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Health Communication Scholarship in Utah: Looking Ahead to 2026 and Beyond

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The health communication research discipline stands at a pivotal moment in both national scholarship and public life. Over the past decade, researchers across the United States have confronted shifting health landscapes that include emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (Weingott & Parkinson, 2025), widening health disparities (Rothermich, et al., 2025), extreme politicization of health information (Davis, 2025), and a seismic shift in the public's ability to trust science (Schuh, et al., 2025).

These forces have pushed the field to evolve, broadening its theoretical foundations and diversifying its methodological approaches. Today, health communication research is not simply an academic pursuit, but an essential infrastructure for a society navigating complex medical, social, and technological realities.

Nationwide, scholars have highlighted the ways by which individuals make sense of risk, evaluate evidence, form health beliefs, and engage with care systems. Whether through the scope of patient provider communication, narrative persuasion, social determinants of health, media literacy, or strategic health message design, the field has consistently demonstrated its practical value (McCullock, et al., 2021). Public health crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the opioid crisis, rising rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide have underscored the need for communication research that can employ clear messaging, build trust, and change communities. Health communication has emerged as one of the most consequential areas of communication scholarship.

These national trends have particular resonance in Utah. Our state faces a distinctive set of public health concerns shaped by its geography, demographics, and cultural dynamics. Utah is also a uniquely collaborative environment, where academic institutions, healthcare organizations, state agencies, religious institutions and local communities often work together to solve problems. In this context, health communication research is indispensable. It offers tools to bridge seemingly unconquerable gaps in understanding between political foes, foster culturally responsive outreach, and ensure that evidence-based information reaches Utahns where they are, in ways that honor their values.

The articles in this issue showcase the breadth of health and communication research, highlighting local and global challenges through innovative theoretical and methodological approaches. Julius and Farmer (2025) provide a phenomenological examination of rural healthcare using concertive control, demonstrating how community expectations can impose restrictive, informal management systems on providers. Dam (2025) explores advertising effectiveness through a social comparison lens, revealing that ads without spokesmodels may produce more favorable consumer evaluations while also addressing the complex relationship between comparison and body image.

Several articles apply communication frameworks to amplify marginalized voices and rethink foundational ideas in the field. Sedegah, Asemanyi, and Agyei (2025) use photovoice to surface Ghanaian young women's perspectives on sexual and reproductive health, identifying barriers such as stigma, education gaps, and economic constraints. Fullerton and Coombs (2025) revisit Brockriede's (1972) seminal argumentation essay by introducing a trauma-informed game theory reframing that preserves relational ethics while avoiding harmful metaphors, offering a modern and culturally relevant model for pedagogy and health communication.

This issue also demonstrates how communication pedagogy and scholarship intersect in practical and reflective ways. Fitzgerald and Adkisson (2025) contribute a GIFT activity that gamifies research instruction to strengthen students' credibility judgments, citation accuracy, and research literacy. Finally, Coombs and Dietze-Hermosa (2025) review The Handbook of Mental Health Communication, emphasizing its contributions to ethical practice, interdisciplinary integration, and message design while acknowledging accessibility concerns. Together, these works illustrate how communication research informs health, ethics, education, and community engagement in both local and global contexts.

This special issue of the *Utah Journal of Communication* celebrates both the breadth and specificity of health communication work in our state, as well as other institutions across the nation. The contributors highlight the ways researchers are not only engaging with national conversations but also shaping them. As health issues continue to evolve, so too must our scholarly and practical approaches to communication. The work presented here reminds us that the future of public health depends not only on scientific discovery but also on our ability to listen, explain, connect, and build trust. Utah's researchers are helping lead that charge, and this issue stands as a testament to their impact.

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“There’s nobody else here, right?”: Concertive Control in Rural Health

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Abstract
Rural communities present distinct healthcare disparities, including a higher risk for comorbidities, lower socioeconomic status, and a higher hesitancy towards medical care, compared to their urban counterparts. Current research focuses on the lack of personnel and physical resources in rural areas. However, this paper proposes an alternative approach to studying rural healthcare. Concertive control explores how self-managed teams create management structures that are more restrictive than traditional, vertical management systems (Barker, 1993). Eight providers were interviewed to probe their phenomenological lived experiences. Three themes emerged from iterative coding: investment, out of your comfort zone, and nobody else. We conclude that rural communities deserve acceptable healthcare from providers who understand the unique facets of rurality. Current solutions, such as telemedicine and loan repayment programs, do not offer equitable or sustainable options for rural communities and do not consider the controlling gaze of these rural communities revealed by providers.
Keywords: Rural disparities, Provider perspectives, Concertive Control, rural South, Community impact.

In the United States, 46 million people, nearly 20 percent of the population, live in rural areas (FDA, 2021). The dearth of physicians working in these regions evidences the lack of healthcare resources available for rural communities. Only 11 percent of American physicians practice in rural areas (Jaret, 2020), up from nine percent in 2000 (Rosenblatt & Hart, 2000), but still an alarmingly low percentage. Focusing on the location of this study, 78 of North Carolina’s 100 counties are rural, having a population density of 250 people or less per square mile (NCRHA, 2022). Since 2005, 195 rural hospitals have closed nationwide, with 12 being located in North Carolina (Cecil G. Sheps Center, n.d.). Nevertheless, there is limited research on why healthcare providers choose to stay in rural medicine despite known limited resources. One explanation is the development of concertive control structures (Barker, 1993; Barker & Cheney, 1994; Papa et al., 1997). This project explores the relationship between rural providers and their communities and the impact of concertive control on these providers’ decisions to practice rural medicine.

Literature Review

Exploring concertive control in rural healthcare requires a look at concertive control, along with barriers and initiatives.

Concertive Control
In organizational communication, scholars often define control through an organization’s structure and dissemination of power (Mumby & Stohl, 1991). Whereas bureaucratic organizations are controlled by a higher up managerial team and normative control stems from covertly imposed values, self-managed work teams rely on decentralized power and shared decision making (Tata & Prasad, 2004; Barker, 1993). Barker (1993) elucidated self-managed work teams in modern organizations. He outlined three phases of concertive control, a “form of control more powerful, less apparent, and more difficult to resist than that of the former bureaucracy” (Barker, 1993, p. 408). First is consolidation, where a group distinguishes ideals to facilitate self-management. Next is the creation of normative rules, where guidelines emerge based on group norms. Third is the stabilization and formation of rules. Here, the group evolves from rules-based norms to structured, fixed rules (Barker, 1993). By the end of these phases, the group has become more controlling than a typical hierarchical management system.

We maintain that rural communities exhibit characteristics of self-managed teams, and the scope of concertive control can be extended to a community level. Williams (1993) explains that working-class communities create culture through their emphasis on "neighbourhood, mutual obligation, and common betterment" (p. 9). This project applies these principles to rural communities, proposing that the creation and reinforcement of norms in rural areas are reliant on reciprocity and connection. These norms then become stable, explicit rules that are enacted through communication, resulting in the presence of concertive control.

Research has illuminated problems recruiting and keeping rural physicians (Nielsen et al., 2017). Much of this research details the lack of physical resources, including medical facilities, funding, and specialists. Little research focuses on the relationship between rural physicians and their communities, including concertive control (Barker, 1993). Even recent research (Larsen & Tompkins, 2005; Ormes & Ziemer, 2019) does not extend the concept beyond self-contained organizations, except Gibbs et al.'s (2022) theorizing of concertive control in online communities; but Gibbs et al. do not include studying broader communities as proposed by Papa et al.'s (1997) research with the Grameen Bank.

Concertive Control and Identification

Papa et al. (1997) examine how identification functions in concertive control. For concertive control to evolve, each group member must identify with other members and group values. Papa et al. (1997) describe how Grameen Bank workers' organizational identification led to acceptance of more restrictive control systems by outlining two paradoxes: the paradoxes of control and sociality. Workers believe they have freedom because they have control over their work, but they experience more restrictive working conditions. Bank workers find fulfillment helping poor Bangladeshis, but work requirements are brutal. In essence, bank workers are surveilled by two organizations – one formal in the Grameen Bank and the other more informally and invisibly (Foucault, 1979) in the organizing enactment activities (Weick, 1979) of loosely conglomerated centers in the community. The connection between the Grameen workers' fulfillment, identification with other workers, and acceptance of restrictive working conditions offers a foundation for examining similar connections in rural healthcare, where organizing may be understood in terms of the community itself (see Farmer, 1999). This project extends the scope of Papa et al.'s (1997) work, viewing the community as an organization versus examining an established company like the Grameen Bank.

Rural Healthcare Barriers

Prior rural healthcare research is centered on the physical barriers present for rural communities. Coombs et al. (2022) explore barriers present in Montanan healthcare through interviews with rural providers. The two most relevant themes were (1) a barrier exists between the rural identity of patients and receiving healthcare and (4) time and resource constraints. Rosenblatt and Hart (2000) connect specialization and managed care to nationwide rural physician shortages. They offer three solutions to address disparities in rural medicine: advancing educational initiatives that encourage rural practice, reimbursing physicians who offer rural services, and creating government programs that provide rural services. Nielsen et al. (2017) examined health disparities in rural Missouri. They attribute the shortage of rural providers with a lack of training in rural medicine, noting 99% of residency programs are in urban areas. Chipp et al. (2011) specify commonalities among practicing physicians in rural areas, including providers' descriptions of how patients approach them for advice outside the medical setting.

Rural Health Initiatives

Solutions to previously mentioned barriers have hinged on monetary incentives to recruit physicians to rural and underserved areas. Nationally, physicians can apply to the National Health Service Corps' (NHSC) Loan Repayment Program, which repays up to $50,000 in loans to physicians who agree to practice in an approved NHSC site for two years. In North Carolina (where the current project is based), the Department of Health and Human Services' (NCDHHS) Office of Rural Health incentivizes physicians practicing in rural communities through the North Carolina Loan Repayment Program (NCLRP), which offers physicians up to $100,000 towards student loans for a four-year rural commitment (NCDHHS, n.d.). However, current literature suggests that loan repayment programs do not result in providers continuing to practice rural medicine once their obligation has been fulfilled (Russell et al., 2021).

Using the existing literature regarding systemic barriers and impacts of concertive control, we pose the following research questions to understand the lived experience of rural healthcare providers:

- **RQ1:** How does a rural community function as a self-managing team from the lens of concertive control?
- **RQ2:** How does identity affect a provider's decision to accept harsher working conditions in rural areas?
- **RQ3:** How does community dependence affect providers' acceptance of working conditions?

Methods

Participants/Co-Researchers

After obtaining IRB approval, this project used a phenomenological approach to explicate the lived experiences of rural providers (Faulkner & Atkinson, 2024; Glesne, 2014; Patton, 1990). The lead author recruited co-researchers via email from rural areas in North Carolina through snowball sampling (Glesne, 2014; Patton, 1990; Penrod et al., 2003). Co-researchers were practicing (both allopathic [MD] and osteopathic [DO]) physicians and physician assistants (PAs). The lead author grew up in a rural Oklahoma county and experienced firsthand the informality that exists in rural healthcare, with her provider of over 15 years serving as her sixth-grade Sunday school teacher. She initially envisioned a career in medicine before pursuing communication studies. The second author has roots in central Appalachia, also a region with limited healthcare options. His dissertation investigates the concepts of unobtrusive control in the region.

Procedure

Because of co-researchers' demanding schedules, the lead author conducted both in-person and Zoom interviews from November 2023 – March 2024, using a semi-structured guide (Patton, 1990), asking the same questions in each interview with additional probing questions as participants' narratives dictated. The importance of each participant feeling comfortable divulging sensitive information was central to this study, so researchers utilized an individual interview strategy to be cognizant of anonymity concerns. Authors utilized the term "provider" to add a further layer of anonymity by not distinguishing between MDs, DOs, and PAs. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Word Dictate, then manually checked for accuracy. Overall, 200 hours of fieldwork observation and interviews produced 67 single-spaced transcription pages.

Results

Eight providers were co-researchers: 2 MDs, 2 DOs, and 4 PAs. Areas of practice included family medicine, emergency medicine, and pediatrics. Length of practice varied from less than three to 20+ years. The authors coded interviews separately using values coding as suggested by Manning and Kunkel (2014), examining how “value systems operate in a social system by analyzing attitudes, values, and beliefs” (Faulkner & Atkinson, 2024, p. 80). Authors then engaged in multiple rounds of collaborative coding to synthesize resulting themes (Tracy et al., 2024). In response to research questions, the following themes materialized from co-researchers’ lived experience narratives:

In response to RQ1, a theme of Investment emerged. Investment to and in the locale is central to the experience of the rural community, a phenomenon guarded by natives to prevent weakening of community bonds (Syrek, 2009). As Provider A maintained, “people like it when their doctors live in the area . . . patients ask me where I live, because they want to know how invested are you?” This provider explained she “wanted to be the person that ran into patients in the grocery store”, exemplifying the mutual belief of providers being community members. Provider C, who is not local, also sensed community surveillance: “I don’t live here. . . Patients have asked me . . . where I live, and, you know, are you from around here.” Echoing Procter (1990, 2004), the rural community views this investment as a rhetorical act through which social community is created and recreated. Providers sense this intrinsic surveillance narrative (Foucault, 1979), presuming and expecting connection, as the expectations are embedded “in the social fabric” of our communities (Foucault, 1982; Barker & Cheney, 1994, p. 39). The ‘social fabric’ demonstrates the first step of the development of concertive control structures, manifesting itself in mundane communicative occurrences, like Provider H’s affirmation that providers should be “a part of the community, part of their fabric.” Co-participants’ responses showcase the presence of understood ideals with the purpose of self-management. Both providers and patients expect a personal and professional relationship, demonstrating concertive control consolidation (Barker, 1993).

