starting with two core propositions. First, women have been equated with nature in Western thought and representation. Nature as a whole is described as female (e.g., mother earth), and women are conceived as more "natural" (e.g., more body than mind) than men. Both women and nature are fertile, the source of life, nurturing, and unpredictable. Both women and nature are portrayed in dualistic and essentialist terms, as inherently nurturing and inherently chaotic if not outright dangerous. To illustrate both the woman/nature linkage and its dualistic qualities, I use examples such as Raphael's painting *Madonna and Child* contrasted to Ursula the Sea Witch from Disney's The Little Mermaid, and Giorgione's painting Sleeping Venus contrasted to how weather reporting discusses hurricanes and tornados: "mother nature" as destructive and uncontrollable (a list of the visual and audiovisual examples referenced in this and subsequent paragraphs, along with URLs where they can be accessed, is provided in the Appendix).

Second, and most critically, ecofeminism holds that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are deeply interconnected. One example I use is how in many dominant Christian traditions, Eve is blamed for the Fall and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. This "original sin" has often been portrayed as Eve giving into temptation, frequently framed in terms of the body, carnal desire, and sex (despite a lack of support for this view in Genesis 3), and this weakness has been used to justify women's subordination to men (which is directly articulated in Genesis 3). Eve is out of control, as is nature, with both in need of a male authority to keep them in line, as illustrated in Rogers and Schutten's (2004) analysis of the Bureau of Reclamation's presentation of Hoover Dam and the Colorado River, which I assign to my students as both a general introduction to academic ecofeminism and an example of ecofeminist analysis. Griffin's (1978) juxtaposition of manuals for managing female secretarial pools and those for training horses for dressage offers another example of the interconnections between the patriarchal treatment of women and nature, as does Merchant's (1980) discussion of early European science.

The two foundational propositions of ecofeminism and its intersectional approach to all forms of oppression and exploitation sets up an introduction to the role of dualisms in dominant forms of Western thought and representation as well as ecofeminism's approach to dualisms (Plumwood, 1993). Dualisms are unified oppositions that posit each set of paired terms as exclusive (not inclusive), oppositional (not complementary), and hierarchical (unequal). A critical part of ecofeminism is not only a critique of the oppressive nature of dualistic structures, but of Western culture's foundation in an interrelated set of dualisms, including Male/Female, Culture/Nature, Mind/Body, Reason/Emotion, Order/Chaos, Civilized/Primitive, Spirit/Matter, Human/Animal, and Self/Other. I use Jan van der Straet's 16th century drawing *America* depicting Amerigo Vespucci's landing in the "new world." "Primitive" indigenous peoples and their closer connection to nature are represented through the figure of an unclothed, reclining woman, whereas "civilized" Europeans are represented as a standing, clothed man equipped with technology. I illustrate the ongoing interrelationships of these dualisms by the equation of women (particularly of color) with animals in advertising, Carol Adams's (2003) *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, and PETA's "All Animals Have the Same Parts" graphic featuring Pamela Anderson's body parts labeled as different cuts of meat (see the Appendix for links to van der Straet's drawing and PETA's graphic).

Another important concept for ecofeminism (and environmental ethics in general) that is helpful in the subsequent discussion of pornography and ecopornography is the distinction between intrinsic or immanent value versus instrumental value. Entities that occupy the negative side of a dualism are often highly valued, not due to their intrinsic value (which is denied through objectification, discussed below), but due to their instrumental value as a resource for the master identity (male, civilized, human, etc.).

Pornography

With the foundation of ecofeminism, I turn to pornography, primarily grounded in feminist theory. I begin by reviewing legal and general definitions of pornography in order to clarify the major differences between those definitions and feminist perspectives on pornography. In both legal and general terms, pornography typically refers to sexually explicit portrayals designed for sexual arousal, with "sexually explicit portrayals" including both sexual acts such as intercourse and oral sex as well as depictions of sexually-coded body parts such as genitalia and female breasts. The first distinction I make in rejecting these definitions is between pornography and erotica. Whereas for some "erotica" implies an artistic impulse in contrast to porn's "crass" nature, I make the distinction in terms of the types of relationships involved, specifically that erotica involves depictions of sexual relationships between subjects (autonomous and intrinsically valuable agents), be that between people within an erotic representation or between the viewer/reader and the subject of the erotic representation, as opposed to pornography's subject-object relationships. The distinction I draw between pornography and erotica is therefore not about what sexual acts or body parts are explicitly depicted but how they are depicted.

