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Welcome from the Editor, Joshua E. Young pg. 15

Is Kamala Brat? Counteracting Persuasion pg. 16
Resistance with Authenticity on TikTok, Shannon Pappas, Anne
 Oeldorf-Hirsch, and Bailey Quigley

TikTok is the social media app most frequented by Gen Z, yet political candidates have struggled to connect with this audience. However, Kamala Harris' 2024 U.S. presidential campaign has changed how political candidates interact with potential voters. Through unconventional memes and viral moments, she has connected to Gen Z like no other candidate before her. Based on Persuasion Knowledge Model, an online, between-subjects quasi-experimental survey exposed Gen Z participants (N = 370) to three KamalaHQ TikTok videos employing a combination of TikTok (e.g., trending music, humor) and political campaign strategies (e.g., campaign ad). Results show that video exposure reduced message resistance. In turn, participants were more likely to intend to vote for Harris in the upcoming presidential election. Feelings of a parasocial relationship and perceptions of her authenticity were significant influencers in reducing message resistance and increasing likelihood to vote for her. These results have broader implications for how political candidates interact with and persuade potential young voters, particularly on TikTok.

Effects of Diversity Mixed Messages in Organizational pg. 37
Hiring Websites on Perceived Person-Organization Fit and
Application Intention for Entry-Level Applicants, Clementina
 Edema, Edikan Nkanta, Alexis Noela Quick, Linda Kabaaula, Alina
 Niftulaeva, and Caleb T. Carr

Organizations frequently incorporate explicit diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statements and photographs of current employees into their online presence, in part to signal to potential job applicants their ability to 'fit in' to the organization, its culture, and its extant members. This two-factor (match between organizational DEI statement and racioethnic diversity of members depicted) experiment (N = 105) tested

the effect of diversity mixed messages on applicant perceptions of person-organization fit, accounting for the moderating effects of individuals' demographics (i.e., race/gender and political lean). Results revealed the consistency of DEI statements and the depictions of current organizational members did not affect applicants' perceptions they would fit into the organization or their intention to apply to the organization. Moreover, person-organization fit did not have a mediating effect, nor did the individual's status as a majority member nor their political lean moderate that mediating process. Taken together, findings suggest organizations' recruiting efforts may not necessarily be harmed by inconsistent diversity management messaging online.

His Cues, Her Cues: Teaching Presence, Gender, pg. 60
and Relational Impressions in Online Learning, Kyle R. Vareberg,
 Ryan Goke, Ian Berry, Maranda Goke, and Stephanie Kelly

Online courses are increasingly common and taken more frequently by students, yet students' perceptions of them may portray instructors as invisible and uninvolved. Drawing on social information processing theory, we argue that cues intended to signal course design are also interpreted relationally. Teaching presence, the work instructors do to be "present" in the online environment, is not merely instructional structure: it is relational communication embedded in course design. This study explored whether teaching presence and students' perceptions of immediacy and credibility are related, and whether those relationships differ by student gender. Using a cross-sectional survey, we divided our sample into male (n = 97) and female (n = 193) subgroups and conducted correlational analyses to examine potential gender differences. Findings suggest teaching presence cues are perceived more strongly by women than by men, highlighting the need to consider how online courses are experienced differently across student groups. Post hoc moderated regression analysis revealed only modest gender patterns, indicating that the interactions between the teaching presence variables and the perceptions reflect tendencies rather than categorical differences.

I Saw this on TikTok: Examining the Nature of pg. 84
Memorable Health-Related Messages on TikTok, Andrea L. Meluch
and Rhiannon Kallis

This qualitative study examines the foci and characteristics of health-related TikTok videos users find memorable. Specifically, this analysis applies the theory of memorable messages to understand what types of health-related messages on social media are memorable to users and the impact of these messages on health-related behaviors. Participants included college students who use TikTok and recalled a memorable health-related TikTok video. Participants identified (a) exercise and fitness, (b) nutrition and diet, and (c) mental health as the most common memorable health-related topics in TikTok videos. Study findings also indicated that participants often have a strong emotional reaction to memorable content and find that memorable content affirms their identity and behaviors. The implications of the study findings on health-related behaviors and social media use are discussed.

“That’s just not who I am”: Rejection of the Good pg. 107
Mother Ideology and Other Tools Used by Homeschool Moms to
Navigate Motherhood, Gina S. Reynolds

Studying mothers often focuses on the mother-child dynamic rather than the mother as a person. Mother types, such as working mothers, often are singled out for study. One mother that is rarely considered is the homeschool mother. In homeschooling, the mother typically takes the active role in educating the children, and she receives little attention as a person (Lois, 2016). This study examines how these mother/teachers navigate their motherhood. Nine online discussions with 26 homeschooling mothers revealed strong connections to self-efficacy and agency. Agency and self-efficacy contributed to the mother’s ability to navigate and manage the tension between her needs and those of her family (Bandura 1977, 2006). This study suggests that other homeschool mothers and past experiences played roles in establishing self-efficacy, leading to their self-efficacy expectations. Though previous literature suggests that homeschooling mothers connect strongly to the concept of good mother, the mothers in this study rejected many of the principles Hays (1996) suggests a good mother exhibits.

“Donald Trump Is Definitely Fucking Satan”: pg. 128
***South Park*, Media Satire, and Shifting Frames of Acceptance and Rejection for Two Trump Presidencies,** Matt Foy

In light of evolving questions of the role and efficacy of political humor in addressing the exigency of a second Donald Trump presidency, this study analyzes two extended satirical story arcs critical of Trump and MAGA from award-winning adult animated comedy South Park. The study utilizes three of Kenneth Burke's rhetorical frames of acceptance and rejection (comedy, tragedy, and burlesque) to contrast South Park's two most substantive satirical statements on Trump and MAGA: Season 19 and 20's comparatively humane and introspective satire on Trump's 2015-16 candidacy and Season 27-28's dehumanizing mockery of Trump's ongoing second presidency (2025-). The analysis suggests South Park's 2025's application of Burke's burlesque frame of rejection resonated culturally whereas the 2015-16's application of Burke's comic frame of acceptance, traditionally preferred by Burke and Burkean scholars, failed to adequately address Trump's political ascendance due to extending to Trump and MAGA what rhetorician Mike Milford deems "cheap grace": comic forgiveness that seeks deeper understanding of a misguided opponent but is powerless to hold said opponent accountable for transgressions, permitting the transgressor to avoid accountability and deny the Burkean imperative of comic introspection.

Ideological Women and Pursuit of Political pg. 157
Attitude and Opinion Change in Serial Arguments within
Heterosexual Marriage, Jayne R. Goode and Kendra Knight

Despite the present state of political animus in the U.S., relatively little research has examined how spousal political differences along ideological lines influence marital communication and conflict. This study examines wives' perception of marital political conflict from the lens of serial arguments. Using a national sample of heterosexual married women, we examine interrelationships among perceived spousal ideological conflict and serial argument goals. We find that both wife's own political ideology and wife's perception of husband's political ideology influence pursuit of serial argument goals. Specifically, the greater degree of self-rated conservatism, the less wives report expressing negativity or dominance/control. The greater the degree of wife-rated partner conservatism, the less likely wives

report a serial goal of change. Implications for conceptualizing recurring spousal political conflict are discussed.

Liar Stereotypes Among Deaf College Students pg. 180
in the United States, Darrin J. Griffin and Mark G. Frank

This article reports the findings of a study exploring liar stereotypes held by college participants who are Deaf. Inspired by the findings of the Global Deception Research Team's (2006) study on liar stereotypes across the globe, the authors conducted an exploration of beliefs about liars in a sample of college students who are Deaf and hard of hearing in the United States. For comparison purposes, a hearing sample of college students was also surveyed about their beliefs on this topic. This study further confirms the findings of the World of Lies project in that the pan-cultural belief that liars avert their gaze was also expressed as a folk belief about the behavior of liars by this group of signers. Additional findings reveal that the culture of a person (i.e., hearing vs culturally Deaf) may influence the beliefs about what cues to deception are expressed during communication. Implications for lie stereotypes that are driven by other social demographics and future directions for research in this arena are discussed.

Reproducing Audiovisual and Representational pg. 192
Dissonance: Translating Foreign Telenovela into Twinovela,
 Nancy A. Frimpong

This article examines the production processes and cultural implications of adapting foreign telenovelas into "Twinovela"—serialized foreign dramas dubbed into Akan—on Ghanaian television. Focusing on Adom TV and United Television (UTV), the study explores how dubbing practices challenge traditional notions of indigenous media by merging global and local cultural narratives. Using ethnographic research methods, including interviews, participant observation, and institutional discourses, the analysis delves into recruitment strategies, translational practices, and the creative process of dubbing. The study highlights the sociocultural dynamics of Akan language use, the role of linguistic norms, and the integration of Ghanaian cultural motifs to ensure audience resonance. It also addresses the audiovisual and representational dissonance created by the adaptation process, emphasizing the interplay of sound and visuals in fostering cultural identification. The findings reveal that twinovela is not merely a replication of foreign content but a creative adaptation that incorporates Ghanaian cultural motifs, linguistic norms, and

audience preferences. It emphasizes that twinovela represent a complex interplay of cultural, economic, and ideological dynamics, showcasing how global and local influences merge to create a unique media format. This dubbing process not only revitalizes indigenous languages in media but also challenges traditional notions of cultural representation and identity.

Mass Media Refugee Discourse in Bangladesh: pg. 217
A Case of Rohingya in Post-US Funding Reduction, Priyanka Kundu and Hasib Shah Aman

The Rohingya are a Muslim minority community from Myanmar's Rakhine State and are recognized as one of the most persecuted communities in the world. In the recent past, in August 2017, the Myanmar military launched an attack on the Rohingya, which led over 700,000 people to flee to Bangladesh. Since then, over one million Rohingya refugees have been living in Bangladesh. To help this population, international aid, especially from the US, plays an important role. According to the UN, of the total \$852.4 million requirement for 2024, the US provided \$301 million. However, the US administration's decision to suspend or freeze US-funded projects starting in 2025 has significantly affected the community. In this study, we examine how the Bangladeshi popular press has covered the Rohingya issue since the US funding cuts. We qualitatively analyzed Rohingya-related news from three newspapers—the Daily Star, the New Nation, and the Daily Prothom Alo—using critical discourse analysis. The findings show that newspapers emphasized the victimhood of the Rohingya, framed the funding cut as an urgent humanitarian crisis, and criticized the donor communities for their financial withdrawal. The newspapers prioritized the voices of international actors as primary information sources, were heavily reliant on international news agencies for news outsourcing, and lacked original, in-depth reporting.

Amplifying African Immigrant Women's Voices: pg. 234
Self-Advocacy and Competency in Maternal Healthcare Communication in the United States, Sahar Khamis, Faith Otchere, and Delight Agoada

This qualitative study examines African immigrant women's access to maternal health information (MHI), resources, and services in the United States (U.S.), the barriers and challenges they encounter when accessing and utilizing these resources, and strategies for overcoming

these challenges. The study explored how African immigrant women access and share MHI, the degree of agency they exhibit in accessing maternal care, and how their participation in the study's focus group discussions (FGDs) shaped their perceived competence and advocacy regarding maternal healthcare in the United States. Fourteen African women currently living in the United States participated in FGDs. Through these FGDs, the participants were given the valuable opportunity to share their own experiences and voice their concerns, while receiving guidance and MHI which best prepares them to advocate for themselves, exercise agency in seeking maternal care, and become active disseminators of accurate and credible MHI within their communities.

Seeking Support After Miscarriage: pg. 261
A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Semi-Anonymous Communication on Reddit, Mahtab Talafian

Miscarriage is a deeply stigmatized and emotionally complex experience, often leaving individuals feeling isolated and unsupported. Increasingly, people turn to online communities for connection and assistance after miscarriage, and this has been the focus of research for a while. However, little is known about how they seek support in the presence of anonymity. This study examines the strategies people use to seek social support in the r/Miscarriage subreddit, addressing a gap in both health and communication scholarship. While previous research has shown that individuals use online platforms following miscarriage to seek information, share experiences, and seek emotional validation, this study demonstrates how semi-anonymity shapes support-seeking communication. Specifically, it reveals that Reddit enables the disclosure of morally complex and socially difficult-to-share experiences, including jealousy, resentment, self-blame, loss of faith, and narratives of unmet support.

Dynamic Social Impact Theory and the pg. 286
Consolidation and Dispersal of Clusters in *Squid Games: The Challenge*, Adrienne Darrah and Robert J. Darrah

This study utilizes a dynamic social impact theory (DSIT) framework to analyze human influence on the popular Netflix television series Squid Game: The Challenge. A British reality competition, Squid Game: The Challenge is comprised of ten-episodes and features 456 contestants vying for \$4.56 million. As contestants self-organize into social

alliances, their shared attitudes, beliefs, and values transform the physical space into a dynamic social space. The creation of clusters through these alliances, the correlation between contestant attitudes and behaviors, and the consolidation of contestant attitudes and behaviors reflective of alliance needs is reinforced by the physical proximity of contestants, the number of contestants participating in the competition, and the characteristic strengths of the individuals participating in the competition. As a cultural case study, Squid Game: The Challenge illustrates DSIT dynamics in a mediated social space by exposing the conditions under which social clustering, cluster consolidation, and cluster dispersal may occur.

Understanding Dementia Challenges in pg. 309
Rural Ghana: A Systematic Review, Diana Maame Agyeiwaa
 Agyei, Sesi Sedegah, Abena Abokoma Asemanyi, Theresa
 Ayerterey, and Wendy Yeboah

Dementia poses an escalating public health challenge in Ghana due to an expanding aging population, yet rural awareness remains critically low. Guided by Mohan Dutta's Culture-Centered Approach (CCA), this PRISMA-compliant qualitative systematic review synthesized ten peer-reviewed articles to examine cultural perceptions and lived experiences surrounding dementia in rural Ghana. The findings highlight that cognitive decline is widely misattributed to witchcraft or normalized as standard aging. Witchcraft misconceptions subject individuals—especially older women—to severe stigmatization, social exclusion, physical abuse, and banishment to "witch camps". Meanwhile, normalizing symptoms as ordinary aging delays critical medical care and shifts family decision-making away from patients. Effectively addressing dementia in rural Ghana requires community-centered, participatory strategies that engage local populations to eliminate stigma and foster culturally appropriate geriatric care.

Editor's Forum

A Call for Collaboration Among Professionals: pg. 328
Opening Dialogues About Our Professional Organizations,
 Joshua E. Young

State Communication Associations as Local Advocacy Hubs: Reimagining Digital Presence in Service to Educators Students and Professionals, Russell D. Jones pg. 331

This essay examines how the public-facing presence of state communication associations, particularly their websites and social media accounts, shapes whether communication instructors and professionals perceive these organizations as relevant to their work. Drawing on a focused review of several state association websites and social media profiles, along with scholarship on professional associations, contingent faculty, K–12 professional learning, and nonprofit digital strategy, the essay identifies recurring patterns: visually dated sites, sparse or inward-facing information, and limited attention to K–12 teachers, contingent faculty, students, and practitioners. Rather than treating these features as evidence of apathy, the analysis situates them within the structural realities of small, volunteer-run, modestly funded organizations whose priorities have often centered on annual conferences. The essay argues that digital first impressions function as a key site where association missions, value propositions, and stakeholder commitments are communicated, or obscured. It then outlines feasible, low-cost strategies for improving alignment between public image and member needs, including revising audience-facing language, simplifying navigation, partnering with campus design or communication programs, and using social media for ongoing, two-way engagement. The conclusion contends that digital communication is not a cosmetic add-on but a central means by which state communication associations can clarify, enact, and sustain their purposes.

Building Value and Maintaining Engagement In State-Level Professional Associations, Steve A. Stuglin and Paul R. Raptis pg. 343

Engagement with international, national, regional, and state professional associations provides invaluable experiences for scholars at any level, and many scholars maintain several memberships throughout their careers. Each level of association offers different things to members, though, and not every association should be trying to fill the same role or to meet every need. Those interested in the future for a state association should identify what role that association fills, what it can provide, and for which audiences. State associations are best positioned to offer a high-value and low-barrier means of engagement, targeting students and junior professionals for

membership and participation. Here, we consider the high-value and low-barrier version of state associations we envision and which we have worked to develop in our own state association. We relay insight about what motivates or prevents engagement from this and other disciplines. Several actionable steps can reduce barriers and increase value, encouraging engagement and sustaining these organizations into the future.

Close Enough to Know, Organized Enough pg. 352
To Respond: State Associations as First-Response Advocacy Networks, Jordan Atkinson

This essay argues that state communication associations are uniquely positioned to serve as first-response advocacy networks for the communication discipline. In a higher education climate shaped by declining public trust, program cuts, academic freedom concerns, enrollment pressures, and contingent labor, state associations can provide local forms of connection, support, and advocacy that complement the work of regional and national associations. Drawing attention to their proximity, relationships, and responsiveness, the essay considers how these associations can help members recognize emerging threats, share resources, coordinate responses, and communicate the public value of communication education. It also argues that effective advocacy requires more than crisis response; state associations must build stronger pipelines into the discipline, support contingent faculty as central members, and move beyond annual conferences toward year-round professional communities. Ultimately, the essay calls for such associations to become more visible and meaningful infrastructures for disciplinary advocacy, professional development, and collective action.

Call for Papers: Volume 59 pg. 363
of the Iowa Journal of Communication

Welcome from the Editor

Joshua E. Young

Welcome to Volume 58.1 of the Iowa Journal of Communication. We are an award-winning state journal that publishes the highest quality peer-reviewed scholarship on a variety of communication topics. Our journal is a product of the Iowa Communication Association, a professional organization whose purpose is to unite those persons with either an academic or professional interest in all disciplines of Communication and the Performing Arts.

This volume contains scholarship that is diverse and timely, covering a breadth of critical contemporary issues. A significant focus of this volume addresses the intersection of media, health, and risk communication in contemporary society. Another important aspect represented in the articles of this issue is the need for cultural adaptability and understanding. The journal also features critical rhetorical and cultural studies addressing pressing social and identity issues. I hope that you will find something that will spark new questions or inspire new insights.

Further, I invite you to consider submitting your work to the Iowa Journal of Communication. Manuscripts are now being sought for Volume 59.1, which is open to any topic in communication. The official call for papers, including the announcement of the next Editor's Forum, is included at the end of this issue. We are proud that our published articles are indexed through EBSCO. In addition, I am researching ways to index with other providers and increasing how often readers can find articles in the *Iowa Journal of Communication*; I hope you'll contribute and benefit. The deadline for submissions for the next issue is April 30th, 2027. Email me at joyoung@dwci.edu with submissions and for more information, making sure to include the *Iowa Journal of Communication* in the subject line. Thank you for your interest in the Iowa Journal of Communication.

Dr. Joshua E. Young
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Is Kamala Brat? Counteracting Persuasion Resistance with Authenticity on TikTok

Shannon Pappas, University of Connecticut
Anne Oeldorf-Hirsch, University of Connecticut
and Bailey Quigley, University of Connecticut

Abstract: TikTok is the social media app most frequented by Gen Z, yet political candidates have struggled to connect with this audience. However, Kamala Harris' 2024 U.S. presidential campaign has changed how political candidates interact with potential voters. Through unconventional memes and viral moments, she has connected to Gen Z like no other candidate before her. Based on Persuasion Knowledge Model, an online, between-subjects quasi-experimental survey exposed Gen Z participants (N = 370) to three KamalaHQ TikTok videos employing a combination of TikTok (e.g., trending music, humor) and political campaign strategies (e.g., campaign ad). Results show that video exposure reduced message resistance. In turn, participants were more likely to intend to vote for Harris in the upcoming presidential election. Feelings of a parasocial relationship and perceptions of her authenticity were significant influencers in reducing message resistance and increasing likelihood to vote for her. These results have broader implications for how political candidates interact with and persuade potential young voters, particularly on TikTok.

Introduction

On July 21, 2024, President Joe Biden stepped away from the 2024 presidential race, endorsing Vice President Kamala Harris to replace him on top of the ticket (Nicholas & Gregorian, 2024). Within 24 hours, Harris' campaign had raised \$81 million, with 60% of donors making their first ever contribution to a campaign (Goldmacher, 2024). Along with this monetary success, Harris was thrust into the spotlight of social media. TikTok users quickly created memes and remixes of Harris' old interviews. Three days after President Biden's endorsement, the top trending hashtag on TikTok was #KamalaHarris, garnering over 147 million views (Luo et al., 2024). Kamala Harris and her fledgling campaign had gone viral.

Kamala Harris gained a social media following in 2017 during her first year as a senator (Kircher, 2024). This following grew over the years, as Harris went viral for her role in the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court confirmation hearing in 2018 and her initial run for the

presidential nomination in 2019. The day that President Biden endorsed Harris, the campaign's social media accounts changed usernames from Biden HQ to Kamala HQ. Overnight, their followers doubled (C. Lee, 2024).

TikTok has over 1 billion monthly users, with those age 18-24 (Gen Z), making up roughly 60% (Stahl & Literat, 2023). This has created new opportunities for political candidates as they attempt to reach hard-to-reach voters. McClain (2024) found that 48% of TikTok users under 30 use the app to keep up with political news. In response to this new audience, there has been an increase in political communication on TikTok (Cervi et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2024; Ureke, 2024). While some of this political communication has remained traditional, others have swayed toward entertainment media, attempting to match the existing content on the app.

As Harris only began running her presidential campaign in July 2024, very little work has been done to analyze her political communication on TikTok. Luo et al. (2024) investigated how users engaged with popular Kamala Harris memes. However, there is much that remains unknown about how users are impacted by the Harris content. Therefore, the current study investigated the influence of Harris' TikTok campaign strategy on Gen Z, using the persuasion knowledge model and parasocial relationships as a theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

Persuasion Knowledge Model

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad & Wright, 1994) aims to explain "how people's persuasion knowledge influences their responses to persuasion attempts" (p. 1). The model states any time an individual (target) experiences a persuasion episode by an agent, they will enact persuasion coping behaviors. In online political communication, the persuasion episode could be a single social media post, which is part of a larger persuasion attempt that includes the agent's attempt to influence, and the target's attempt to cope. PKM argues that the outcomes of persuasion attempts depend on three knowledge structures held by both the agent and the target: topic knowledge, target/agent knowledge, and persuasion knowledge. During a persuasion episode, these knowledge structures are used to inform the target's persuasion coping behaviors, which guide their response in the persuasion attempt. In the case of viewing a political post, the viewer's behaviors could be to consider the credibility of the post, decide whether to look up more information, or scroll away to other content.

When individuals encounter a political advertising message, their reactions depend on the extent to which they perceive there to be manipulative intent, i.e., an aspect of persuasion knowledge. Practically, research indicates that the greater knowledge that individuals have about politics in general (topic knowledge), the greater their knowledge of persuasion attempts (Nelson et al., 2021). When encountering political videos by presidential candidate Kamala Harris, persuasion knowledge is likely to be triggered, particularly depending on the type of video seen (e.g., a campaign ad vs. a video that capitalizes on a current TikTok trend). Generally speaking, evidence shows that the greater an individual's awareness of a persuasive political attempt, the greater their resistance to that message (Valli & Nai, 2023), which can also impact their intention to vote for a given politician (Vitriol et al., 2020).

Message Resistance

Most people do not want to be persuaded by messages (Fransen et al., 2015). Therefore, when presented with a persuasive message, people may instinctively try to resist the argument. Two common forms of resistance are counterarguing and reactance (Breves et al., 2021). Reactance refers to individuals perceiving a threat to their freedom and autonomy when presented with a persuasive message. Counterarguing occurs when an individual questions the source's credibility or message (Breves et al., 2021).

In the political realm, research indicates that persuasion attempts become less successful the more effort that individuals put into resisting the message, especially by counterarguing and cognitively elaborating on the messages presented (Valli & Nai, 2023). On social media specifically, when users recognize that social media content (e.g., a tweet) is promoted by a political party, their skepticism increases, while trust and intention to vote for that party decreases (Boerman & Kruikemeier, 2016). Therefore, in the case of political videos on TikTok, greater awareness that these videos are attempting to persuade should lead to greater resistance to those messages, and lower likelihood to vote for the political candidate.

H1: Persuasion knowledge is positively related to resistance to Kamala Harris' campaign videos.

H2: Message resistance is negatively related to intention to vote for Kamala Harris.

RQ1: Does message resistance mediate the relationship between persuasion knowledge and intent to vote?

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships between audience members and a media figure (Hoffner & Bond, 2022). If audience members view frequent content, interact with the media figure, or perceive the media figure as authentic, a stronger parasocial relationship is likely to occur (Bond, 2016). Historically, parasocial relationships were observed with celebrities of traditional media, such as newscasters, actors, or singers. As social media has become more popular, social media influencers have also become the subjects of parasocial relationships.