In response to RQ2, the theme of Out of Your Comfort Zone emerged. Provider D maintains rural conditions are “a good challenge, because it pushes you out of your comfort zone a little bit. It’s rewarding and I think that’s . . . kind of what it’s all about.” The identification with the rural community discussed for RQ1 unobtrusively trains (Foucault, 1979) providers to accept working conditions foreign to their urban colleagues. Provider B, who described herself as “almost overly involved in [her] community”, has worked “every Saturday since April of ‘21”, except for one Saturday to watch her son graduate from college. When speaking about time off, Provider B explained that “it’s hard to take vacations, because…if I’m going to take a vacation, they just close the clinic”, and Provider F corroborated this by stating she receives calls from patients when she takes time off around Christmas. The second stage of concertive control is exemplified through these narratives, with a normative rule being that providers should be available whenever needed. Rural providers must work as bricoleurs to create something from nothing (Baker & Nelson, 2005; see also Haider & Cleaver, 2023; Shafaei, et al., 2023); yet the resulting ‘something’ remains constrained by environmental factors. Provider F commented that those factors are “kind of the restraints in rural medicine that you won’t get other places because . . . they won’t go or they fall through the cracks.” At times, the rural “won’t go” is a function of rural resilience (Ballard-Reisch, 2010; Okamoto, 2020), but constraints remain (Bell et al., 2024). Care is compromised, as Provider B stated, “the standard of care is dramatic between rural and urban. . . . [local] infant mortality. . . . It’s the same as Bangladesh.” While such constraints go unrecognized by patients, providers are acutely aware and frustrated by administrative answers. As reassurance for rural practice, administrators offer comforting statements to providers like “Don’t worry. If anything bad happens, they’ll just helicopter them out” (Provider B). Provider B offered a narrative that defies administrative excuses:

I had 27-week twins… They needed to be in a NICU… I got both of them intubated . . . [they were] too little to breathe… so I was just holding their tubes in with my gloved hands . . . waiting for the helicopter to come. . . . Helicopter doesn’t [sic] fly in thunderstorms. So . . . we were waiting on ground transport… so it was hours and hours I had to keep the 27-week-old twins alive.

Certainly, value-laden premises (Barker, 1993) of health professions contribute to providers’ persistence working through barriers, but the power of concertive community expectations creates an additional layer of responsibility (Mumby & Stohl, 1991).

In response to RQ3, the theme of Nobody Else emerged. Provider B explained that she “sort of [feels] obligated to keep taking care of [her patients]”, because “there’s nobody else here, right?”. Due to rural communities’ demographic profile, there are additional barriers to care, including lack of public transportation and, more gravely, limited specialists. Provider D explained she has, “to act like whatever kind of specialist I was trying to refer to”. When describing rural primary care, Provider E stated that he is, “the specialist for everything until [he] can’t anymore”. This community and professional dependence prompted Provider H to spend nearly a decade working with a local initiative that provided uninsured individuals with care outside normal business hours. She was asked if she would, “be interested in helping in this clinic”, but the underlying question was, “would [she] be interested in staying till midnight” once a week. She chose to add this additional responsibility because her supervising physician “was pretty much doing that clinic by himself”.

These provider experiences illuminate the final stage of a community-based concertive control system. Whereas Barker (1993) described organizational workers creating a “communal value system that eventually controls their actions through rational rules” (p. 435), our co-researchers are immersed in pre-existing value systems that demand expertise, loyalty, and time. Their medical training provides connection to the Hippocratic Oath (Kopel, 2022); more demanding is one communicated through a communityderived concertive control apparatus where providers are trained and surveilled (Foucault, 1979) in what is expected of a rural provider. They are watching; the community creates Foucault's (1979) Threefold Disciplinary Apparatus: Hierarchical Observation, Normalizing Judgement, and Examination. The community provides surveillance from above (Hierarchical Observation), the individuality-focused rural culture works from an initial premise of equality to homogenize what is expected (Normalizing Judgment), and the community gaze is a ritual that normalizes the expectations of rural providers (Examination; see also Papa et al., 2006). The community expects the provider to be perpetually available, knowledgeable, and personal. While these expectations might be present in suburban and urban practice areas, they are magnified in the rural, because "there's nobody else here, right?" (Provider B).

Discussion

Much healthcare research highlights a limited scope of systemic problems plaguing rural areas, including a lack of funding, resources, and rural-focused medical training. Practicing medicine in rural communities can be rewarding-despite harsh working conditions. By shifting the focus from systemic problems persistent in rural healthcare to examining how identity with a rural community shapes rural physicians' experiences, proactive initiatives can be created to enhance rural healthcare. Identified struggles from these physicians' experience can be removed, because the underlying causes of stress in rural medicine can be understood more fully. The conditions expressed through provider interviews echo Grameen Bank fieldworker Antiquar Rahman's question – "How can I let down . . . the poor people we serve? (Papa et al., 1997, p. 231). The community identification (Burke, 1969) of rural providers interviewed is strong, as providers maintain "it is unreal the personal and professional fulfillment that you get from connecting with the community" (Provider H). The community functions much as Barker's organizationally located self-managed team (Barker, 1993; Barker & Cheney, 1994; Barker & Tompkins, 1994); the community exerts concertive control more exacting than a provider's professional standards or organizational responsibilities.

Conclusion and Limitations

With the continuing and increasing need to recruit healthcare providers to rural areas (see Bell et al., 2024; Nye Barton, 1982), current incentives need to be examined and improved. Loan repayment programs are becoming more accessible for providers who want to practice rural medicine (see Daniels et al., 2007; Gillette et al., 2022; Kaplan et al., 2020; Opoku et al., 2015; Watanabe-Galloway et al., 2015), but the absence of medical schools and residency programs in rural areas remains, although some have developed rural residency or post-graduate programs (Butler et al., 2021; Casapulla & Longenecker, 2023; McGrail et al., 2023). More medical schools and residency programs need to be located in rural areas, because the personal identification with rurality highlighted in this project is a powerful driving force for practicing rural medicine.

The limitations of this study include the location of participants, methodology, and focus on primary care. Because this study took place in North Carolina, the findings exemplify the lived experiences of rural providers in central North Carolina. Further studies can be conducted that look at rural providers in other regions, including the Great Plains, West, and Midwest. While qualitative methodology aligns with prior research on concertive control, it does not allow for generalizability. We did not interview specialized physicians, so further research could be done to examine how the experiences of rural specialists compare to primary-care providers.

Rural communities deserve access to healthcare equivalent to that which is available in suburban and urban settings. In attempts to improve rural healthcare availability and delivery, it must be acknowledged that concertive control functions to enculturate providers to stay and become part of the community – or they leave. This project extends the scope of concertive control, highlighting the presence of concertive control in rural medicine and explicating how identification and community dependence push providers to accept difficult working conditions. To loosely paraphrase a former NFL great, rural healthcare practice is not for soft people.

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Body image and advertising effectiveness: Examining Spokesperson Physical Attractiveness and Social Comparison

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Abstract
Utilizing the social comparison framework, the following study examines the impact of exposure to various levels of physically attractive advertising spokesmodels and the influence on consumer evaluation and perceived body image. A quasi-experimental design with 343 participants completed an online survey comparing exposure to a non-gendered product advertisement (e.g., breath strips) featuring a highly attractive spokesmodel, a moderately attractive spokesmodel, or no spokesmodel. Findings revealed that the condition featuring no spokesmodel was the most effective for consumer evaluation. Results also found that experimental conditions were not significantly related to negative body image. However, findings demonstrated that social comparison negatively correlated with body image. Findings contribute to social comparison literature and provide practical implications for advertising professionals.
Keywords: social comparison, body image, advertising effectiveness, spokesperson, physical attractiveness.

Physically attractive and thin spokesmodels are often used in advertisements because of their proven effectiveness in influencing consumer evaluation. Consumer evaluation can be conceptualized as the process of assessing attitudes and purchase intentions on specific products or services. Past studies have shown that utilizing physically attractive spokespersons in advertisements can positively impact consumer attitudes and intentions (Caballero & Pride, 1984; Saad, 2004; Trample et al., 2010). However, the majority of spokesmodels depicted in advertisements are physically dissimilar to average individuals. For example, the majority of fashion models are thinner than 98% of American women and approximately only 5% of individuals are able to attain a model-like body (Smolak, 1996). The vast difference in body type and physical attractiveness, and the impossibility of attainment between images used by advertisers and everyday individuals who are exposed to advertisements, may trigger physical appearance-related social comparison tendencies (Adomaitis & Johnson, 2007; Botta, 1999). For instance, individuals who make social comparisons to media images are more likely to endorse and hold onto idealized images (Botta, 1999).

The social comparison framework proposes that individuals compare themselves in an upward social comparison to ideal media images depicting the "beauty ideal," which may lead to body image dissatisfaction (Bessenoff, 2006). Engeln-Maddox (2006) found that individuals believed that achieving media's depiction of physical attractiveness resulted in positive characteristics (i.e., more socially competent or successful). Thus, the inability to achieve an ideal physical attractiveness from images depicted in advertisements increases one's susceptibility to body dissatisfaction. A common method for beauty enhancement and decreasing dissatisfaction with one's physical appearance is the use of cosmetic products. According to Statista (2025), in 2023, the cosmetic industry revenue in the US was approximately 19.4 billion dollars. Gen Z reported spending over $2000 annually on beauty products and indicated a willingness to cut back on other expenses for beauty items (Statista, 2025). While studies have heavily examined the implications of advertising using primarily physically attractive spokesmodels, there is a paucity of research on the implications of advertising with spokesmodels who depict a more representative appearance that a majority of individuals can relate to. Thus, the following study examines the impact of exposure to advertisements featuring varying levels of physically attractive spokesmodels on consumer evaluation and perceived negative body image.

Literature Review

Social Comparison and Body Image

Several studies have examined the relationship between physical appearance and media images utilizing the social comparison framework (e.g., Botta, 1999; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2011; Kharkwal et al., 2025; Pan & Pena, 2020). The social comparison framework proposes that mental comparisons are driven by the need for self-evaluation and determination of standing in life (Festinger, 1954). Festinger (1954) conceptualizes upward social comparisons as making comparisons with someone believed to be better off whereas downward social comparisons refer to making comparisons with someone believed to be worse off. Research has found that individuals exposed to media images of attractive spokesmodels tend to make upward social comparisons (e.g., Buunk & Disjkstra, 2011; Dietrichs & Lee, 2010; Leahey et al., 2007). In addition, Richins (1991) found that individuals who were exposed to physically attractive spokesmodels would increase their perceptions of what constitutes physical attractiveness, thus rating average individuals as less attractive.

The social comparison framework has been widely used in advertising research to examine consumer attitudes and behaviors (Blomquist et al., 2020; Bourcier-Bequaert et al., 2021; Hogg & Fragou, 2003; Jung & Heo, 2020). In a study examining body size portrayals in advertising, Jung and Heo (2020) reported social comparison tendencies moderated the relationship between exposure to advertising spokesmodels and consumer evaluation such that those exposed to the physically heavier advertising spokesmodels (versus thinner or normal body sized spokesmodels) were more likely to report favorable attitudes toward the advertisement if they had downward-comparison tendencies. Similarly, Buunk and Dijkstra (2011) found moderating effects for social comparison when comparing consumer evaluation from exposure to a physically attractive (as opposed to a moderately attractive) spokesmodel. Therefore, social comparison tendencies can emerge when exposed to advertisement images, which can impact consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions.

In a study examining various sized spokesmodels, Kharkwal et al. (2025) found that women exposed to gym ads featuring thin-sized spokesmodels regardless of slogan type exhibited higher levels of appearance comparison and lower body satisfaction when compared to those exposed to Instagram gym ads featuring plus-sized models, suggesting the support of social comparison theory. Similarly, Pan and Pena (2020) found that men indicated lower appearance esteem after exposure to photos depicting attractive and higher weight male models. Thus, research has found gender differences in social comparison tendency with females reporting more social comparison tendencies from media exposure (Harrison, 2002; Sohn, 2009). The following hypothesis is posited:

- **H1:** Female participants will report higher social comparison perceptions than males.

Body Image and Advertising Spokesmodels

Social comparison resulting from advertising exposure and mass media can influence one's body image. Research has found that negative body image perceptions can emerge as a result of an upward social comparison to individuals who are deemed to be more attractive (Leahey et al., 2008). Body image can be conceptualized as an individual's attitude (e.g., positive satisfaction or negative satisfaction) towards his or her body through personal evaluations, with a particular focus on its size, shape, and attractiveness (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990). For example, individuals who are exposed to fashion spokesmodels in the media may perceive fashion spokesmodels to embody the idea of what constitutes beauty and inadvertently compare their own physical appearance to those who appear to be more physically attractive.

Past research on exposure to media images and the impact on negative body image have examined the implications of body image on an individual's mood upon exposure to physically attractive spokesmodels (Jung, 2006), the mitigating effects of interventions and body dissatisfaction (Quigg & Want, 2011), and the negative effects of images depicted in music videos and body image (Tiggemann & Slater, 2003). In the context of advertising, Adomaitis and Johnson (2007) found that while female body image was generally negatively affected by idealized media images, when an average-sized model was depicted as actively promoting a product, females criticized the average-sized model's inability to obtain the ideal body type. In summary, previous studies have demonstrated the relationship between perceived negative body image and exposure to idealized media images. Thus, exposure to advertisements featuring physically attractive spokesmodels could predict higher negative body image perceptions. The following hypothesis is proposed:

- **H2:** Exposure to the highly attractive spokesmodel advertisement, compared to the moderately attractive spokesmodel advertisement and no spokesmodel advertisement, is positively related to higher negative body image perceptions.

Several studies have examined the positive impact of using physically attractive spokespersons on consumer attitudes and behaviors (Buunk & Dijkstra, 1991; Leng et al., 2024; Onu et al., 2019). For instance, Buunk and Dijkstra (1991) found that attitudes toward the advertised product was positively related to exposure to the highly attractive, as opposed to the moderately attractive, spokesperson. Likewise, Onu et al. (2019) noted a positive relationship between levels of physical attractiveness in advertising spokespersons and consumer evaluation. In a study on planned behavior for weight loss, Pan and Pena (2024) found that exposure to photos of more attractive spokesmodels indicated higher planned behaviors to lose weight compared to those who saw less attractive spokesmodels. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed regarding consumer evaluation:

- **H3:** Exposure to the highly attractive spokesmodel advertisement, compared to the moderately attractive spokesmodel advertisement and no spokesmodel advertisement, is positively related to higher consumer evaluation.

Methods

Upon institutional review board (IRB) approval, participants were recruited from introductory level communication courses at a large northeastern university. Extra credit was given to participants in exchange for survey completion. A total of 343 students completed the quasi-experimental study. The sample consisted of 42.9% male participants and 57.1% female participants. Of all participants, 76.0% were Caucasian, 12.4% were Asian, 5.5% were Hispanic, 3.7% were African American, 1.2% were Pacific Islander, .9% were American Indian, and 1.4% reported other.

Ad Stimuli and Procedure
In the quasi experimental design, participants were randomly assigned to one of three exposure conditions with female spokesmodels promoting a gender-neutral product (e.g., breath strips). Three ads were created using the same advertisement background and product (See supplement materials). The first ad featured a female spokesmodel with heavy makeup (e.g., highly attractive condition). The second ad featured the same female spokesmodel but with minimal makeup (e.g., moderately attractive condition). Both ads featured a close up of the female spokesperson's face against a blue background with the Fresh breath strips displayed prominently in the front. The third ad only featured the blue background with the Fresh breath strips.