To further clarify this distinction and to set up the conceptualization of ecoporn, I introduce critical, feminist definitions of pornography, such as (1) sexual depictions that involve sexual objectification (most typically, of women) and (2) sexual depictions that eroticize the domination, humiliation, and coercion of women (and possibly others as well). By these definitions, depictions need not be "explicit" (showing genitalia or sexual acts) to be pornographic; indeed, by many of these definitions much advertising (among other genres) featuring women could be considered pornographic. However, these definitions are partially consistent with Dworkin and MacKinnon's (1988), which stipulates that "pornography is the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words" and also adds that "the use of men, children, or transsexuals in the place of women…is also pornography" (Appendix D; emphasis added). For Dworkin and MacKinnon, in other words, sexually explicit is a criterion for pornography, but so is the subordination of women (or other Others).

To clarify the operation and implications of these critical definitions, I introduce the concept of objectification with a focus on sexual objectification. Objectification involves two conditions. The first is separation: a necessary condition of turning a subject (i.e., a person) into an object (i.e., a thing) is clearly differentiating the person or entity being objectified from the objectifying party. This is one of many aspects of pornography where the role of dualisms is critical. Most obviously, the dualism male/female clearly separates women depicted in pornography from the (mostly male, but that can be conceived of as a subject position as opposed to a biologically sexed body) producers and consumers of pornography, as dualisms posit their two categories as exclusive and opposed.

The second condition of objectification is devaluation. While devaluation is also implicit in dualistic structures of thought and representation, objectification can involve two different forms of devaluation. The first is demonization, whereby the Other (women, nonwhite people, LGBTQIA people, "aliens," and the like) is portrayed as having negative value or as responsible for negative effects. This could include women's irrationality/unpredictability, nonwhite people's inherently violent nature, or the presumed moral threat of LGBTQIA people. The second form of devaluation, instrumentalization, can be more difficult to identify because the Other can be portrayed in a way that clearly assigns positive value to them. However, in instrumentalization, the Other is valued only for what they can provide to the self. This reflects the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value: women may be highly valued, but not due to their status as a subject (intrinsic value) but due to their value as an object, a resource to serve the needs, interest, or desires of the objectifying subject (Adams, 2004). So, while women may in some cases be "put on a pedestal" or "worshipped," they are nevertheless positioned as objects that provide pleasure or other benefits to the objectifying self. Sexual objectification involves turning a person into a sexual object, a thing that exists only to provide sexual pleasure/gratification to the self (Griffin, 1981).

A key dynamic in sexual objectification is the male gaze (Mulvey 1975). Under the power-laden operation of the gaze, the viewer (the possessor of the gaze, e.g., the videographer and, by extension, the viewer) is separated from and positioned "above" while the object of the gaze is positioned as passive and "below." In patriarchy, males possess the gaze: men look and women are looked at; "men act, women appear" (Berger, 1972, p. 47). In the age of photography, film, and video, the camera often adopts an implicitly or explicitly "male" (heterosexual, dominant) position, operating as an active subject, gazing at the object (women). This is sometimes made explicit, as when the camera shows a man looking (even, perhaps, lowering his glasses), then switches to a shot of a woman who, by implication, is being watched by the man. In other cases, the camera's gaze mimics a patriarchal heterosexual male, panning up and down a woman's body, lingering on breasts, butt, legs, lips, or other sexually-charged body parts.

Music videos offer a ready supply of examples of the objectifying operation of the male gaze, such as the 2014 music video for Shakira's "Can't Remember to Forget You," featuring Rihanna. There are no men in the video, only Shakira and Rihanna, who are often shown in bed together but not in terms of a relationship (sexual or otherwise) between them. The camera pans over various parts of each woman's body, visually fragmenting whole persons (subjects) into discrete objects. When the women are shown in bed together, they look not at each other, but at the camera (the presumed male viewer) and smoke cigars to cue their role in providing men pleasure, not each other (cf. Griffin, 1981, p. 38). The video in some ways parallels the "woman-on-woman" genre of pornography, which is in no way about lesbian relationships, as the women engage in sexually-charged acts with each other solely to provide pleasure for the heterosexual male viewer. Stopping short of "graphic sexually explicit" (Dworkin & MacKinnon 1988), Shakira's video is sexually objectifying and arguably pornographic. Although it does not explicitly link pleasure to women's humiliation or coercion, it does link pleasure to a gendered and sexualized subjugation: the women act to please the male gaze, not themselves or each other (see the Appendix for a URL for Shakira's video).