Social media has changed the landscape of how people interact with peers and influencers. Influencers can garner large, diverse audiences across social platforms. Their followers often see them as relatable and not so different from themselves (Han & Balabanis, 2024). This parasocial relationship is only strengthened by interaction with the influencer. While traditional influencers have very little interaction with their fanbase, influencers can create connections through likes, comments, and shares of follower-produced content (Bond, 2016). This perceived, two-way relationship increases trust and authenticity, thus making influencers seem more reliable when it comes to brand endorsements and persuasive messaging.

To lessen message resistance on social media, brands and influencers have attempted more covert forms of persuasion, which may attempt to activate parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships may act as a buffer against the message resistance usually sparked by persuasion attempts. For instance, in an advertising context, greater feelings of parasocial interaction predicted greater purchase intention (Lin et al., 2021). Additionally, while message resistance is predicted to be negatively related to intention to vote for a politician, perceptions of a parasocial relationship should positively predict intention to vote for a politician.

H3: Perceptions of a parasocial relationship with Kamala Harris are negatively related to message resistance.

H4: Perceptions of a parasocial relationship with Kamala Harris are positively related to intention to vote for her.

RQ2: Does message resistance mediate the relationship between parasocial relationship and intent to vote?

Authenticity

Authentic behavior is any behavior perceived as being done without thought of reward (J. A. Lee & Eastin, 2021). This realistic behavior helps audience members see a media figure as an equal, thus allowing a stronger parasocial relationship to occur (Bond, 2016). Perceived authenticity is a powerful tool in terms of influence over a fanbase. For example, Lee et al. (2024) found that social media influencers that are perceived as authentically themselves online can detach themselves from any brands they endorse. Instead, their followers view any endorsement as a recommendation from one friend to another, regardless of any paid promotion acknowledged by the influencer.

In advertising, influencers who are seen as more sincere are also more likely to garner a positive impression, more followers, and greater purchase intentions (J. A. Lee & Eastin, 2021). These findings extend to TikTok specifically, where greater authenticity leads to more consumer engagement (Walsh et al., 2024). Similarly, when targeted political advertising is perceived to fit with the values of the audience targeted, perceived manipulative intent is lowered (Hirsch et al., 2024). Therefore, greater perceptions of authenticity in political TikTok videos should lead to lowered message resistance and greater intent to vote for that politician.

H5: Perceived authenticity of Kamala Harris is negatively related to message resistance.

H6: Perceived authenticity of Kamala Harris is positively related to intention to vote for her.

RQ3: Does message resistance mediate the relationship between authenticity and intent to vote?

TikTok Video Content

A crucial aspect of Kamala Harris' campaign has been her attempt to authentically connect to Gen Z on the platform they frequent most: TikTok (Stahl & Literat, 2023). Previous research indicates that while politicians are flocking to TikTok, most are not taking advantage of the platform's features for interactive content (Cervi et al., 2023; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). TikTok content also relies heavily on collaborative features such as stitches, duets, and other remixes of fan-created content. One analysis of partisan TikTok videos by US politicians reveals that a greater proportion are duets than original

content (Medina Serrano et al., 2020), indicating that some politicians are savvy to TikTok's features. Several case studies of politicians on TikTok found that those who adapt to the short video affordances and interactive features of the platform are more successful in engaging younger voters (Cevallos et al., 2024; Hung, 2022; Moir, 2023; Ureke, 2024).

What remains to be seen is whether Harris' engagement on TikTok has tangible effects on Gen Z's attitudes and voting intentions. Therefore, we test three types of content from the KamalaHQ account that address more or less alignment with TikTok content expectations: 1) Informational, using a traditional official political campaign video; 2) Humor, using a less traditional political video that adopts a current video edit trend; and 3) Music, using a video with the least political message that capitalizes on trending music. We ask the following research questions about how these content types may variably affect outcomes:

RQ4: How do a) persuasion knowledge, b) parasocial relationship, c) authenticity, d) message resistance, and e) voting intentions differ by type of video content (official campaign, Gen Z edit, Femininomenon)? See Figure 1 for full theorized model.

Method

This study employed an online between-subjects quasi-experimental survey in which participants were shown one of three Kamala Harris TikTok videos to induce persuasion knowledge. Then, participants rate their feelings of parasocial relationship, authenticity, and intended voting behavior. The study received university ethics approval in October 2024, and data were collected the same month.

Sample

Participants ($N = 370$) were recruited from an introductory communication course at a public northeastern US university, for which they received course research credit. They ranged in age from 18 to 22 ($M = 19.14$, $SD = .90$). This sample represents Gen Z, who are not only the most likely to use TikTok, but also engage with persuasion attempts differently than older (Gen X, Millennial) generations (Childers & Boatwright, 2021). Most (64.3%) identified as women, 35.4% as men, and 0.3% as Gender Fluid. The majority (74.6%) identified as White, 13.5% as Asian, 11.4% as Hispanic/Latino, 8.4% as Black or African American, and 8.6% as multiple ethnicities. Finally, 60.7% stated they were either registered as Democrats or were Democrat-leaning, while 39.3% stated they were either registered as

Republicans or were Republican-leaning. Additional demographic details can be found in Table 1.

Stimuli

Participants were randomly assigned to see one of three possible videos taken from the “Kamala HQ” account on TikTok (Figure 2). These videos represent common types of political video content on the platform: information, humor, and music. The information video, captioned “Kamala’s first 2024 campaign video,” was 1 minute 23 seconds long and consisted of Harris’ first campaign ad set to Beyonce’s song Freedom. The humor video captioned “Letting the Gen Z intern edit the US presidential debate,” was 47 seconds long and consisted of Kamala Harris’ facial expressions in response to Donald Trump’s statements in the presidential debate. The music video captioned “Femininomenon,” was 33 seconds long and consisted of shots of Kamala Harris set to Chappell Roan’s song Femininomenon. This design did not use a control condition, as we needed to prime persuasion knowledge to test its potential outcomes.

The videos were found by searching “Kamala Harris” on TikTok. The traditional campaign ad was posted by the KamalaHQ verified account, while the other two videos were fan edits. The videos were chosen as viral (i.e., millions of likes and shares) representatives of common types of TikTok content (information, humor, music), and because prior knowledge of the trending memes was not needed to understand the message. In comparison, Kamala Harris’ coconut tree videos were more popular, but required the participant to understand why it went viral to begin with (i.e., topic knowledge and/or agent knowledge).

Furthermore, these videos offer varying persuasive techniques. For example, the informational video represents traditional political persuasion, created by the campaign, towards voters of all ages. In comparison, the humor and music videos were fan-generated, and as such, achieved virality among younger, harder to reach voters. While these videos were not created by the campaign, they still enacted persuasive techniques through music or comedy, leading to countless accounts engaging with the content and creating their own versions of the trend. The diversity of content created by fans, voters, and campaign organizers represents the social media landscape that users interact with – and that politicians must learn to engage with and embrace.

Procedures

Upon consenting to participate, participants continued to the survey hosted on the Qualtrics platform. Because the study involved video with audio, participants were asked to confirm that they could play sound at the time of taking the survey or instructed to return later. After completing demographic and social media use items, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three video conditions and were shown the TikTok video with the survey. Participants were asked if they had seen the video before, and then continued to measures of authenticity, parasocial interaction, message resistance, and persuasion knowledge. Finally, they were asked a series of funneled questions about their voter registration status and intention to vote. At the end of the survey, participants who indicated they are eligible to vote were shown an infographic titled “In college and want to vote this year, but not sure how?” and all participants were forwarded to a separate survey to receive course research credit.

Measures

Participants in each condition complete identical items about persuasion knowledge, message resistance, parasocial relationship, authenticity, and their politics.

Persuasion Knowledge

Boush et al.’s (1994) six-item skepticism toward advertising scale was utilized to measure persuasion knowledge. As the scale was written for advertisements, scale items were reworded to relate to Kamala Harris. For example, “How hard is the advertiser trying to... make you want the product” was reworded to “... make you want to vote for Kamala Harris.” The six tactics originally used in the scale were not relevant to the current study, as they focused on the use of cartoon characters, demonstrations, and showing kids who are a lot like you and your friends. For this reason, only the intended effects of the scale were used. Participants were given the following prompt to answer on a 5-point scale (1 = Not trying hard at all – 5 = Trying very hard): “How much the video is trying to...” Examples of scale items include “to make you like Kamala Harris” and “get you to believe what Kamala Harris says.” The scale was found to be reliable ($\alpha = .81$, $M = 3.34$, $SD = .86$).

Resistance

To measure resistance, two scales were combined: Dillard & Shen’s (2005) three-item reactance scale and Nabi et al.’s (2007) two-item counterarguing scale. Participants were prompted to answer

questions regarding the video they watched, on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree – 5 = Strongly agree). Examples of scale items include “The video is trying to pressure me” and “I found myself actively disagreeing with points in the video.” The scale was found to be reliable ($\alpha = .80$, $M = 2.79$, $SD = .82$).

Parasocial Relationship Perception

To measure parasocial relationships, Hakim and Liu’s (2021) seven-item parasocial relationships with political figures scale was used. Participants were prompted to answer questions regarding how the video made them feel about Kamala Harris, on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree – 5 = Strongly agree). Examples of scale items include “I find her life story to be inspiring” and “I think she is like an old friend.” The scale was found to be reliable ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 2.81$, $SD = .93$).

Authenticity

Lee and Eastin’s (2021) authenticity scale was used to measure participants’ perceived authenticity of Kamala Harris. Specifically, two subscales, totaling eight items, within the authenticity scale were used: sincerity and expertise. These two subscales were chosen for the direct applicability to the study and could be answered without prior knowledge of the candidate. The subscales not used in this study were truthful endorsements, visibility, and uniqueness. Participants were prompted to answer questions based on how Kamala Harris appeared in the video, on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree – 5 = Strongly agree). Examples of scale items include “is down-to-earth” and “is skilled in her own field.” The scale was found to be reliable ($\alpha = .93$, $M = 3.30$, $SD = .93$).

Politics and Voting

Ten survey items were related to the participant’s political behavior and intentions. These questions consisted of contributions to political campaigns, eligibility to vote, if participants were registered to vote, specifying if they registered to vote after President Biden dropped out of the Presidential race, which political party they identify with, intention to vote in the Presidential election, and which candidate they plan to vote for. The relevant outcome variable used for our hypotheses was a binary-coded variable indicating whether participants intended to vote for Kamala Harris. Political party and political leaning were combined into a binary variable for use as a control variable.

Demographics

Participant age and gender were assessed with open-ended items, and race/ethnicity with standardized Qualtrics categories. Originally, 535 participants attempted the survey, but after removing survey responses that did not indicate their voting intentions, a sample size of 370 remained for analysis. First, zero-order bivariate correlations were assessed among all study variables (Table 2). To test our hypotheses, we conducted structural equation modeling with all theorized paths. To test our RQ, we conducted a MANOVA of video on persuasion knowledge, parasocial relationship, authenticity, and message resistance; with age, gender, race, and political party as covariates. Post-hoc Bonferroni tests were run to observe pairwise differences between video conditions.

Results

Hypotheses and Research Questions

After using modification indices to account for high correlation between errors for persuasion knowledge, parasocial relationship, and authenticity, the model showed a strong fit: $\chi^2(1, N = 370) = .000, p = .987$; comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00, RMSEA = .000. See Figure 3.

H1 predicted that persuasion knowledge would be positively related to resistance to Kamala Harris' campaign messages. Knowledge was a significant predictor of message resistance ($\beta = .27, p < .001$). Thus, H1 was supported. H3 predicted that perceptions of a parasocial relationship with Kamala Harris would be negatively related to message resistance. A perceived parasocial relationship was a significant predictor of message resistance ($\beta = -.32, p < .001$). Thus, H3 was supported. H5 predicted that perceived authenticity of Kamala Harris would be negatively related to message resistance. Perceived authenticity was a significant predictor of message resistance ($\beta = -.24, p < .01$). Thus, H5 was supported.

H2 predicted that message resistance would be negatively related to intention to vote for Kamala Harris. Message resistance was a significant predictor of intention to vote for Kamala Harris ($\beta = -.14, p < .001$). Thus, H2 was supported. H4 predicted that perceptions of a parasocial relationship with Kamala Harris would be positively related to intentions to vote for her. Parasocial perceptions was a significant predictor of intention to vote for Kamala Harris ($\beta = .48, p < .001$). Thus, H4 was supported. H6 predicted that perceived authenticity of Kamala Harris would be positively related to intention to vote for her. Perceived authenticity was a significant predictor of intention to vote for Kamala Harris ($\beta = .15, p < .05$). Thus, H6 was supported.

RQ1-RQ3 asked if message resistance mediates the relationship between persuasion knowledge, parasocial relationship, and authenticity, and intent to vote, respectively. SEM results reveal that the indirect effects of persuasion knowledge ($\beta = .006$), parasocial relationship ($\beta = -.007$), and authenticity ($-.004$) on voting intention are not significant, as the confidence intervals span zero. Therefore, message resistance is not a significant mediator of these relationships.

RQ4 asked how outcomes differ by type of video content. MANOVA revealed a significant overall effect of condition on outcomes, Wilks' lambda = .75, $F(8, 536) = 10.31$, $p < .001$. Specifically, we found significant differences between conditions for knowledge, $F(2, 271) = 30.64$, $p < .001$; authenticity, $F(2, 271) = 6.26$, $p < .01$; and resistance, $F(2, 271) = 5.30$, $p < .01$. A Post Hoc Bonferroni test was performed to analyze pairwise differences between videos. Persuasion knowledge was significantly higher for the information content (campaign) video ($M = 3.76$) than the music content (Femininomenon) video ($M = 3.47$, $p < .05$) and the humor content (Gen Z debate edit) video ($M = 2.89$, $p < .001$). Perceived authenticity for the information content (campaign) video ($M = 3.49$) was significantly higher than for the humor content (Gen Z debate edit) video ($M = 3.09$, $p < .01$). Message resistance was significantly higher for the humor content (Gen Z debate edit) video ($M = 2.88$) than for the music content (Femininomenon) video ($M = 2.55$, $p < .01$). Video type did not show a significant effect on parasocial relationship perceptions. Additionally, a Chi-square test showed no significant effects of video condition on intention to vote for Kamala Harris, $\chi^2(1) = .72$, $p = .70$.

Discussion

Overall, this study finds support for our proposed model that while greater knowledge of political persuasion attempts will lead to greater message resistance and decreased intention to vote for a candidate, perceptions of candidate authenticity and feelings of a parasocial relationship with the candidate lead to lower resistance and increased intention to vote in their favor. First, our results show that when individuals feel that Harris' TikTok videos are attempting to persuade them to like, believe, and vote for her; they feel resistance to the video itself. Specifically, they experience reactance (i.e., "the video is trying to make a decision for me") and engage in counterarguing (i.e., "I was looking for flaws in the video's arguments"). Furthermore, the greater resistance they felt, the less likely they were to vote for Kamala Harris. This corroborates previous research about the diminished persuasive effects in political advertising as individuals

make more effort to cognitively resist the message (Valli & Nai, 2023), and generally supports PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

More interestingly, resistance to Harris' message was reduced if individuals felt a parasocial relationship with her. Parasocial relationships generally require time to develop, and strengthen with more frequent contact (Bond, 2016), but our findings indicate that even brief exposure to Harris through TikTok can make her seem relatable. This could be partly explained by feelings of authenticity, which is an important precursor to persuasion in political and advertising realms (Hirsch et al., 2024; J. A. Lee & Eastin, 2021; Walsh et al., 2024). In this case the more authentic individuals felt that Harris appeared in her TikTok videos, the less resistance they had to their message.

Both parasocial and authenticity perceptions also increased the likelihood that individuals would vote for Harris over any other candidate. Compared to the effects of message resistance on voting, these effects were much larger. For every step increase in feeling a parasocial relationship, an individual was six times more likely to vote Harris than another candidate. Similarly, for every step increase in finding Harris authentic, they were over four times more likely to vote for her over any other candidate. This indicates that while message resistance is a significant barrier to voting, a candidate's authenticity and the parasocial feelings that individuals develop could be a much more powerful motivation for voting.

Per our research question, we also uncovered some unexpected effects between the three types of content that participants were exposed to. No video was the clear winner in terms of overall persuasion, but each had their unique advantages. Persuasion knowledge was significantly higher for the information content (traditional campaign) video than the other two videos. This is expected, as campaign videos often contain direct persuasive elements to attempt to connect with potential voters. Surprisingly, the humor content (Gen Z debate edit) video received the lowest persuasion knowledge scores. A presidential debate is a serious political event in which candidates are directly attempting to persuade voters. However, the edited video shown catered to a TikTok audience, highlighting out-of-context quotes and close-ups of Harris' facial expressions when reacting to Trump's comments. The Harris-Trump debate went viral for being highly "meme-able;" i.e., screenshots of Harris' facial expressions were easy to circulate for entertainment. Therefore, it is likely that the comedic elements decreased participants' knowledge of persuasion. Additionally, while the music content (Femininomenon) video only showed Harris dancing to a popular song, it is possible the feminist undertones clued participants into potential persuasive tactics.

Message resistance, however, followed a different pattern: The music content (Femininomenon) video incurred the least resistance of the three. While this video takes a clear feminist stance, it also contains the least political information; instead showing clips of Harris dancing to the song playing. Interestingly, the humor content (Gen Z debate) video led to just as much resistance as the campaign video, even though persuasion knowledge effects had indicated that it had less political messaging. In this case, the format of the video – music and dancing – may be the most important factor in lowering resistance, as it is the least obviously a political message.

Also unexpected was that authenticity was higher for Harris' information content (official campaign) video than the humor content (Gen Z debate) video. The campaign video was not edited for TikTok; instead just showing her official video in full, similar to what voters could view on traditional media. Authenticity is particularly important for influencers (Lin et al., 2021), and thus for Gen Z, who is most likely to engage with influencers (Childers & Boatwright, 2021). Thus, we may have expected that individuals would interpret videos that engage with TikTok trends as most authentic, such as the Gen Z debate that highlights Harris' authentic reactions to Trump's statements. However, individuals are hearing directly from Harris in the campaign video. Thus, hearing her voice and learning about her plans are likely what makes her feel more authentic in this video than in videos in which her presence is heavily edited.

Finally, there were no differences between videos in terms of parasocial effects. This was at first surprising, as parasocial relationship perceptions had significant impacts on message resistance and voting intention. However, parasocial relationships take time to build (Bond, 2016), meaning that one video is not enough to develop these feelings. In fact, it is likely the parasocial effects found are built on existing feelings that participants have about Harris. Viewing one of these videos could have reminded participants of their feelings, but not created them.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study supports PKM (Friestad & Wright, 1994) by further corroborating previous research on the links between persuasion knowledge, message resistance, and behavioral intentions, as a response to persuasive attempts. Our findings also extend the model to include key concepts that may disrupt persuasion knowledge and lower message resistance: authenticity and parasocial relationships. Authenticity is already known to be important for advertising, where it can lead to greater engagement with a product (Walsh et al., 2024).

Likewise, politically, it can lower perceptions of manipulative intent (Hirsch et al., 2024), which has important downstream effects on voting. While parasocial relationships take longer to develop than perceptions of authenticity, even initial impressions of their possibility also reduce message resistance and behavioral outcomes.

Practically, our findings about the specific videos offer insights into the realm of political content on TikTok. For the younger adult generation (Gen Z), videos that edit together fan content, use current trends, and incorporate popular music could be more effective in affecting attitudes than traditional media which may focus on substantive campaign messages. This further highlights politicians' needs to understand the norms and expectations of the TikTok content landscape, beyond just uploading standard campaign content there (Cervi et al., 2023; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). Indeed, our findings demonstrate the value of entertaining content over informative persuasive messaging (with our Gen Z participants). On the negative side, these findings also highlight how on a platform like TikTok, political videos need to have very little substance to lower resistance toward a candidate and potentially increase the likelihood that viewers would vote for them. This indicates that politicians need not be particularly qualified to get far – an effect that exists outside of social media but may be amplified by the nature of TikTok videos in particular.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research comes with several limitations which must be addressed in future research. First, while our sample is representative of Gen Z in terms of age, it is skewed in other demographics. Our sample is predominantly white, whereas Gen Z as a whole is more racially diverse than any previous generation (Igielnik, 2020). The sample also over-represents women and may over-represent left-leaning views for this generation. These factors could in part be due to geographical factors (northeastern United States) and are also limited by those currently in higher education, which is not representative of all young adults.

We are also limited in our ability to measure certain concepts. Most importantly, we cannot fully assess parasocial relationships in just one video exposure, as these feelings take time to develop. This is evident in the lack of differences between videos; no video triggered more of a parasocial effect than any other. Though we found a significant relationship of parasocial relationship on message resistance and on intention to vote, parasocial feelings may have already developed prior to this study, which we did not measure here.

Finally, we measured the effects of three common types of TikTok content involving a well-known politician. While there are many videos related to Harris, we were limited by TikTok's niche algorithm, whereby participants may not understand some content if they were not previously exposed. Additionally, our design did not include a control group, as it is difficult to know how previous exposure to Harris' content may impact participants' perceptions of her. It is unlikely that these videos are the first our participants have seen, so it is highly unlikely that an experiment would capture the true effect of the videos. Finally, only one of the three videos was campaign-generated. The production value, scripting, and content of the campaign-generated video could have introduced unknown biases when compared to shorter, fan-generated videos featuring Kamala Harris' dancing or comedic facial expressions.

Future research should continue to investigate how alternative campaign messages impact voter turnout. While our findings demonstrate the persuasive elements of entertaining content, this may not be true for all social media users. Future work should continue probing how much the content of messages impacts virality and voter turnout. Additionally, little is known about how social media influencers posting, commenting, dueting, or stitching political content impacts followers' intentions to vote for a certain candidate. Understanding how political candidates compared to influencers attempt to persuade voters would broaden the scope of political communication on platforms like TikTok. Finally, we did not ask participants if they decided to seek out other content about Kamala Harris after viewing one of her videos. TikTok's capitalization on short-form, viral content does not always leave room for education on political stances and ideas. Future studies should seek to understand if and how users educated themselves on the political candidate's stances after initial exposure to a video.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand how Kamala Harris' unique social media campaign influenced Gen Z's resistance to persuasion and intentions to vote for her. Results found significant relationships between message resistance and persuasion knowledge, authenticity, and parasocial relationships respectively. Furthermore, message resistance, authenticity, and parasocial relationships were significant predictors of the participant's intention to vote for Kamala Harris. Persuasion knowledge, message resistance, and perceived authenticity varied based on the type of video show. For example, viewers perceived Harris as the most authentic in the traditional campaign

video. The video geared towards popular music and dancing encountered the least message resistance. Knowledge of persuasion tactics was the least for the video that followed current trends and memes.

Results of this study add to existing knowledge of how Gen Z interacts with short-form, persuasive content on TikTok. It also showcases the impact untraditional campaign messaging can have on potential voters. While further research is needed to understand if these methods can impact the overall election, our findings broaden the framework of the PKM and the political communication field by providing examples of what content influences Gen Z and how it affects their message resistance and overall voting intentions.

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Figure 1.

Theorized Model

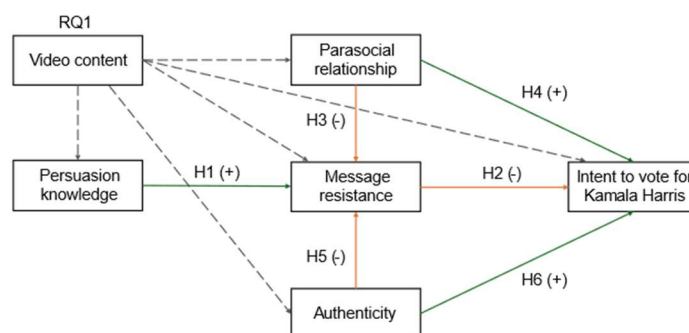


Table 1.

Additional Sample Characteristics

Variable	n	%
Social Media Used		
Instagram	359	97.0
Snapchat	340	91.9
TikTok	312	84.3
YouTube	290	78.4
LinkedIn	223	60.3
Facebook	139	37.6
WhatsApp	54	14.6
X (Twitter)	312	84.3
Reddit	84	22.7
Follows Kamala Harris on Social Media		
TikTok	56	15.1
Instagram	29	7.8
X (Twitter)	7	1.9
Do not follow	298	80.5
Unsure	8	2.2
Seen Kamala Harris' Videos		
TikTok	293	79.2
Instagram	234	63.2
X (Twitter)	93	25.1
Facebook	24	6.5
Has not seen	29	7.8
Unsure	4	1.1
Donated to Campaigns		
Trump	5	1.4
Harris	6	1.6
Biden	3	0.8
Voter Eligibility		
Eligible	370	100.0
Voter Registration Status		
Registered	317	85.7
Not registered	53	14.3
Registration Before Biden Dropped Out of Race		
Registered	229	61.9
Was not registered	85	23.0
Political Party		

Figure 2.