Participants first answered demographic questions followed by questions regarding social comparison. Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. After a 60-second exposure, participants were asked questions on consumer attitudes and perceived body image. Participants were also asked to measure the perceived attractiveness of the spokesmodels in the assigned conditions of highly attractive spokesmodel, moderately attractive spokesmodel, and no spokesmodel exposure. This item was used as a manipulation check on the physical appearance of the spokesmodel type used to promote the product. An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), controlling for gender, was conducted to assess spokesperson physical attractiveness. Results indicated that the main effect for the experimental conditions was significant, $F(2, 339) = 993.05$, $p < .001$. A post-hoc test using the LSD procedure indicated that participants in the attractive spokesmodel condition rated the spokesmodel ($M = 2.85$) higher in physical attractiveness than participants in the moderately attractive spokesmodel condition ($M = 2.39$).

Measures

The Physical Appearance Comparison Scale (PACS).
Social comparison consists of an individual's tendency to compare his/her own appearance to the appearances of others. Adapted from Thompson et al., (1991), five items using a 5-point likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always) were used to access the appearance-related social comparison tendencies as it pertains to exposure to spokesmodels promoting products. Items include: "When looking at magazine ads, I compare my physical appearance to the physical appearances of spokesmodels," "The best way for a person to know if they are overweight or underweight is to compare their figure to models," "When looking at magazines, I compare how I am dressed to how the models are dressed," "Comparing your "looks" to the "looks" of models in magazines is a bad way to determine if you are attractive or unattractive," and "I sometimes compare my figure to the figures found in magazine advertisements" ($\alpha = .81$, $M = 2.75$, $SD = .75$).

Body Image Scale
A set of items adapted from Cash et al. (2002) was used to assess attitudes toward body image. Participants were asked six items using a 5-point likert-type scale ranging from 1 (extremely dissatisfied/extremely physically unattractive/a great deal worse) to 5 (extremely satisfied/extremely physically attractive/a great deal better) on their attitude towards their current body image: "Right now I feel… with my physical appearance," ("extremely dissatisfied – extremely satisfied"); "Right now I feel…with my body size and shape," ("extremely dissatisfied – extremely satisfied"); "Right now I feel…with my weight," ("extremely dissatisfied – extremely satisfied"); "Right now I feel…physically attractive," ("extremely physically attractive – extremely physically unattractive"); "Right now I feel…about my looks than I usually feel," ("a great deal worse – a great deal better"); and "Right now I feel that I look…than the average person looks," ("a great deal better – a great deal worse") ($\alpha = .84$, $M = 2.87$, $SD = .51$).

Consumer Evaluation
Consumer evaluation measures attitudes toward the ad and purchase intentions. A two-item scale adapted from Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) was measured on a four-point scale. Sample items include: "How would you describe your reaction to the ad" ("unfavorable – favorable") and "How likely are you to purchase this on your next shopping trip?" ("unlikely – very likely"). These items were merged to create a composite variable (Inter-item correlation = .52, $M = 2.25$, $SD = .64$).

Results

A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between body image and social comparison. A negative correlation that was statistically significant was found, $r(337) = -.319$, $p = .000$. H1 explored whether female participants would report higher social comparison perceptions than males. An independent t-test was conducted and found that females ($M = 3.02$, $SD = .70$) reported significantly higher social comparison scores than males ($M = 2.40$, $SD = .68$), $t(332) = 8.162$, $p < .000$. Thus, H1 is supported.

To examine H2, a one-way analysis of variances (ANOVA) was calculated to examine whether participants who viewed the print advertisement with the highly attractive spokesmodel will have significantly higher negative body image when compared to participants who viewed the less attractive spokesmodel condition and no model condition. The experimental conditions were not significantly related to negative body image, ($F(2,334) = .365$, $p = .694$, $n^2 = 0.002$).

To test H3, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), controlling for gender, was conducted to examine the mean differences between experimental conditions and consumer evaluation. Results demonstrated that the main effects for experimental condition ($F(2, 321) = 26.82$, $p < .000$, $n^2 = 0.142$) was statistically significant. Post-hoc comparisons using Bonferroni correction to identify which specific group means differed significantly found that participants who viewed the advertisement with no spokesmodel ($M = 2.59$, $SD = .51$) had significantly higher consumer attitudes than those who viewed the advertisement with the physically attractive spokesmodel ($M = 2.08$, $SD = .60$) and those who viewed the average spokesmodel ($M = 2.12$, $SD = .62$). However, consumer attitudes did not differ significantly ($p = .56$) between those who viewed the advertisement with the physically attractive spokesmodel and those who viewed the advertisement with the average spokesmodel. Thus, H3 is not supported.

Discussion

Utilizing the social comparison framework, this study examined how various levels of physically attractive spokesmodels could impact consumer evaluation and body image perceptions. Surprisingly, the advertisement featuring no spokesperson was the most effective in positively impacting consumer attitudes and intentions to purchase a non-gendered product (e.g., breath strips). Findings are consistent with research from Blomquist et al. (2020) who found that food advertisements featuring no spokesmodels (versus advertisements with a spokesmodel) resulted in greater purchase intentions. Blomquist et al. (2020) suggested that the possibility of social comparison tendencies from exposure to advertising spokesmodels could led to perceptions of body image dissatisfaction, which may negatively influence consumer attitudes and intentions. This suggests that the marketing of gender-neutral products may not benefit from the use of advertising spokespersons, regardless of the level of physical attractiveness, due to the risk of social comparison tendencies.

Results also indicated that no significant difference emerged between the highly attractive spokesmodel and the moderately attractive spokesmodel on consumer evaluation. A possible explanation for the lack of significance with the varying levels of physically attractive spokesmodels could be that the highly attractive spokesmodel, manipulated with the use of heavier make-up, could have been perceived as an untrustworthy or unlikeable source. For example, source credibility research from Mittal and Silvera (2019) found that the overuse of makeup on a spokesperson negatively impacted perceived trustworthiness from both men and women while a natural-looking appearance was the most effective for consumer evaluation (Mittal & Silvera, 2019).

Similar findings from Smith et al. (2022) noted that participants were more willing to buy beauty products with natural (vs. beautiful) looking advertising messaging. These findings could be an artifact in the popularity of the no-makeup movement in cosmetic sales on social media (Smith et al., 2022). For instance Unilever's The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty launched in attempt to redefine the concept of beauty by showcasing females of all body types without makeup or computer modifications. Quigg and Watt (2011) found that The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty reduced body dissatisfaction in individuals exposed to music videos depicting the thin ideal. Findings provide practical implications for marketing professionals by suggesting that advertisements featuring more natural-looking spokesmodels could positively impact consumer evaluation and non-gendered products may be more effective without spokesmodels.

This study also explored perceived body image perceptions from exposure to varying levels of physically attractive spokesperson advertisements. Results indicated no significant differences in body image perceptions when exposed to the experimental conditions. Hogg and Fragou (2003) explain that advertising images could prompt social comparison tendencies based on one's social comparison goals (i.e., self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement). Therefore, the lack of significant findings on body image could be that the non-gendered product (e.g., breath strips) used in the advertisement did not induce any social comparison goals. Because the non-gendered product may not need physical beauty to market to consumers, participants may not have considered the attractiveness of the spokesmodel compared to themselves, thus their body image perceptions were not negatively impacted. For instance, Jung and Ho (2020) found that when individuals reported no or low comparison tendencies, the body size of advertising spokesmodels did not significantly relate to consumer evaluation.

Social comparison studies suggest that individuals tend to socially compare due to the amount of success by comparing their results to individuals around them (Engeln-Maddox, 2006; Myers, & Crowther, 2009). Nonetheless, perceived negative body image impacted by media depictions of physically attractive spokespersons remain important. According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (2024), approximately 28 million Americans may experience an eating disorder in their lifetime. Approximately 80 percent of females have expressed dissatisfaction with their physical appearance (Ross, 2012). Our study findings indicated that female participants reported higher social comparison tendencies than their male counterparts. Results align with past research that also noted gender differences in social comparison tendencies (Harrison, 2000; Sohn, 2009). Findings contribute to social comparison literature by extending support that gender differences exists between males and females, suggesting the need to further include gender as an important variable in social comparison research.

Prior work suggest that negative body image perceptions is a result of individuals who socially compare themselves to others (Botta, 1999; Tiggemann, & Slater, 2004). While exposure to experimental conditions from this study did not result in significant differences in perceptions of negative body image, results did show that social comparison and body image were negatively correlated such that higher social comparison was related to negative body image perceptions.

Findings from this study support past research demonstrating that individuals who socially compare themselves to the unattainable beauty ideal such as media depictions of celebrities and spokesmodels appear to increase their likelihood of having higher body dissatisfaction.

Conclusion

Several limitations exist for the current study. The manipulation of spokesmodel physical attractiveness could be strengthened for future studies. For instance, heavy make-up and no make-up in each of the spokesmodel conditions was the only indicator of physical attractiveness and thus, cannot be used to generalize physical attractiveness. Additional indicators of physical attractive, such as a svelte body, were not seen on the spokesmodel because the advertisement only showed a profile picture. As previous literature has indicated, the ideal beauty constitutes both physical and body appearance. While participants could presume the spokesmodel to have a svelte figure since comparisons can be made from facial features, a full body spokesmodel in the advertisements could increase the strength of the manipulation and be more indicative of purchasing intentions and body image perceptions. Additionally, the study utilized convenience sampling and promoted a non-gendered and low-involvement product (e.g., breath strips), thus generalizability of study findings is limited.

Body Mass Index (BMI) was also measured by providing participants with a chart and by asking participants to self-report their own BMI. However, several participants were unable to self-report their BMI from the provided chart. In the future, self-reported height and weight could be asked and calculated for participant BMI. Thus, the measurement of BMI, which could be a moderator for social comparison and body image, could not be analyzed.

Another limitation is that the study examined print advertisements, which may be an outdated form of consumer advertisement among the college population. Participants indicated that they did not read a lot of magazines and perhaps do not look at print ads. Future studies could examine digital advertisements shown on social media platforms or the effectiveness of social media influencers, which could increase the strength of the manipulation of physical beauty. If participants were more engaged with spokesmodels or influencers through various social media platforms, they could be more invested in their attitudes regarding the advertisements.

Future research could also examine popular gendered products among young adults to get further understanding of their attitudes in regards to physical beauty as a tool for persuasive marketing. In addition, types of physical beauty can be explored such as the use of traditional beauty, sexy beauty, or exaggerated beauty. In doing so, research could contribute to help marketers effectively target consumers of this demographic.

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Photovoice Reflections on Female Sexual and Reproductive Health Resources and Education in Ghana

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Abstract
In Ghana, young women face a difficulty in accessing sexual and reproductive health resources and education. This presents a major health problem for the country leading to general negative health effects, such as the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases, complications with fertility, among others. This paper uses photovoice as a community-based research methodology to understand the perspectives of young women in accessing sexual and reproductive health resources and education. The participants of this study took photos of resources that represented a challenge or an opportunity for them, in terms of access to female sexual and reproductive health resources and education. Focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, where their photos were discussed, in relation to the objectives for the research. The findings revealed themes such as economic factors, stigma, gender disparities, and insufficient education. The study concludes by providing recommendations for policy reformulation and implementation on issues of sexual and reproductive health resources and education.
Keywords: Female sexual and reproductive health, Photovoice, Gender, Ghana.

Negative health effects such as the contraction of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) result from inadequate understanding about sexual and reproductive health (Guan, 2021). Access to knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and services was recognized as a fundamental human right at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (Agyire-Tettey et al., 2019). Adequate provision of reproductive health care services is crucial because it impacts not only widely acknowledged human rights but also individual and economic growth (Ogundele et al., 2018).

Concern over youth reproductive health has increased because of data showing a steady rise in the prevalence of STDs, early pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections among young adults in developing countries (Dapaah et al., 2016). Since young people, who are between the ages 10 to 25 (Edwards et al., 2022) consistently have higher rates of STIs and unsafe sexual behavior than other age groups, they continue to be a priority for sexual and reproductive health issues (Dapaah et al., 2016). Without the knowledge, or services to support a healthy sexual and reproductive life, young people worldwide have had to make their way to sexual maturity without proper education and guidance (Dapaah et al., 2016).

Young adulthood is a crucial stage for physical and mental development, with long-term consequences. Access to comprehensive reproductive health services is crucial for young people's safe and healthy sexual and reproductive lives. However, many struggle to obtain and utilize these resources (Grindlay et al., 2018). Young people in developing countries, where there are few or no adolescent health care services, have significant obstacles in receiving reproductive health services. One of these countries is Ghana.

Laar et al. (2024) report that Ghana is one of several low- and middle-income nations where young people's sexual and reproductive health needs are unfulfilled. There is a disconnect between the responses of present traditional sexual reproductive health interventions and the informational demands of young people in rural areas. Laar et al. (2024) describe that barriers to traditional sexual and reproductive health services still exist in Ghana, despite multiple government initiatives to guarantee widespread access to sexual and reproductive health information and services.

Sexual and reproductive health is essential to women's empowerment and encourages their full participation in profitable economic endeavors. However, Agyire-Tettey et al. (2019) argue that access to and usage of sexual and reproductive health services are hampered for women and adolescents in Ghana. Existing literature from different parts of the world focus on women and adolescent sexual health needs, including contraceptive use and family planning methods, like the studies of Belda et al. (2017), Rahimi-Naghani et al. (2016) and Dapaah et al. (2016). The absence of social science studies examining the lived experience of women's sexual and reproductive health resource access and use in Ghana calls for research that expands knowledge on this subject. Responding to this need, this study presents a photovoice project focusing on barriers and pathways that eight young Ghanaian women encounter regarding sexual and reproductive health education and resources in Ghana.

Literature Review

Reproductive health education encompasses information and counseling on sexual and reproductive health issues, as well as promotion of healthy sexual behavior, family planning information, condom promotion and provision, testing and counseling for pregnancy, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections, STI management, among others (Nyarko, 2022). Owusu et al. (2011) report that reproductive health aims to promote responsible and safe sexual behavior, including the ability to reproduce and choose when and how often to do so. Reproductive health education, thus, is critical for ensuring safe sexual behaviors, particularly among teenagers who are more sexually active during puberty. Reproductive health education promotes national development and reduces illness burden by educating young people about sexuality and related issues (Nyarko, 2022).