The work of objectification—its costs to the persons being gazed at—is often obscured, creating the illusion that objectification or its negative effects are not in operation. This can ease the objectifying party's potential cognitive dissonance at objectifying other persons. I illustrate this through a discussion of what goes on "behind the scenes" of sexually objectifying, male gaze dominated, and/or pornographic depictions of women. Albrecht Durer's 1538 woodcut *Man Drawing a Reclining Woman* illustrates the objectifying dynamics of the male gaze. The male artist is shown drawing a woman on a canvas with a grid on it while viewing the woman through a grid positioned in between him and the female model (the grid manifesting separation). The male artist is the active party, fully clothed, sitting upright, looking at the woman, and drawing her. The female is passive, reclining, largely naked, and looking away from the artist and the viewer, reducing her subjectivity. The striking similarities between Durer's woodcut and Jan van der Straet's *America* (discussed above) offer additional opportunities to illustrate ecofeminism's approach to the intersectional nature of systems of oppression (see the Appendix for links to both van der Straet's and Durer's images).

Moving to photography, I show posed and carefully lit studio photographs of Jayne Mansfield, an actress, singer, Playboy playmate, and fairly typical 1950s-1960s sex symbol (see the Appendix). Showing Mansfield from the waist up, the photographs highlight her blond hair, face, lips, and prominent breasts. I follow that with the photograph from John Berger's (1972) *Ways of Seeing* that shows a photo shoot of a similar model in a similar pose from the same general era (p. 43). This photograph, however, was taken from behind the model, showing her back as she sits on the arm of a chair, looking toward a host of male photographers taking pictures of her. What this photo clearly shows is what is necessary to achieve the kind of photos that depict Mansfield: the model is precariously perched on one arm of a chair, her arms extending behind her in an awkward and uncomfortable pose—a pose necessary to accentuate her breasts and present herself for consumption by the male gaze. This photo shows, unlike the photos of Jayne Mansfield, the costs of objectification: in this case, a disregard for the woman's comfort or how she normally sits—that is, her subjectivity.

One characteristic that distinguishes a variety of forms of sexual objectification of women from pornography as I specifically define that here is the linking of pleasure to the domination, coercion, and/or humiliation of women. One clear example is the popular Bang Bus internet porn site (Kimmel, 2008, p. 176; Wikiporno, 2011). Bang Bus videos and those from similarly-themed sites share the same basic plot: a woman is picked up by a group of men in a van and offered money to participate in a documentary video, then more money to strip, and yet more money to have sex with the men while being filmed. Each video ends with the woman being dropped off in a random location without the promised money, clearly linking male heterosexual pleasure to women's humiliation and exploitation.

To summarize, my interpretation of a critical, feminist conceptualization of pornography includes sexual objectification in support of a hetero-patriarchal masculine master identity, an obscuring (in some cases) of the processes of objectification and subjugation, patriarchally idealized portrayals of human sexual relationships, and the linking of desire and pleasure to domination and subjugation.

Ecopornography

Like feminist views of pornography, an ecofeminist understanding of ecoporn is not the same as will be discovered by googling the term. Ecoporn's analytic potential is not as a synonym for greenwashing, although it is used by many in that way. Instead, ecoporn refers to representations of nature that (1) stimulate desire but misrepresent reality and fail to reflect actual human-nature relationships

(Meisner, 2010), (2) foster subject-object relationships between human viewers and the natural world, (3) offer viewers the identity of "nature's master," and/or (4) link the domination/exploitation of nature to pleasure. In ecoporn, objectification is based on the human/nature dualism. Humans possess the gaze and nature is its object, but, following ecofeminism, the human/nature dualism is also gendered. Particularly in terms of pleasing pictures of natural landscapes, cuddly animals, and charismatic megafauna, the devaluation part of objectification is achieved through instrumentalization: nature's value is what it does for the viewer, be that aesthetic pleasure, fostering denial about anthropogenic violence against the nonhuman world, and/or the pleasure of dominating nature. Some ecoporn, however, is more sanitized (the pleasing pictures that are the focus of most prior work on ecoporn) while other forms of ecoporn are more overt in linking pleasure to domination. To clarify this distinction, and thereby expand the range of representations considered ecoporn, I utilize an analogy to softcore versus hardcore pornography.