Kamala Harris TikTok Videos Used as Experimental Stimuli



Note. From left to right: Information (Campaign), humor (Gen Z debate edit), music (Femininomenon).

Table 2

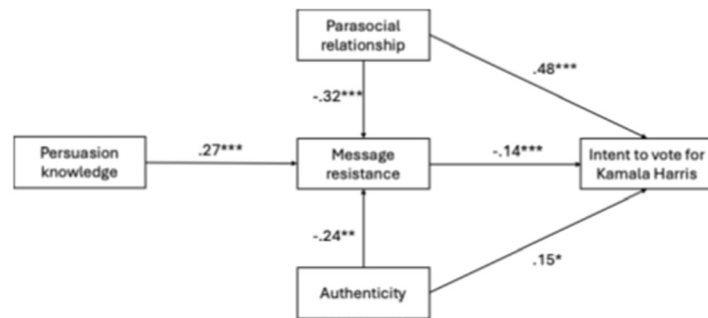
Correlation Matrix of All Variables in Analysis

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	19.14	.90	-							
2. Gender	.64	.48	-.17**	-						
3. Race	.11	.32	.07	.06	-					
4. Party	1.61	.49	.04	.29**	.13*	-				
5. Knowledge	3.39	.84	-.02	-.02	-.04	.15**	-			
6. Resistance	2.74	.81	-.07	-.29**	.14*	-.39**	.07	-		
7. Parasocial	2.86	.96	.01	.33**	.08	.69**	.32**	-.43**	-	
8. Authentic	3.34	.97	.00	.26**	.09	.64**	.41**	-.39**	.83**	-
9. Vote	.49	.50	.05	.35**	.14*	.73**	.20**	-.40**	.66**	.60**

Notes. Gender (binary-coded): 0 = male, 1 = female; Race (binary-coded): 0 = white, 1 = non-white or mixed race; Party (binary-coded): 1 = Republican or republican-leaning, 2 = Democrat or Democrat-leaning. Vote Harris: 0 = Other, 1 = Harris. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Figure 3.

SEM Model Results



Notes. Standardized Betas; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Effects of Diversity Mixed Messages in Organizational Hiring Websites on Perceived Person-Organization Fit and Application Intention for Entry-Level Applicants

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Abstract: Organizations frequently incorporate explicit diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statements and photographs of current employees into their online presence, in part to signal to potential job applicants their ability to 'fit in' to the organization, its culture, and its extant members. This two-factor (match between organizational DEI statement and racioethnic diversity of members depicted) experiment (N = 105) tested the effect of diversity mixed messages on applicant perceptions of person-organization fit, accounting for the moderating effects of individuals' demographics (i.e., race/gender and political lean). Results revealed the consistency of DEI statements and the depictions of current organizational members did not affect applicants' perceptions they would fit into the organization or their intention to apply to the organization. Moreover, person-organization fit did not have a mediating effect, nor did the individual's status as a majority member nor their political lean moderate that mediating process. Taken together, findings suggest organizations' recruiting efforts may not necessarily be harmed by inconsistent diversity management messaging online.

Introduction

Employee recruitment seeks to attract qualified applicants who possess the skills, personalities, and other competencies needed to enhance an organization. Organizations therefore spend substantive resources creating self-presentational messages directed toward job-seekers, as their messages and branding are important means by which prospective employees form initial impressions of the employer, affecting their perceptions of the organization and application intentions (Uggerslev et al., 2012). Online tools, including social media and more traditional websites, are an important part of this messaging strategy; and organizations carefully present messages online they

believe will effectively construct an identity perceived as attractive by qualified candidates (Allen et al., 2013). However, the myriad of messages an organization can incorporate into its online messaging can also result in mixed messages: the misalignment between various messages, including between textual statements and audiovisual representations (Johansen & Gregersen, 2024).

One focus of many organizational messages—both visual and textual—to prospective applicants has become their diversity climate: “the degree to which a firm advocates fair human resource policies and socially integrates underrepresented employees” (McKay et al., 2008, p. 352), where “underrepresented employees” can consist of any relevant social category, including racioethnic, gender, age, disability status, that serves as a demographic or social status minority within the organization (Kidder et al., 2004). A global issue, diversity climate has been of growing focus of US-based organizations since the 1980s (Holmes et al., 2021); and both theoretical (Cox, 1994) and empirical (Holmes et al., 2021) work has generally recognized the organizational benefits of more inclusive workplaces. One particularly visible manifestation of an organization’s diversity climate has been an articulated diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiative promoting, “a culture in which, within a given context, each person is valued and given equal opportunities to thrive” (Feitosa et al., 2022, p. 437). DEI statements formally articulate the organization’s DEI initiatives, codifying the organization’s diversity climate via policy regarding their culture.

However, an organization’s self-statements and its actual behaviors regarding diversity are not always congruent, resulting in inauthentic self-presentations. Avery and Johnson (2008) referred to this misalignment between an organization’s words and actions as diversity mixed messages. Across three studies, Windscheid and colleagues (2016) demonstrated the negative effect of an organization’s use of a diversity mixed message on employer attractiveness, moderated by perceptions of behavioral integrity. Specifically, the presence of a diversity mixed message negatively affects applicants’ perceptions of the organization’s behavioral integrity, and subsequently further negatively impacts the employer’s attractiveness.

The present study extends Windscheid et al.’s (2016) study in three important ways. First, we consider perceptions of person-organization (PO) fit—rather than behavioral consistency—as a mediator. Second, we sought to replicate their findings amid the current sociopolitical climate within the United States. Third and relatedly, this work additionally considered the moderating factors of race and political leaning. Amid the cacophony of diversity climate messages

organizations now generate online, and concurrent to sociopolitical tensions around diversity efforts, this research provides empirical answers to the question: Do DEI statements work?

Literature Review

Diversity Management and Its Role in Applicant Perceptions

Job applicants increasingly emphasize the importance of working for organizations who share their views on social issues (Firfiray & Mayo, 2017). Consequently, organizations increasingly try to signal their valuations of such issues, particularly their diversity climate, which is made manifest through various diversity management practices. These practices can increase the organizational attractiveness of an organization to potential applicants, particularly those belonging to traditional workforce minority groups (Avery et al., 2013). Diversity initiatives had been considered normative and a reflection management practices of the core values of US-based organizations since the late-1980s (Kidder et al., 2004), and were most prominently communicated through diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statements (Wang et al., 2022).

Diversity, equity, and inclusion statements are explicit written artifacts used to (1) attract talent, (2) become employers of choice, and (3) signal that certain psychographic and demographic dimensions are relevant—and therefore important—to the organization (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity and race, nationality, culture, knowledge, education; Jonsen et al., 2021). DEI statements are an important part of a company's brand and can help applicants gauge whether the organization values diversity and if they would feel welcome and supported as organizational members (Wang et al., 2023). However, for DEI statements (and likely other diversity management efforts) to be successful, they need to be perceived as authentic representations of actual organizational practices. When an organization's statements regarding their diversity practices and their actual actions to promote diversity are inconsistent, they are engaging in a diversity mixed message (Avery & Johnson, 2008). For example, an organization claiming to foster and promote a diverse workforce whose staff are shown to be comprised of only White males is transmitting a gender and racioethnic mixed message. Though clear diversity messages can enhance an organization's attractiveness to potential applicants, diversity mixed messages can reduce the organizational attractiveness perceived by potential applicants.

In an illustrative series of experiments utilizing German adult participants, Windscheid et al. (2016) explored the effect of diversity mixed messages on perceived organizational attractiveness, mediated

by the perceived behavioral integrity of the organization. They considered behavioral integrity as an intermediate variable, theorizing that diversity mixed messages evidenced the organization decoupled their values from implementation and were less trustworthy, leading to reductions in perceived attractiveness. Findings generally supported the indirect relationship of diversity mixed messages on organizational attractiveness, mediated by behavioral integrity, provided the visual depiction of diversity reached a sufficient tipping point to cue a consistent diversity message. Specifically, at least two minority members (i.e., women) needed to be pictured among six other men on an executive board to activate diversity consistent messages, as the presence of only one woman was perceived as tokenism: insufficient to demonstrate gender diversity among organizational leadership.

Informative in its own right, Windscheid et al.'s (2016) study offers a template on which to build and advance communication scholarship in three ways. First, their consideration of behavioral integrity as a mediating factor impacted by diversity mixed messages suggests a direct perception of the organization (i.e., Does the employer have integrity?) rather than applicant-focused perceptions (e.g., Is this employer's integrity commensurate with my own standards?). Second, though their sample of German adults provides a broad understanding of the effects of organizations' online messages, such processes may differ for a younger subset of workers, who—without years of work experience or industry knowledge—may interpret organizational recruitment messaging differently. Finally, it is important to extend their research into populations in which diversity climate may not be as uniformly valued, considering how specific demographic and psychographic variables influence these processes. Consequently, the present study extends Windscheid et al. (2016), considering person-organization fit as an alternate mediator to explain the presence of mixed diversity messages on applicants' behavioral intention to apply.

Person-Organization Fit

Person-organization (P-O) fit refers to the alignment between an individual's values, beliefs, and personality with the culture, values, and norms of an organization (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). P-O fit offers a conceptually-distinct mechanism from behavioral integrity, as it addresses a perception intrinsic to the applicant rather than an external perception of the organization; and such attitudinal perceptions are more focal to theories of diversity climate on applicants (see Cox, 1994). As younger (e.g., Generation Z) applicants place substantive import on the perceived match between their own values and those of a potential organization (Cho et al., 2013; Dutta, 2010; Firfiray & Mayo,

2017), perceptions of P-O fit have become critical in the contemporary hiring landscape. Consequently, it has become increasingly important for organizations to signal their organizational culture, values, and norms to maximize the potential P-O fit between applicants and themselves. The presence of diversity messages therefore positively impacts perceptions of P-O fit with an organization (Bradley et al., 2024), by signaling the organization's values matches the applicant's own.

Organizations often use photographs of current employees on their website and other online channels to, "manage potential applicants' impressions of their current levels of, and actions to improve" diversity (Windscheid et al., 2018, p. 997). Manifesting the adage, "Show, don't tell," organizations can use imagery to selectively present their demographic composition. Germane to this research, Braddy et al. (2009) demonstrated potential applicants perceive greater P-O fit with organizations whose websites depicted demographically-diverse employees.

Diversity consistent messages should increase perceptions of P-O fit among applicants. Beyond influencing perceptions of organizational integrity due to assessing the internal alignment of organizational messages, diversity mixed messages serve as message contents themselves to provide assessments of the organization's emphasis. Diversity mixed messages should signal to potential organizational members the organization's position and actions regarding diversity are not as strong as when a consistent set of messages is presented. Just as applicants view their P-O fit with an organization more favorable when seeing a single message (2009), applicants exposed to consistent diversity management messages should similarly assess the fit between themselves and the organization favorably. Alternately, applicants exposed to diversity mixed messages should be less-able to determine (and thus experience lower) P-O fit.

H1: An applicant's perceived person-organization fit is greater when presented with diversity consistent messages than with diversity mixed messages.

As a critical dimension of fit for potential employers (Kristof, 1996), P-O fit also substantively influences applicants' attitudes and behaviors toward the organization. Applicants who perceive a strong alignment between their values and those of the organization (i.e., high P-O fit) are more likely to be attracted to the organization, actively pursue job opportunities there, and accept a job offer (Cable & Judge, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2023; Pfieffelman et al., 2010; Swider et

al., 2015). In the present work, rather than intermediary perceptions (e.g., organizational attraction) which lead to subsequent behaviors, we sought to focus on the behavioral implications of P-O fit that are critical to many organizations, specifically application intention. Such a focus can account for situations where an individual may see an organization as attractive for membership, but still not have an interest in applying. Substantive work has demonstrated perceived P-O fit is a critical element of whether an applicant will consider applying to a job with an organization (e.g., Hayduk & Walker, 2018; Yen et al., 2011), and specifically that perceived P-O fit moderates the effect of an organization's online claims on application intention (e.g., Sharma & Tanwar, 2023; Suprawan et al., 2025). We therefore predicted:

H2: Perceived person-organization fit is positively related to intention to apply.

Moderating Roles of Gender and Race

Though research generally presumes organizations articulating inclusive diversity climates tend to experience benefits (Cox & Blake, 1991; Windscheid et al., 2016), these effects are not universal; and some diversity management practices can result in backlash. Kidder et al. (2004) defined backlash as, "a negative response to a decision or policy that occurs when a person thinks that others have received undeserved benefits" (p. 79). These negative reactions to diversity management practices are more frequently experienced by higher-status majority group members, who can perceive those practices as providing preferential treatment to lower-status minority groups: particularly White men.

As diversity management programs often manifest as initiatives for minorities, those initiatives are often met with backlash by White men, who have typically held high-status positions in workplaces in the United States (Ridgeway, 1991). Given the historically dominant status of their social category, White men can perceive diversity management program as a threat to their majority status (Kidder et al., 2004). Though not new, some studies suggest backlash among White men is intensifying as sustained diversity management trends have created a perception of racial victimhood (Kaiser et al., 2022). Given this, consistent messages about an organization's diversity climate may reduce White male applicants' perception they belong in or are wanted by the organization, reducing their perceived P-O fit. Contrarily, inconsistent messages about an organization's diversity climate (i.e., diversity mixed messages) may be perceived by White male applicants as ambiguity in company policies

and procedures, and thus they are more likely to ‘fit’ ‘with the company. Taken together, these considerations suggest an applicant’s racioethnic and background (i.e., White males vs. not) moderates the effect of diversity mixed messages on their perception of P-O fit. Formally:

H3: White male job applicants experience greater perceived person-job fit due to the presence of an organization’s diversity mixed messages than do non-White or non-male applicants.

Moderating Role of Political Lean

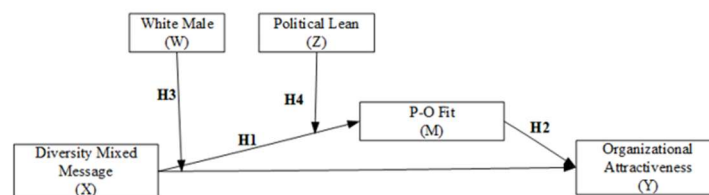
A final purpose of the present research was to extend accounting for some of the unique sociocultural and political landscapes of the contemporary United States, which differs substantively from that of the German participants of Windscheid et al. (2016). Again, US-based organizations have increasingly engaged in diversity and inclusion efforts for almost four decades (Holmes et al., 2021); and early-career workers had increasingly perceived an organization’s diversity management as desired and favorable (Bradley et al., 2024). However, recent changes in the political and social landscape of the United States have reversed those norms and behaviors. Organizational DEI efforts have become a polarizing political issue in the past ten years, as the United States government and right-wing political parties have sought to erroneously deny the existence of systemic racism in US history and policy, and suppress DEI efforts accordingly (Trump, 2025; Zahn, 2025).

There is empirical evidence that the impact of political ideology can influence perspectives of DEI efforts (Iyer, 2022). Kukharkin and colleagues (2026) recently found Trump supporters (i.e., far- and alt-right conservatives) were more likely to perceive diversity management as upsetting their hierarchical social and organizational status, and thus more likely to support banning DEI efforts. More directly, Folberg et al. (2024) found that as individuals were more conservative (i.e., right-leaning) they perceived less organizational fit and were less interested in applying to an organization who requested applicants submit a DEI statement along with other application materials. Taken together, these suggest one’s political attitudes should further moderate the effect of the presence of a diversity consistent message on perceptions of person-organization fit, as more conservative (i.e., right-leaning) individuals would be less impacted by the presence of a diversity consistent message. ;

H4: Political lean moderates the relationship of diversity consistent messages, so that the effect of diversity mixed messages on person-organization fit is stronger for left-leaning than politically right-leaning individuals.

Taken together, these hypotheses suggest a complex interaction of sociodemographic factors activated upon exposure to diversity consistent or mixed messages, impacting a potential applicant's perceived person-job fit with the organization and subsequent application intention. These relationships are presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1.
Hypothesized relationships among study concepts.



Method

Procedures

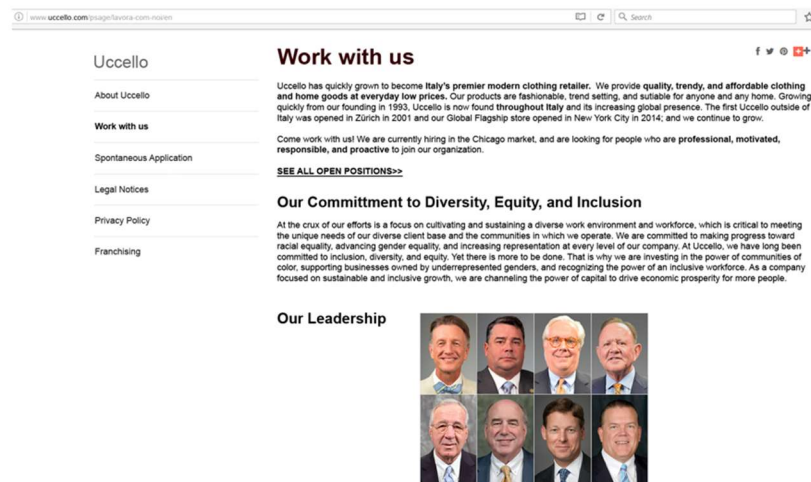
An online experiment was conducted using a convenience sample of participants. After consenting to participate, participants viewed a static image of the website of an organization currently hiring for multiple positions at various employment levels. A static image was used rather than an actual website to prevent participants from navigating away from the focal stimulus. Additionally, the target organization—Uccello—was fabricated for this study, so all resultant perceptions can consequently be attributed to experimental conditions rather than preexisting knowledge or attitudes about the target organization. After carefully reading the stimulus, participants completed a set of measures about their perceptions of the organization and themselves.

In all conditions, participants saw an organizational hiring website (Figure 2). The website provided a brief summary of the organization, a diversity, equity, and inclusion statement, and a picture of either the leadership team or prototypical staff. To alleviate concerns of message effects associated with single-message designs (Reeves et al., 2016), multiple DEI statements were drawn from actual corporate

DEI statements: One from Goldman Sachs and another from International Rescue Committee (see Appendix A) and inserted into the hiring web page stimuli to under a header, “Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.” Participants were randomly exposed to one of the two DEI statement messages.

Figure 2.

Example of Diversity Mixed Message Stimulus, Presenting DEI Statement and Picture of Racioethnically Homophilous/Staff.



The consistency of diversity messages was achieved by the manipulation of the images that appeared below the DEI statement, depicting either the Board of Trustees or a group of interns at Uccello. Photographs were manipulated to be either racioethnic and gender homophilous or heterophilous. One set of photos depicted racially and gender homophilous company members (i.e., all individuals were White males), whereas the other set of photos depicted racially and gender heterophilous company members (i.e., diverse racioethnicities and gender, as at least half of the individuals depicted were non-White and not male). This variance in the racioethnicity of current Uccello members thus presented participants with either a diversity consistent message (i.e., a DEI statement followed by demographically diverse individuals) or a diversity inconsistent message (i.e., a DEI statement followed by demographically homophilous individuals). Participants were equally distributed among these two conditions, $\chi^2(1) = 1.15$, $p = .28$.

Participants

A convenience sample of respondents were recruited from the student population of an over-enrolled university in the Midwest United States. Though some have raised concerns about social science's overuse of college student samples (e.g., Gordon et al., 1986), such a sample was appropriate for the present study as it a population about to enter the workforce and thus highly attuned to learning about potential employers, and as such employers target that demographic with their messages about job openings (Rozelle & Landis, 2002). A total of 109 individuals completed the study; but data from 4 respondents were excluded due to failing both of the two attention checks used to ensure data quality, resulting in a final $N = 105$. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 47 ($M = 22.11$, $SD = 5.57$); and self-reported myriad of genders: female = 75, male = 20, transgender = 4, self-specified = 5, and no response = 1. Additionally, participants' races generally reflected the student population: White = 86, Black or African American = 6, Asian = 5, American Indian or Alaska Native = 1, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander = 1, and multiracial = 3.

As the third hypotheses specifically predicts a moderation effect for White males, these demographics were recoded so that any participant who indicated their race as only White and their gender as male was categorized as a White male. Any participant indicating a gender other than only male (i.e., including those indicating male among multiple concurrent gender identities) and/or indicating a race other than only White (i.e., including those indicating White among multiple racial identities) were recoded as non-White male. This resulted in an asymmetrical distribution of White males ($n = 15$) and non-White males ($n = 90$), $\chi^2(1) = 53.57$, $p < .001$, primarily driven by few participants indicating solely a male gender.

Measures

Unless noted otherwise, all items were measured using 7-point Likert type scales, with higher values indicating greater levels of the construct. *Application intention* was measured with three items from Highhouse et al. (2003), including "I would probably apply for a job at this company if they had a position for which I was qualified." The scale demonstrated good reliability, $\alpha = .83$.

Person-organization (P-O) fit was operationalized via three items. Two items, "Given my overall impression of this employer, I think there is a good 'fit' between Uccello and myself," and "I think people in Uccello will think I fit in well with the organization," were drawn from Adkins et al. (1994); and were supplemented with one item from Saks and Ashforth (1997): "Uccello measures up to the kind of

organization I would be looking for.” The three items demonstrated good reliability, $\alpha = .86$.

Political lean was assessed using a single-item measure asking participants to indicate how they viewed themselves along a 7-point scale ranging from very liberal to very conservative. Responses were recoded so that anyone responding to any degree (i.e., Strongly, Moderately, Somewhat) of either Liberal (coded as -1) or Conservative (coded as +1) were coded as such, and anyone indicating the scale midpoint (i.e., nonpartisan / independent) was coded as 0. Though participants disproportionately ($\chi^2[2] = 40.52, p < .001$) self-reported a Liberal political lean ($n = 65$), both Independents ($n = 23$) and Conservatives ($n = 16$) were sufficiently represented for analyses. Finally, the instrument captured respondents’ age, race, and gender. Bivariate correlations among key study variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Descriptive and Bivariate Correlations Among Study Variables.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>
1. Diversity Consistent Messaging	.45	.50	-			
2. Person-Organization Fit	4.16	1.42	.18	-		
3. Application Intention	4.87	1.27	.03	.77*	-	
4. White Male [†]	.14	.35	-.09	-.07	-.002	-
5. Political Lean [‡]	.47	.75	-.05	.12	.12	.04

Notes: $N = 210$

* $p < .05$

[†]White males were dummy-coded as 1, while anyone not self-reporting to be both (and solely) White and male were coded as 0.

[‡]Political orientation was asked on a 7-point scale ranging from “Very Liberal” (-3) to “Very Conservative” (+3), centered on “Apolitical/Independent” (0). All liberal responses (i.e., -3 to -1) were collapsed and recoded as “Liberal” (-1) and all conservative responses (i.e., +1 to +3) were collapsed and recoded as “Conservative” (+1) for analyses.

Results

Hypothesis Testing

Given the predicted relationship among variables, Hayes’ (2020) PROCESS macro (v. 3.3, Model 9) was used to test the hypothesized moderated mediation model. The presence (vs. absence) of a consistent diversity message was entered as the predictor variable (x), application intention as the outcome variable (y), with person-organization fit as a mediating variable (m), and both white male (w; dummy coded so that meeting both conditions was coded as 1, failure to meet either demographic coded as 0) and political lean (z) were entered as moderators.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 predict the main and mediating effects of diversity mixed messages on application attention through person-organization fit. Consistent with H2, perceived person-organization fit positively predicted application intention, $B = .70$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$ (see Table 2). However, the presence of a diversity mixed message did not directly affect either perceived person-organization fit, $B = .17$, $SE = .35$, $p = .63$, or application intention, $B = -.30$, $SE = .16$, $p = .07$; nor did P-O fit mediate the effect of a diversity mixed message on application intention, $B = .36$, $SE = .19$, 95%CI: $-.01, .75$. As perceived person-organization fit did not statistically differ for participants exposed to a consistent diversity message ($n = 47$, $m = 1.22$, $sd = 1.22$) and a diversity mixed message ($n = 58$, $m = 3.93$, $sd = 1.54$), $t(103) = 1.87$, $p = .06$, so H1 was not supported.

Table 2.

Moderated Mediation Model Predicting Willingness to Apply to An Organization.