Since 1994, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) has recognized the unique needs of young people in terms of sexual and reproductive health. Numerous programs, activities, and research studies have addressed these issues. Despite two decades of the ICPD, young people, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, still have poor adoption rates of services (Abubakari et al., 2020). In Ghana, students at the basic level are taught about sexual and reproductive health, including STIs, HIV/AIDS, teen pregnancy, unsafe abortions, and abstaining from sexual activities (Owusu et al., 2011). Berhe et al. (2024) report that Ghana has policies for adolescent health, including adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH), however they confront substantial implementation issues. Financial resources are limited and unduly reliant on external funding, and ASRH is poorly coordinated with other elements of the health system. ASRH is taught in schools as part of Ghana's Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) syllabus, overseen by the Ghana Health Service (GHS) and Ghana Education Services (GES), but it faces challenges due to insufficient teacher training, resulting in poor implementation and inconsistent messaging. Contraceptive awareness among unmarried teenagers is high, however there is a considerable gap between knowledge and use among sexually active unmarried females aged 15 to 24. Misinformation and misunderstandings regarding side effects, as well as cultural and religious beliefs, are all factors contributing to non- use of these contraceptives.

Berhe et al. (2024) add that Ghana also has poor access to contraception, with just 38% of single adolescent females receiving family planning services, and an estimated 25% of unsafe abortions occurring among girls aged 15 to 19. Furthermore, roughly 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 gave birth in 2019, with 2.5 million under the age of 16. Many teens have insufficient understanding about safe abortion services. It was discovered that 13 of every 15 abortions observed were unsafe among 30 previously pregnant 13–19-year-olds in a slum in Accra.

Klu et al. (2023) state that misconceptions and ignorance about sexuality, fertility, and contraception persist in Ghana. Adolescents and young people are typically unaware of their sexual rights and available options. The lack of knowledge and information about adolescents' perceptions of their SRH rights, as well as their actual acquisition and use of services, exacerbates the situation. Young people in Ghana have had limited access to adequate health information over time. They face challenges such as adverse attitudes from healthcare practitioners, inadequate facilities, financial restraints, and lack of parental support. These factors influence their perceptions of health care and hinder their use (Klu et al., 2023).

The literature shows that there is a lack of education and access to sexual and reproductive health in Ghana, particularly among adolescents and young people, which could be caused by a variety of factors, including stigma, inaccessible health facilities, and insufficient communication among parents and children, healthcare providers and patients on the issue. This study, therefore, employs photovoice as a method to explore sexual and reproductive health from the perspectives of young women in Accra, Ghana.

Methodology

Study Design

This study is qualitative and implements photovoice as a community-based participatory research approach. Wang and Burris (1997) state that photovoice is a participatory strategy employing images and narrative storytelling to depict social injustices and inequality in society. This is a study approach in which research participants take photographs and interpret them to bring about improvements in their communities. The photovoice approach allows researchers and co-researchers or participants to visually depict events and offer personal knowledge about situations that may be difficult to communicate with words alone. This photovoice project, thus, sought to discuss the barriers and pathways that pertain to the accessibility of Ghanaian women to sexual and reproductive health education and resources.

Site and Participants

The site for this project was virtual, on Microsoft Teams, since we were not in the same physical location as the participants. Relying on our connections from Ghana, we conveniently sampled eight young women. This recruitment was done by speaking to our friend groups about the research and asking them if they could be a part of the study. Golzar et al. (2022) indicate that convenience sampling describes the data collection procedure that allows the researcher to access a population that is easily reachable for a study. The researchers utilized convenient sampling because at the time of the research, we were living in the US and wanted to capture the experiences of young women who were living in Ghana at the time. It was also convenient since all the participants lived in Ghana's capital and so were able to access the internet and get on calls via Microsoft Teams. While this proved a suitable sampling technique for the researchers, we recognize that this sampling technique presents the limitation of our inability to generalize the findings of the study.

This virtual community was made up of young Ghanaian women between the ages of 21 and 30. Participants' education ranges from undergraduate to master's degree completion. The literacy rate of this community is key to establishing the fact that they have access to sexual and reproductive health and education, as they may have come across it during their time in school. The participants of the study were tasked with taking pictures that reflected an aspect of sexual and reproductive health. After the pictures were taken, we engaged the participants in individual and focus group interviews. The researchers employed semi-structured interviews for the collection of narratives about the images captured. Alsaawi (2014) explains semi-structured interviews as a combination of pre-planned questions with open-ended questions, enabling the interviewee to elaborate on specific topics.

Procedure

After successful recruitment for the study, participants completed the consent process. An introductory meeting, in the form of a training workshop, was conducted to brief participants about the nature of the study and key terms that were important to the study and ethics in research. We, together with the participants, determined the objectives for the study and the questions guiding our interpretation of the photos.

Participants were asked to use the cameras on their smartphones to take pictures of aspects of their lives that reflected a pathway or barrier in accessing sexual and reproductive health resources and education. Participants were tasked with taking a minimum of two photos and a maximum of five photos over the course of three weeks for the project. Weekly meetings were held with individual participants during the data collection period to discuss their images. Participants additionally recorded their reflections in the form of audio notes, which were discussed in the meetings.

The participants shared ideas and images on a private platform site that required protected passcodes for access. The decision to use this platform was made by the participants who expressed that this platform was simple and accessible as a site for communication. Participants were given a period of three weeks to take a set of pictures, out of which they were to select their favorite three pictures which related to the study topic. Three meetings were held with participants on Microsoft Teams in which participants made interpretations of the photos shared.

The researchers facilitated semi-structured interviews about the images and probed participants about the pictures they had taken and how they related to pathways and barriers in accessing sexual and reproductive health resources and education. An interview guide, popularly referred to as the SHOWED method (Wang and Burris, 1997), consisting of six questions, served as a basic set of prompts for us. The six questions in this interview guide are as follows:

1. What do you see in this photo?
2. What is happening here?
3. How does this picture relate to our lives, especially in terms of accessing sexual and reproductive health resources and education?
4. Why does the situation exist?
5. What can we do about the situation?
6. What can we do to address these issues?

We added an additional question to the interview guide, which was "How do you feel about the picture?" Throughout the discussions, participants made submissions that necessitated follow-up questions. Interview meetings consisted of a blend of focus group interviews and individual interviews, all lasting less than one hour in length.

Ethics

Some ethical considerations for this study were adopted from Laar et al. (2024). These considerations included the emphasis of the voluntary nature of involvement, the recording and transcription, and the guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality of their data. Every participant gave their consent. An additional responsibility of these participants included seeking the approval of other people they photographed. Photographs clearly depicting individuals were not used for any part of this study. Participants were not identified by their names or any forms of identifiers throughout the reporting of findings for the study.

Data Analysis

The data for the study was thematically analyzed. The interviews were transcribed using the feature that comes with Microsoft Teams that allows for audio transcription. Cleaning and correcting imperfect transcriptions were the first phase of preparation for analysis. Next, the researchers read the raw data multiple times and identified codes that would later be developed into themes. Following reflection on the participants' own words, phrases, and experiences, the codes were inductively categorized into themes that related to the research issue. To find meanings and connections between the themes, the themes were examined in more detail in the last phase of analysis.

Data Analysis Process

The study adopted the thematic analysis steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data analysis followed a thematic approach, allowing for identifying and interpreting patterns and themes within the collected data. An inductive approach ensured that the themes emerged directly from the data. The data were analyzed based on the study's objectives.

We carefully read through the transcribed data to find meaningful patterns related to our research questions. After reading the transcribed data multiple times, we individually color-coded similar narratives from the participants, which we later developed into codes. These codes accurately represented the data that we collected and answered our research questions. After developing the codes, we employed intercoder reliability where we read through each other's code sheets and the data again, to check for consistency in the codes that we each generated and to compare our codes to generate themes that would help us answer our research questions. After this, we reviewed all the codes to ensure coherence and consistency with the raw data. At this stage, the themes were named and described to ensure that they could be understood. Finally, the themes were analyzed and discussed in the context of the research.

Results and Interpretations

This section presents the findings from the data collected for the study. They are discussed under the following themes: variety of resources, economic factors, stigma, gender disparities and insufficient education.

Variety of resources

Contraceptives, menstrual pads, tampons, menstrual cups, reusable pads, pain relief medicines, heating and cooling pads, hot water bottles were some of the materials that participants took photos of. In the discussion, it was revealed that participants had fair access to a number of these items. They agreed that with contraceptives, especially emergency contraceptive pills, the variety that was available to them in the pharmacies was an indication that they had some control over preventing unwanted pregnancies and protecting themselves in that regard. One participant said, "In the pharmacy, there are a lot of pills for sale. It means that in the event of you having unprotected sex, you know that there are pharmacies that will have these to help you prevent getting pregnant." From their responses, it was evident that the easy access to emergency contraceptive pills were a relief to the participants, who described the availability of contraceptive pills as a step in the right direction with regards to easily accessible birth control methods.

Menstrual pads, which was an item that the participants easily identified, also showed that their menstrual needs were well taken care of. One participant explained that the varied lengths and thickness that existed in the market catered for the varied bleeding patterns of women. The number of pads, and the waste bag usually included in one of the brands of pads was also helpful, in the sense that it was easy to carry a pad in their bag in times of emergencies.

Tampons and menstrual cups, which are not common in the Ghanaian market, was brought up in the discussion of the photos. One participant, who was in Europe at the time of this project, identified the use of tampons and menstrual cups as a pathway, and as a barrier. She stated that, she only got to experience the use of tampons and menstrual cups when she travelled to Europe. The inability of the Ghanaian participants to have access to these items posed a barrier, because according to another participant, tampons and menstrual cups reduce the occurrence of rashes that happen with the use of menstrual pads.

It was a common experience for participants that the cramps they experienced during their menstruation caused so much pain, and so they often used pain relief medications. These pain reliefs came in the form of pain killers, heating and cooling pads, hot water bottles, and herbs. Participants were familiar with the different pain killers that were available, and they individually attested to using several of them. One participant took a photo of herbs that they had in their backyard garden that they brewed into tea and drank as a pain relief.

Most of the other participants did not know about this herb, so there was some education on the herb. From the discussions, participants agreed that this too would prove beneficial to women across the country because it reduced the cost involved in obtaining different pain reliefs for the cramps they feel during their periods.

These findings confirm the evidence by Klu et al. (2023) and Nyarko (2022) who state that young people with formal education understand sexual and reproductive health from a variety of viewpoints, and that higher education levels are associated with increasing utilization of sexual and reproductive health services.

Economic Factors

The cost of contraceptive pills and sanitary pads came up in an interview with one of the participants. According to a participant, the prices of some emergency contraceptive pills were high, and this could be discouraging for young women who need access to this resource. She explained that emergency contraceptive pills were a painless substitute, as opposed to other birth control methods. This makes it quite easy to obtain them. The participant also stated that the high price of menstrual pads was a serious problem, and it could be attributed to the inability of the government to make sanitary pads easily accessible to young women.

When asked why she took the picture, she said, "The pads are so expensive! How do they expect young girls like us to be able to afford these every month?" She stated that the prices of sanitary pads had increased by almost 300% in the last five years, which made access to these sanitary pads a matter of luxury rather than necessity. She also attributed the hike in price to the exorbitant taxes that have been imposed on sanitary pads. She also stated that given the economic issues plaguing the country, the high cost of sanitary pads could deter young girls who are unable to cater for themselves from accessing this basic reproductive health resource. She stressed that the use of sanitary pads was a healthcare issue and should be treated as such.

Stigma

While stigma was not explicitly discussed because of the photos that were shared, we realized that some form of stigma was at play in the interactions with the participants. In the discussion of contraceptive pills, one of the researchers asked the participants if there was anyone who had some experience with using either contraceptive pills or female condoms. There was no answer from anyone in the group. However, in the individual interviews, some participants mentioned that they had used contraceptive pills before, for sexual purposes as well as for hormonal balancing. In another interview with another participant, she stated that, the silence that accompanied the researcher's question in the focus group discussion could be attributed to the general hush culture associated with topics of sexual and reproductive health in Ghana. It is common in Ghana that young women do not speak about their sexual and reproductive health because they do not want to be perceived as immoral. So, although young women may be sexually active, there is the tendency to be quiet about sharing their experiences and concerns with other people.

This is in tandem with Berhe et al. (2024), who assert that one major challenge in the Ghanaian society concerning reproductive and sexual health is, discussing sex is frequently frowned upon, making it extremely difficult for young people to openly address sexual and reproductive health difficulties with parents or other members of the community. As a result, young people are hesitant to seek guidance or obtain contraception, which raises the risk of unsafe sex, STIs, unwanted pregnancies, and abortions. Abubakari et al. (2020) also report that the stigma associated with sexuality can hinder young people from accessing necessary information and sexual and reproductive health services. Young women face stigma when seeking family planning services and taking contraception, leading to feelings of fear, shame, and embarrassment.

Gender Disparities

Some participants shared photos of a variety of brands of male condoms at pharmacies they frequently visited anytime they needed to purchase sanitary items, or medicines. One participant, when asked about her photos, said, "Men have so many options, and women have really little, and it's funny because the few options that women have can alter their hormones and stuff like that, while men have to experience nothing like that. The gender disparity is huge."

In another photo a participant shared an advertisement of female condoms. The advertisement of female condoms came as a shock to another participant. According to her, she had almost forgotten that female condoms existed, since they were not as talked about as male condoms. She went on to state that, female condoms were not as common because the design of the condoms made it uncomfortable for women to use during sex. She went on to say that "…it's like there are more options for the men than there are for women."

Another participant explained that the only way to prevent transmission of STIs was using condoms. Female condoms were hard to come by and uncomfortable for women to use, but male partners get to wear condoms. This then creates a power dynamic where women are left powerless, since they cannot protect themselves, and men, powerful, since it is their call to prevent the transmission of STIs during sex.

Insufficient Education

One of the participants, who is a health worker, took photos of drugs that she described as being used for either sexual or reproductive purposes. In the ensuing conversation, she explained that sometimes, women had no idea of their cycles, and any anomalies associated with them. She explained that until they came to the hospital or the pharmacy, they did not know that their cycles were irregular. She further stated that literate women were the ones who have some idea of their cycles and whether they were normal or not, as well as women who have access to the internet.

She stated that, "…because in the society we find ourselves in, people aren't really educated, right? So let me just say that few women see a doctor and then get informed about what's happening to them and then seek or look for drugs to help with their condition." The participant further stated that knowledge on menstrual cycles and everything else associated with it should be taught in basic schools. The rationale was that, since some young girls start menstruating before they get to high school, education on menstrual cycles should be incorporated into the basic school's curriculum.

The participant also mentioned the myths that surrounded some reproductive health conditions such as fibrosis. The common myth was that the growths can be dissolved with hot water bottles. The participant related the spread of this myth to insufficient education on the condition, stating that these myths prevent women from seeking out accurate information about their reproductive and sexual health. Another participant decided to visit a sexual and reproductive healthcare facility to seek for information about birth control methods. According to her, when she got to the facility, she was denied the chance to ask the healthcare providers any questions.