The distinctions drawn between softcore and hardcore porn are varied, and in some cases parallel the diverse distinctions between erotica and pornography. For some, erotica is different from pornography in being less explicit or graphic (e.g., avoiding depicting genitalia), where for others erotica is defined by being "artistic" as opposed to porn being solely for prurient interests. For others still, erotica implies nonobjectifying and nondegrading sexual depictions (the distinction I used above). Similarly, for many, softcore porn is less explicit, avoiding genitalia, anuses, and sexual activity beyond kissing and petting but often still implying genitally-involved activities such as oral sex and intercourse, with hardcore porn defined by explicit depictions of genitalia, anuses, intercourse, and oral sex. I rework what "implicit" versus "explicit" references based on the distinction between erotica as depicting subject-subject sexual relations and pornography as depicting subject-object sexual relations. Softcore porn, in my use, is still porn, and therefore objectifying, but the objectification is more subtle, muted, or disguised. In softcore porn, women are objectified through the male gaze and other dynamics, but the portrayal may be contextualized as romantic, mutually satisfying, fully consensual, nondegrading, or the like. Hardcore porn, in my use, is more explicit, but "explicit" is not about graphic depictions of body parts and sex acts, but explicit subordinations of women, such as actions and storylines that overtly link the humiliation of women to men's pleasure, or that explicitly depict a lack of mutual pleasure and/or consent. As with porn versus erotica, this variation of the softcore/hardcore distinction is not about which body parts or sexual acts are depicted, or how explicitly they are depicted, but about how those acts are portrayed in the context of the relationships between persons in the pornographic depiction and/or between the viewer and the persons in that depiction.

Softcore Ecoporn: Softcore ecoporn presents its objectification of nature for human pleasure in the guise of an appreciation of and desire to protect nature, objectify nature while denying or obscuring that it is doing so. This includes the kind of "greenwashing" ads labeled by Mander (1972) as ecoporn, such as energy companies using images of unspoiled nature and healthy wildlife to claim that they are actually protecting, or at least mitigating their negative impacts on, animals and ecosystems. Softcore ecoporn also includes the images of unspoiled landscapes and healthy animals used by environmental organizations that Millet (2004) and Meisner (2010) critique. These types of images, especially those used by environmental organizations, often present landscapes and animals in the same way as pictures of "wilderness"—typically without humans and without signs of human impacts—which maintains the human/nature dualism that is central to objectifying the natural world (Cronon, 1996; DeLuca & Demo, 2000). Paralleling many forms of softcore porn, they present an idealized and sanitized image of nature (and humans' relationship to it), erasing the realities of anthropogenic degradations of nature.

To illustrate softcore ecoporn, I use the trailer for the BBC's *Planet Earth*, a series many students have watched and enjoyed (see the Appendix). With the context of my lecture on softcore ecoporn and the readings from Millet (2004) and Meisner (2010), students are able to readily identify the general lack of human beings and the absence of signs of human impact on animals and ecosystems. The series promises in its tagline to present nature "like you've never seen it before," using the camera to pleasurably present the unseen, the unfamiliar, and the exotic by means of careful editing and cinematographic techniques, not unlike some pornography. The series' visual and verbal reverence for the natural world disguises its objectifying gaze, fostering in viewers the feeling that they are not participating in something exploitative.

A question raised by this conceptualization of softcore ecoporn is whether such idealized depictions of untouched nature could be efficacious in increasing people's appreciation of, commitment to, and support of conservation efforts. While such a possibility cannot be ruled out, there are several reasons to suspect claims of relatively positive effects of these kinds of images. First, these are the kinds of images identified not only as ecoporn, but as corporate greenwashing. Do oil companies' advertisements featuring healthy natural animals and ecosystems have the effect of increasing people's conservationist impulses, do they mislead people as to the reality of anthropogenic environmental degradation, or could they do both? Even if they increase conservationist commitments, they would likely do so through the anthropocentrism embedded in contemporary conservationist and preservationist ideologies and practices. By presenting healthy natural environments as those without marks of human influence, they rely on conceptions of wilderness grounded in the human/nature dualism and thereby perpetuate anthropocentric environmental ideologies and, presumably, practices. They divert attention away from preserving or rehabilitating the "impure," "imperfect" nature that exists in industrial sites, urban areas, and contaminated ecosystems (Cronon, 1996). Just as mainstream pornography presents only images of women that match patriarchal ideals in order to offer the pleasures of domination to male viewers, softcore ecoporn and related forms of greenwashing also present images of nature that match anthropocentric ideals of nature—specifically, variations of "wilderness"—in order to offer the distractions and pleasures made possible by denying the extent of human-caused environmental degradation. Both softcore pornography and softcore ecoporn idealize their objects of affection to make people feel better in the context of objectifying structures, be they gendered and/or environmental.