	Model 1 (Moderators)		Model 2 (Mediator)	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i> _{bootstrap}	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i> _{bootstrap}
<i>Predictor and mediator</i>				
Diversity message consistency (X)	.17	.35	-.30	.16
Person-Organization fit (M)			.70*	.06
<i>Moderators</i>				
White male [†] (W)	-.68	.49		
Political lean [‡] (Z)	.46	.26		
<i>Interactions</i>				
M × W	1.15	.83		
M × Z	-.42	.37		
Constant	4.25*	.24	2.10*	.25
R ²	.08		.60	

Notes: $N = 104$

* $p < .01$

[†]White males were dummy-coded as 1, while anyone not self-reporting to be both (and solely) White and male were coded as 0.

[‡]Political orientation was asked on a 7-point scale ranging from "Very Liberal" (-3) to "Very Conservative" (+3), centered on "Apolitical/Independent" (0). All liberal responses (i.e., -3 to -1) were collapsed and recoded as "Liberal" (-1) and all conservative responses (i.e., +1 to +3) were collapsed and recoded as "Conservative" (+1) for analyses.

Finally, hypotheses 3 and 4 predict the moderating effect of being a White male (H3) and political lean (H4) on the relationship between the presence of a consistent diversity message and P-O fit. As shown in Table 3, the indirect effect of being a White male on the relationship between consistent diversity message and P-O fit was not significant, $B = .81$, $SE = .61$, 95%CI: $-.41, 2.01$. Thus, H3 was not supported. Similarly, the indirect effect of political lean on the

relationship between consistent diversity message and P-O fit was also not significant, $B = -.29$, $SE = .24$, 95%CI: $-.77, .16$. Thus, H4 was also not supported.

Table 3.

Indirect Effect of Diversity Message Consistency on Willingness to Apply to An Organization through Person-Organization Fit Moderated by Whether Individual Is White and Male and Political Lean.

<u>Mediator: Person-Organization Fit</u>		<u>DV: Application Intention</u>			
<i>Moderators:</i>				Bootstrap 95%CI	
White Male	Political Lean	Effect	Bootstrap SE	LL	UL
Yes	Liberal	.43	.27	-.10	.98
Yes	Independent	.28	.42	-.59	1.09
Yes	Conservative	-.15	.40	-.96	.63
No	Liberal	1.12	.68	-.24	2.42
No	Independent	.98	.68	-.31	2.41
No	Conservative	.55	.74	-.95	1.96

<u>Indices of partial moderated mediation:</u>				Bootstrap 95%CI	
	Index	Bootstrap SE		LL	UL
White Male	.81	.61		-.41	2.01
Political Lean	-.29	.24		-.77	.16

Notes: $N = 104$; 10,000 bootstrap sample

Discussion

Organizations continue to signal their internal attributes—their culture, members, and character—online, particularly to potential job applicants. As discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion within organization cultures dominate the current zeitgeist (e.g., Zahn, 2025), organizations can selectively self-present their image online—including explicitly via the inclusion of DEI statements and implicitly via their selection of imagery used to present extant organizational members—to signal their attitudes towards inclusiveness, potentially shaping applicants' decision-making process. These online signals are particularly important as applicants increasingly rely on online tools gather information and assess critical aspects of a company such as its culture, reputation, and transparency (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015); and particularly to determine the consistency of what an organization says and what it does. By extending Windscheid et al.'s (2016) prior work to consider the mediating role of person-organization fit amid the current American political climate, the present research found that diversity mixed messages did not impact—either directly or indirectly—an individual's intent to apply to a position with that

organization. Below, we discuss the theoretical and applied implications of these findings.

Theoretical Implications

Counter to expectations, the present work did not support the hypothesized relationships between the consistency of an organization's diversity management messages and applicants' perceived person-organization (P-O) fit. Windscheid et al. (2016) theorized diversity mixed messages directly impacted perceived organization integrity as a function of the consistency of their messaging. As organizations increasingly engage in strategic ambiguity to, in part, concurrently communicate contradictory messages to disparate stakeholders (Eisenberg, 1984), this finding may reflect an increasing innate distrust in the fidelity of organizational or need for consistency therein. Likewise, individuals seem to be increasingly assess fit dimensions with smaller levels within the organization (e.g., specific manager or workteam) than the holistic macro-level organization (Kristof-Brown et al., 2023); and participants may have perceived the holistic diversity consistency of Uccello less germane than their potential P-O fit with a specific workgroup with whom they would interact more regularly. Findings therefore extend theory by revealing P-O fit may be a more holistic assessment of the organization than would be determined by any singular evaluation.

The present work did substantiate the hoary effect of participants' perceptions their personal values, beliefs, and personality align with those of the organization on their intention to apply to an available job with that organization (see Edwards & Cable, 2009; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Swider et al., 2015). However, that effect of P-O fit seemed to vary more idiosyncratically within-participant than due to the antecedents manipulated experimentally between-participants. Overall, these findings suggest P-O fit remains a robust and important criterion for hiring organizations to consider and proactively present to applicants.

Even despite the lack of support for most a priori hypotheses, this investigation remains theoretically meaningful as it sheds light on how an organization's diversity management communication contributes to shaping applicants' initial perceptions of organizational values and culture. For organizations, the absence of consistent diversity messaging may still pose a risk of alienating underrepresented groups, which could have implications for attracting diverse talent. Consequently, our study calls attention to the need for more research on how different populations interpret and respond to diversity initiatives

during recruitment, even when such initiatives may not directly translate into perceived fit (see also Samaniego, 2022).

Practical Implications

Findings additionally provide several practical implications for organizations seeking to construct their identity online to attract applicants. First, that diversity mixed messages did not impact a potential applicant's perceived person-organization fit indicates that—through the lens of conveying identity to applicants—organizations may not see reduced applicant interest even when online messaging regarding diversity initiatives is inconsistent, counter to prior work (i.e., Braddy et al., 2009) suggesting that staff photos of all White men made applicants less interested in the organization. As individuals are increasingly aware of the ability (and willingness) of organizations to selectively self-present their images on their own media, it could be applicants are increasingly wary of how strongly those depictions warrant the organization's actual offline self. For example, Dayley (2022) found students perceived college recruitment materials as unethical when overrepresenting the diversity on-campus. Job applicants may likely be wary of all online self-claims, concerned that organizationally-selected images may not faithfully or accurately reflect the prototypical organizational values or member, thus rendering the actual effect of an organization's online recruitment messaging inert. Thus, these findings may suggest online identity representations are no longer considered as faithful messages of the organization's actual attributes.

A second practical implication of this work is the lack of effect key demographics had on these processes. Though an organization's diversity climate has been increasingly recognized as an important consideration for applicants (Bradley et al., 2024), sociopolitical trends in the United States increasingly result in backlash among White men toward organizations espousing inclusive values and cultures (Kaiser et al., 2022; Kukharkin et al., 2026). Neither being a White male nor leaning politically-right had the expected moderating effect (or even main effects) on either P-O fit or application intentions in this work. The coopting of the Republican party by Donald Trump's 'Make American Great Again' (MAGA) movement in 2015 was largely due to the far-right group's appeal to young white men via stochastic rhetoric focused on appealing to 'White identity' and reaffirming the dominance of White men in systemic structures in the United States (Feagin & Ducey, 2025). Even so, these effects did not manifest in this sample; and White men were not disproportionately influenced by the consistency of diversity messages, potentially

indicating backlash effects are not as widespread as some media reports suggest.

Taken together, these findings may suggest a reversal in a 40-year trend of organizations focusing on clearly articulating diversity initiatives. Contemporary organizations may not need to be as worried about the consistency their textual and pictorial online diversity statements. As organizations continue to present themselves to potential organizational members via a seemingly ever-growing array of online tools, the opportunities for mixed messages are more abundant (Johansen & Gregersen, 2024). These data suggest the consequences of diversity mixed messages may not be as problematic as previously feared (Windscheid et al., 2016), without demonstrable effects on whether or not applicants actually apply for a job. Whereas employer messaging and branding remains important, ensuring consistent messages across channels and media may not merit the intense scrutiny and care that has been taken in recent years.

Limitations & Future Directions

The present research has several innate limitations, which future work can redress and continue to explore. First, future investigations can expand beyond racioethnicity in messaging, focusing how other dimensions of diversity, such as age or physical disability, might interact with DEI messaging. For example, studying the effects of an organization that articulates ceasing DEI efforts while concurrently depicting organizational members who require mobility assistance like wheelchairs (Abbott, 2025) could illustrate how different diversity mixed messages may result in alternate processes.

An additional opportunity for future research is to overcome the potentially-constrained perceptions of participants in the present work. Though college students are an appropriate sample for this research, findings may not be broadly generalizable for two reasons. First, participants were drawn from a single institution in the Midwest USA, and may not reflect the same perceptions, experience, and effects as college students in other regions of the United States, let alone globally (see Cheon et al., 2020). Second, the history effects under which the present work was conducted should be acknowledged and accounted for. With these data collected during a time of sociocultural turmoil in the United States—particularly around ideas of diversity, equity, and inclusions—it may not be that similar findings would be expected in five or fifteen years, when DEI is (hopefully) less polarizing. Continued replication of this work in more stable DEI environments may help determine to what degree these findings truly

reflect generalizable human phenomena rather than a snapshot of a moment in history.

Conclusion

This research explored the effect of consistent diversity management messaging on applicants' application intentions, mediated through perceptions of person-organization fit with an organization. Findings revealed organizations with diversity mixed messages—discrepant online cues regarding the organization's DEI efforts—neither directly nor indirectly affected individuals' intentions to apply to that organization. Possibly either due to the oversaturation of diversity messages in the last three decades or the increasing deliberate ambiguity of many organizations' diversity messages amid the more politically-tumultuous last decade, inconsistencies among diversity messages may be now so common they no longer provide meaningful signals regarding a workplace's employee inclusiveness. This is not to say that diversity management efforts are no longer important, simply that the consistent messaging thereof may not have meaningful impacts for organizational recruitment.

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His Cues, Her Cues: Teaching Presence, Gender, and Relational Impressions in Online Learning

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Abstract: Online courses are increasingly common and taken more frequently by students, yet students' perceptions of them may portray instructors as invisible and uninvolved. Drawing on social information processing theory, we argue that cues intended to signal course design are also interpreted relationally. Teaching presence, the work instructors do to be "present" in the online environment, is not merely instructional structure: it is relational communication embedded in course design. This study explored whether teaching presence and students' perceptions of immediacy and credibility are related, and whether those relationships differ by student gender. Using a cross-sectional survey, we divided our sample into male ($n = 97$) and female ($n = 193$) subgroups and conducted correlational analyses to examine potential gender differences. Findings suggest teaching presence cues are perceived more strongly by women than by men, highlighting the need to consider how online courses are experienced differently across student groups. Post hoc moderated regression analysis revealed only modest gender patterns, indicating that the interactions between the teaching presence variables and the perceptions reflect tendencies rather than categorical differences.

Introduction

During a recent conversation, one of the study's authors spoke with an undergraduate student about online learning. The student described their online instructor as "just a facilitator, and kind of invisible." This observation prompted several follow-up questions. In an era where millions of students take courses online, when does an instructor move from content manager to actual teacher? When does an instructor become present (i.e., "visible")? And, importantly, do all students experience that presence in the same way?

Since COVID-19, enrollment in online education has increased in higher education. When the National Center for Education Statistics (2024) began recording online enrollment in 2012, roughly 25% of students reported enrolling in some online courses; this number

grew to 36% by 2019, peaked at 73% in 2020, and then settled at 53% by 2024, signaling that mediated enrollment options have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Despite this shift, little research has explored how gender groups may interpret online course design cues (see Richardson & Swan, 2003), though prior work has examined gender in computer-mediated communication (Li, 2006; Yates, 2001) and instructional outcomes (Frymier & Houser, 2000). As online learning becomes more normative, it is critical to understand how instructional design might function as relational communication, making instructors visible to students, and whether that visibility differs across student subgroups.

We argue that students' perceptions of an instructor as immediate and/or credible are associated with online instructional design cues intended to establish teaching presence, and that gender may condition these associations. Rather than functioning as neutral pedagogical features, instructional design, discourse, and direct instruction simultaneously communicate *instructional* and *interpersonal* information. Drawing on social information processing theory's cue-substitution mechanism (Walther, 1992, 1993), we argue that students actively substitute available cues, including those designed for instructional purposes, to form relational impressions of their instructors. In online, cue-lean environments, this substitution means course design functions as relational communication whether instructors intend it or not. Because students of different genders may process and interpret these cues differently (Anderson & Haddad, 2005), the relational impressions derived from teaching presence may show distinct gendered patterns. This research seeks to describe those patterns and offer recommendations for instructors teaching across gender groups.

Literature Review

Social Information Processing Theory

Social information processing theory (SIPT; Walther, 1992) posits that relationships can develop online, albeit at a slower pace and through distinct social cues that may not be present in face-to-face interactions. SIPT would apply to virtual, cue-lean classrooms, where the absence of traditional nonverbal cues might pose challenges. SIPT suggests that interactants adapt by using available cues, both intentional (e.g., textual elements) and unintentional (e.g., response timing), to build impressions (Walther, 1993; Walther & D'Addario, 2001). Given the centrality of relationships to learning (Frymier & Houser, 2000; Frymier et al., 2019), SIPT is a valuable framework for exploring how students interpret and respond to virtual instructors' cues.

Central to SIPT is that, in cue-lean environments, interactants will interpret available cues relationally, including cues never intended to carry relational meaning, because the drive to form impressions persists regardless of the sender's intent (Walther, 1992, 1993) and can help relationships grow or create barriers (Walther, 2006). While previous studies using SIPT found that students use relational cues, such as textisms and emojis, to form impressions of instructors (Vareberg & Westerman, 2023), these cues were integrated purposefully into instructional messages. Not all instructional cues are sent intentionally. In online classes, cues meant for instruction may also be interpreted relationally. Most interactions between students and instructors in online courses (especially asynchronous ones) involve students engaging with the course design, not the instructor directly. In other words, students mostly interact with teaching presence cues that instructors design into courses. Teaching presence, as conceptualized by Garrison and colleagues (2000), refers to specific design cues that students may substitute for the traditional nonverbal cues absent in online spaces.

Teaching Presence as Cues

In their *Community of Inquiry* (CoI) model, Garrison and colleagues (2000; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007) argue that an exceptional learning experience occurs at the intersection of three types of *presence*: cognitive presence (with the content), teaching presence (with the instructor), and social presence (with peers). CoI suggests a collaborative, constructivist design approach (Arbaugh et al., 2008), in which students engage with content through hands-on tasks, work with their professor to learn about and confirm their understanding of essential topics, and collaborate with peers to discuss ideas (Caskurlu et al., 2021). This study focuses on teaching presence, which emphasizes what the instructor does to teach (e.g., designing the online environment, providing direct feedback; Caskurlu et al., 2021), rather than on who the instructor is as a person.

Teaching presence reflects critical elements of course design, such that learning becomes less meaningful when it is absent (Capra, 2013). It has also received increased attention due to the rise of asynchronous courses (Lim & Richardson, 2022; Ratan et al., 2022). Enhancing teaching presence requires aligning instructor actions with student expectations to create an (inter)active environment that fosters mutual knowledge creation. This alignment is essential, as teaching presence complements other elements of course design (Lim & Richardson, 2022; Martin et al., 2022), suggesting the more present an instructor is in their design, the more involved students become.

Teaching presence involves designing, organizing, facilitating, and directing the cognitive and social components that make educational outcomes meaningful (Caskurlu, 2018; Garrison et al., 2000; Martin et al., 2022).

Design and Organization

Design and organization refers to how an instructor communicates not only what the course topics, content, and assignments are but also how to successfully learn or complete them (Caskurlu, 2018; Caskurlu et al., 2021). Clear design and a present instructor, often signaled through contact information, accessibility, and feedback (Martin et al., 2022), improve student engagement (Caskurlu et al., 2021). An instructor's content delivery shapes students' learning behaviors (Wilson & Berge, 2023) and, perhaps, their relational impressions.

Facilitating Discourse

Instructors play a crucial role in fostering student conversations; facilitating discourse refers to instructors' efforts to cultivate these interactions (Caskurlu, 2018). Asynchronous discussion boards, live sessions, and/or collaborative assignments serve as the primary means of discourse (Martin et al., 2022). While students' sense of connectedness is a form of social presence, the responsibility for creating interaction rests with the instructor (Caskurlu et al., 2021). Students may struggle to form relationships without peer-to-peer engagement, and these challenges could ultimately shape their perception of the instructor.

Direct Instruction

Teaching presence is also one-on-one instruction, primarily through feedback (Caskurlu, 2018). Teaching presence occurs when "feedback loops – in terms of both formative and summative assessment, classroom assessment techniques, and program evaluation – are built into the learning process" (Ekmekci, 2013, p. 36). Feedback should be context-specific, include strengths and opportunities for improvement, and avoid couching or hedging (Gardner et al., 2017). Feedback plays a paradoxical role in developing presence: it must accurately diagnose learning issues (Martin et al., 2022) while encouraging sustained engagement (Holzweiss et al., 2014). How an instructor balances these demands may influence students' potential learning behaviors (Wilson & Berge, 2023).

These teaching presence cues represent the implicit design features students encounter most frequently in online courses and, per

SIPT, are therefore available for relational interpretation regardless of their intended instructional purpose. Though teaching presence cues refer to what instructors do rather than who they are, students interpret these cues and subsequently form relational impressions (e.g., immediacy, credibility) of that instructor (Walther, 1992, 1993). In short, instructional design cues become relational information that shapes students' impressions of the instructor as a person, regardless.

Student Impression: Immediacy

Perceived immediacy is pivotal in shaping students' experiences and perceptions of instructors. Perceived immediacy, defined as a feeling of decreased psychological distance (Mehrabian, 1969), captures how close the student feels to the course instructor (Richmond et al., 2018). Immediacy is often studied in the classroom as it serves as a vehicle for future relationships. Instructors who present themselves as warm and supportive impact students' eventual learning outcomes (Frymier et al., 2019), even when that communication occurs through mediated channels (Kelly et al., 2015). Conversely, instructors' low immediacy may negatively affect students' learning outcomes and experiences (Ojeda-Hecht et al., 2022).

Online presence, as conceptualized in the CoI model, is similar to immediacy (Thorpe & Morreale, 2023), as both presence and immediacy deal with cues to indicate closeness; however, as Kelly and Westerman (2016) argued, the behaviors alone do not equal students' perceived closeness (see also Kelly et al., 2015; Vareberg & Westerman, 2023). Students tend to react not to the cues themselves, but to their perceptions of those cues and their broader impressions (Kelly & Westerman, 2016; Kim et al., 2022). How students interpret these cues can shape their views of their instructors. In online courses, where direct interactions may be limited, instructors' ability to create a presence through design may influence students' perceptions of their immediacy (Christen et al., 2015). This project examines the relationship between teaching presence and students' perceived immediacy.

Student Impression: Credibility

In addition to perceptions of immediacy, students may form impressions of the instructor's credibility, as the sender of a message affects its reception (Teven & Katt, 2016). Conceptualized around Aristotle's idea of ethos, credibility is a multidimensional construct that assesses whether a source is perceived as knowledgeable, trustworthy, and caring. Credibility has been shown to significantly affect students' learning (Finn et al., 2009; Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998), but, like

many instructional variables, it has seldom been explicitly studied in online environments (Morreale et al., 2021), where its effects may differ from those observed in in-person settings. Past research has shown that nonverbal cues affect perceptions of credibility (Kelly et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2014; Vareberg & Westerman, 2023) and that course design influences how credible an instructor is perceived to be (Christen et al., 2015a), suggesting that teaching presence cues could have similar effects.

Although Aristotle initially linked these three indicators, credibility is derived from the audience and may vary depending on context and message (Teven & Katt, 2016). Therefore, it is best to split the construct into three dimensions: competence, character, and caring. Perceived competence is an instructor's perceived knowledge and ability to teach the content effectively (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Competence underpins an instructor's credibility: "An instructor who shows great compassion and caring for students without being perceived as highly competent gains no ground when it comes to students' impressions of his/her credibility" (Miller et al., 2014, p. 13; emphasis added). Perceived character refers to a source's trustworthiness and is often viewed as the heart of credibility (Teven & Katt, 2016). Audience members who perceive a source as untrustworthy are likely to view that person as less credible. Lastly, perceived caring positions the source as someone with the receiver's best interests in mind. Being viewed as caring generates more positive perceptions of competence and character, contributing to the image of an ideal educator (Teven & Katt, 2016).

Online students may substitute available cues, such as those implicit within course design, for absent cues to form impressions of the instructor, which will be reflected in students' perceptions of immediacy and credibility. However, these perceptions may not be equally experienced across all student groups. One distinction that may prompt differences in interpretation, based on research on computer-mediated communication more broadly (Li, 2006; Yates, 2001), is student gender.

Student Gender

Since research on Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) began, user gender has been an important and oft-considered factor. During early research, few gender-based differences emerged (Yates, 2001); those that did explained much about CMC, including that female users were more likely to report higher collaboration frequency, more engagement approaches, and to enjoy immediate feedback, while males were more likely to be seen as authoritative in online spaces and as

more skilled (Li, 2006). Herring (2000) argued that differences may be bifurcated by whether the communication is synchronous or asynchronous. Further, based on Hyde's (2005) Gender Similarities Hypothesis, the genders are more similar than different. Hyde continues, noting potential consequences for overinflating gender differences; as such, where differences emerge, they are best understood as tendencies rather than categorical distinctions.

In online learning environments specifically, these tendencies have taken on added significance yet reveal patterns in the literature that are exceedingly inconsistent. For instance, although female students were expected to experience greater satisfaction in online courses, they did not (Arbaugh, 2000). Relatedly, regarding social presence (another CoI dimension), female students were predicted to experience more social presence; they did (Richardson & Swan, 2003). However, Tu and colleagues (2011) later found no gender differences in social presence. Cho and colleagues (2022) found that male students experienced more social presence in their sample of South Korean learners, while female students tended to perform better in more organized courses (i.e., teaching presence). Additionally, women reported higher competence beliefs in digital learning spaces (Korlat et al., 2021), despite potential broader CMC challenges. Most recently, Mutawa (2025) found that male students were more satisfied with online courses, contradicting Arbaugh's earliest predictions. The conflicting evidence suggests the debate over gender patterns in online courses is far from settled; rather, the identified contradictions may stem from prior research that did not account for the formation of relational impressions. Relational information may be embedded within course design, such as the cues that make up teaching presence, and prompt students to view their courses and the cues within them differently across genders.

These differences between CMC and online learning settings may reflect a broader phenomenon in which males and females are socialized differently within learning environments. Online courses may necessitate certain skills and competencies that, as noted by Anderson and Haddad (2005), "complement women's ways of knowing" (p. 4). Skills such as dedication, motivation, and socio-emotional intelligence are in greater demand in online than face-to-face classes, and women, with their already greater use of CMC for socio-emotional purposes (Li, 2006), may be better suited to this environment than their male counterparts (Kamuhanda et al., 2025). Interestingly, Korlat and colleagues (2021) recently argued that it may be time to shift our focus from female to male students, who are being left behind during the enrollment crisis (Black, 2025; Mangan, 2022). These

differences in how each gendered group experiences and is socialized into online courses may ultimately shape how they interpret cues and form impressions within those courses.

Perhaps the most likely explanation is that teaching and learning inherently involve a relational element (Frymier & Houser, 2000). In online courses, these relational components are implicit in the course design. According to SIPT (Walther, 1992), online communicators substitute available cues for absent cues; as such, students derive social and relational information from cues intended to convey only instruction. Because instructional communication is inherently relational, and these teaching presence cues carry relational weight in online courses, how male and female students interpret these cues and the impressions they form may differ in meaningful ways. As such, we ask the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do teaching presence cues (design and organization, facilitating discourse, direct instruction) relate to students' perceptions of instructor immediacy, and do these relationships differ by gender?

RQ2: To what extent do teaching presence cues (design and organization, facilitating discourse, direct instruction) relate to students' perceptions of instructor credibility (competence, character, and caring), and do these relationships differ by gender?

Method

We used a cross-sectional survey to explore the relationships between students' perceptions of teaching presence (i.e., design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction) and instructors' relational impressions (i.e., immediacy and credibility).