This confirms the assertion of Abubakari et al. (2020) who, in their study, found that some sexual and reproductive health treatment providers lacked empathy for young people presenting with sexual and reproductive health problems at their institutions.

Communication Implications of Findings

Photovoice is a part of the broader community-based approaches to research; it contributes to the field of communication by centering the voices of the participants and making them an integral part of the research. This bottom-up approach counters the conventional top- down approach to health communication that often marginalizes communities in discursive spaces. By placing these young women at the center of the research, we highlight their voices and their experiences with their own pictures and words. In a society where women are not given autonomy over their voices, this study opens conversations on how women can take back the power of their voices especially in matters that relate to their reproductive and sexual health.

Photos tell a complex, multifaceted story that words sometimes do not. In sensitive situations like this topic, words may not be enough to express lived experiences and so conducting this study, with photovoice as a method, presented several communication opportunities, beyond words, that expand the field of communication.

Little research exists on using photovoice as a method to study pathways and barriers in women's access to reproductive and sexual health resources and education in Ghana. This study, thus, seeks to contribute to expanding the existing body of literature on health communication, health literacy, and the broader field of communication.

Conclusion

This study explored female sexual and reproductive health resources and education in Ghana. Using photovoice as a method, the perspectives of eight Ghanaian women were gathered for the study. Findings from the study showed that young women had access to some resources that were needed for their day-to-day sexual and reproductive health needs such as sanitary pads, emergency contraceptive pills, among others. Even though Ghana has had improvements in the matter of providing sexual and reproductive health resources and education in years past, the data shows that more work needed to be done. This can be done by making health facilities and health care providers easily accessible and reducing the taxes imposed on items such as sanitary pads. The current tax percentage on menstrual pads, which is 32%, is exorbitant and makes a basic reproductive health resource inaccessible for young women all over the country. We call for a reformation on the policy of taxation on menstrual resources, where the current tax percentage should be highly subsidized. The study also concludes that there should be an urgent implementation of the comprehensive sexual education in basic schools in Ghana. This education program may work to reduce the stigma that is associated with conversations about sex in Ghana. Based on the findings of the study, it is evident that there is currently low stakeholder involvement in women's sexual and reproductive health in Ghana. We therefore call for a stakeholder engagement influencing policy decisions and implementations and the extending of support and programs to rural parts of the country.

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Arguers as Players: A Game Theory Reframing of Brockriede's Seminal Essay

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Abstract
Wayne Brockriede's (1972) Arguers as Lovers marked a pivotal shift in argumentation studies by framing argument as a relational and ethical practice rather than merely a logical one. His metaphors of the "rapist," "seducer," and "lover" captured dynamics of coercion, manipulation, and respect, shaping decades of scholarship on rhetorical ethics. However, subsequent critiques have highlighted the limitations and harms of sexual violence metaphors, which risk retraumatizing survivors, reinforcing adversarial models, and undermining trauma-informed pedagogy (Foss & Griffin, 1995; Ben-Amitay et al., 2015). This article argues that while Brockriede's relational insight remains invaluable, his metaphors should be retired. Drawing on game theory, it is proposed to reframe arguers as Enforcer, Trickster, Teammate, and Spoiler—roles that preserve distinctions of domination, deception, cooperation, and betrayal without invoking harmful imagery. This trauma-informed reframing honors Brockriede's legacy while providing a more accessible and culturally relevant model for contemporary scholarship, pedagogy, and health communication.
Keywords: Argumentation, Game theory, Trauma-informed pedagogy, Rhetorical ethics, Metaphor.

Wayne Brockriede's (1972) Arguers as Lovers stands as one of the most influential essays in the history of argumentation theory. The essay shifted scholarly attention away from the purely logical and technical dimensions of argument toward its ethical and relational dimensions. Brockriede identified three metaphorical stances to describe the ways arguers interact in conflict through intentions, attitudes, and consequences. This framework offered a new way of thinking about argument as a relational practice, grounding it in questions of power, equality, and responsibility rather than only in reasoning or persuasion (Van Eemeren et al., 2013).

Although widely adopted, Brockriede's metaphors have been subject to sustained criticism as they are rooted in sexual violence. Scholars have argued that the use of sexual violence as metaphor is ethically problematic, conceptually ambiguous, and pedagogically harmful. Metaphors affect emotion and behavior, not just reasoning (Andreolli, 2024). Others note that in classroom contexts, references to rape, seduction, and molestation risk retraumatizing survivors and alienating students, undermining the very commitment to ethical communication that Brockriede sought to advance (Ben-Amitay et al., 2015; Mok, 2025).

This article argues that while Brockriede's relational insight remains invaluable, his metaphors should be retired. Building on game theory, new metaphors are proposed: Enforcer, Trickster, Teammate, and Spoiler. These new metaphors aim to preserve Brockriede's ethical distinctions without reproducing harmful imagery. Using metaphors indiscriminately in health communication runs avoidable risks (Hauser & Schwarz, 2020). By reframing rather than discarding, we can honor Brockriede's legacy while offering a trauma-informed model appropriate for contemporary scholarship, pedagogy, and health communication.

Literature Review

Wayne Brockriede's (1972) Arguers as Lovers is widely regarded as a turning point in argumentation studies because it shifted the field's focus from logic and strategy to the relational and ethical dynamics of discourse. He proposed three metaphorical stances to describe how arguers interact: the "rapist," who coerces through force; the "seducer," who manipulates through charm or deceit; and the "lover," who seeks engagement grounded in respect and mutual understanding. By emphasizing that arguers inevitably bring their humanness into the process of disagreement, Brockriede positioned argument as an ethical practice rather than a purely technical one (Van Eemeren et al., 2013).

Brockriede argued that ethical argumentation requires "bilateral power parity," where participants recognize one another as equals rather than objects to be dominated. This challenged dominant adversarial models of the time that emphasized winning and conquest over collaboration. His framework invited scholars and educators to evaluate not only the content of arguments but also the quality of relationships between arguers (Brockriede, 1972).

Adversariality and Rhetorical Critique

Despite its influence, Brockriede's framework drew criticism for conceptual and practical ambiguities. Blythin (1979) pointed out that his categories were not always clearly defined. For instance, describing the rapist's intent as either "manipulation" or "violation" conflates very different actions, and characterizing the seducer as one who can either "charm" or "trick" blurs the line between benign persuasion and deception. These ambiguities, Blythin argued, complicated the consistent application of the framework. While recognizing its potential as an evaluative tool, he called for greater definitional clarity.

Dowling (1983) extended the discussion to pedagogy, observing that competitive debate often encourages "rapist" or "seducer" styles, privileging domination and manipulation over ethical engagement. He suggested that Brockriede's framework could be useful in debate education by encouraging students to reflect on the ethics of argumentative practice. In this way, Arguers as Lovers began to shape how educators approached the teaching of communication and forensics, even as its metaphors sparked discomfort.

Later scholarship situated Brockriede's work within broader critiques of adversarial paradigms in argumentation. Casey (2020) argued that adversarial models of communication, whether framed as conquest, manipulation, or seduction, distort the purpose of dialogue by privileging domination over understanding. Although not directed solely at Arguers as Lovers, Casey's critique echoes concerns that Brockriede's metaphors, while vivid, risk reinforcing adversarial assumptions. This tension underscores the difficulty of employing metaphors that simultaneously critique domination while drawing directly from its language.

Feminist rhetorical scholars advanced these concerns more directly. Foss and Griffin (1995) argued that persuasion itself, whether framed in terms of force or seduction, remains tied to domination. Even the "lover" stance, they suggested, privileges influence over equality. In response, they proposed invitational rhetoric, a model based on equality, mutuality, and safety, in which communicators offer perspectives without attempting to impose them. This alternative framework directly confronted the patriarchal assumptions embedded in coercive or manipulative metaphors and emphasized inclusivity in rhetorical practice.

Condit (1997) expanded the critique by stressing the importance of accounting for diversity in rhetorical theory. She argued that adversarial metaphors risk oversimplifying or excluding gendered and cultural experiences, reinforcing exclusionary patterns in public communication. Instead, Condit praised models that foster "eloquent diversity," in which differences are respected and meaning is negotiated without reducing communication to battles for dominance. From this perspective, Brockriede's metaphors may fail to encompass diverse rhetorical practices and risk perpetuating marginalization.

Expansions and Alternative Models

Beyond critique, scholars have sought to build on and refine Brockriede's framework. Hample and Dallinger's "Arguers as Editors" reconceptualized the argument as a collaborative process of revising and refining ideas. In this model, arguers work together to improve discourse, emphasizing construction rather than domination (1990). Similarly, Corder's (1985) Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love reimagined argument as a cooperative process of discovery, rooted in openness and humility. These expansions extended Brockriede's relational insight while attempting to avoid his problematic metaphors.

Other extensions aimed to capture dimensions of argumentative behavior not addressed in the original framework. Blythin (1979) highlighted ambiguities, and later scholarship introduced the metaphor of the "molester," describing arguers who feign intimacy or cooperation only to exploit trust (Van Eemeren et al., 2013; Woods, 2011). Although controversial, the "molester" metaphor reflected efforts to grapple with forms of betrayal and exploitation in discourse.

Enduring Significance and Contemporary Relevance

Taken together, these expansions and critiques demonstrate the durability and limitations of Arguers as Lovers. On one hand, Brockriede's insistence that argument is about how people treat one another continues to resonate. His virtue-based approach paved the way for scholarship that foregrounds ethics, responsibility, and relationships in argumentation (Van Eemeren et al., 2013). On the other hand, the metaphors he used (rape, seduction, and love), are increasingly recognized as ethically problematic. They risk reinforcing domination, retraumatizing survivors, and excluding diverse perspectives.

The enduring debate around Arguers as Lovers underscores both the brilliance and the limitations of Brockriede's contribution. His metaphors sparked conversations that inspired new pedagogical practices, feminist alternatives, and theoretical expansions. Yet they also highlight the need for trauma-informed and inclusive frameworks that preserve his insight without reproducing harm. Scholars continue to refine, critique, and reframe his model, demonstrating its lasting impact while adapting it to the needs of contemporary argumentation theory and pedagogy.

Why Sexual Metaphors Should Be Abandoned

Wayne Brockriede's (1972) Arguers as Lovers was groundbreaking in reframing argument from logical form to relational dynamics. Yet its reliance on sexual violence metaphors creates ethical and pedagogical problems that now outweigh their rhetorical utility. Over the past five decades, scholars in philosophy, rhetoric, feminist studies, and trauma research have shown that such metaphors not only obscure meaning but can also harm learners and perpetuate cultural assumptions (Ben-Amitay et al., 2015; Monti et al., 2024).

First, sexual metaphors are pedagogically dangerous. In classrooms, terms like “rape” or “seduction” risk retraumatizing students who are survivors of sexual assault, a significant portion of college populations. College women are three times more likely to experience sexual assault than any other female counterparts (RAINN, 2025). With only 20% of those victims reporting through law enforcement and subsequently receiving victims’ services support. This limits their ability to access applicable resources towards healing. Trauma-informed pedagogy stresses the importance of safe learning environments where triggering language is avoided, particularly when alternative metaphors can convey similar concepts (Monti et al., 2024). When repeated uncritically, these metaphors can alienate students from engaging in argumentation, limiting participation in debate, health communication, and rhetorical education.

Second, sexual metaphors perpetuate cultural harm by normalizing violent imagery in discourse. Fraser (2018) argues that rape metaphors sustain hermeneutical injustice by reinforcing distorted cultural understandings of both sexual violence and argument itself. They map domination and coercion onto communication, thereby replicating patriarchal and exploitative worldviews. This aligns with Field-Springer et al.’s (2022) analysis of gaslighting and narrative silencing, which shows how language practices can invalidate survivors’ experiences and reproduce rape culture. This creates ethical irony: a framework intended to foster respectful argumentation simultaneously relies on the language of violation it seeks to critique.

Third, cultural shifts have rendered these metaphors unacceptable. In 1972, Brockriede’s language reflected a scholarly context less attentive to trauma and inclusivity. Today, sexual violence is widely recognized as pervasive and devastating, and rhetorical studies are more ethically attuned. Miller (2023) cautions that reducing sexual violence to metaphor trivializes lived trauma, while Ewing (2013) demonstrates how biblical and literary uses of sexually violent imagery perpetuate harmful associations of women as dangerous or disposable. These critiques illustrate that sexualized metaphors often reinforce stigma rather than challenge it (Ben-Amitay et al., 2015).

Fourth, sexual metaphors are counterproductive in pedagogy. Students frequently disengage when confronted with terms like “rapist” or “molester,” which distract from Brockriede’s central insight about ethical argument. If we want students to learn how to argue in meaningful ways, we have to give them spaces that feel safe and conversations they can actually step into. Gage (2021) notes that intimacy and cooperation can be conveyed without sexual framing, while Ben-Amitay et al. (2015) argue that disturbing imagery risks confusing learners rather than clarifying concepts. By relying on these metaphors, instructors inadvertently shift focus away from meaningful dialogue and land instead on the disturbing language itself.

Finally, abandoning sexual metaphors aligns with principles of metaphor theory. Hills (1997) contends that apt metaphors illuminate their subject without distortion or harm. When a metaphor draws so heavily on trauma-laden imagery that it obscures understanding or causes alienation, it ceases to be apt. Replacing sexual violence metaphors with neutral alternatives, such as those from games, cooperation, or play, provides clarity without retraumatization (Monk, 2025; Monti et al., 2024).

Sexual metaphors for argumentation are no longer defensible. They reexpose individuals to traumatic memories, perpetuate cultural harm, conflict with trauma-informed pedagogy, and fail the ethical test of aptness. More inclusive metaphors exist, and adopting them allows scholars to preserve Brockriede’s relational insight while discarding the harmful language that undermines it.

Proposal: A Game Theory Reframing

Game theory, broadly defined, is the study of strategic interaction among rational agents. Developed in economics and mathematics, it models how individuals make choices when outcomes depend not only on their own actions but also on those of others (Farooqui & Niazi, 2016). At its core, game theory assumes that “players” select strategies to maximize payoffs while anticipating the possible responses of others. The resulting interplay can produce cooperative, competitive, or mixed outcomes.

Applied to communication, game theory repositions discourse as a form of strategic exchange. Each utterance becomes a calculated move in an interactive game rather than a simple transfer of information. As Allott (2006) explains, communicators weigh costs, benefits, and risks of speech acts much like players considering tactical moves. A speaker’s credibility, timing, or rhetorical framing may thus be viewed as strategies designed to influence others while anticipating their replies. This model highlights the fundamentally interdependent nature of communication, where no participant acts in isolation.