The issue here is not decontextualized pictures of pretty nature and their effects, but the structures and contexts characterizing the presentation of those pictures. DeLuca and Demo's (2000) analysis of Carleton Watkins's photographs of Yosemite, for example, demonstrates how images of the sublime were altered by inclusions of the beautiful in order to offer not only feelings of awe and insignificance, but also a sense of safety and comfort while viewing sublime nature, thereby creating what they term the tourist gaze. While Watkins's photographs demonstrably supported efforts to protect Yosemite and eventually make it a national park, they did so through anthropocentric frameworks (e.g., preservationism) as well as systems of both economic and racial/ethnic privilege. In a different context, Dickinson's (2013) analysis of environmental education programs based on the idea of Nature Deficit Disorder challenged the premise that exposure to nature automatically leads to a connection with nature because it overlooks the form of that exposure, the set and setting of children's experiences in nature, and the frameworks taught to children that mediate their exposure and subsequent connections to nature and their appreciations thereof.

Hardcore Ecoporn: Based on my categories and definitions, almost everything that has heretofore been discussed as ecoporn is softcore ecoporn (Lindholt, 2009; Mander, 1972; Meisner, 2010; Millet, 2004; an exception is Welling, 2009). Using the analogy to softcore/hardcore pornography reveals additional forms of ecopornography that explicitly show human domination and exploitation of nonhuman nature and in many cases clearly link desire and pleasure to such subjugations and exploitations. Hardcore ecoporn is by all means pornographic, but is not a form of greenwashing. Vicariously obtaining the master identity is a relatively overt appeal. The MAGA mantra "drill, baby, drill"—often performed as a collective chant at rallies—can be understood as gendered, sexualized, objectifying, and violent. The pleasures taken in degrading and dominating nature are on full display, not unlike the Bang Bus porn videos described above.

Easy-to-find, common examples of hardcore ecoporn are advertisements for four-wheel drive, off-highway vehicles such as SUVs and pickup trucks. For example, a 2017 ad for the Chevrolet Colorado titled "The Ultimate Off Road Adventure" begins with two of the pickups driving on dirt roads in a dry, rocky environment (see the Appendix). The portrayed value of the pickup is neither its ability to get one from point A to point B via whatever roads are available nor to carry cargo. The truck's value is its destructive capacities, the apparent aim of an "ultimate off road adventure." The trucks are driven as fast as possible, maximizing any opportunity to unnecessarily spin their wheels, drift, and spew as much dirt into the air and across the landscape as possible. The trucks are then shown in a forested environment, where they drive across a stream at high speed, splashing water and spewing mud as they maximize their damage to the rich riparian setting. Next, one truck is shown going up a steep, rock-strewn slope; as the truck "gets air" at the top (i.e., climaxes), the video temporarily switches to slow motion, followed by a close-up of large rocks tumbling down the hill in the aftermath. The ad hails viewers with the identity of nature's master, an identity performed by needless destruction of natural environments, consistent with Millet's (2004) characterization of ecoporn as offering "illusions of control, ownership, and subjugation" (p. 147). The ad also demonstrates how such identities and pleasures are promoted by what Lindholt (2009) describes as "staged intimacies or ecstasies. In the visual media, [ecoporn] may deploy provocative lighting, tricks with perspective, and close-up shots to enhance and tantalize" (p. 15), but in this ad, it is to enhance and tantalize through showcasing subordination rather than obscuring it.