Participants

A total of 304 students completed the questionnaire. Eight were lost during data cleaning. Because of the small number of students in each identifying group, those who identified as transmale ($n = 2$)¹,

¹ Transmale participants were not collapsed with cisgender male participants because doing so would assume equivalent socialization into online learning environments. Individuals are often socialized based on perceived or assigned sex rather than gender identity, meaning transmale and cisgender male students may represent distinct socialization trajectories. Collapsing these groups would conflate those trajectories and obscure rather than clarify potential differences. Given

non-binary ($n = 2$), or preferred not to respond ($n = 2$) were excluded from the analysis. The remaining sample ($N = 290$) included 97 males and 193 females. Our sample comprised 76 seniors, 72 juniors, 71 first-year students, 55 sophomores, and 16 graduate students. Our participants had an average age of 23.35 ($SD = 8.54$) and were predominantly Caucasian ($n = 220$). Other ethnicities represented were 44 Black, 12 Hispanic, 11 Indigenous American, 9 Asian, and 4 Middle Eastern; 7 participants preferred not to respond. (Participants could select multiple ethnicities.) Because this project sought to describe students' interpretations of an online asynchronous course, only students who indicated current enrollment in an online course were included as participants; 69 students were enrolled in a single online course, 95 in two courses, 55 in three, 45 in four, and 26 in five or more.

Procedures

Participants for this cross-sectional survey were recruited in three ways: first, from an introductory-course research pool at a medium-sized university in the upper Midwest U.S.; second, by recruiting broadly from the communication department at the same university; and third, by using snowball sampling via an organizational listserv to reach instructors at other universities whose students' experiences were relevant to our study. Upon opening the invitation, participants first saw the informed consent and were prompted to "agree and proceed" or "disagree and exit." Compensation (i.e., course points) was provided to students at the original university; other instructors independently determined whether to offer compensation. When completing the instruments, participants were instructed to consider the design of one fully online, asynchronous course in which they were currently enrolled.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire included seven continuous measures and demographic information. Before hypothesis testing, all measures were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). AMOS maximum-likelihood parameter estimation was used to conduct unidimensional measurement model tests. Byrne's (2016) fit standards were met, with

the small subgroup size, the decision was made to exclude transmale participants from analysis; future research should explore these questions with transgender and gender-diverse populations specifically, examining whether socialization history or gender identification are the more meaningful conditioning variables.

GFI ≥ 0.90 , CFI ≥ 0.90 , RMSEA ≤ 0.10 , and SRMR ≤ 0.08 . Notably, because of RMSEA's extreme sensitivity, Chen and colleagues (2008) note that a measure can be used for hypothesis testing if misfit is only shown in RMSEA. During CFA, items that contributed a statistically significant amount of residual error were removed sequentially, starting with the most problematic item, until the measure's fit was acceptable. Removed items were not used during hypothesis testing. (See Table 1 for descriptive statistics.)

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skew	Kurtosis	ω	α
Design & Organization	1.00	7.00	5.95	1.10	-1.36	2.13	.93	.92
Direct Instruction	1.00	7.00	5.63	1.44	-1.23	0.94		.86
Facilitating Discourse	1.00	7.00	5.50	1.33	-1.10	0.95	.94	.94
Perceived Immediacy	1.00	6.56	2.03	1.11	1.27	1.36	.95	.95
Competence	1.00	6.50	1.79	1.01	1.66	2.60	.91	.91
Caring	1.00	7.00	5.47	1.27	-0.75	0.34	.87	.87
Trustworthiness	1.00	7.00	6.32	0.96	-1.67	3.13	.93	.93

Teaching presence was measured using 13 items from Caskurlu's (2018) Community of Inquiry assessment, a multidimensional measure comprising four items assessing *design and organization*, seven items assessing *facilitating discourse*, and two items assessing *direct instruction*, all on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Facilitating discourse lost two items during CFA (*The instructor is helpful guiding...*; *The instructor is helpful identifying...*). Perceived immediacy was measured using Kelly and colleagues' (2015) assessment, consisting of nine semantic differential items on a 7-point scale (e.g., *cold-warm*). Fit statistics were acceptable. *Credibility* was measured using McCroskey and Teven's (1999) multidimensional assessment. Each subdimension—*competence*, *caring*, and *character*—captured perceptions using six items on a 7-point semantic differential scale. Overall, the measurement model lost three items: two from goodwill (*self-centered-not self-centered*; *not understanding-understanding*) and one from trustworthiness (*honorable-dishonorable*).

Results

To answer our research questions, we split the dataset so that analysis could be conducted separately by gender. We ran Pearson's correlations for each variable of interest. Results are shown in Table 2 for cismale students and in Table 3 for cisfemale students.

Regarding immediacy, all three teaching presence variables were significantly related to perceived immediacy, and these relationships did show some gender patterns. While all variables were positively related to perceived immediacy, these associations were stronger among female students than among male students, particularly for facilitating discourse and direct instruction (see Table 4 for confidence intervals).

Table 2. Correlations for Males.

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Design	97	5.86	1.02	-						
Discourse	97	5.52	1.24	.80**	-					
Direct Instruction	97	5.64	1.20	.70**	.80**	-				
Competence	97	5.90	1.12	.40**	.47**	.43**	-			
Caring	97	5.31	1.10	.38**	.51**	.46**	.71**	-		
Trustworthiness	97	6.01	1.12	.42**	.38**	.35**	.72**	.63**	-	
Perceived Immediacy	97	5.78	1.20	.44**	.49**	.43**	.76**	.74**	.79**	-

Table 3. Correlations for Females.

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Design	193	6.01	1.12	-						
Discourse	193	5.55	1.34	.85**	-					
Direct Instruction	193	5.60	1.45	.74**	.83**	-				
Competence	193	6.37	0.92	.71**	.72**	.60**	-			
Caring	193	5.82	1.18	.66**	.72**	.67**	.71**	-		
Trustworthiness	193	6.45	0.87	.76**	.70**	.60**	.72**	.80**	-	
Perceived Immediacy	193	6.01	1.02	.72**	.78**	.78**	.70**	.88**	.77**	-

Table 4. Confidence Intervals.

Variable 1	Variable 2	Male Students		Female Students	
		<i>r</i>	95% CI	<i>r</i>	95% CI
Design	Competence	0.40	[0.22, 0.55]	0.66	[0.57, 0.73]
Design	Caring	0.38	[0.19, 0.54]	0.58	[0.48, 0.67]
Design	Trustworthiness	0.42	[0.25, 0.58]	0.67	[0.59, 0.74]
Design	Perceived Immediacy	0.44	[0.26, 0.59]	0.64	[0.54, 0.71]
Discourse	Competence	0.47	[0.30, 0.61]	0.64	[0.55, 0.71]
Discourse	Caring	0.51	[0.34, 0.64]	0.67	[0.58, 0.74]
Discourse	Trustworthiness	0.38	[0.19, 0.54]	0.66	[0.57, 0.73]
Discourse	Perceived Immediacy	0.49	[0.33, 0.61]	0.75	[0.68, 0.81]
Direct Instruction	Competence	0.43	[0.25, 0.58]	0.57	[0.47, 0.66]
Direct Instruction	Caring	0.46	[0.29, 0.61]	0.62	[0.53, 0.70]
Direct Instruction	Trustworthiness	0.35	[0.16, 0.52]	0.59	[0.49, 0.67]
Direct Instruction	Perceived Immediacy	0.43	[0.25, 0.58]	0.74	[0.67, 0.80]

Note:

a. All correlations are significant at $p < .001$ (1-tailed).

b. CIs computed using Fisher's r -to- z transformation with z -critical = 1.96.

Relationships between the teaching presence variables and credibility variables were also positive. For competence, only design and organization showed a gender difference, with competence more strongly related to these cues for female students than for male students. In contrast, the relationships between direct instruction and competence, as well as facilitating discourse and competence, did not show significant gender differences. Regarding trustworthiness, all three areas of teaching presence were associated with it for both male and female students. However, the associations were stronger for female students than for male students for facilitating discourse and design & organization. Last, each teaching presence area was positively associated with caring for both female and male students; however, no gender differences emerged.

Post Hoc

Although this project was intended to capture descriptive tendencies, confidence intervals suggested that cisgender female students perceived several relational impressions more strongly than cisgender male students. To further explore whether the gender

differences observed in the correlational analyses reflected meaningful interaction effects, moderated regression analyses were conducted.

Interaction effects between each independent variable (teaching presence dimension) and gender were investigated for each dependent variable (perceived credibility and immediacy). DesignXgender and goodwill was the only moderated regression that approached statistical significance ($b = -.20$; $p = .08$). This negative interaction suggests that females may benefit more, in terms of goodwill perception, from higher design quality than males do. Ultimately, the lack of findings suggests the observed descriptive tendencies did not translate into interaction effects.

Discussion

This study was designed to explore the extent to which teaching presence cues substitute for otherwise absent relational information and, as such, are used by students to form impressions of immediacy and credibility, and further, these relationships may differ by student gender. Our findings suggest that teaching presence serves dual roles, conveying both content and relational information, allowing students to better “see” the instructor in the course. These signals are perceived more strongly by women than by men, highlighting the need to consider how online courses are experienced differently across student groups. In short, though both male and female students experience relational impressions in online course design, male students perceive these effects to a lesser degree, suggesting they are not entirely disengaged but rather experience them differently. Below, we unpack these descriptive findings, argue that online course design is, in some ways, a form of relational communication, and then explore the potential implications of these findings. We conclude with limitations and future directions.

Gender Differences in Student Impressions

Based on the evidence from this project, female and male students differ in the strength of the potential relationships between teaching presence and relational perceptions. However, because no significant predictors emerged in the moderated regression, the findings here should be viewed as tendencies rather than categorical distinctions. Consistently, the correlations among women were stronger than those among men; however, in line with Hyde’s (2005) hypothesis, post hoc analysis showed only one pair approaching significance, indicating that the genders are more alike than different. As such, our findings suggest that online course design carries relational weight and that this perception may differ across genders. We

argue for two potential explanations: first, structurally, online courses may be designed to cater more to women than to men; and second, women may process these online cues more deeply than men do. As Anderson and Haddad (2005) argued, online courses may more naturally complement "women's ways of knowing" (p. 4), suggesting that something structural about online courses works to the advantage of female students. Requiring students, especially online, to sit, process, make sense of, and create in single interactions may advantage women whose cognitive abilities enable them to engage in such behavior. These environments do not lend themselves as easily to the hands-on, applied instruction that male students may benefit from more (Kamuhanda et al., 2025). Current evidence indicates that each teaching presence dimension is more strongly associated with perceived immediacy and credibility among female students than among male students. Perhaps these scores reflect simply the structural advantages women may have in online courses: they are better able to engage with and interpret online cues. That the relationship between direct instruction and competence broke down further suggests that when the online environment is private, the structural advantages favoring women may also break down. Feedback, given its private nature and focus on correcting ideas based on course content, may equally signal competence to students.

Ultimately, though female and male students appear to perceive online course design through relational lenses, the relationships were consistently stronger for women, suggesting women may attend to, value, or relationally interpret cues differently than male students. This finding is not wholly surprising: Anderson and Haddad (2005) found that women perceived themselves as more engaged when learning online. Perhaps because of structural advantages, women may attend to and process more online information than male students. While male students may view online course design cues in isolation (i.e., as background information), female students may view online courses holistically. If male students view the information in pieces, the number of cues may need to meet a higher threshold to strengthen perceptions. Future researchers might draw on construal level theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Wakslak & Joshi, 2020) to test whether female students process online cues more abstractly, seeing them in terms of their relevance to the bigger picture, whereas men process them more concretely. The more time female students spend processing the cues, the more they see the course design as a holistic artifact, and the more relational information they derive from it. Future research should examine how this processing-depth mechanism mediates course design and perceptions.

Course Design as Relational Communication

If an exceptional learning experience exists at the intersection of three intersecting types of “presence” (i.e., social, content, and teaching; Garrison et al., 2000), and if the teaching presence dimension specifically deals with the design of the online environment or how feedback is provided (Caskurlu et al., 2021), it becomes necessary to reframe these cues as serving both rhetorical and relational purposes. The cues instructors use in online courses to signal course design influence how students perceive instructors relationally. Just as an instructor’s proximity or smile can convey relational information in the classroom, online design decisions – every click, comment, and folder description – communicate relational information to students. However, unlike in the classroom, where instructors can rely on physical cues, online instructors might feel limited in this regard. In the absence of other relational cues from instructors, students substitute these design cues.

Social information processing theory (SIPT; Walther, 1992) suggests that users can and do interpret online cues, and, based on past research (e.g., Vareberg & Westerman, 2023), these cues are not always interpreted as the instructor intended. The cues used to convey instructional information carry additional relational weight, and that weight is not interpreted uniformly. Given female students’ structural and processing advantages, they may interpret more cues, forming a richer, more complete picture of the instructor (i.e., deriving more relational information from the design cues embedded in the course). Past studies have found that female students performed better in more organized online courses (Cho et al., 2022), which teaching presence cues measure; the current findings corroborate this, as female students reported higher perceptions of *design and organization* ($M = 6.01$ for females and $M = 5.86$ for males). Thus, while it is important to note that online course design cues carry relational weight, it is consequential that we recognize students perceive this weight differently based on gender.

Some patterns in the current dataset suggest potential significance, though post hoc analysis confirmed that no true moderation effect existed. Interestingly, caring was the only credibility dimension that showed no gender patterns, suggesting that the relational warmth embedded in course design is perceived equally across genders. Regarding the three areas of Teaching Presence (Garrison et al., 2000), five patterns emerged: design and organization to competence (female $r = .66$, male $r = .40$) and to trustworthiness (female $r = .67$, male $r = .42$); facilitating discourse to trustworthiness (female $r = .66$, male $r = .38$) and to perceived immediacy (female $r =$

.75, male $r = .49$); and direct instruction to perceived immediacy (female $r = .74$, male $r = .43$). Taken together, these patterns suggest that female students do not necessarily perform better in online courses; rather, they may perceive a more relational communicator on the other end than a more transactional one. Male students, on the other hand, may view information in isolation and fail to connect the relational threads running through the design, discussion, and feedback. Recognizing these gendered patterns presents opportunities for instructors to support all learners.

Practical Implications

The findings have several practical implications for instructors. First, instructors should remember that course design is inherently relational and rhetorical; as such, even instructional features instructors perceive as “neutral” function as relational cues for students. Just as well-organized courses and stimulating discussion boards can reinforce an instructor’s existing persona, poorly designed courses can just as quickly detract from it. This effect is not simply additive, but seems multiplicative, in that each cue that follows will either reinforce or contradict the one that came before. Each element of teaching presence matters; when each is done with intention, students may form richer, more complete impressions of their instructor. Instructors should intentionally design all course elements knowing they will be interpreted relationally, not just instructionally.

Second, instructors should consider integrating more intentional relational cues to both allow students to gain this information and to allow design cues to serve a less ambiguous purpose. This integration can take the form of conversational language in course communications and brief snippets about instructors’ personal lives, positioning them as more than just academic authority figures. Integrating a smiley-faced emoji, for instance, in welcome communication can shift students’ relational impressions (Vareberg & Westerman, 2023), which the course design then matches. These examples, drawn from Walther’s (1992) social information processing theory, involve small but intentional adaptations that help instructors compensate for the cue-lean nature of the online environment.

Third, instructors need to recognize that these relational impressions are not experienced the same way across groups, so efforts should be made to design online environments that are appropriate for all learners. Much as Korlat and colleagues (2021) argued, our energies may be best spent not focusing (solely) on supporting female students, but also on supporting male students and the unique challenges they encounter. Male students in this study appeared to derive comparatively

weaker relational impressions from implicit instructional cues than female students. Thus, if we want to support them further, we need to make the relational part of course design more explicit. By intentionally embedding additional immediacy cues, instructors can more clearly signal teaching presence and relational authenticity in online courses. In practice, this can look like adding inclusive language to synchronous video meetings, asynchronous video announcements, and subsequent scaffolded modules. Even instructors who attempt to build relational warmth into their courses through design must remember that male students may not connect those threads as easily or derive as much relational information, so our intentional use of cues can help make up the difference.

Lastly, instructors should recognize the relational potential inherent in giving students information. The explicit and private nature of these interactions offers an opportunity to provide corrective feedback while still conveying relational warmth. Past research shows that students struggle with feedback and that what instructors provide can shape how students use it (Vareberg et al., 2026), reinforcing the psychological and relational aspects of direct instruction. Instructors can use feedback to send explicit relational signals. Having control over those messages allows instructors to set the relational boundaries they want with their students. Instructors can focus their efforts and maximize their impact on students across gender groups by using explicit relational cues in their feedback. Online instructors who intentionally integrate relational cues across course design, explanatory videos, feedback, and other communication channels are more likely to shape relational impressions, especially when students are already forming them organically.

Limitations & Future Directions

These findings must be interpreted in light of this study's limitations. First, despite efforts to diversify our sample, a considerable number of students were from a single institution affiliated with a single researcher, which could introduce self-report bias. Relatedly, students may have inflated their scores to appear more competent in their online skills (i.e., social desirability bias). Replicating the current study using randomized sampling across varied institution types (i.e., Historically Black Universities/Colleges, Tribal Universities, Private Universities) and including students from key academic groups (e.g., STEAM vs. Liberal Arts vs. Humanities) or with different comfort levels regarding online learning (e.g., digital self-efficacy) could reinforce these findings. Further, because this study focused on gender-based differences and required sufficient subgroup sizes for analysis,

participants who did not fall into comparable binary gender categories were excluded; future research should use quota sampling to better explore the perspectives of trans, non-binary, and other gender-minority groups.

This study is limited by its cross-sectional design. Longitudinal work can better determine whether the observed relationships reflect the time/context in which students were currently participating. Collecting data multiple times during the semester would allow researchers to more accurately assess whether relational impressions shift as students become more familiar with the course design and their instructor. Future research should also focus on male students to identify ways to build better online spaces. It should be noted that men shared many of the same perceptions as female students, but to a lesser extent. Prospective studies identifying ways to support all students without detracting from others' experiences are vital as we navigate the technological era of teaching and learning.

Lastly, CoI argues that teaching presence complements content and social presence, and that satisfying all three can foster exceptional learning experiences. Future research should continue to examine the relationships between cognitive presence and social presence on students' impressions. Furthermore, in line with SIPT (Walther, 1992), researchers should connect these impressions to potential approach or avoidance behaviors, as measured through communication (e.g., willingness to communicate, classroom reticence, instructional dissent). Identifying potential approach/avoidance behaviors to measure as communicative outcomes may illuminate whether the relational weight of online course design translates into action.

Conclusion

The cues explored here signal an online instructor's visibility. Course design cues are interpreted through different perceptual and relational lenses rather than experienced uniformly across students. As such, instructors are not designing online content in isolation but are constructing a holistic course that serves as a proxy for how students perceive their teaching presence in relational terms. In this sense, his cues and her cues are not different because the course changes, but because interpretation does.

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I Saw this on TikTok: Examining the Nature of Memorable Health-Related Messages on TikTok

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Abstract: This qualitative study examines the foci and characteristics of health-related TikTok videos users find memorable. Specifically, this analysis applies the theory of memorable messages to understand what types of health-related messages on social media are memorable to users and the impact of these messages on health-related behaviors. Participants included college students who use TikTok and recalled a memorable health-related TikTok video. Participants identified (a) exercise and fitness, (b) nutrition and diet, and (c) mental health as the most common memorable health-related topics in TikTok videos. Study findings also indicated that participants often have a strong emotional reaction to memorable content and find that memorable content affirms their identity and behaviors. The implications of the study findings on health-related behaviors and social media use are discussed.

Introduction

Social media use has increased significantly over the past decade with short-form videos emerging as a popular format for online content consumption. TikTok currently is the dominant social media platform for short-form video content. As of 2025, TikTok boasts more than 135 million active users in the U.S. (Statista, 2025a). TikTok is also widely used by younger generations, with women between the ages of 18 and 24 years old comprising 14.1% of TikTok's global audience and men between the ages of 18 and 24 years old comprising 16.6% of TikTok's global audience (Statista, 2025b). TikTok largely functions as a space to consume creators' and influencers' content rather than posting one's own content (Bestvater, 2024; Faltesek et al., 2023). Thus, TikTok is rapidly becoming a key channel for receiving information among social media users.

TikTok users receive video content through two main feeds: (a) their "Following" tab, featuring accounts they have chosen to follow; and (b) their "For You Page," (FYP) which provides content to users via a refined algorithm (Bestvater, 2024; Faltesek et al., 2023). About 85% of TikTok users report their "For You Page" content is "at least somewhat interesting," with 40% describing it as "extremely or very interesting" to them (Bestvater, 2024). Recent developments in social media algorithms on platforms like TikTok customize content on

the viewing feed based on individual user characteristics, such as amount of time spent viewing videos and the amount of engagement users have with specific types of videos (B. Smith, 2021). As such, it is likely that almost every TikTok user has a somewhat unique viewing experience in terms of the content that they are seeing, albeit that popular videos are more likely to be viewed by more people. Videos focused on health-related topics are particularly popular on TikTok. As of October 2025, #medicaltiktok and #healthtok have over 375,000 and 246,000 videos associated with them, respectively. Popular health topics covered on TikTok include diet, exercise, sexual health, and mental health, with videos focusing on prevention, taking health actions, inspirational content, personal stories, and modeling behavior often garnering high interaction (Jerin et al., 2024; O'Donnell et al., 2023).

TikTok is used by health professionals and non-professionals to discuss various health issues, such as acne and eating disorders (McCashin & Murphy, 2023). It is no surprise that viewers perceive TikTok health professionals (sometimes referred to as “Medfluencers” [medical influencers]) (Mayat et al., 2022) to be more credible than other creators and are more likely to act on their messages (Kirkpatrick & Lawrie, 2024). However, a review of studies shows videos created by health professionals are in the minority and, more often, creators and influencers without a medical background create health-related content (McCashin & Murphy, 2023). Content creators are users who produce and share engaging video content, such as personal journeys (e.g., weight loss), and topic-specific advice (e.g., cleaning tips; West, 2022). Social media influencers are users who strive to influence, or shape their viewers' attitudes, in some manner (e.g., purchasing a product; West, 2022). Mid-tier influencers and content creators comprise about 50% of TikTok accounts followed by U.S. users (Widjaya et al., 2024).

Content creators and influencers often build strong connections with their viewers through their videos as they showcase vulnerability and direct eye contact with the camera (O'Donnell et al., 2023). Research suggests that followers typically perceive their favorite influencers to be trustworthy and genuine (Lou, 2022). This can lead viewers to potentially form parasocial relationships with influencers (Yang & Ha, 2021). Parasocial relationships are one-way interactions with celebrities or media figures, where the audience feels an illusion of intimacy with the media figure, much like they are a friend (Horton & Wohl, 1956). More recently, the term trans-parasocial relationship is being used to more accurately capture the experiences followers have with social media influencers. Trans-parasocial relationships include the nuances of influencer-follower interactions that fall somewhere in-

between parasocial relationships and interpersonal relationships (Lou, 2022). Trans-parasocial relationships tend to be more reciprocal, as influencers often reply to comments and hold live-streaming videos on social media to interact with their followers (Lou, 2022). Early research exploring this concept suggests trans-parasocial relations are positively correlated with stickiness of messages and purchase intention via livestreaming apps (Kim et al., 2022). In addition to fostering trans-parasocial relationships, influencers' videos may have broader reach because they are more skilled at leveraging the platform than other content creators, such as health professionals or "medfluencers."

Research indicates that content creators and influencers often share unfounded and even inaccurate health information online (e.g., Baumel et al., 2021; Melchior & Oliveira, 2022; Nan et al., 2022). Kirkpatrick and Lawrie's (2024) study focusing on young women's experiences with health-related messages on TikTok found that 98% of participants reported viewing misinformation on TikTok. The lack of evidence-based health information on social media is particularly troublesome, as social media becomes a central channel for the dissemination of health-related content. Even though most of the information individuals view on social media is unlikely to be remembered long-term, it is clear that at least some messages social media users consume will stick with them for an extended amount of time and can even lead to behavioral changes and/or behavioral intentions (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025; Hample, 2022). The present study examines the foci and characteristics of health-related TikTok videos users identify as memorable to them personally.

Memorable Messages

Cooke-Jackson et al. (2025) define memorable messages as messages that stick over time because they are influential in ways that shape the receiver's identity, beliefs, and behaviors. Research on memorable messages has grown exponentially over the past forty-years (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025; Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2018, 2023). Memorable messages can focus on a variety of topical areas, such as organizational life (e.g., Stohl, 1986), health (e.g., Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2018, 2023; Miczo et al., 2013; S. Smith et al., 2009, 2010), and family (e.g., Kellas, 2010; Lucas & Buzzannell, 2012). Memorable messages emanate from a variety of sources, including friends, colleagues, family members, and, even, through computer-mediated sources (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025).