Recent scholarship has extended these insights into applied contexts. Game theory has been used to model crisis communication, where organizations and stakeholders negotiate disclosure, trust, and uncertainty in high-stakes settings (Weverbergh & Vermoesen, n.d.). Similarly, game-based perspectives have been applied to interactive media, where discourse resembles gameplay characterized by signaling, cooperation, and occasional betrayal (Rao, 2011). Video game studies provide further analogies: cooperative play demonstrates the importance of trust and shared strategy, while competitive or high-risk modes highlight the long-term consequences of betrayal (Barr, 2016; West, 2020). Communication, like gameplay, often unfolds as an iterative process where participants adapt strategies and renegotiate rules across repeated interactions.

In this light, reframing Brockriede’s (1972) metaphors through game theory provides a neutral, flexible, and trauma-informed framework. It preserves his central insight that argument is relational and ethical while shifting the language toward concepts of strategy, cooperation, and choice rather than domination or violation.

Game Theory as a Framework for Argument

Game theory supplies a concise vocabulary for analyzing argumentative interaction. Players represent arguers, whether individuals, groups, or institutions. Strategies are the communicative choices they select, from evidentiary framing to withholding information. Payoffs are the outcomes they seek to maximize, including persuasion, trust, credibility, and reputation. Equilibria refer to stable configurations in which no participant can improve outcomes through a unilateral change in strategy (Allott, 2006). Framed this way, analysis shifts from moralized metaphors of sexual violence to strategic reasoning: Which strategy is in play, which incentives support it, and how do repeated encounters alter the likelihood of cooperation across time?

This framework is preferable to dialogic, invitational, and conflict-transformation metaphors because it meets four criteria important for classroom use: operational clarity, coverage of mixed-motive interaction, testable predictions, and trauma-informed neutrality (Harrison et al., 2023; Arbour et al., 2024). The constructs of players, strategies, payoffs, and equilibria enable observable coding of coercion, deception, cooperation, and betrayal within a single analytic system, including bounded rationality and iteration that mirror semester cycles (Allott, 2006; Farooqui & Niazi, 2016). Payoffs can be defined to include ethical goods such as trust, credibility, and repair, which preserves Brockriede's relational aims while avoiding harmful imagery. Trauma-informed pedagogy favors frameworks that minimize re-exposure to violence-laden language and that create predictable, safe learning conditions; a game-theoretic vocabulary advances both aims (Harrison et al., 2023; Arbour et al., 2024). Communication theory likewise underscores the value of mechanism-explicit models that link conceptual claims to instructional design and assessment (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2021).

Competing frameworks remain valuable but tend to under-specify strategic mechanism. Invitational rhetoric secures equality, safety, and mutuality, yet offers fewer levers for diagnosing manipulation or forecasting breakdowns when bad-faith strategies surface (Foss & Griffin, 1995). Dialogic models illuminate recognition and reciprocity, but provide limited tools for analyzing incentives, defections, and credibility cascades in mixed-motive contexts (Casey, 2020; Littlejohn et al., 2021). Conflict transformation foregrounds structure and repair, but is less granular about turn-by-turn signaling, sanctioning, and conditional cooperation. A game-theoretic lens complements these approaches by specifying stability conditions for cooperation, the effects of sanctioning on payoffs, and the pathways by which spoilers erode trust in iterated interactions. Thus, dialogic and invitational theories delineate the normative horizon of ethical arguing, while game theory supplies the mechanism that renders those conditions durable in real classrooms.

Preserving Relational Ethics Without Harmful Imagery

Brockriede's (1972) primary contribution was the argument that arguers should treat one another as partners in mutual discovery rather than as objects to be manipulated. This vision of relational ethics continues to shape argumentation pedagogy and practice. Yet the metaphors of rape, seduction, and molestation are ethically untenable. They risk trivializing or retraumatizing lived experiences of violence, particularly in educational settings.

Game theory metaphors provide an alternative that retains the original ethical distinctions while avoiding harmful associations. Unlike sexual metaphors, game-based terms are culturally familiar, non-traumatizing, and emphasize agency and choice. Students often encounter these terms through economics, political science, or gaming culture, which makes them both accessible and pedagogically effective (Rao, 2011; Weverbergh & Vermoesen, n.d.). They also highlight the same key relational dynamics Brockriede identified: domination, manipulation, cooperation, and betrayal, while grounding them in a framework that is precise, ethically responsible, and adaptable to contemporary classrooms.

Recent empirical evidence demonstrates that trauma-informed pedagogy can significantly enhance classroom climate by fostering higher levels of student resilience, improving the quality of teacher–student alliances, and creating greater order and emotional safety in learning environments (Wassink-de Stigter et al., 2024). Similarly, a two-and-a-half-year case study of a disadvantaged secondary school that adopted Trauma-Informed Positive Education (TIPE) reported large improvements in orderly learning environments, effective teaching time, and student connectedness after whole-school professional learning, coaching, and consistent classroom routines (Stokes, 2022).

These outcomes underscore how trauma-sensitive practices cultivate both academic engagement and social-emotional stability. It would be immoral to attempt to test the inverse of these results by deliberately exposing students to trauma to measure the effects on learning or classroom order. Instead, the growing prevalence of student distress signals and formal complaints should serve as compelling evidence for administrators to adopt and sustain trauma-informed approaches. In doing so, schools not only respond to a moral obligation to protect student well-being but also strengthen the foundational conditions that make effective learning possible.

Advantages of the Reframing

The game-theoretic reframing carries several advantages over the original metaphors. First, it is pedagogically safe, allowing instructors to teach argumentation without introducing triggering or alienating imagery. Trauma-informed pedagogy emphasizes creating environments where students can engage without encountering unnecessary risks of retraumatization, and game theory aligns with these goals.

Second, the framework is analytically precise. Game theory provides a robust vocabulary for describing strategies, payoffs, and equilibria, allowing scholars to model argumentative behavior with more clarity than metaphors of sexual violence permit. In simple terms, game theory gives us a way to talk about argument like a shared activity with rules and choices, rather than something dangerous or harmful.

Third, it is culturally relevant. With the rise of digital games and gaming culture, students are familiar with terms such as cooperation, signaling, and defection. These metaphors resonate across diverse audiences, enhancing accessibility and comprehension (Barr, 2016; West, 2020).

Finally, it preserves ethical clarity. Brockriede's core aim was to identify how arguers ethically position themselves in relation to one another. A game-theoretic reframing retains this relational insight while avoiding metaphors that trivialize or normalize violence. By drawing from concepts of play, cooperation, and strategy, it directs attention to the choices arguers make and the consequences of those choices in sustaining, or undermining, dialogue.

Mapping Old Metaphors to New Roles

Rapist → Enforcer. In Brockriede's (1972) original typology, the rapist seeks to dominate an opponent through coercion, ignoring mutual respect or equality. In game-theoretic terms, this stance maps onto the Enforcer. The Enforcer pursues brute-force strategies, often treating argument as a zero-sum game in which only one party can "win." Like a player in a competitive game who insists on overpowering rather than negotiating, the Enforcer disregards fairness and parity. The payoff sought is domination, and the equilibrium reached is one of suppression rather than dialogue.

Seducer → Trickster. The seducer manipulates through charm or deceit, luring an opponent into agreement without transparency. Game theory reframes this stance as the Trickster, a player who exploits signaling games and "cheap talk." Tricksters misrepresent information, distract, or mislead to secure advantage (Allott, 2006). While the Trickster can achieve short-term gains, equilibria built on deception are fragile. Once deception is detected, cooperation collapses, and credibility is permanently weakened.

Lover → Teammate. The lover was Brockriede's (1972) ideal stance, characterized by respect, parity, and genuine engagement. In game-theoretic terms, this maps naturally to the Teammate. The Teammate treats argument as a cooperative or iterated game where the highest payoff emerges from sustained mutual benefit. Rather than viewing communication as zero-sum, the Teammate engages in strategies that encourage reciprocity, trust, and fairness (Farooqui & Niazi, 2016). The logic mirrors the prisoner's dilemma: when parties expect repeated interaction, cooperation becomes the rational strategy.

Classroom Applications

Current classroom applications of the Arguer's as Lovers article sometimes involve asking students to describe a time when they were "the rapist" in an argument. This framing is deeply flawed and injurious. Asking survivors to identify with the very figure who violated them is an inappropriate and damaging exercise. The irony is striking: when a professor, with unilateral control over the curriculum, imposes such an assignment, they replicate the very dynamic the article warns against. The lesson meant to discourage domination in argument instead becomes an act of domination itself. Students, particularly those with trauma histories, have no real power to refuse participation, underscoring the imbalance of authority at play. Regardless of where a student is at in their healing process, this does not help.

In contrast, when using game theory metaphors to explore conflict, instructors can create structured simulations that allow students to assume roles and negotiate resolutions without causing psychological harm. These models are effective because they encourage reflection without requiring personal identification with acts of violence. However, when students are asked to embody individuals whose actions are so egregious they would result in imprisonment, educators must exercise extreme caution and sensitivity.

The viral debate over whether a woman would rather be trapped in the woods with a man or a bear illustrates how gendered power dynamics persist in cultural discourse. Given the documented prevalence of sexual assault among both women and men, such assignments fail to recognize the lived realities of survivors and cross clear ethical boundaries in classroom practice. Brockriede's theoretical framework holds enduring merit, yet the metaphor he employs to illustrate it undermines his own principles through its unfortunate implications.

Conclusion and Implications

Wayne Brockriede's Arguers as Lovers (1972) remains foundational because it reframed argument as a relational and ethical enterprise. His central insight, that arguers must decide how to treat one another, whether through coercion, manipulation, cooperation, or betrayal, continues to resonate across communication studies. Yet the metaphors he employed, drawn from sexual violence, have become ethically indefensible in light of trauma-informed pedagogy, feminist critique, and cultural shifts in how sexual violence is understood. As a society that knows the deep harm survivors face, we have a responsibility to do better.

By adopting metaphors from game theory, we can preserve Brockriede's insight while discarding the harm. In this reframing, arguers are conceptualized as players, their strategies described in neutral terms that capture patterns of domination, deception, cooperation, and betrayal without invoking harmful imagery. This approach allows teachers, researchers, and practitioners to apply Brockriede's framework in ways that are accessible, precise, and responsible. It honors his legacy while adapting it for contemporary classrooms and scholarly debates. For example, later expansions of Brockriede's framework introduced the "molester" to describe arguers who exploit intimacy, betraying trust from within (Van Eemeren et al., 2013; Wood, 2011). In game-theoretic terms, this is the Spoiler, a hidden defector who pretends to play fairly but undermines cooperation for personal gain. Spoilers exploit cooperative equilibria by disguising selfish motives, much like free riders in collective action games. Once exposed, however, Spoilers destroy the possibility of future cooperation.

The implications of this reframing extend across health communication, pedagogy, and scholarship. In health communication, trauma-informed language is central to fostering conditions of safety and trust. Communication itself can either retraumatize survivors of violence or create space for healing (Ben-Amitay et al., 2015). Brockriede's original metaphors undermine these goals by embedding domination and violation into the vocabulary of argument.

Game theory metaphors, by contrast, align with principles of fairness and accountability while providing a safer alternative. They preserve important distinctions between coercion, manipulation, and cooperation without alienating participants. Moreover, the language of games and play is culturally familiar, accessible across disciplines, and widely understood by students through sports, digital games, and popular culture (Barr, 2016). This familiarity enhances teaching by making abstract ideas more concrete and relatable.

For scholarship, reframing Arguers as Lovers ensures its relevance in contemporary theoretical conversations. Brockriede's work remains central because it emphasized argument as a relational act rather than a purely logical procedure (Van Eemeren et al., 2013). Yet continued reliance on sexual violence metaphors risks undermining that legacy. Updating the model with game theory metaphors allows scholars to retain the intellectual value of the framework while aligning it with current ethical and cultural expectations. Just as invitational rhetoric emerged as a feminist alternative to adversarial paradigms (Foss & Griffin, 1995), game theory metaphors can serve as an ethically responsible update that preserves Brockriede's brilliance while moving beyond outdated language.

Ultimately, reframing Arguers as Lovers underscores the enduring importance of Brockriede's contribution. Argument, he reminded us, is not only about claims and logic but about how people treat one another in disagreement. That lesson remains urgent today. What must change, however, is the language through which the lesson is communicated. Sexual violence metaphors, once tolerated, are now understood as harmful in both health communication and pedagogy. If the goal is to treat people well in an argument, then our teaching should be rooted in respect. It is time to retire the outdated metaphors.

By adopting metaphors of players, strategies, and outcomes, we retain the ethical clarity of Brockriede's insight in a trauma-informed, accessible, and culturally resonant form. This reframing not only safeguards his legacy but also ensures its usability for new generations of students, teachers, and practitioners committed to fairness, cooperation, and respect in communication.

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Research and Finding Credible Sources Scavenger Hunt GIFT

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Abstract
This GIFT activity presents a gamified approach to strengthening research literacy and oral citation skills in a basic or introductory communication course. The lesson engages students through a two-level scavenger hunt that requires locating credible sources, crafting accurate oral citations, and applying research tools such as library databases, Google Scholar, and Google News. By scaffolding instruction and aligning it with typical speech rubric criteria, the activity reinforces information literacy, ethical citation practices, and credibility judgments. Gamification increases motivation, engagement, and participation, while the verification process ensures instructional clarity and reinforces accuracy. Preliminary implementation across multiple course sections demonstrated measurable improvement in students' ability to locate, evaluate, and cite evidence orally during speeches. The activity also revealed students' increased confidence in research practices and ethical source integration. This adaptable design is transferable to online, hybrid, or discipline-specific contexts, making it a versatile tool for supporting foundational communication competencies.
Keywords: information literacy, gamification, oral citations, credibility.

The purpose of this lesson is to strengthen information literacy in students by providing hands-on opportunities to find, evaluate, and cite sources. Specifically, this activity developed to be used in a basic communication course (BCC) to help students improve their research and oral citation skills for speech assignments. This activity allows students to apply ethical standards associated with research, credibility, and public speaking and helps ensure students are equipped with these essential skills early in their academic careers. By the end of this process, students will be able to locate and evaluate credible sources relevant to their speech topics, integrate and orally cite supporting evidence appropriately, apply ethical standards when selecting, paraphrasing, and presenting research material, and assess the credibility of their sources.