Many of the popular reality TV shows from the late 2000s into the 2010s focusing on homosocial, blue-collar groups engaged in extractive practices, such as *Gold Rush* and *Ax Men*, could also be interpreted as hardcore ecoporn. Currently in its 15th season, the Discovery Channel's highly popular *Gold Rush* (see the Appendix), for example, rarely if ever raises environmental concerns over the miners' actions, and offers viewers vicarious pleasures in manifesting hegemonic masculinity by making a living (and maybe getting rich) through physically and mechanically pillaging earth's resources—not only extracting gold, but in doing so creating large scars and piles of tailings on the landscape and diverting streams for use in their large wash plants. Restoration efforts are never shown or mentioned, but on rare occasions disruptions are created by regulators shutting down an operation because of illegal water diversions or safety violations.

Each *Gold Rush* episode ends with the "money shot": the leader of each group is shown pouring the most recent cleanout cycle's bounty of gold onto a scale while the rest of their group looks on in anticipation as someone announces the rising count of ounces of gold. In hardcore human porn, the "money shot" is a man ejaculating on a woman, often marking the end ("climax") of the video. The analogy is not perfect; failures in ejaculation would not find their way into a typical porn video, while in *Gold Rush* it is not uncommon that a group's "take" is severely disappointing, demonstrating their symbolic impotence, and sometimes leading the group to give up and look for gold elsewhere. In sexual terms, erectile dysfunction and/or coitus interruptus plague some of the groups' efforts. Portraying actual or feared failure is, of course, effective in driving the narrative forward and maintaining viewer engagement. However, typically at least one of the multiple groups that are followed in each episode achieve at least acceptable, if not dramatic, success, and for any of the groups a failure in one episode may be followed by success in a later one.

Is it stretching the analogy too far to characterize *Gold Rush's* narrative structure as ecoporn based on similarities to human pornography? From an ecofeminist perspective, the series represents groups of almost entirely men, manifesting contemporary blue collar masculinity, working to extract "resources" from the landscape to achieve their own ends. The show evidences no concern for the natural entities thereby affected, entities which have a very long history of being represented as female. Each episode's narrative culminates in the "money shot" described above, which involves each group of men collectively watching that week's take being tallied, followed by disappointment or success. Masculinity and threats to it are the fulcrum of the show, albeit a largely implicit one, and the gold count is the measure of their success as men. The homosocial nature of these men's exploitative efforts not only mirrors some forms of hardcore pornography, such as the Bang Bus-style narratives discussed above that are based on groups of men achieving pleasure through the humiliation of women, but also some porn viewing practices, such as collective viewing in homosocial groups (Kimmel, 2008). Some examples of representations around extractive masculinity, however, are more easily identified as pornographic due to being more explicit not only about their extractive relationship to natural environments, but also about the gendered foundation of that relationship.

An example of hardcore ecoporn that was judged by many to have gone "too far" due to its explicit articulation of not only gendered but outright misogynist bases for resource extraction comes from the context of petromasculinity, specifically the Alberta oil fields in Canada. In 2020, the fracking company X-Site Energy Services placed a sexually violent image and the company logo on a sticker that could be put on workers' helmets or the like. Subsequently distributed on social media, the image inspired outrage on social media and in mainstream media outlets (Fowks 2021). The image is a "POV shot" of the type commonly used in pornography—that is, the drawing shows viewers what the male actor sees, much like a first-person shooter video game, thereby obscuring the male actor, positioning the viewer of the image as the male actor, and highlighting the object of the gaze. The drawing shows a woman's bare back and the back of her head, complete with Greta Thunberg-style braids and the name "Greta" on the woman's lower back, the location of a tattoo commonly known as a "tramp stamp." The only parts of the male actor that viewers see are his wrists and hands, each holding one of the braids. The image clearly implies via cultural codes a man having intercourse with a woman from behind—a position often coded as dehumanizing ("doggie style"), with the man's hold on the woman's braids symbolizing subjugation and control (holding the "reins" as it were; cf. Griffin 1981, p. 39). Given the explicitly marked identity of the woman, what is being depicted is Greta Thunberg being raped—child rape, Thunberg being 17 years old at the time (Fowks). At the bottom of the image, positioned where the woman's butt would otherwise be seen, is the name of the company, with "X-Site" being larger, bicolored, and stylized; while perhaps coincidental in this context, "X-Site" is a homonym of "excite," furthering the sexualization not only of the image, but of the petroleum extraction industry, explicitly linking pleasure with domination and violence (see the Appendix for a link to the image).