Early memorable messages research was often atheoretical examining the concept of positive memorable messages in conjunction with socialization processes (Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2018; Knapp

et al., 1981). However, in recent years researchers have explored negative memorable messages, the mechanisms through which memorable messages impact behavior, and the modality of memorable messages (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025; Cooke-Jackson & Rubinsky, 2018). The Theory of Memorable Messages (ToMM) forwards five formal propositions to explain memorable messages communication (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025). The first proposition of ToMM is that memorable messages are recalled for a long period of time, but the meaning that individuals attribute to those messages can evolve over time through retrospection and sense-making processes (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025). The second proposition of ToMM is that memorable messages are valanced, conveying both positive and negative connotations (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025).

The third proposition of ToMM is that memorable messages are highly contextual and can be influenced by the relationship between interactants and the modality through which the message is received (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025). As such, the ToMM integrates the contextual nature of social media and, including how trans-parasocial relationships with content creators and influencers may influence the memorability of messages. The fourth proposition of ToMM states that memorable messages are “agents for socialization, shaping identities, beliefs, and behaviors” (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025, p. 266). The fourth proposition is particularly relevant to health communication research as memorable messages related to health may impact health-related behaviors, the role of illness in shaping one’s identity, and an individual’s beliefs about health-related information. Finally, the fifth proposition of memorable messages forwards that memorable messages can be disrupted or transformed in ways that allow for new messages to be integrated (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025).

While the majority of research on memorable messages has focused on messages delivered through face-to-face interactions, the ToMM does not limit memorable messages to those communicated in-person. A growing body of literature has examined memorable messages received through mediated modalities (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025; Christy et al., 2017; Hample, 2022; Miczo et al., 2013; Reffner Collins et al., 2024; S. Smith et al., 2009). For example, S. Smith et al. (2009) found that more than one-third of memorable messages about breast cancer came from mediated sources. Miczo et al. (2013) found that almost half of memorable messages about H1N1 were mediated, including emails, flyers, television, and radio sources. More recently, Hample (2022) found that participants received about a third of memorable messages about COVID-19 through social media. Specifically, participants in Hample’s (2022) reported mainly receiving

memorable messages about COVID-19 from Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram.

The present mixed methods, exploratory study seeks to further understand memorable health-related messages on social media by exploring the experiences of TikTok users. First, this study aims to understand what topics covered in health-related TikToks have users found to be memorable. Thus, the first research question posed is:

RQ1: What health-related topics are covered in TikTok content that users report to be memorable?

Next, this research attempts to understand the responses users experience because of the health-related TikToks that they found memorable. Thus, the second research question posed is:

RQ2: What types of responses do users report experiencing from the memorable health-related TikTok videos?

Methods

Participants

Participants ($N = 232$) included undergraduate students enrolled in classes at a medium-sized, public four-year Midwestern University who used the TikTok social media platform and stated that they recalled a memorable health-related TikTok. Participants' age ranged from 18-52-years old ($M = 23.86$, $SD = 6.825$). Most participants identified as female ($n = 138$, 59.5%), although 36.2% of participants identified as male ($n = 84$). The remaining participants self-identified their gender as non-binary ($n = 3$, 1.3%) or preferred to not report their gender ($n = 7 = 3\%$). The majority of participants identified as white ($n = 182$, 78.4%). The remaining participants identified their race as black or African American ($n = 28$, 12.1%), Asian ($n = 10$, 4.3%), Hispanic/Latino ($n = 8$, 3.4%), and American Indian or Alaskan Native ($n = 3$, 1.3%), or preferred to not report their race/ethnicity ($n = 4$, 1.7%). More than three-quarters ($n = 179$, 77.16%) of participants reported using TikTok on a daily basis and estimated that they averaged spending 102.56 minutes on the platform each day ($SD = 71.63$).

Procedures

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, students were recruited to participate in this study via email by their instructors. Participants completed an online survey administered through Qualtrics. Extra credit was offered to students for survey participation and alternative options were provided to students who did

not want to participate in the survey or did not meet the inclusion criteria (i.e., being 18-years or older and use the TikTok platform). All responses were anonymous, and students submitted a standardized screenshot from the end of the survey to confirm participation and receive extra credit.

Participants were asked closed-ended questions about their TikTok use and completed several measures examining credibility and memorability of online content that were not included in the present analysis. Next, following Kerr et al.'s (2020) survey design for collecting open-ended memorable messages data, participants were asked to answer open-ended questions related to health-related TikTok videos they found to be memorable. During the survey, participants were asked to read the following prompt, adapted from Stohl's (1986) definition of memorable messages:

This survey is designed to understand your experience viewing health-related TikToks. It is not uncommon for people to think back on their time using social media and recall something they saw that had a lasting impact on them. Each day we are bombarded by a lot of messages, both online and in-person, but the interest in this study is on those online messages that we vividly remember because they seemed to have a sizable impact on how we live our lives. Specifically, we are interested in whether you have seen a TikTok that included health-related content (e.g., diet/exercise, mental health, pregnancy) that you remember clearly and has had some type of impact on the way you think about the health topic.

Following the prompt, participants were asked if they could recall a health-related TikTok video(s) that has stuck with them in some way. Responses from participants who answered "yes" ($n = 232$, 70.9%) that they recalled a memorable health-related TikTok message are included in the present analysis. Participants were instructed to describe any health-related TikTok content that they vividly remembered. Specifically, they were asked to explain what the TikTok content was about, who had recorded the content (if they remembered), and any other relevant information. Next, participants were asked to describe their reaction to the health-related TikTok content they had described, including, if they had taken a health-related action following their exposure to the content.

Qualitative Data Analyses

Participants' open-ended survey responses were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Owen, 1984). This process began with both authors reviewing participants' responses to familiarize themselves with the data. Next, both authors generated line-by-line initial codes to describe the data. While some discrepancies existed in how the authors worded some initial codes (e.g., Author 1's initial code: "changed diet" versus Author 2's initial code: "gave himself permission to eat more"), the authors concurred that sentiments were aligned. Next, both authors reviewed the codes and identified patterns, or categories, that informed the study findings. The result of the qualitative analyses was a typology of memorable health-related topics that answered RQ1 and four of themes to answer RQ2.

Study Findings

Typology of Memorable Health-Related TikTok Videos

To answer RQ1, "What health-related topics are covered in TikTok content that users report to be memorable?" participants were asked to recall and describe any health-related TikTok videos they vividly remember. Of the 328 participants, 232 participants recalled vividly remembering specific health-related TikTok videos. Analysis of responses revealed seven categories of memorable health-related topics covered in TikTok videos that were memorable to participants (See Table 1). The following sections describe each health-related category of TikTok video topics that participants reported as memorable¹.

Table 1

Typology of Memorable Health-related TikTok Videos

Topical Focus of TikTok Videos that Participants Described as Memorable	Number of Users Reporting Memorable Messages Related to the Topic ¹
Exercise and Fitness	71
Nutrition and Diet	58
Mental Health	41
Skincare	38
General Health	31
Disorders, Chronic Health Conditions, and Illness	21
Women's Health	14

¹ Some users identified and described more than one TikTok that they found memorable. In those cases, the number of times a topic was referenced in the dataset was recorded for Table 1.

Exercise and Fitness

Exercise and fitness videos include content about workout routines, proper form, weightlifting, stretching, and more. Participants recalled memorable content, such as a “12-3-30 workout,” “exercises for toning abs,” and the “correct way to hold the bar for pull ups,” while others mentioned specific memorable fitness creators (e.g., Movementbydavid and @KeepingitKatrina). Many participants described videos that had a lasting impact on their routine. One participant noted, “The TikTok I seen was a diet for athletes to gain weight. It stuck with me because this is something that I am trying to do. A personal trainer recorded the video.” Another explained, “I still to this day use the workout program to get stronger. It was a man describing better ways to workout, like why increasing your lifting weight with less reps is better than using low weight with high reps.” These examples suggest that not only can participants recall memorable exercise and fitness TikTok videos, but many incorporate the techniques and strategies from the TikTok content into their fitness routines.

Nutrition and Diet

Nutrition and diet content was the second most common health-related topic participants identified as memorable. Participants described nutrition and diet videos as focusing on healthy recipes, protein-rich meals, gut health, weight loss, and diet programs such as Keto. A few memorable creators were recalled by name (e.g., “nikitafair” and Sydney Adams), though most participants described the content of the memorable video (e.g., “probiotic greens to help with bloating”) instead of information about the content creator. A nutritionist’s video that came up on the “For You Page” was particularly enlightening for one participant:

She went through the grocery store and said all of the foods that we thought were good for us and she explained why they were actually bad. These included foods such as protein drinks and granola bars that I considered healthy before.

Mental Health

The third most common memorable topic identified by participants was mental health. Participants described TikTok videos focused on mental health topics, such as anxiety, depression, ADHD, and positive self-talk as resonating with them. Memorable content ranged from educational (e.g., “benefits of meditation”) to inspirational

(e.g., “reframing mental health issues”) to action-based (e.g., “breathing exercises”). Participants communicated the importance of these videos in relation to their mental health. One noted:

All of Matthiasjbarkers videos are filmed in a way that sticks with you. He talks about mental health in a way that is applicable to real life scenarios, and they all hit close to home. He then provides real life ways you can try to mend these issues/approaches. I think about his videos daily.

The creator elyse myers was also mentioned as memorable for mental health discussions because she “made the conversation more welcoming for a lot of people.”

Skincare

Participants frequently recalled skincare videos including content about skincare routines, skincare products, acne, and pimple popping. Some examples shared were educational (e.g., “how to properly pop a pimple”) while others were product-based (e.g., “witch hazel to heal sunburn”). Several participants noted memorable skincare videos by health professionals (e.g., “skin cycling from a dermatologist”), while others referred to influencers’ videos (e.g., “I specifically remember his [Hyrain] videos on which drugstore skincare products are bad and which are good”).

General Health

General health covered topics such as sleep, hygiene, and everyday health practices. One participant wrote, “I don’t remember the creator, but it was about hand dryers in the bathrooms and how they have more bacteria than anything else in the bathroom and it is safer to just air dry your hands instead.” Other memorable messages reported in this category included situations participants faced daily (e.g., “sleep schedules”), situations they could potentially encounter (e.g., “choking hazards”), and debunking ideas they once believed (e.g., “the myth of a ‘second wind’ when you’re exhausted”).

Disorders, Chronic Health Conditions, and Illness

Participants reported memorable content relating to health conditions such as autism, diabetes, eating disorders, sleep apnea, and PCOS. Many videos described by participants were educational (e.g., “an ehlers danlos syndrome creator made a lot of symptoms click for me”) and contained practical strategies (e.g., “OCD and ways to cope

with it”). Messages shared by health professionals were particularly memorable, with one participant noting they “follow a lot of healthcare professionals and epidemiologists to discuss Covid related news and potential emerging pandemics, including polio and Ebola.” Other memorable messages come from creators sharing their personal journeys:

It was a woman on her road back to recovery from having an eating disorder and becoming anorexic. I do not remember her name, but it left an impact on me because she had told her story and as someone who has struggled, not as much as her, but in some of the same context, it was beautiful to see her tell her story and seeing her happier and eating the proper meals to be healthy again.

Videos in this category had the ability to resonate with viewers not only if they were created by health professionals but when general creators shared personal health stories.

Women’s Health

Content on women’s health, such as pregnancy, fertility, and birth control, was especially memorable for several participants. Some viewers noted the educational value of the content. One participant shared, “I remember her [a gynecologist] teaching about fertility and when women are most fertile. I had poor sex education, so this information was new to me. It was very helpful to know.” Other viewers remembered popular women creators’ journeys. One participant wrote about a “real-time positive pregnancy test reveal by creator Caitlyn O’Neil.” The participant said the creator is “dealing with secondary infertility and documents her journey through treatments, positive and negative tests. It was an incredibly emotional video that elicited strong emotions of excitement from me, even though it is a stranger on TikTok.” Finally, another participant viewed an unforgettable video of “the harsh realities of pregnancy and birth,” which made the viewer “think twice about wanting children in the future.” While many memorable videos in this category were educational and inspirational, others gave viewers fright and resulted in re-thinking future health decisions related to family planning.

Participants’ Reactions to Health-Related TikTok Videos

To answer RQ2, “What types of responses do users report experiencing from the memorable health-related TikTok videos?”

participants were asked to recall their reactions to the memorable health-related TikTok videos they had described. Thematic analysis revealed the following four themes: (a) evoking strong emotions, (b) motivation to take health-related action, (c) identification and connection to health-related content, and (d) reinforcing or shifting beliefs around health and wellbeing.

Evoking Strong Emotions

Participants often recalled the emotions that they experienced because of viewing the health-related TikTok videos that were memorable. Examples of emotions participants identified include “shock,” “amazement,” “envious,” and “disgust.” Several participants discussed that they were genuinely taken aback by health-related content that they had viewed on TikTok. For example, one participant described strong emotions while watching IUD content: “Some of the videos scared the life out of me. After the fear passed, I got angry. Why is TikTok the first place I’ve heard about these things?” Other participants recalled feeling saddened by memorable TikTok videos. For example, one participant described a TikTok that had discussed the pressures men feel to hide their emotions as memorable. They recalled, “Honestly, I cried. At the end of the content, the creator said your emotions matter. And I am not sure why, but I broke down.” One participant’s response especially captures the nature of this theme. They shared the following about mental health TikTok videos:

My reaction is always emotional. Because these videos show up randomly, I am forced to face thoughts/emotions [related to mental health] I otherwise would not have. This is impactful and really sticks with me because of the emotional footprint left.

As such, participants often recounted strong emotions being evoked when viewing memorable health-related TikTok videos. While these emotions had wide variety, it was clear among many participants that for a TikTok video to be memorable, they needed to experience a strong emotional response to it.

Motivation to Take Health-Related Action

Next, participants noted that they sometimes were motivated by the memorable health-related TikTok videos to take health-related actions, such as trying a new workout routine, skincare routine, or diet. Memorable messages often have an important impact on individuals

because they spark behavioral change (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025). In the context of memorable health-related TikTok content, participants repeatedly noted that content was “inspirational,” “helpful,” and/or “motivational.” For example, one participant said, “These TikToks help me improve my physical training by making them more efficient and safe to do.” Likewise, another participant noted, “My reaction to the TikTok was that I need to buy the face care items people were using to clean up my acne.” Another participant implemented product and lifestyle changes:

I switched by birth control to something that TikTok recommended would work for my body. The advice helped! I also made changes according to the neurodivergent content as well. Things like melatonin gummies, and keeping track of my mental state on a daily basis.

These findings suggest that memorable health-related TikTok content may influence a variety of health-related behaviors (e.g., exercise, diet) and, relatedly, consumer behaviors among users (e.g., purchasing decisions related to health).

Identification and Connection to Health-Related Content

Another theme among participant reactions to memorable health-related TikTok videos was participants experiencing identification through connecting to the content. Participants repeatedly recalled identifying with memorable TikTok videos in ways that made them feel “less alone” and “understood.” For example, one participant described “feeling understood and heard” after seeing a TikTok that discussed the ways anxiety affects relationships. Another participant noted:

For the PCOS one, I felt very validated as the creator described some symptoms that aren't often talked about, and it made me feel less angry with my body. I was grateful to know others are struggling with the same issues.

Thus, individuals who identify with health-related TikTok videos may find that these videos help them to make sense of health issues they have experienced (e.g., mental health, chronic health conditions).

Reinforcing or Shifting Beliefs around Health and Wellbeing

The final theme related to participants' reactions to health-related TikTok videos was that health-related TikTok content was able to reinforce or shift personal beliefs around health and well-being. Memorable messages are not stagnant and instead allow for new information to be integrated and evolve over time (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025). Participants described how their reactions to health information shared by TikTok content creators shaped their beliefs about health. For example, one participant said that following a TikTok discussing choking hazards they did "extensive googling." Another participant, said that watching a TikTok about ADHD "made me question if I had ADHD." More broadly, one participant said that after watching a TikTok about mental health it "made me think a little bit more about mental health as a whole." Participants, thus, may find that memorable messages are important as they prompt additional introspection related to health-related information, identities, and behaviors.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the foci and characteristics of health-related TikTok videos users find memorable. Overall, the study findings indicate that TikTok users find some health-related content memorable and, in those cases, that content often affirms their identity, beliefs, and/or behaviors. The typology of health-related content (e.g., exercise and fitness, nutrition and diet, mental health) covered in TikTok videos participants describe as memorable suggests that TikTok users often find content memorable that directly relates to their health-related interests and/or concerns. The topics (a) exercise and fitness, (b) nutrition and diet, and (c) mental health were the focus of health-related TikTok videos participants most often recalled being memorable. This finding aligns with prior research identifying the topics mental health, diet, sexual health, and exercise as the most popular ones covered by content creators on TikTok (e.g., Jerin et al., 2024; O'Donnell et al., 2023; Sattora et al., 2024). A current search on TikTok shows there are 69.4 million posts for #exercise and #fitness, 9.4 million posts for #nutrition and #diet, and 31 million posts under #mentalhealth. Furthermore, about 16 of every 500 videos in a typical TikTok feed are focused on mental health content (Merrill et al., 2025). Further, research on TikTok mental health educational content shows that mental health-related content has greater reach on the platform than general health educational content (Jerin et al., 2024).

Given nutrition, physical fitness, and mental health are health-related topics that are of mainstream interest, and likely of particular interest to younger populations, the findings suggest that TikTok users are prone to remember these topics. Additionally, participants who had first-hand experience with specific conditions (e.g., PCOS, sleep apnea, ADHD) or other health concerns (e.g., birth control), reported that TikTok videos covering this content was often meaningful to them personally and, thus, memorable. Finally, TikTok's algorithm may influence the popularity of health-related videos being shown to viewers, and thus how memorable they are. An analysis of 900 U.S. TikTok users' viewing history revealed that the TikTok algorithm may focus on mental health content over other topics, such as politics (Merrill et al., 2025). Mental health content may be "stickier" than other content on TikTok as an analysis revealed it was more difficult to get mental health videos out of an algorithm versus videos focused on other content. For example, after watching a full video on politics it takes roughly 1.3 skips of future political videos to undo the algorithm's impact on political videos; however, for mental health content, it takes about 2.2 skips to algorithmically remove the content from a future feed (Merrill et al., 2025).

According to Holladay (2002), memorable messages are likely to be remembered because of the way they affect receivers. The study findings indicate four themes related to participants' responses to memorable health-related TikTok videos. First, participants recounted experiencing strong emotions after viewing memorable health-related TikTok videos and, often, feeling affirmed by the videos that were memorable to them. Psychology research has examined the relationship between emotions and memorability, and findings have shown a relationship between emotional responses and the memorability of stimuli (Cahill & McGaugh, 1995; Wakeland-Hart & Aly, 2025). Likewise, communication scholars examining memorable messages note that emotional intensity contributes to the memorability of a message (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025). Participants' strong emotional reactions to specific health-related TikTok videos likely reinforced the overall memorability of the message and process of forming the memory (McIntyre et al., 2012).

Second, participants often reported considering taking a health-related action or having taken a health-related action when they found a health-related TikTok video to be memorable. The health-related actions participants reported being motivated to take included purchasing a health-related product, trying a new diet, changing medication, getting cancer screenings, and incorporating a new exercise into their workout routine, among other types of behaviors. The ToMM

proposes that memorable messages are agents that can shape behavioral outcomes (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025). The findings indicate that memorable online messages can influence health-related behaviors in myriad ways, including consumer purchasing decisions, nutritional choices, exercise habits, healthcare decisions, and more. As such, the overall memorability of online content, such as TikTok videos, has important implications regarding the short-term and long-term impact of those videos on user health and well-being.

Finally, participant reports of being validated by and/or identifying with the health-related content they found memorable on TikTok suggests that in addition to behaviors, memorable online messages can influence sensemaking processes around health and identity. For example, one participant had noted how a memorable video related to PCOS helped her to feel less alone in the physical and mental symptoms she experienced because of her chronic condition. Participants noted how memorable TikTok videos made them think differently or more critically about health-related issues. As such, memorable online messages may prompt sensemaking behaviors that influence health beliefs and identity.

Theoretical Implications

Understanding the characteristics and sources of mediated memorable health-related messages has important implications for improving health outcomes (Christy et al., 2017; Hample, 2022; Holladay, 2002; S. Smith, 2009). The present study builds upon prior research examining the nature of health-related TikToks (Jerin et al., 2024; O'Donnell et al., 2023), perceptions of memorable mediated messages (Hample, 2022; Christy et al., 2017; S. Smith, 2009), and the effects of memorable messages on behaviors, identity, and beliefs (Cooke-Jackson et al., 2025; Holladay, 2002). In particular, the study findings indicate that short-form videos, such as those shared on TikTok, are powerful messages that can strongly resonate with users and potentially impact beliefs and behaviors around health. In the context of the ToMM, this finding is useful as it underscores the importance of the contextual nature in which memorable messages are communicated. That is, early memorable messages studies focused on the importance of face-to-face contact and figures of authority on socialization and sensemaking processes (Knapp et al., 1981; Stohl, 1986). However, the findings of the present study align with more recent research that indicates that memorable messages communicated through social media may resonate strongly with individuals and potentially impact behaviors because of favorable opinions toward media figures and social media connections (Hample 2002; S. Smith,

2009). In particular, trans-parasocial relationships with content creators and influencers may impact memorability of health-related online content resulting in changing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors among followers.

The amount of time individuals spend online has grown rapidly in recent years and TikTok has emerged as a dominant platform in the social media landscape (Faltese et al., 2023). The findings of the present study suggest that the personalized nature of many short form videos on the TikTok platform, where users may feel as if content creators and influencers are directly talking to them (O'Donnell et al., 2023), may have the ability to better connect with users and, thus, impact the memorability of messages when compared to other types of mediated content. That is, users may find that they identify with and/or have strong emotional reactions to the short form video content enjoyed on TikTok specifically, resulting in memorability. Thus, in relation to the ToMM, the present study findings suggest that users may find the modality of short form social media videos found on TikTok to have the potential to be more memorable to them in terms of online messages.

Practical Implications

Because of TikTok's widespread use, it is recognized as an "ideal platform" to share health information (McCashin & Murphy, 2023, p. 280). However, it has also been called a "breeding ground for misinformation" (Heiss et al., 2024) with users self-diagnosing after viewing TikTok content and sometimes oversimplifying nuances of important health conditions (Blum et al., 2025). With potential for both positive and concerning health-related outcomes, TikTok represents an important space to understand health message dissemination and consumption. The present study findings offer several practical implications related to social media use. This study provides evidence that TikTok is a source for health information that users find memorable and will potentially act on. Most participants reported daily use of TikTok and sometimes taking a health-related action based on what they viewed. The most memorable videos focused on exercise and fitness, nutrition and diet, mental health, and/or skincare. While this highlights the health topics that resonated most with participants, it also draws attention to health topics that were never or infrequently noted by participants (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases, alcohol consumption). This suggests the need for further research into why certain health topics attract attention, engagement, and memorability, while other important health concerns do not.

Notably, many memorable videos inspired action (e.g., purchasing a product). Although some participants conducted further research before acting, most appeared to act on what they viewed without confirming the validity of the information. While outcomes of purchasing an ineffective product may be minor, the consequences of implementing risky dieting techniques or internalizing health misinformation, can be far more serious. Several participants referenced specific memorable accounts by name, suggesting that the type of creator (e.g., health professionals, influencer accounts) may influence the memorable message and subsequent behaviors (e.g., more likely to change behavior if suggested by a doctor). Additionally, ability to connect with the creator and/or content because of related experiences (e.g., another user who is also gluten and dairy intolerant) added to the memorability of the message. Finding these relatable experiences might only be realized in watching other general or influencer-type accounts especially because influencers are known for forming strong bonds (e.g., trans-parasocial relationships) with their viewers. However, this may yield an opportunity for health professionals to partner with content creators to share health messages which resonate with viewers and to correct misinformation on TikTok (Kirkpatrick & Lawrie, 2024).

Overall, TikTok presents both opportunities and challenges for health communication. While health professionals may be remembered for their credible videos communicating best health practices, it is also possible that viewers feel a stronger connection to everyday creators' personal stories and content. Either way, TikTok's refined algorithm suggests that once viewers engage with certain health-related TikTok content, they are likely to be exposed to a bevy of similar videos. Because of this, it is especially important to continue to understand the types of health-related videos and accounts that engage TikTok users and what actions users take after viewing health-related TikTok videos.