This lesson serves as a formative step that scaffolds students' performance on major speech assignments. By aligning the learning outcomes, classroom activities, and grading criteria used in a typical BCC speech rubric, the lesson ensures that information literacy and ethical and accurate citation practices are taught, practiced, and assessed. More specifically, during major speech assignments, students are typically expected to be able to incorporate at least three credible oral citations, and their ability to do this effectively is generally demonstrated within the "Body" section of the speech rubric, which is typically worth 25-30% of their total speech grade.

To ensure consistency and transparency in evaluating oral citations and credibility judgments, the lesson uses a two-level plan aligned with the speech rubrics used for assessment in the course. During the first level of this process, students will demonstrate initial competence in locating credible sources and orally citing them properly. Feedback is formative, emphasizing accuracy of citation format and recognition of credible evidence. The next level asks students to apply their research skills again by using various research tools, such as their school's library database, Google Scholar, Google News, and more. Since students will engage with these processes during their graded major speech assignments, their oral citations and research worksheet are checked for accuracy by the instructor, and students will not advance levels until they have fully completed each step accurately and appropriately. In other words, this lesson provides teachers and students with the ability to achieve full clarity of the research expectations related to the major speech assignments in the course.

Rationale

College students are regularly expected to showcase their research skills by identifying relevant information from a variety of sources to showcase their information literacy (Cutillas et al., 2023). Consequently, it is imperative that teachers of the BCC do their best to help encourage the development of research skills in their students. More specifically, during a BCC students are generally asked to utilize their research skills to develop quality oral citations. Oral citations are the result of the process of accumulating information on a topic from outside sources and reporting it to others during an oral presentation (Billington & McKay, 2022). Oral citations typically include the name of the author(s), the source's credentials/credibility, the date of publication, and any other relevant source information (Billington & McKay, 2022). Subjective teacher preferences can influence the teaching of oral citations, but these specific lessons can assist in the generation of more quality and complete citations from students (Buerkle & Gearhart, 2016). The process of properly citing sources orally during a formal speech presentation helps increase student information literacy and avoid plagiarism while boosting the credibility and ethos of the speaker.

For clarity, an example oral citation can sound similar to, "According to a 2020 article in the Journal of Learning, a reputable journal who publishes studies focused on the education of college students, 75% of students dislike public speaking (Grand Valley State University Speech Lab, 2024). This brief example contains the author name, source credentials, date of publication, and the information being used to support a claim. Another example, which is utilized in this lesson plan, is citing the popular song "See You Again" by musical artist, Wiz Khalifa. This oral citation could sound like, "According to the rapper, Wiz Khalifa, a highly successful, Grammy nominated rapper, in his 2015 song, "See You Again" played at the end of the movie, Furious 7, the lyrics state, 'We've come a long way from where we began and I'll tell you all about it when I see you again.'" The previously mentioned examples include the necessary components of an oral citation, which are, author name, author credibility, date of publication, and other relevant source information.

During a BCC, oral citations and conducting quality research have been found to be one of the most difficult aspects of the speech development process for students (Kinnick & Holler, 2012). Some possible reasons for this struggle can be due to university librarians struggling to target literacy instruction to students who need it most (LeMire et al., 2025), significant gaps among students' research skills (Dempsey & Dalrymple, 2023), and because of the rise of a reliance on A.I., which some define as a disruptive force on the education system (Yu & Guo, 2023).

Since improving the research and information literacy skills of students is essential, BCC teachers should be certain that information literacy skills are clearly addressed in their courses. To ensure these skills are developed, this research-focused activity utilizes gamification. Gamification is defined as adding game-like features to nongame contexts (Rahmi et al., 2025). Within the context of education, gamification has been found to increase students' concentration, motivation, engagement, and increase student outcomes (Celasun & Kaya, 2025; Oliveira et al., 2022). Compared to traditional teaching, gamification has the potential to yield a variety of positive student outcomes such as teachers creating a more enjoyable learning experience, encouraging students to develop a more positive attitude toward learning, increased student motivation, increased in information literacy skills, and a significant increase in student performance (Wang et al., 2024). The elements of gamification, which are utilized in this research focused activity, cultivate a sense of achievement and progression, which has been found to drive students to engage more deeply with the material and develop these skills more effectively (Celasun & Kaya, 2025). Gamification elements have the ability to reveal significant effects on both the cognitive factors and affective dimensions of students, including motivation, participation, and academic achievement (Simsek & Karakus Yilmaz, 2025). The development and implementation of this activity capitalizes on the advantages of gamification to ensure that students are developing high quality oral citations and cultivating quality research habits. The positive outcomes associated with the utilization of gamification in the classroom have the ability to overcome the previously mentioned significant gaps in students' research abilities.

Explanation of Activity

After covering the textbook materials related to conducting quality research and citing sources, teachers will then separate students into small groups and prepare to facilitate the activity. Due to the incorporation of gamification, this activity contains two levels and students must complete the first level before moving on to the next. The first level asks students to find specific sources and cite them correctly. The second level asks students to complete a research focused worksheet where they will need to utilize a variety of research tools.

Logistics and Materials

This lesson and activity typically need 90 minutes to 2 hours to complete in a class with approximately 20-25 students. Instructors will need to print out additional "scavenger hunt" worksheets prior to the start of class. A PowerPoint or Google Slides presentation should also be created and projected to facilitate the activity. Therefore, instructors should have a preparation checklist consisting of the following: fully developed slides, printed worksheets, access to an overhead projector, and the necessary time needed for students to complete this lesson and activity.

Directions

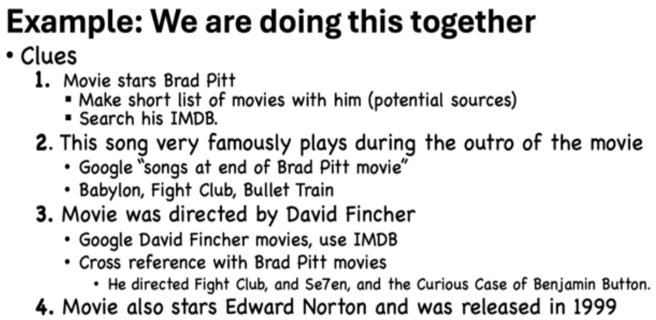
The specific process of this activity involves teachers presenting the clues to the students, 30 seconds per clue. Clues are presented from vague to specific to provide guided direction during the research process. This part of the activity contains 5 total movie clues, including popular films like The Matrix, Furious 7, Perks of Being a Wallflower, and more, all of which have famous scenes including famous songs. Instructors can include, omit, or change the movie/song/example at their leisure. Engaging in this process allows students to enhance the efficiency of their research practices, explore different research tools, and craft accurate oral citations that support their work throughout the course.

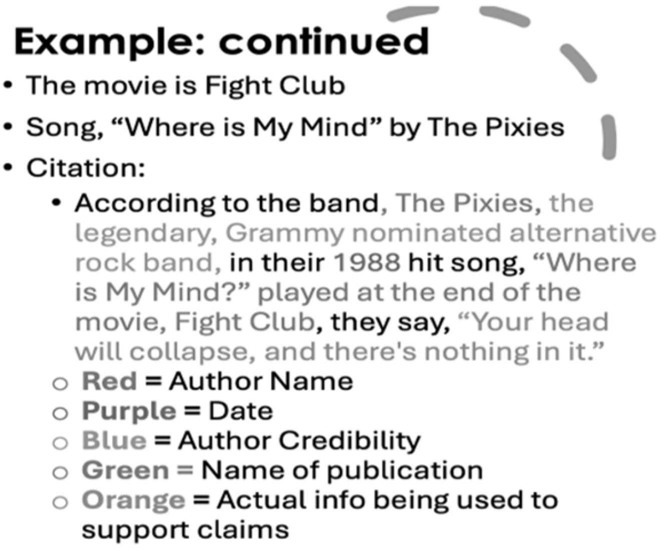
Students complete this level once accurate oral citations have been created for each movie/song referenced. Each round dedicated to movie clues will take approximately 5-10 minutes. Students will use clues to research the corresponding movie, then find the corresponding song, and create an accurate oral citation. Prior to starting the process, instructors should clearly explain the directions for this activity should be stated clearly to students. The directions presented on the slides in class should resemble the process below.

- Use the clues AND YOUR RESEARCH SKILLS to find the MOVIE being described.
- Once the movie is found, find the artist and title of the SONG used in the movie's corresponding scene.
- Once the song is found, cite it correctly using each component of oral citation.
- The round is completed once the ARTIST AND SONG are cited correctly.
- Do not shout out answers. Ask for verification.
- Once verified, the level is complete.

Due to the succinctness of these directions, a few of these steps require more discussion. Specifically, if students shout out answers, teachers reserve the right to disqualify those students for that round. However, students complete this specific part of the process when they have successfully generated an accurate oral citation. So, shouting answers is not recommended mainly because it negatively impacts the student's ability to "win" the round and finish first among their classmates. Instructors may also choose to award extra credit to students who are the first to produce an accurate citation.

The primary focus for teachers during the movie clue level is the verification process. During this portion of the activity, instructors will meet with each group or individual student to confirm the accuracy of their citations. Instructors will review all student-created oral citations and provide immediate feedback to correct any observed errors. This collaborative process allows both instructors and students to clarify concepts and reinforce accurate citation practices. Additionally, the slideshow teachers develop should include correct examples that serve as reference points, ensuring that students can compare their work and address any lingering confusion after each round. Again, instructors may also choose to award extra credit to students who complete accurate citations most quickly. The competitive element of this approach, which is common during the inclusion of gamification in the classroom, can enhance student engagement and motivation. Even when implementing the strategy of encouraging speediness, instructors will still circulate throughout the classroom to discuss student responses and provide individualized feedback. Figures below present screenshots illustrating the full movie clue process using Google Slides.





After all rounds of the movie clue activity are completed, the first level has concluded. The second level of the lesson asks students to complete a research worksheet within their groups. During this stage, students use a range of research tools, including their institution's library database, Google Scholar, and more. This step helps familiarize students with academic resources that may initially seem more complex or intimidating than a standard Google search, such as research databases and scholarly journals. Instructors may choose to award participation or extra credit points to teams that complete the worksheet first while achieving perfect accuracy. The questions can be adapted as needed to align with other institutions' databases. Both the worksheet and its answer key are provided in the appendix.

Debriefing and Appraisal

Since the incorporation of this activity into the BCC, students have showcased an ability to conduct quality research, cite sources more easily and appropriately, and integrate a greater variety of supporting materials into their speeches. In short, the result of this activity has yielded positive results related to information literacy students who have participated.

Since its inception, approximately 120 students have participated in this activity across four 10-week terms. During this time, instructor assessments indicated measurable improvement in students' ability to integrate and orally cite sources within their speeches. Informal feedback reinforces these results because many students report greater confidence in understanding how to cite information ethically during oral presentations. While these findings are preliminary and informal rather than formal statistical analysis, they provide promising evidence that the lesson contributes to the intended learning outcomes.

The limitations of this activity are minor and mostly involve students' comfort in engaging with new tools, as well as citing sources (both traditional sources and those that are not typically defined as scholarly). However, through this assignment, students get experience with both. The first level of the activity asks students to create oral citations using musicians and their songs to ensure they can develop oral citations correctly. The next level asks students to engage with various research tools, including their institution's library research database. Sometimes, these tools have never been utilized by students before this activity. Regardless of this potential learning curve, this activity teaches multiple valuable lessons. First, students learn they have access to a plethora of valuable research tools beyond a basic Google. Second, students learn how to identify what makes a source credible and apply this to their speeches. This activity has led to more quality research being conducted, improved oral citations, and a greater variety of supporting materials being utilized by students.

Implementation Variations

While this activity is geared towards a smaller sized classroom, a number of implementation variations can occur. After all, the action of finding sources and citing them correctly is not exclusive to oral presentations. Therefore, instructors across disciplines could tailor this idea to their specific courses. For example, a professor of history could alter this lesson by utilizing movies related to historical events and adjust the second level of this process to be specific to properly citing history-related research in the correct context.

Further, instructors could work in conjunction with the librarians at their respective institutions to increase the research abilities of students. Librarians could co-teach this lesson with instructors, which could theoretically help save time during the verification process. This collaborative approach could also help students better utilize the plethora of resources college libraries offer.

This lesson can also be effectively adapted for online learning environments. During synchronous courses, instructors may use breakout rooms to facilitate group collaboration and leverage the institution's learning management system (LMS) to organize and assess student submissions. In asynchronous settings, instructors can assign a comparable activity or assignment that guides students through the same research and citation steps independently. Overall, the benefits of this lesson are transferable across multiple instructional formats and course types that emphasize high-quality research practices.

Handouts and appendicies available online at www.UJOC.org/.

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Bridging Mental Health and Communication: A Review of The Handbook of Mental Health Communication

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Abstract
This review evaluates *The Handbook of Mental Health Communication* (Yzer & Siegel, 2025) and is organized using Husselbee and Coombs's (2023) framework for UJOC book reviews. The volume establishes mental health communication as a distinct scholarly domain by integrating psychological, behavioral, and sociocultural perspectives on message design, audience processing, and ethical practice. Its strongest contribution is the IIFF model, which offers a multi-stage framework for increasing help-seeking. The editors emphasize methodological rigor, cultural responsiveness, and the ethical imperative to avoid harm. Although accessibility concerns remain, the handbook provides significant theoretical, pedagogical, and applied value.
Keywords: Mental health, Health Communication, IIFF, Book review.

The Handbook of Mental Health Communication
Marco C. Yzer & Jason T. Siegel (Eds.).
Wiley-Blackwell, 2025.
528 pp.
$195 hardcover / $156 ebook.

Mental health is one of the most urgent public health concerns of the twenty-first century, yet communication research addressing it still lags behind other health promotion domains. *The Handbook of Mental Health Communication* (Yzer & Siegel, 2025) fills this gap by positioning communication as a central mechanism for understanding and improving mental health outcomes. Edited by Marco C. Yzer of the University of Minnesota and Jason T. Siegel of Claremont Graduate University, the volume assembles nearly one hundred contributors across psychology, public health, and communication to examine how message design, audience processing, and ethical considerations intersect in mental health promotion.

Editors Marco C. Yzer and Jason T. Siegel bring complementary expertise in health communication and social psychology to the volume. Yzer's work on behavioral prediction, cognitive characteristics of mental illness, and strategic message design, together with Siegel's extensive research on help-seeking for depression, stigma reduction, and large-scale health campaigns, provides a strong scholarly foundation for the handbook's integration of mental health science and communication theory. The editors propose that advancing mental health outcomes requires integrating mass communication theory with insights from psychopathology and behavioral science. Their framing of mental health mass communication as a research and practice domain sets the tone for a volume that bridges clinical and communicative approaches.