Effects and Theoretical Bases

Empirical support for the negative effects of consuming ecoporn is limited, mostly due to a lack of relevant research[2]. One body of relevant research on media effects on attitudes toward environmental issues that grounded in empirical research is that guided by cultivation theory (Good, 2007). While traditionally focused on television, the underlying mechanism for cultivation theory's take on media effects is the shaping of viewers' understandings of the world by the repetition of similar values, images, and/or narrative structures. In the context of violence, for example, cultivation theory does not argue that viewing violent media causes violent behavior, but instead cultivates a view of the world as a violent, dangerous place. In this light, the effects of ecoporn through cultivation is not causing people to objectify and exploit aspects of the natural world, but to normalize objectifying human-nature relations through the repetition of the structures and dynamics of ecoporn, as described throughout this paper, possibly to the point of such structures being uncritically and even unconsciously accepted as "common sense." Studies of media consumption and environmental attitudes through the lens of cultivation theory are limited, but do show a correlation between heavy television viewing and a lower concern about environmental issues, possibly mediated by the pervasiveness of materialism in television content, as well as between heavy television viewing and lower levels of environmental activism (Good, 2007). However, in the case of ecoporn as I have conceptualized it here (and especially hardcore ecoporn), cultivation theory's explanatory mechanisms do not provide a role for the appeal of occupying the position of the master identity and the pleasures linked to environmental exploitation (or the parallel pleasures linked to the domination and humiliation of women in hardcore pornography).

A closer parallel to the psychodynamics of (eco) pornography may be found in Althusser's (1971) theory of interpellation, specifically the role of messages in "hailing" certain identities. Messages offer viewers a subject position from which the message "makes sense"; only those who occupy a relevant subject position will recognize that it is they who are being addressed by the message, thereby (re)constituting that identity. Hardcore (eco)porn more explicitly "hails" a dominating subject position, whereas softcore (eco)porn may be understood as hailing a subject position that is less overtly framed as dominating. The pleasures of domination experienced by a viewer in response to hardcore (eco)porn can be understood as an acceptance of its hail—as proof of one's successful occupation of the subject position of the master identity, be it over the earth or over women. This link to Althusser can be further tailored to the role of pleasure in (eco)porn consumption through Scholes's (1989) conceptualization of textual economies: "The rhetoric of textual economy... will take the form of an investigation into the flow of pleasure and power that is organized by any text" (p. 108).

The Relevance and Value of Gender and Pornography in Ecocriticism

Dualistic structures and objectification—the dynamics of which are central to my conceptualization of ecoporn—are widely used in diverse critical approaches to environmental communication and are tackled by approaches other than ecofeminism generally or ecoporn specifically. Examples include approaches that focus on commodification of nature (a form of objectification), the instrumental versus intrinsic value of other-than-human entities and ecosystems (instrumental value being based on objectification), efforts to deconstruct dualisms such as human/animal and associated anthropomorphisms, developments of "posthuman" environmental theory, and more (e.g., Abram, 1996; Börebäck & Schwieler, 2018; Burford & Schutten, 2017; Day, 2018; Dickinson, 2013; Schutten, 2008), all without a direct focus on gender or use of ecofeminist theory. Given this state of affairs, why gender, why ecofeminism, and why ecoporn? Put another way, what do ecofeminist approaches contribute to ecocriticism that other conceptualizations and critical tools do not?

Ecofeminism focuses attention on intersectional dynamics in ways that not all approaches to environmentally-related dualisms and objectification would necessarily do. That focus both directs the attention to potentially different kinds of environmentally-themed messages compared to other approaches (e.g., Griffin, 1978; Rogers, 2008) and helps reveal other aspects of the dynamics of dualistic logics and objectifications of various forms. For example, the concept of the master identity within ecofeminist theory helps identify not just what objectification is, but how it works, part of which is by providing those who identify with/as the master the pleasures of domination (Plumwood, 1993; Rogers & Schutten, 2004). The pornography analogy specifically not only highlights the gendered structures underlying the objectification of the other-than-human world, but helps foreground, dissect, and challenge the role not only of pleasure in promoting adherence to the dominant ideology, but the articulation of domination and pleasure and the profound distortions required to attain such pleasures (e.g., alienation from the natural world, our bodies, and other "feminine" entities and experiences). In addition to focusing on potentially different kinds of environmental messages, ecofeminism can provide additional tools to assist in moving beyond identifying such structures—naming the what—toward deeper understandings of how such structures work, a potential that this essay works to nurture and cultivate.