Limitations

This study includes several limitations related to understanding memorable online health messages. First, the sample was a convenience sample of college students that was not stratified by specific demographics (e.g., health condition, socioeconomic status, frequency of TikTok use). Thus, the results do not provide insight on specific types or effects of memorable online messages on certain populations of adults using TikTok (e.g., people diagnosed with ADHD, people managing an eating disorder) or differences in memorability based on usage of the platform. Future research should examine the characteristics and effects of memorable online messages

on people managing specific health conditions. Second, the survey provided examples of types of health-related content (e.g., diet, exercise) in the online survey, which may have primed participants to recall TikTok videos about those topics. As such, future research may consider asking participants to identify and define health-related topics instead of providing examples first. Finally, this study did not analyze the length of time between participants viewing a video and describing it as memorable. That is, some participants may have described a TikTok video they had viewed earlier in the day as memorable, whereas other participants may have been describing a TikTok video they had seen months or years prior to completing the survey. Thus, future research should further explore the short-term and long-term effects to understand whether online memorable messages have the same effects as those that are communicated face-to-face.

Conclusion

TikTok became an impactful space for health discussions during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic (Comp et al., 2020) and has since remained an outlet to share and consume health-related information, advice, and product recommendations (Blum et al., 2025; Faverio, 2024). As technology continues to be a part of individuals' daily routines, social media users are likely conditioned to return to platforms like TikTok because they can gain information immediately (Kirkpatrick & Lawrie, 2024). Because of that, it is critical to continue to study health-related messages users are consuming on TikTok, what remains memorable, and what kind of health-related actions people are taking based on this content.

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“That’s just not who I am”: Rejection of the *Good Mother* Ideology and Other Tools Used by Homeschool Moms to Navigate Motherhood

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Abstract: Studying mothers often focuses on the mother-child dynamic rather than the mother as a person. Mother types, such as working mothers, often are singled out for study. One mother that is rarely considered is the homeschool mother. In homeschooling, the mother typically takes the active role in educating the children, and she receives little attention as a person (Lois, 2016). This study examines how these mother/teachers navigate their motherhood. Nine online discussions with 26 homeschooling mothers revealed strong connections to self-efficacy and agency. Agency and self-efficacy contributed to the mother’s ability to navigate and manage the tension between her needs and those of her family (Bandura 1977, 2006). This study suggests that other homeschool mothers and past experiences played roles in establishing self-efficacy, leading to their self-efficacy expectations. Though previous literature suggests that homeschooling mothers connect strongly to the concept of good mother, the mothers in this study rejected many of the principles Hays (1996) suggests a good mother exhibits.

Introduction

Research has frequently focused on moms, including working mothers (Belekhova & Ivanovskaya, 2022; DeSimone, 2020), stay-at-home moms (Aslam & Adams, 2022; Lukacs, 2018), engineers (Henley et al., 2023), nurses (Chesiak et al., 2020), and others. Mothers are vital not only to their children but also to their families and society. It is critical to consider how different circumstances impact motherhood, how mothers can be supported, and what their needs may be. Despite extensive research on many groups of mothers, homeschool moms have received little attention. Homeschooling mothers take on additional responsibilities that shape their daily lives and create unique needs. To better understand their challenges, we will first examine motherhood in general, followed by a review of research focused on homeschool mothers.

Literature Review

Mother Ideologies

In this area, two key constructs emerge: mothering (focused on child outcomes) and motherhood (the mother's own experience)

(Arendell, 2000). Tensions often arise as mothers try to balance their needs with those of their children. This study focuses on the motherhood ideology, which shapes mothers' self-perceptions and expectations.

Within this motherhood ideology models, such as intensive and extensive motherhood emerge. The intensive mothering idealizes mothers as self-sacrificing, child-centered, and emotionally involved (Hays, 1996; Guendouzi, 2006). This model, often equated with being a good mother, can be detrimental as it prioritizes children's needs above mothers' own (Budds, 2021). Understanding how this concept affects homeschool moms is crucial.

Intensive mothering is often unrealistic, as it prioritizes children's needs over mothers' which is problematic (Douglas & Michaels, 2005; Budds, 2021). Douglas and Michaels (2005) instead propose an extensive model in which mothers delegate more childcare to others and focus on their own needs and economic independence. Utilizing and examining these models may help us better understand the challenges homeschool moms face.

Power in Mother

Mothers often face tension between caregiving and their own needs, especially related to work (Arendell, 2000; Guendouzi, 2006). Many equate family work with being a good wife and mother, and research shows that mothers bear the majority of childcare responsibilities, often with little support (Hauser, 2015; Arendell, 2000). Some mothers find empowerment in this role, especially in parenting, and homeschool moms often view homeschooling as a meaningful extension of being a good mother (McCabe et al., 2021). Lois (2016) found that homeschooling is typically undertaken by mothers, linking the role to the ideals of good motherhood. Other research explores homeschooling mothers' experiences and motivations which may also give indications of some tensions (Sabol et al., 2018; Thorell et al., 2021). However, studies still focus more on academic choices than on the mothers themselves.

Homeschool moms juggle both motherhood and the added responsibilities of teaching, administration, and mentoring (Catlin, 2019; Sherfinski, 2014). Most teaching duties fall to mothers (Lois, 2016), making home their workplace and mothers educational professionals (Gaither, 2009). In addition to academic roles, they face personal stresses from household management and concerns about their teaching abilities, which may affect their sense of success as mothers (Klein & Poplin, 2008; Mayberry, 1992; Lois, 2016).

Agency and Self-Efficacy

Agency and self-efficacy refer to people's beliefs about their ability to control events and their confidence in accomplishing goals (Bandura, 1977, 2006). Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977) and human agency theory (1999) build on these concepts, with human agency requiring self-efficacy to be effective (Bandura, 2006). To believe they can make a change, individuals must first believe they are capable (Bandura, 2006). Exploring self-efficacy and agency may aid in a better understanding of homeschool mothers.

Self-efficacy not only shapes a person's belief in their ability to accomplish a task, but also impacts their expectations and outcomes (Bandura, 1977). Bandura (1977) distinguishes between outcome expectancy—the belief that a behavior will lead to certain outcomes—and efficacy expectation—the confidence in executing the behavior needed to achieve those outcomes (p. 193). The strength of a person's efficacy expectation influences how much effort they invest and how long they persist. High expectations increase effort and persistence, while low expectations reduce them, sometimes preventing any attempt at all (Bandura, 1977). Four main factors shape a person's sense of efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

The first source of influence on the expectation of efficacy comes from performance accomplishments (Bandura, 1977). These performance accomplishments can be either positive or negative experiences an individual recalls from their own life, guiding their estimation of efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Morrison, 2016). Secondly, vicarious experiences observed in others can influence an individual's efficacy estimation (Bandura, 1977). By observing others succeed or fail, individuals can form opinions about their own ability to successfully perform those same tasks (Bandura, 1977). The third source of influence on the expectation of efficacy involves both social and verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1977). Often, this form of influence shows itself as encouragement. The source of this persuasion or encouragement may come from people such as friends and family, or from other media, including books, magazines, conferences, and blogs (Morrison, 2016). Lastly, arousal, as a source of influence on the expectation of efficacy, can be negative when it is highly aversive (Bandura, 1977). This source affects the estimation of efficacy in positive and negative ways. Stress, fatigue, or frustration, for example, can cause self-doubt (Morrison, 2016). High anxiety can undermine self-efficacy (Usher & Pajares, 2008). On the other hand, things that bring calm, such as the freedom to control their own schedule, led to feelings of success among unschooling mothers (Morrison, 2016).

Distinguishing between efficacy expectation and actual outcome is crucial. People with low self-expectancy may avoid tasks, even when they believe the actions could achieve desired results (Bandura, 1977). Efficacy outcomes connect to agency. Belief in personal efficacy is central to human agency (Bandura, 1977, 2006). Agency is the capacity to influence one's own outcomes, and self-efficacy must exist for agency to be enacted.

To examine the challenges for homeschool moms while navigating teaching, the following research questions were asked:

(RQ1) In what ways do homeschool moms attempt to balance parts of their lives with their role as teacher?

(RQ2) How do homeschool mothers relate to the good mother concept as described in previous literature?

These questions seek to understand the intentional or unintentional ways mothers' actions or inaction specifically help or hinder the orchestration of various parts of their lives and how models proposed in literature may help or hinder these moms in understanding their role.

Method

To examine how homeschool moms navigate the academic and non-academic aspects of their lives, an engaged qualitative study was conducted. Qualitative methods, particularly focus groups, allowed the voices of individual moms to be heard while facilitating discussion among moms, creating further insight into how they navigate their lives.

This study pertains to the lives of homeschool moms, and therefore, potential participants were asked to be currently homeschooling mothers aged 18 or older. Once IRB approval was obtained (2023505), homeschool groups were contacted to partner in this research, enabling the study to engage with the homeschool community and gain access and credibility within it.

Participants for the focus groups were located through emails and online notices that solicited volunteers. Snowball sampling was used to recruit additional participants (Richards, 2021). Participants completed a pre-survey containing demographic information, availability, and contact details for scheduling. Once their survey was received, participants were contacted to schedule an online Zoom focus group session.

For the snowball sampling, many participants expressed excitement and their intention to share with others. However, some participants reported that their friends were cautious about participating, a point further discussed in the limitations section.

Participants

This group of participants homeschooled between one and eight children, with a mean of 3 ($SD = 1.83$). It should be noted that many of the participants had other children who were either too young to be schooled, had already graduated, or were enrolled in public or private schools that were not included in the number of children. Most of these homeschool moms were married ($n = 23$, 89%), with only three (12%) who indicated they were single. Likewise, most of the homeschool moms did not work ($n = 19$, 73%), with several reporting part-time work ($n = 6$, 23%) and one mom (4%) reporting full-time work. Most moms considered themselves to be religious ($n = 22$, 85%), with only four moms (15%) listing none as their religious beliefs. These moms had been homeschooling one to more than 20 years. Though it is not possible to accurately get a mean due to several moms indicating 10 plus or 20 plus years, using the lowest of the possibilities gives 7.4 as a mean ($SD = 5.47$).

Small focus groups were used as the primary data collection method because they combine observations and discussion, often yielding rich narratives (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2014). Smaller groups allow for more detailed responses (Litosseliti, 2003). Though overrecruiting is encouraged because drop-out rates can affect the actual group size, in this demographic, it proved challenging (Morgan, 1997; Ray, 2021; Wilkinson, 2004). This challenge will be addressed later in the limitations section.

Data Analysis

As each focus group was completed, data were analyzed. Transcripts and notes were taken immediately after each focus group session. Notes provided useful information to aid in later coding and discovery of inductive findings (Terry et al., 2017). Zoom auto-generated transcripts served as a foundation for the transcription process. Focus group data collection was complete when data saturation was reached, which was determined through coding.

Data were coded first topically, looking for responses with similar subjects (Richards, 2021). After topical coding, analytical (or secondary) coding was conducted to examine theory emergence and support, as well as the interplay and tension between codes (Richards, 2021; Tracy, 2019). This stage requires interpretation and meaning-

making (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When no new codes were found and enough thick, rich descriptions obtained, data collection was completed (Richards, 2021). Coding in this way enabled the prioritization of participants' voices and responses through themes that capture the homeschool mothers' experiences.

Results

Attempting to Balance (RQ1)

The first research question asked in what ways do you attempt to balance parts of your life with your role as teacher? In other words, how do these moms navigate or cope with all the areas, pieces, roles, relationships, responsibilities, or expectations in their lives? This question seeks to answer how moms navigated the conflicts, intersections, or fit of the various parts of their lives. The tone of these questions assumes they have the power and ability to balance their lives. In other words, this question directly relates to the concepts of self-efficacy and agency (Bandura, 1977, 2006).

In the responses four themes emerged: changing frames of reference (n = 63), thinking ahead (n = 48), involving others (n = 46), and filling your cup (n = 28). These themes will be discussed in order of salience below. An exemplar chart of the themes is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Exemplar Chart: How moms navigate the mother-educator role

Theme	Frequency	Definition	Example
Changing Frames of Reference	63	These responses show ways moms change their thinking, perspective or expectations to look at their life in a different way.	"It doesn't have to look in a certain way." "...how important it is to be patient in the short term and trust the growth in the long term."
Thinking Ahead	48	These responses contain thoughts or written out plans that help these moms navigate their life but sorting through what is most important and planning for it.	"I feel like it, I can write it down. It helps me think through." "So you need to look at your day, what is urgent and important? What do I have to prioritize today?"
Involving others	46	These responses show the ways they involve others in their lives either by receiving words of encouragement or actual physical help with their responsibilities.	"a gift to have moms who were years ahead who helped normalize some of that feeling of the juggling." "That's one area that I splurge in. I have a cleaning lady because I need it for my sanity."
Filling your cup	28	These responses show the ways moms attempt to find space and time to renew themselves and "fill their cup."	"I try to get up and read my Bible and pray every morning before my family's up." "...making sure I still have time to do the things that fill my cup, it sounds like a laugh when I say it, it sounds like a lot."

Changing Frames of Reference

The theme changing frame of reference refers to the set of ideas or assumptions that determine how their role of homeschool teacher and mother is understood. Many of the responses in this theme contain words like "different perspective," "managing my own

expectations” or “hard days are always mixed with the good days.” With this theme, the moms do not change their situations or circumstances, or the number of things on their metaphorical plate, but rather shift their thinking about those responsibilities.

Changing to a long-term perspective helped many of the moms get through the day while keeping the longer-term goals and accomplishments in sight. Angie talked about this concept by asking herself some questions:

What do you, what are you hoping to accomplish?
Are you hoping to turn out Ivy league scholars? Are you hoping to, you know, turn out, I don't know, like, you know, professional ball player like, what? What do you, who are you hoping to raise? And, what are you doing this for? And, you know, a lot of people that are in my circle. It's like, well, they're hoping to raise disciples of Jesus Christ. They're hoping to raise people who are intelligent enough to share their faith, and who can work and contribute to society. And, I think then I just say, well then, you need to reframe what education looks like, and I think it's a lot easier to do when you reframe what education looks like.

Her thoughts on reframing her overarching goal or end goal in the homeschooling process made her process easier.

Kelly reminds herself that navigating all the various parts of her life is just life. She said:

That's how life goes when we all start dropping [the balls], well. I mean, you kind of take them back over towards you, and then pick them up and get them going in the juggling again, and that's just how it goes. That's part of home schooling. That's part of living life whether you're home schooling or not.

Here Kelly uses a familiar metaphor which resonated with most of the moms of juggling. Every time this metaphor was brought up ($n = 9$), the rest of the moms in the group nodded or verbally expressed agreement and understanding. She feels like when she drops some of the things she is supposed to be managing, she just picks them back up and moves on. For her, this framing suggests that dropping the ball should be expected as part of life, homeschooling or not.

Reframing what they thought their mother teacher role would look like also helped them navigate the challenges of being a homeschool mom. The idea that there is a way the life of a homeschool mom should look, or at least a way each mother sees her ideal life, entered the minds of some of the moms. Fifty-two codes elucidated the idea of changing their thinking on what their role should look like. They rejected and reframed this role by reminding themselves that it does not have to be a certain way. Their rejection of this concept allowed them to reframe their role to fit their own life and circumstances. Carrie talked about it like this, “I think I had like a type, a kind of idealistic looking, like, that's how it would look with everything in blocks, schedule, or whatever. That's just not who I am.” She flat-out said no to any preconceived notion of what her life should look like. She rejected that identity. While we see this rejection of preconceived notions hinted at here, we'll explore this more fully in the data analysis of RQ2.

All these reframing methods of looking at the bigger picture, daily reminders to keep a different perspective, and recognizing that they are not missing some idealized mark work to help the mom navigate all the things she needs to accomplish. The next theme of thinking ahead will address how more than thinking, but doing some things helped them navigate their lives.

Thinking Ahead

The theme of thinking ahead focuses on the ways moms plan or put in place strategies and structures ahead of time to help them navigate the many things in their lives. These strategies might even be actual plans, steps, or ideas they write out on paper or store in their computer. This category also includes mental activities such as prioritizing, sifting, and organizing their responsibilities and activities in their days by order of importance or significance. These things are the planning type activities, both physically and mentally, that help them function better with all the things they have on their metaphorical plate. Some of the things in this theme included responses like: “I like to get up, like to do my to-do list in the morning, while I'm picking my coffee” or “I've identified that something else is the priority.” Looking at this theme, I will first discuss the more mental activities of thinking ahead and then move to the ones that take a more physical approach.

For many of the moms, thinking ahead involved reflecting on their lives, making decisions, and devising strategies to navigate them. Many of these moms talked about the mental activity in sorting and sifting through the various things they needed to do. One mom used the metaphor of triage. It is the idea of assessing what is the most critical

and what can wait, just like they do in the emergency room. Elizabeth said, “I’m thinking of triage, I think, is the best word I can think of constantly having to sift through like, how important is this?” Rochelle said it this way, “so, you need to look at your day, what is urgent and important? What do I have to prioritize today? What do I have to prioritize this week?” Rochelle pointed out that this activity occupied her mind. She thinks through the things in her day and organizes them by how urgent or important they might be. Though many responses focused on prioritizing, others discussed planning in general.

While some moms do most of this planning ahead mentally, at least at first, others move to physically planning out some things on paper. Sometimes the physical act of writing things out, or having a list on hand to refer to, helped these moms to navigate and cope with all the things in their lives. Lauren went on to talk further about her planning, saying:

[If] I can write it down. It helps me think through it like, so that's everything about helping me not to overwhelm this if I write it down, and I look at it, even if I can't get it all done like that. I can see I can get it done within a specific timeframe, which I think I could...It's kind of journaling to get it all, I kind of like getting out of my head and on the paper.

Lauren mentioned that writing down became a type of journaling for her. It helped her reflect and process her days.

Sometimes these lists or writings help moms plan activities for days when things do not go well. Jacki made a list ahead of time of things to do when they need a break or diversion because something is not going as planned. When asked for specifics about her list, she said:

Oh, yeah, I'm sure it's different for everybody but my own list is make some coffee, or have a dance party, or my biggest two right now are going outside or playing in water, because everybody likes those things—they are like a sensory reset. So, when we're having a bad day, we do those things.

For Jacki, this strategy of keeping a list of things to do when her family needed a break became a tool for navigating her life as a homeschool mom. While these planning-ahead activities may be introspective, other coping strategies involve others. The theme of involving others explores how moms enlist others to help manage their lives.

Involving Others

This theme of involving others explores how moms seek help from others to either physically participate in the responsibilities she must handle or how she is impacted by the advice or encouragement of others. Moms allow spouses, extended family members, other former and current homeschooling moms, friends, church members, and even their own children to help them with their responsibilities. I will first explore the ways moms enlist physical help, then move on to the types of emotional or informational support they rely on from others.

Others support homeschool moms in physical, tangible ways by taking on roles and responsibilities for them at times. This response from Becky fits this theme well: “(I’m) intentional about simplifying and then asking for help and farming out things I don’t need to take on.” Many moms were quite enthusiastic and found extraordinary joy in relinquishing parts of their duties to others. Several of the moms expressed sentiments like this one, “that’s one area that I splurge in. I have a cleaning lady because I need it for my sanity.” Caitlin elaborated on how others help her while continuing her metaphor, comparing navigating her life as a homeschool mom to that of a train. She said:

I truly feel that my community makes it so that I can kind of get through stuff. So, even when things do start going sideways, I’m invested in people more. What my kid understands [is] because those people help my kid understand things, too. I fall short. I’m a human. And there’s things that I’m not going to be able to do all the time. So, when things do start getting hard, definitely lean into others. And, I’m okay with kind of relinquishing responsibility because I know that I need the break or whatever. So, I guess that’s what I was hearing myself [say], you know, when things get hard. It can feel like it’s a complete train wreck, but you still get there, and sometimes you are going to rely on others to like help.

For Caitlin, when she feels like her life is a train wreck, relying on others is okay. She indicated that she relies on others to instruct her child and alludes to other “things” that she delegates.

Moms relinquished household duties often to spouses, children, and professional help. Often, they simply say their children do chores to lighten the household burden, or, as one mom said, “I’ve taught my kids to take over certain jobs around the house.” Their

spouses often shared these household responsibilities as well, as one mom says, “With the change in my husband’s work commitments, he actually liked to cook, and I hate to cook, so that’s lifted a mental burden.” While these physical ways others help moms are critical, words of advice, encouragement, or information from others can be just as helpful.

One of the most often mentioned people who helped them did so not only by providing information, encouragement, and advice, but also by setting an example. Their fellow homeschool mom friends, or friends who were former homeschool moms, led these moms first by their example and then with timely words of encouragement, advice, or information. Amy’s response speaks to this:

I felt very self-conscious and very unsure of myself,
and it was such a gift to have moms who were years
ahead, who helped normalize some of that feeling of
juggling and didn’t make me feel like I was doing
something wrong.

Julie also commented on the advantage of having other homeschool moms in your life, “Well, my biggest thing is, I have a couple of veteran homeschool moms that I know that I can turn to at any time that can remind me that the gaps are going to get filled in.” Other people mentioned friends and family who did not homeschool. These comments may connect strongly to the concepts and sources of self-efficacy.

Whether help from others comes in the form of tangible physical acts, such as cleaning the house, or more emotional support, like encouragement or spending time in conversation, these moms enlisted others to navigate their lives. Having others’ help also allowed them to do things for themselves that they might not otherwise have time for. The theme of filling your cup explores how these moms find time to recharge their own resources.

Filling Your Cup

The theme of filling your cup involved activities that either spiritually or emotionally refreshed them or gave them the time and space to do things for themselves. Time spent in prayer, meditation, or scripture reading filled these moms up spiritually. Time away from their responsibilities and their children allowed them to recharge, sometimes just by taking time alone, and other times by engaging in activities just for them, such as sports, exercise, hobbies, or time with friends. Darla said:

You know it can, it can get overwhelming, and I will be like, hey, Mom's out of commission for a couple of hours. You need to go find something to do that's useful, and I'll come back out when I'm ready.

Recognizing that they need time to themselves was important for many of these moms.

Some of the activities these moms engaged in helped focus their energies in other directions. Jan said, "Running and lifting is like my one thing I have by myself. That's like my meditation. That's my alone time." For Becky, it requires getting up early, "I try to get up and read my Bible and pray every morning before my family's up. I get up before them if possible so I can collect myself and get my feet on solid ground."

While the moms knew they needed these times to recharge, some moms also mentioned the difficulties in getting this time. They said, "the hardest thing for me is childcare, is getting time to just go to the grocery, or have time out alone to go shopping. You know that's been a struggle", or from Wendy, "the biggest struggle for me with homeschooling the entire time has been never having just me-time, like time where I'm alone. And that really is how I recharge." When these moms struggle to find time to recharge, they recognize that they may not be at their best.

Through the themes of changing frames of reference, thinking ahead, involving others, and filling your cup moms not only gave clues to the connections to self-efficacy and agency in their responses but also pointed to the need for a more direct question related to the identification with the good mother model as explored in the previous literature section. Since previous research had indicated this was a concept that homeschool mothers embraced the question now is do these mothers still identify with the good mother concept?

The Good Mother Concept Rejected (RQ2)

Since previous literature, such as Lois (2016), relates the homeschool mother to the concept of a good mother as proposed by Hays (1996), it must be now asked if this holds true for these mothers. The good mother conceptualization of motherhood takes the stance that there is a model or ideal that society, or even mothers themselves, hold mothers to. To this end, RQ2 asks, how is the good mother concept viewed by homeschooling mothers? Two main themes emerged in the responses on this ideal model. First, non-existence, it does not exist but may have in the past. Secondly, delegation, this acknowledges a strong recognition that these moms need others and do not feel a need to do it

all themselves. They do not have to do it all and recognize their need to involve others. Involving others draws from some of the same responses as the theme in the previous section which highlighted involving others as a tools used by these moms to navigate their life. This suggests that this delegation is part of how they have self-efficacy and agency.

For the moms in this study, the ideal of a homeschool mom did not exist in their minds, or, if it did, others had that vision, but they did not. Wendy spoke about this ideal like this:

I think that the ideal probably is almost exclusive to other homeschooling moms, where we're looking at, you know, the glossy magazine cover, or you go to the homeschool conference, and you see this. And you think, wow, I'm not doing any of that. But, I don't think there actually is an ideal. And I think for every family that's going to be a little different in terms of you know, what their priorities are. So, the ideal homeschool mom that Mandy is describing, I don't envy that family at all. I feel sorry for them, and part of that is because that was my experience growing up.

Wendy grew up homeschooled. In the era when she was homeschooled, she felt like there was a stereotype, but now it no longer exists. Rita also said she felt that homeschooling is getting "softer and easier" than it was 10 years ago, and the homeschool community "has relaxed a bit."

Some of the moms may have admitted to having had an ideal, at least in the past, but most strongly refuted the idea that there was any model they were patterning after or wanting to conform to. Over and over, moms talked about flexibility and letting homeschooling moms work out their roles and responsibilities however they saw fit. They rejected the idea of a right way, not just to homeschool but to live life as a homeschool mom.