Summary of Content

The opening chapter defines mental health mass communication as the study and practice of purposefully designed messages that aim to improve the well-being of people with mental illness through awareness, stigma reduction, and encouragement of help-seeking. The editors outline seven guiding principles: developing systematic and transparent research programs, accounting for cognitive characteristics of message recipients, anticipating unintended message effects, matching messages to cultural meanings, testing messages with affected populations, recognizing assumptions about mental health, and maintaining an ethical commitment to do no harm.

Subsequent chapters apply these principles across seven sections. The first examines how emotional and cognitive processing affect message reception, linking neurological and behavioral mechanisms to the success or failure of persuasive appeals. Later sections address measurement issues, digital media, and communication inequalities. Contributors explore emerging topics such as gaming disorder messaging, chatbots, mHealth interventions, and data privacy. The handbook also devotes extensive attention to stigma reduction, help-seeking behavior, and positive emotion strategies such as gratitude and savoring.

The final chapters synthesize lessons from digital health, multi-behavior interventions, and persuasive prevention theory. Yzer and Siegel conclude with their IIFF Model (Information, Inference, Feeling, and Facilitation), which frames help-seeking as a multi-stage communication process. Throughout, the book emphasizes evidence-based design and the ethical responsibility of communicators to safeguard vulnerable audiences. Together, these sections provide a comprehensive overview of contemporary mental health messaging research, setting the stage for a critical assessment of the handbook's broader contributions.

Critical Evaluation

Scholarly Contribution

The book's hallmark contribution lies in its successful integration of mental health science with communication theory. By merging cognitive, neurological, and sociocultural perspectives, it establishes a unified framework for understanding how mental health messaging functions across diverse contexts and populations. This multidimensional synthesis addresses a longstanding gap in the health communication literature, which has historically prioritized physical health behaviors over mental health needs. In doing so, the handbook elevates mental health communication to equal theoretical and methodological standing within the discipline.

A particularly notable theoretical advancement is the IIFF model for mental health communication, which offers a comprehensive framework for increasing help-seeking by integrating four simultaneous supports: Information, Immediate Help-Seeking Mechanisms, Favorable Activation, and Focused Engagement (Yzer & Siegel, 2025). The model synthesizes cognitive appraisal, affective response, and behavioral facilitation into a cohesive process, moving the field beyond traditional information-deficit approaches. By aligning message design with contemporary understandings of emotion, motivation, and behavioral change, the IIFF model provides a robust foundation for empirical testing and facilitates meaningful integration into both pedagogy and intervention design. In this way, the handbook not only advances theoretical development but also strengthens the applied relevance of mental health communication as a scholarly domain.

Methodological Rigor and Transparency

Yzer and Siegel emphasize the importance of methodological integrity in mental health communication research by advocating for transparent and programmatic studies that resist fragmentation and selective reporting. Their call aligns with principles of the open science movement, reinforcing accountability and strengthening the credibility of the field. Several chapters contribute to this effort by presenting concrete research protocols, including procedures for pretesting messages, measuring self-stigma, and assessing help-seeking intentions. These protocols offer replicable templates for future scholarship. This emphasis on ethical design and methodological clarity represents a meaningful progression in health communication research, promoting both rigor and reproducibility.

The handbook's methodological breadth is both a strength and a challenge. Its thirty-three chapters span theory development, empirical research, and applied case studies, demonstrating remarkable comprehensiveness. The organizational structure moves from foundational scientific frameworks to practical implementation, which helps maintain coherence across a large and diverse body of work. However, the extensive scope may be overwhelming for readers who are new to the discipline. In addition, certain chapters revisit well-established theories without offering substantial new insight. These circumstances suggest that future editions could benefit from a more focused editorial approach that balances breadth and depth to optimize clarity and accessibility.

Ethical and Cultural Awareness

The handbook's sustained attention to ethical and cultural dimensions significantly elevates its scholarly contribution. The editors and contributors emphasize that mental health messaging can produce unintended harm when cultural values are overlooked or when stigma is inadvertently reinforced. Several chapters illustrate how poorly tailored campaigns can have counterproductive effects, reinforcing the principle that effective communication requires more than simply disseminating information. The discussion of cultural meaning offers compelling insight into how historical and social contexts influence receptivity to mental health messages. These analyses underscore the importance of inclusivity, community engagement, and culturally grounded message design.

Accessibility emerges as a secondary ethical concern. Like many academic titles, this handbook's high price creates substantial barriers for educators, students, and early-career researchers who stand to benefit most from its insights. This issue reflects a broader challenge in academic publishing, where knowledge produced for public and scholarly advancement often remains restricted by prohibitive costs. While this limitation does not detract from the handbook's intellectual merit, it highlights persistent structural inequities that constrain access to important research. The quality and originality of The Handbook of Mental Health Communication merit wide readership, making attention to accessibility an important consideration for future dissemination.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The Handbook of Mental Health Communication represents a milestone in health communication scholarship. Its interdisciplinary scope, methodological transparency, and ethical sensibility deliver a comprehensive synthesis that advances mental health communication as a distinct and mature domain of inquiry. The editors successfully demonstrate that effective mental health messaging must account for cognition, culture, and compassion in equal measure.

The handbook holds clear pedagogical and professional value. Its cross-disciplinary organization allows graduate instructors to demonstrate how communication theory extends into mental health contexts, while practitioners in public health, nonprofit advocacy, and policy can apply its evidence-based strategies to design ethical and culturally responsive interventions. By emphasizing collaboration across communication, psychology, and medicine, the editors underscore the practical relevance and applicability of the volume.

Although its cost may limit accessibility, the book's intellectual and instructional value is substantial. Scholars seeking to expand the theoretical and practical boundaries of health communication will find it both foundational and forward-looking. If accessibility barriers can be addressed through institutional support or more affordable editions, *The Handbook of Mental Health Communication* stands to become an essential reference for researchers, educators, and practitioners committed to advancing public understanding of mental health through communication.

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The Master's Program in Mass Communications at BYU is designed for students who are passionate about research, media, and the broader impact of communications in society. With a strong emphasis on preparing students for doctoral study and academic careers, the program also offers valuable training for leadership roles in professional communications. The School of Communications offers one graduate degree—a Master of Arts (M.A.) in Mass Communications—with only 10 to 15 students admitted each fall, allowing for close faculty mentorship, hands-on research opportunities, and a values-centered learning environment. Over the course of two years, students complete a rigorous curriculum of required and elective coursework, along with thesis research that builds advanced academic and applied expertise. Whether pursuing a Ph.D. or advancing in the communications industry, graduates leave prepared to make meaningful contributions in their fields.

Preparation for Doctoral Studies

The program's top priority is to prepare students for advanced academic work. It emphasizes an in-depth exploration of the mass communications industry, including theoretical frameworks, research methods, and scholarly writing—core competencies needed for success in Ph.D. programs and academic careers.

Career Advancement in Communications

In addition to academic training, the program equips students with advanced analytical, writing, and strategic communication skills. After a deep dive into communications research, graduates are well-prepared for leadership roles in strategic communications, digital communications, media, corporate communications, and non-profit sectors.

Personalized Faculty Mentorship

Graduate students benefit from close collaboration with experienced faculty who are engaged in cutting-edge communications research. Faculty provide one-on-one mentoring, helping students design studies, publish papers, and build academic credentials.

Real-World Research and Publishing Experience

Graduate students at BYU have opportunities to co-author research papers with faculty, present their research at national conferences, and publish research articles in peer-reviewed journals—key experiences that make applicants competitive for doctoral programs and applied research roles in the communications industry.

Values-Based, Supportive Environment

BYU offers a unique academic environment that integrates faith, ethics, and rigorous scholarship. For students seeking a community that supports both intellectual and spiritual development, this setting is ideal. The program encourages ethical scholarship and principled communication practices, which are highly valued in today's professional and academic settings.

Integration into Alumni and Placement Network

Graduates of the program have gone on to earn doctoral degrees at top-tier institutions and to build impactful careers in higher education, government, non-profit, and private-sector communications—a testament to the strength and versatility of the BYU training.

Application Deadline: March 31

For additional questions, please contact:
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Graduate Coordinator, School of Communications
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Call for Manuscripts

The UJOC aims to be a general forum for communication scholarship, and all theoretical approaches and methods of scholarly inquiry are welcome. Submitted manuscripts should make original contributions to academic research in communication studies and address critical, theoretical, and empirical questions in communication relevant to scholars within and across specializations.

The UJOC is an open access journal available to all at no cost. While articles by scholars living in Utah, as well as articles covering topics particularly relevant to Utah are especially welcome, we encourage authors from all places to submit their work to this issue of the UJOC. Every paper receives full consideration regardless of any Utah connection. At least one article of each issue will be reserved for a current masters or doctoral candidate.

Original Research

All submitted manuscripts should include an abstract of 100-200 words and five keywords. The standard article length is 3000-4000 words, including references, tables, figures, and notes. The organization is mainly dependent on the methodological tradition used. However, all submitted manuscripts should include a title page, an introduction, a literature review, a methodological summary, a report of results and findings, a discussion that explains the impact and analysis of the study, and a conclusion that considers the study's limitations and implications for future research. The UJOC adheres strictly to the 7th edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA 7). Submitted manuscripts should include:

- Title page with full article title and each author's complete name and institutional affiliation.
- Abstract of 100-200 words and five keywords at the end of the abstract.
- Text
  - » Begin article text with introduction.
  - » Headings and subheadings should be completed in accordance to APA 7.
  - » Each text citation there have a corresponding citation in the reference list and each reference list citation must have a corresponding text citation. The reference list should also be completed in accordance to APA 7.

Book Reviews

Scholars who are interested in publishing an academic book review in the UJOC should give careful consideration when selecting a book and preparing their submission.

Books under review should have been published within last three years. The subject of book must be relevant to the field of comunication, as well as the the focus and scope of the UJOC. The subject of the book should also be relevant to the expertise and field of study or practice of the reviewer; one must possess adequate knowledge or background in the subject. Reviewers should also avoid books written by an author they know personally, or for which there may exists some real or perceived conflict of interest. Reviewers should also avoid subjects about which you feel strong emotion or that you do not believe you can review fairly and professionally.

Completed book reviews should be only 1,000-2000 words in length and contain the following elements:

- Author, title in full, place, publisher, date, edition statement, number of pages, price.
- Reviewer's name, institution.
- A description of the topic, scope, and purpose of the book.
- Relevant information about the author or editor.
- The author's point of view or frame of reference.
- The thesis or message of the book.
- The school of thought or scholarly current that the book arises from.
- Comment on intended audience or readership.
- Evaluation of the author's success in achieving their purpose.
- Contribution to knowledge in the field.

GIFTs

Occasionally, the UJOC will publish "Great Ideas For Teaching" articles that focus on innovative pedagogy. Articles include original teaching ideas, lesson plans, semester-long activities, and classroom assessments.

Original Teaching Ideas
Communication educators in all contexts are invited to submit original teaching activities for classroom implementation. Activities may address any communication course, including research methods, technologies, theory, interpersonal, intercultural, instructional, mass, organizational, public relations, media studies, and public speaking, whether introductory or advanced. Single Class submissions should generally contain no more than 1500 words.

Unit Activities
This may entail an original teaching activity that takes place throughout an entire class unit that spans several days or weeks. A unit activity should follow the same format as the single class activity, and should contain no more than 2000 words.

Semester-long Activities
Original teaching activities that outline a semester-long project or approach to an entire course are also welcome. These manuscripts should follow the same format the single class activity and should generally contain no more than 2500 words.

Assessment Articles
Communication educators in all contexts are invited to submit original assessment research. Assessment involves systematic reflection upon and analysis of instructional practices and

challenges communication educators to monitor student learning as well as improve the quality of specific courses or overall programs. Assessment articles should be data driven, qualitative or quantitative. Assessment research provides educators an opportunity to modify their instructional practices based on the results of such studies. Submissions should generally contain no more than 3,500 words.

Brief Reports

The UJOC will occasionally accept and publish brief reports. Brief reports are shorter than traditional submissions and often do not meet the typical rigor expectations of more developed papers. However, any brief report should provide obvious value to scholars in the field of communication.

Submission Types

Conceptual Paper: Focuses on developing hypotheses and/or research questions. Often preliminary or incomplete data is used to support concepts the author(s) is developing.

Case Study: Applies communication theory or conceptual frameworks to interventions, experiences, or events that provide new insight and understanding to the field of communication.

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

Literature Review: These papers should only be submitted if the literature review provides a comprehensive update of literature on a specific communication theory or concept that hasn't been previously published by any author.

Technical Report: These reports usually reflect applied work done by the author(s) in practical and professional contexts.

What to Include

- A brief title,
- Submission type,
- Abstract with up to five key words,
- Main text (headings will vary depending on submission type),
- Include any tables and figures in the main text (tables and figures should be used sparingly in brief reports),
- References.

Commentary Pieces

The UJOC also welcomes Commentary submissions. Commentary pieces are concise, thought provoking examinations of current issues in communication that advance scholarly dialogue. These articles should be anchored in relevant literature and may take several forms, including:

- Critical reflections on contemporary developments or emerging issues in the field.
- Reassessments, updates, or extensions of seminal research that has shaped communication scholarship.
- Scholarly discussions of research methods, methodological innovations, or disciplinary shifts in how communication research is conducted.

Commentary submissions should offer clear academic value, present well supported arguments, and situate their insights within existing communication scholarship. These pieces are typically shorter than full research articles and should generally be no more than 2,000–2,500 words, including references.

Each submission must include a brief title, an abstract of 100–200 words with five keywords, appropriately formatted headings, and references consistent with APA 7.

Peer Review Process

Manuscripts considered by the UJOC Managing Board to be of sufficient quality and in line with the UJOC mission will be sent to two members of the UJOC Editorial Board. The editorial board editors will serve as the peer reviewers of the double-blind review for those works deemed ready for external review. All reviewer feedback is then sent to the UJOC Managing Board, which will send a final decision letter to the corresponding author. The UJOC Managing Board retains the right to make changes in accepted manuscripts that do not substantially alter meaning, as well as for grammatical, stylistic, and spatial considerations.

Upcoming Publications

Topic/Issue	***Submission Deadline***	***Publication***
General 4.1	2/28/26	May 2026
Instructional 4.2	8/31/26	Nov. 2026
General 5.1	2/28/27	May 2027
Technology 5.2	8/31/27	Nov. 2027
General 6.1	2/28/28	May 2028
Video Games 6.2	8/31/28	Nov. 2028
General 7.1	2/28/29	May 2029
Nature 7.2	8/31/29	Nov. 2029
General 8.1	2/28/30	May 2030
GIFTs 2.2	8/31/30	Nov. 2030

Visit https://ujoc.org/submit/ to submit.

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