Conclusion

This paper has three goals. The first is to move the conceptualization of ecoporn beyond an inductive process that begins with "I know it when I see it." Instead, grounded in (eco)feminist theory, I have endeavored to develop the concept, then explore what kinds of texts manifest its core traits. Through this process, the analogy to softcore versus hardcore pornography revealed a range of common texts that manifest a type of ecoporn that is by no means greenwashing, thereby further questioning the common equation of ecoporn with greenwashing. The second goal is to develop the concept in a way that lends itself to the systematic critical analysis of environmental texts as opposed to a clever, memorable, and (appropriately) pejorative catch phrase. Finally, my overriding goal has been to present the concept in a manner that lends itself to pedagogical uses, from explaining and illustrating the concept to challenging students to find their own examples and analyze them to determine whether and how they function as ecoporn. As with many other concepts (like culture and communication), a more useful approach is often driven not by the question "what is it?" but "what does it do?" Like human pornography, the key issue is not what ecoporn depicts, but how it depicts and the consequences and implications of those textual structures.

Notes

1. The earliest confirmed appearance in print is Tom Turner's (1970) essay "Ecopornography, or How to Spot an Ecological Phony" in *The Environmental Handbook*, published for the first National Environmental Teach-In (Turner, n.d., 2008), which later became known as Earth Day.

2. While several empirical studies have examined the effect of corporate greenwashing (some even specifically focusing on pretty pictures of nature), those are limited to the effects of those messages on corporate images, reputations, sales, and profits (e.g., Schmuck et al., 2018) as opposed to the effects on people's environmental attitudes or actions. On the pornography side, much research has been done on various factors affecting attitudes towards sexual assault, including viewing pornography. For example, a recent meta-analysis of previous studies found that viewing pornography had significant but relatively small effects on the acceptance of rape myths, with the more specific factor of viewing violent pornography having greater, albeit still modest, effects (Hedrick, 2021) However, a substantial problem with applying such research to my conceptualization of ecoporn is the definitions of pornography used by these studies, which are consistent with the legal and everyday definitions of pornography as explicit depictions of sexual acts and sexually coded body parts, not the underlying structure of objectification that is at the core of many feminist definitions of pornography. While the definition of violent pornography may overlap more with my definition of hardcore ecoporn, that is also a much narrower category, as pornography can be nonviolent and still meet my definition of hardcore pornography.

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Appendix

Sources for Images and Videos Discussed in the Paper

Image/Video	URL
Raphael's painting *Madonna and Child* (the Tempi Madonna)	https://www.wga.hu/art/r/raphael/2firenze/2/40tempi.jpg
Ursula the Sea Witch from Disney's *The Little Mermaid*	https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097757/mediaindex/?ref_=tt_mi_sm
Giorgione's painting *Sleeping Venus*	https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sleeping_Venus_(Giorgione)
Jan van der Straet's drawing *America*	https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/343845
PETA's "All Animals Have the Same Parts" graphic featuring Pamela Anderson	https://www.peta.org/features/pamela-anderson-shows-animals-same-parts
Shakira's music video "Can't Remember to Forget You" (featuring Rihanna)	http://youtu.be/o3mP3mJDL2k
Albrecht Durer's woodcut *Man Drawing a Reclining Woman*	https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/366555
Studio photograph of Jayne Mansfield	http://media.baselineresearch.com/images/99988/99988_full.jpg
Photograph of photo shoot with female subject	Berger, 1972, p. 43 (see references section)
Trailer for the BBC's *Planet Earth*	https://youtu.be/tiVNk6_0GdY
Chevrolet Colorado "The Ultimate Off Road Adventure" ad	https://youtu.be/4aOccxX2j_s
The Discovery Channel's *Gold Rush* website	https://www.discovery.com/shows/gold-rush
Greta Thunberg X-Site Energy Services rape graphic	https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2020/03/04/canada-oil-firm-apologizes-for-sexualized-greta-image.html

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- Text
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Viewpoint: Papers that rely heavily on the author(s)' interpretation of data, artifacts, or events, more so than in traditional research papers.

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- Include any tables and figures in the main text (tables and figures should be used sparingly in brief reports),
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