Jan talked about her experiences growing up in her home and how she wanted something different. She said:

Yeah, like dishes. They'll be there. You know what I mean. Like they'll sit there, and they'll be there, and I have wonderful parents. But for my mom, our home was very tidy, and everything in its place, and very clean, and I can't tell you how many times I wanted

to play with my mom or have a book read to me, and she'd be like, oh, I'm cleaning. I'm doing. You know what I mean. Like the clean house was the priority, and I just have sort of always told myself, you know, that wasn't going to be the priority for me.

Jan went on to discuss how she decided that she needed to be her own priority. She said, "I just decided it needed to be a higher priority. I am not sure where that came from, it was just, I just sort of decided like, I need to start putting myself, you know, [higher] as the priorities go." This idea of a mom putting herself and her needs over the needs of her children contradicts the typical good mother as proposed by Hays (1996).

For delegating, the second theme under the rejection of the good mother model, we find that these mothers also readily trusted others to perform many of their duties, including those directly related to the care of their children, which contradicts aspects of the traditional notion of a good mother. Mom's spoke of allowing husbands to do some of the teaching, hiring tutors, and even allowing extended family and friends to care for their children so that they can have a break. This goes a bit beyond just the involving others, as in the previous research question discussion but takes it further to a trust and offload of the mental responsibility. Farah talked about allowing her husband to play a crucial role in the homeschooling, like this:

My husband's strength and mine like to play off each other, so that sometimes he has a way of explaining things, and a lot of this relates back to emotional intelligence as well, which is a huge piece of what's meaningful to us in terms of what we're teaching our kids. And he'll think of ways to explain things that just didn't even occur to me. That's my job. But my husband will still think of things which I really enjoy. I love that he has a different perspective.

This mom does not appear to be threatened by her husband's involvement in the children's schooling, nor does she have a superior attitude about her abilities compared to his. In other words, she does not seem to be playing the role of a good mother who feels that only she can take care of her children or do it best.

Though there are many examples like the ones given above, indicating that these moms do not follow the pattern of the good

mother, some remnants of this good mother model may remain. For example, Jan said:

Yeah, I think things like Instagram have set some really high standards for what you're supposed to do in a day, and what it's supposed to look like, and we're all baking bread from scratch. And you know what I mean, like doing all the things. So yeah, I think there's a little bit of that. And on the flip side of that, there's also what people think of homeschool. You know what I mean, like all the negative stereotypes that come along with, oh, you home school, you know you get a lot of that as well.

Jan acknowledges the types of images or ideals that do exist. Many of the moms commented that they were aware of some of these ideas, but most felt they no longer pertained to them or, at least, did not apply to their lives, and they did not feel pressured to conform to any ideal. This rejection of an ideal may have changed over time for these moms.

Discussion

Homeschooling has changed over the years, with more people homeschooling and technological advances. This change has allowed more homeschoolers to network, find groups, and be mentored by fellow homeschoolers, as there are many more people with whom to easily and conveniently connect. This more convenient networking may make it easier for homeschool moms today to have a source of efficacy more readily available to them. This networking may contrast with previous literature that found mothers to be more isolated, lonely, and to receive less input from other homeschool moms (Catlin, 2019; Sherfinski, 2014). While it remains unclear why the contrast with previous findings emerged, it is worth noting that this is an understudied demographic, and studies such as Catlin (2019) and Sherfinski (2014) were limited in scope.

The work of Lois (2016) found homeschool moms somewhat discontent in their role, with some regretting things they gave up, including careers. The mothers in this study did not appear to exhibit these characteristics. These moms seemed more comfortable with the homeschool life. The idea that their homeschool could be whatever it needed to be led to rejection of many of the characteristics of the concept of good mother (Hays, 1996). Other homeschool moms and the community play a key role in this, and greater exposure to fellow

homeschoolers, especially those farther along in their journey, may have contributed to this finding and their own efficacy estimation.

While these moms borrowed from the extensive mothering model by allowing others to care for their children, most did not, however, follow this model in seeking satisfaction through outside employment; they found great satisfaction through a job well done within their role as homeschool teachers (Douglas & Michaels, 2005). They expressed immense joy and satisfaction at the accomplishments and progress of their children, which they saw as inspired or taught by themselves, and found job satisfaction in that.

Unlike the good mother, they allow a lot of input from others and do not seem to see their knowledge as superior. They are, in fact, quite humble, freely admitting they do not know what they are doing, but they are okay with it.

Part of not following a model stems from the freedom they experienced in homeschooling. If something does not work, they have the power and agency to change it to suit their family's needs. This was a critical power to these moms and was repeated, recurring, and forceful in the data. These women valued this flexibility and freedom to have agency in their lives. Having this power helps them have a efficacy expectation.

It is essential for the mothers of these families to maintain their autonomy and agency. Part of being able to change things to work for them relies on their freedom to choose to associate with homeschool groups, adopt a particular curriculum, schedule their days and weeks as needed, and plan their extracurricular activities in accordance with their family values. Infringement on this agency forced moms to leave groups or choose different activities based on the priorities they each individually valued. Another scholar also emphasized the importance of homeschool moms retaining their freedom (Catlin, 2019). These moms valued their role in affecting their own lives. The implications of this finding could lend support to current and future legislation regarding homeschooling restrictions.

Recommendations for groups and those wanting to work with homeschool mothers might include facilitating support from fellow homeschool mothers, particularly those who are further along in their journey. This critical connection enabled these moms to feel successful and supported, which is necessary to realize their self-efficacy.

Future directions

More research will be needed to explore this and determine whether it is a change specific to homeschool moms, just this group of

homeschool moms, or a broader movement among women to be more flexible and content with who they are and to reject traditional ideals.

Previous literature has focused on homeschool mothers enacting the role of a good mother; however, this group of mothers firmly rejected this notion. It will be essential to continue this work to determine whether this is unique to this group of mothers or can be generalized to all homeschool mothers, or even to mothers in general. A new model of the homeschool mother may be in order.

Limitations

As with any research, this study has limitations. First, the findings in this study cannot be generalized to other populations. The findings pertain only to this group of people. While many of the findings may be applicable to a larger population of homeschoolers, more quantitative and qualitative research is needed with broader participant pools to extend any findings beyond this limited sample. Secondly, this sample was also limited in that both the researcher's contacts and the partnering group were centered in the Midwest. Because laws tend to vary in different areas regarding homeschool, things such as freedoms, as previously discussed, could significantly alter the findings in places such as the eastern portion of the United States, where laws tend to be more restrictive for homeschooling.

Also, using an existing group to find participants meant that most of the moms in this connection may already have more established connections than other homeschool moms who have not yet joined groups. It is difficult to say how this may have impacted the findings, as any pool of homeschoolers is likely to be found through connections and contacts. There is no effective way to network with this demographic without these connections. It is likely that most research to date on homeschoolers has used group connections and networking.

This study also had challenges with finding enough participants, as many were reluctant to participate. Some contacts also reported that their friends were skeptical about who was doing this research and how it would be used. Due to these challenges, focus group sizes were typically small. The size of the focus groups may have had both positive and negative impacts.

Conclusion

In many ways, this research marked the beginning of understanding the needs and concerns of the homeschool mom as an individual. Although some research had been conducted, it was limited in scope and dated. This current homeschool mom recognizes she has

much more choice and can successfully homeschool her own way. She is often surrounded by fellow homeschoolers who support, guide, and model a path to success. This mom readily admits her failures and is deeply committed to doing life together with her children. For her, homeschool is a lifestyle, and she chooses homeschool because it fits her life. Her sense of self-efficacy and agency shapes her mothering, and these moms recognize ways to navigate their lives by enlisting the support of others and adjusting their perspectives. Further research is needed to support and expand this work.

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“Donald Trump Is Definitely Fucking Satan”: *South Park*, Media Satire, and Shifting Frames of Acceptance and Rejection for Two Trump Presidencies

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Abstract: In light of evolving questions of the role and efficacy of political humor in addressing the exigency of a second Donald Trump presidency, this study analyzes two extended satirical story arcs critical of Trump and MAGA from award-winning adult animated comedy South Park. The study utilizes three of Kenneth Burke's rhetorical frames of acceptance and rejection (comedy, tragedy, and burlesque) to contrast South Park's two most substantive satirical statements on Trump and MAGA: Season 19 and 20's comparatively humane and introspective satire on Trump's 2015-16 candidacy and Season 27-28's dehumanizing mockery of Trump's ongoing second presidency (2025-). The analysis suggests South Park's 2025's application of Burke's burlesque frame of rejection resonated culturally whereas 2015-16's application of Burke's comic frame of acceptance, traditionally preferred by Burke and Burkean scholars, failed to adequately address Trump's political ascendance due to extending to Trump and MAGA what rhetorician Mike Milford deems "cheap grace": comic forgiveness that seeks deeper understanding of a misguided opponent but is powerless to hold said opponent accountable for transgressions, permitting the transgressor to avoid accountability and deny the Burkean imperative of comic introspection.

Introduction

Donald J. Trump's shocking ascendance and first term as U.S. president presented critics and scholars with myriad exigencies for an unprecedented political epoch. Among them: the shifting role and potential of political satire. How can the art of satire in the tradition of Aristophanes, Rabelais, Swift, and Rogers affect public consciousness in the face of a political regime outwardly unbridled by shame, decorum, or temperance, its machinations unfolding against the backdrop of an increasingly siloed media landscape and polarized populace? If comedians and satirists are to retain their roles as righteous truth-telling fools in the carnival of ever-radicalizing political-ideological spheres, from what stance might critics, scholars, and artists most potently affect political consciousness?

While pillars of U.S. pop culture such as *Saturday Night Live*, establishment late-night talk shows, and scions of the "fake news"

edutainment sphere (e.g., *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*) confronted Trump and the MAGA movement circa 2015-20 with varying degrees of acclaim, another prominent voice notably wavered with the sharpness of its satirical edge: award-winning adult animation *South Park*. The second-most prolific animated series in U.S. history with over 330 episodes and five Primetime Emmy awards, *South Park* carved its reputation as one of modern television's most searing comedies thanks to its interweaving of fresh-from-the-headlines storytelling, grotesque yet poignant dark satire, and sociopolitical gestalt combining fragments of progressive, conservative, and libertarian ideologies, permitting viewers from disparate viewpoints to claim *South Park*, and by extension its outspoken auteurs Trey Parker and Matt Stone, as warriors for principled, iconoclastic free expression.

After dedicating much of its twentieth season to satirizing Trump's 2015-16 campaign, *South Park* self-consciously pivoted away from President Trump after his 2017 swearing in. During the following four years in which Alec Baldwin's Trump parody was a fixture of *Saturday Night Live* and Oliver's serialized coverage of "Stupid Watergate" (i.e., Russiagate and the events leading to Trump's first impeachment) cemented the latter as one of contemporary media's leading satirists, *South Park* zagged away from the daunting task of incorporating Trump's all-consuming presence into its fantastic universe. "It's tricky now because satire has become reality," Parker explained. "[W]e were really trying to make fun of what was going on but we couldn't keep up and what was actually happening was much funnier than anything we could come up with. So we decided to kind of back off and let them do their comedy and we'll do ours" (Schafter, 2017).

When Trump resumed dominance over news cycles in 2024 as his third campaign as the Republican nominee intensified, Parker and Stone expressed exhaustion at the prospect of the former and future president's shadow reforming over *South Park*. "Obviously, it's fucking important," Stone told *Vanity Fair* of Trump's impending return, "but it kind of takes over everything and we just have less fun." "I don't know what more we could possibly say about Trump," Parker added (Canfield, 2024). The duo's conviction to avoid Trump appeared sincere. *South Park* sat out the entirety of the 2024 election cycle while Parker and Stone engaged in protracted contract negotiations with parent corporation Paramount. In April 2025, *South Park* released a teaser trailer for Season 27 (*South Park Studios*, 2025) that visually referenced some of early 2025's political chaos—January's fatal D.C. air crash and FAA layoffs, Elon Musk's alleged ketamine abuse while overseeing DOGE's government slashing, Canada's tariff-fueled

conflict with the U.S.—without depicting or directly referencing Trump himself.

Then July 2025's Season 27 premiere episode, "Sermon on the Mount," arrived. With no forewarning and having discarded anything teased in the false season trailer, "Sermon" was a sensation among fans, critics, and journalists by virtue of its excoriating portrayal of Trump, who appears as himself for the first time in *South Park* as a political figure.¹ *South Park*'s Trump circa 2025 is almost certainly the most incendiary, abasing portrayal of a president in U.S. mainstream media history. *South Park* portrays Trump as a jabbering pervert habitually disrobing and flaunting his micropenis, constantly annoying his aggrieved homosexual lover Satan (a recurring *South Park* character), and obliviously gadding about a carnivalesque White House while arrogantly commanding a legion of mortified sycophants such as Vice President J.D. Vance, Department of Homeland Security secretary Kristi Noem, and Federal Communications Commission chairman Brendan Carr. Trump's braying voice, speech patterns ("hey, relax, guy!"), art style, and narcissistic demands for unfulfilling sex from a resentful Satan are clear intertextual evocations to *South Park*'s past depictions of semi-recurring villain Saddam Hussein, a callback by which *South Park* "invites audiences to make specific lateral associations" (Ott & Walter, 2000, p. 430) between Trump and Hussein, the latter recognizable to fans as simultaneously an apocalyptic threat and an idiotic nuisance.

South Park's ruthless caricature of the president arrived as the Trump administration escalated its mobilization of executive power to constrain media criticism of the president, including successfully suing Paramount and inducing the media titan's hand to cancel Trump critic Stephen Colbert's *The Late Show*. *South Park* parlayed its vicious mockery of Trump into, according to Paramount as reported in *Business Insider*, its "biggest audience share for a linear premiere since 1999 and its best season premiere rating since 2022" (Spirlet & Needleman, 2025), recapturing the media zeitgeist with intensity unseen since *South Park*'s peak of cultural influence in the mid 2000s. The episode was widely covered and praised in mainstream media: *Rolling Stone*, for example, praised "Sermon" for attacking Trump "at a

¹ Trump's *South Park* debut came in 2001 during Season 5's "The Entity," in which Trump briefly appears as a potential investor for Mr. Garrison's invention IT. Unlike his 2025 incarnation, Trump is portrayed in "The Entity" in a relatively neutral fashion consistent with his media-cultivated image as a brash business magnate.

moment when so many in the media—Parker and Stone’s corporate bosses in particular—are terrified of pointing out that the president is acting like a fascist” (Sepinwall, 2025). “Sermon” gained further resonance when it succeeded in getting under the Trump administration’s collective skin, reportedly drawing the “seething” ire of Trump (Patten, 2025) and provoking a next-day response from the White House that extended *South Park*’s time in the spotlight:

Just like the creators of *South Park*, the Left has no authentic or original content, which is why their popularity continues to hit record lows. This show hasn’t been relevant for over 20 years and is hanging on by a thread with uninspired ideas in a desperate attempt for attention. President Trump has delivered on more promises in just six months than any other president in our country’s history — and no fourth-rate show can derail President Trump’s hot streak. (Dolak, 2025).

At a moment of heightened anxiety over Trump and allies’ zealotry to constrain media criticism, the acclaim surrounding “Sermon” suggests *South Park*’s moment of kairos was not merely well-timed; the substance of its critique of Trump and MAGA resonated where many American media satirists, including its own previous attempts, fell short. By concocting a satirical counterstatement resilient enough to survive the churn of multiple media cycles, *South Park* rose above the din and captured the public’s imagination, positioning *South Park* as one of U.S. mass media’s most compelling satirists of Trump’s political regime.

Scholars and critics continue to interrogate the role and efficacy of satire in today’s political and media landscape, a discussion that has long included *South Park*. To its credit, *South Park* has been praised for its “allusive political strategy in which it engages taboos, ‘common sense,’ popular media, current events, and its own history, production, and influences in order to highlight and destabilize cultural norms” (Gournelos, 2009, p. 42). Mediated political satire remains popular among audiences in the era of Trump: CBS’s Colbert and ABC’s Jimmy Kimmel rode nightly criticism of Trump to the top of the late-night charts in 2026 despite conservative efforts to silence both (Fitzgerald, 2026). Elsewhere in the world, Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s career as a comedian prior to becoming president of Ukraine is often lauded as evidence that comedy can positively affect political consciousness on a massive scale (Ryabinska, 2020). Yet *South Park*

and its contemporaries such as the *Daily Show* have been accused of promoting irony-poisoned arrogance and cynicism to viewers: “[T]he real cultural villainy of *South Park* is not its depictions of swearing schoolchildren,” Groening (2008) argues, “but its espousal of an emergent cynicism that discourages its viewers from asserting political agency” (p. 125). *South Park*’s approach to satire has also been accused of “lack[ing] the necessary coherence and underlying realism to deliver sincere social criticism” (Frim, 2014, p. 151). The case studies explored in this study suggest that *South Park* both circa 2015 and 2025 can formulate a coherent satirical response to contemporary politics; the salient question becomes whether its messaging harbors potential to change minds as well as entertain.

This study interrogates the rhetorical efficacy of *South Park*’s dueling satirical depictions of Trump and MAGA-friendly figureheads in his orbit. The analysis utilizes Kenneth Burke’s theoretical frames of acceptance and rejection, as discussed in Burke’s treatise *Attitudes Toward History* (1959), across close readings of *South Park*’s two substantive satirical statements on Trump: Seasons 19-20’s arc addressing Trump’s 2015-16 candidacy and Seasons 27-28’s arc addressing Trump’s return to the White House in 2025. The study begins by reviewing literature applying Burkean frames of acceptance—tragedy and comedy—to political discourse, focusing on interrogations of the Burkean ideal of the comic frame’s efficacy to address the exigency of Trump as president. Analysis of *South Park*’s Seasons 19-20 arc suggests application of the comic frame, favored by Burke and many Burkean scholars, failed to address the exigency of Trump’s initial political rise by extending to Trump and MAGA what rhetorician Mike Milford deems “cheap grace”: comic forgiveness that lacks redressive potency to hold the rhetor accountable for transgressions, thus permitting easy evasion of accountability. The analysis then applies Burke’s burlesque frame of rejection to critique “Sermon on the ‘Mount’” and *South Park*’s Season 27-28 arc, arguing *South Park*’s burlesque framing harnesses redressive potency, lacking in its 2015-16 comic framing, to respond to Trump and MAGA’s mobilization of hypermasculinity to sanctify its wielding of repressive power.

Burkean Frames of Acceptance

In *Attitudes Toward History* (1959), Burke observes that human actors respond to adverse social conditions by adopting and modifying our worldviews to better comprehend, cope with, and confront challenges we face:

In the face of anguish, injustice, disease, and death one adopts policies. One constructs his [sic] notion of the universe of history, and shapes attitudes in keeping. Be he [sic] poet or scientist, one defines the “human situation” as amply as his [sic] imagination permits; then, with this ample definition in mind, he [sic]² singles out certain functions or relationships as either friendly or unfriendly (pp. 3-4).

Burke (1959) defines the frames of acceptance through which we perceive our conditions as “the more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking [hu]man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it” (p. 5).

Of the frames of acceptance Burke identifies in *Attitudes Toward History*, the tragic and comic frames are the most frequently applied in rhetorical scholarship. Tragedy frames social conflict fatalistically, positioning adversaries as diametrically opposed and constitutionally evil entities who must be vanquished lest their evil metastasize and consume that which constitutes good. Actors embracing the tragic frame tend toward processes of victimage for social redress, identifying an enemy whose scapegoating (or mortification via voluntary self-sacrifice) for society’s ills promises to paper over breaches in the social order. Burke (1954) warned against the anti-dialogic tragic frame, “a complex kind of trial by jury in which the author symbolically charges himself [sic] or his [sic] characters with transgressions ... and metes out condemnation and penance by tests far deeper than any that could be codified in law” (pp. 247-248), for its violent machinations promote vengeance over introspection and promote ephemeral mitigation of guilt over engagement with and address of systemic roots of social unrest.

Conversely, actors embracing the comic frame view antagonists as misinformed and foolish, not inherently evil, recognizing that we, too, are imperfect, mistaken, and bear some degree of complicity for the conflict. “The comic frame,” Burke (1959) argues, “should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate would not be passiveness, but maximum consciousness. One would ‘transcend’ himself [sic] by noting his [sic] own foibles” (p. 171). Comic consciousness promotes humility, dialogue, self-

² Consistent with many contemporary Burkean scholars, the author utilizes [sic] to acknowledge Burke’s then-common utilization of masculine pronouns to address the whole of humanity.

reflexivity, and seeking root causes of guilt and disorder, address of which harnesses real potential for unity and reconstruction. “When you add that people are necessarily mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness,” Burke (1959) writes, “you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy” (p. 41).

The comic frame, with its “warn[ing] against the dangers of pride” and shifting frame “from crime to stupidity” (Burke, 1959, p. 41), is often held as the poetically ideal approach through which actors ought to approach conflict. “Rather than reducing social tensions through mystification, scapegoating, or banishment,” Christensen and Hanson (1996) observe, “rhetoric in the comic frame humorously points out failings in the status quo and urges society to correct them through thoughtful action rather than tragic victimage” (p. 161). Regarding the present topic of satirical media, comedy affirms the potential of satirical art to affect political change and serves as a potential antidote to the stridencies of today’s polarized climate. “Comedies,” Bonnstetter (2011) suggests, “use jocularly to make fun of the behaviors of a particular person or group of people, but the key is that the rhetor is condemning the action, not the person(s) committing the action” (p. 20). Yet, as history unfolds and exigencies arise, the idealized potency of the comic frame warrants scrutiny in the face of new considerations. Though the destructive pursuits of tragic victimage cannot address the root causes of social disorder, can Burke’s comic circle be complete if one party to conflict refuses the imperatives of earnest introspection and dialogic vulnerability? Can parties to suffering at the hands of repressive power rely on the comic frame’s undergirding presumptions that “all individuals are moral beings” (Powell, 1995, p. 89) and that humans “are amenable to enlightenment, and that knowledge leads more or less directly to repentance” (Hatch, 2003, p. 744)?

Antidotes to tragedy and alternatives to victimage are essential to humanity’s ongoing quest to halt cycles of hatred and factional violence. Yet it is undeniable that the Trump administration and MAGA allies in the legislative and judicial branches have consolidated and actuated disproportionate power through command of repressive state apparatuses (Althusser, 1970/2006): government, police, military that cannot be easily induced to participate in comic dialogue. Can comedy formulate meaningful responses to a non-reflexive, non-dialogic government whose “mistakes” are difficult to parse from strategic campaigns of wrath and repression? What is the role of comic dialogue in the face of exigencies without parallel in U.S. history such

as a sitting president encouraging followers to disrupt the peaceful transition of power, military occupation of U.S. cities resulting in the brutalization and killing of peaceful citizen protestors, or state-sponsored disinformation advocating unlawful violence against citizens and political opponents?

In the wake of Trump's first presidency and the events surrounding its coda on January 6, 2021, rhetoricians such as Milford (2021) and Kunde (2024) reinvigorated debate over the efficacy of the comic frame in political conflict. Milford argues that senators who moved to acquit Trump during his 2019-20 impeachment trial, during which Trump was accused of soliciting foreign interference in the 2016 election, utilized comic framing to absolve Trump's actions as merely the misguided errors of a political neophyte:

Like the Senators, many rhetors hinge their comic framing on aspirational presuppositions that agents will move forward with new knowledge. But without a shared ethical framework there is little awareness of one's need for accountability, which is Trump's stock in trade. And since the comic frame has no mechanism for ensuring compliance like the victimage ritual, violators are free to continue in the manner that provoked the statement to begin with. In such cases, the comic frame functions less as an opportunity for enlightenment and more as a way to rationalize the accusations away (Milford, 2021, p. 298).

Milford persuasively argues that Senators' comic framing morphed into homeopathic framing, in which resigned actors "develop tolerance to possibilities of great misfortune by accustoming himself [sic] to misfortune in small doses, administered stylistically" (Burke, 1959, p. 45), resulting in what Milford deems cheap grace that lacked corrective potency. "What is needed for a comic corrective to work as Burke and others envision, Milford (2021) argues, "is a strong consensus on the underlying principles behind comedy. Comedy that lacks a shared definition of its impetus for creation (injustice) and its ultimate goal (justice) between critics and the errant will fall flat" (p. 300).

In an analysis of the rhetorical limitations of the tragic frame utilized in the *Final Report* by the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, Kunde (2024) offers a counterargument, suggesting that Burke did not position comic framing "as a rhetorical tool used to achieve certain motives" but rather "as a

process to explore motives” and that the resulting “cheap grace” “might be better read not as a limit of the comic frame itself but as instances of the comic frame not being used to its full potential and flexibility” (p. 210). From this perspective, the comic frame is not a mechanism for inducing change in one’s opponent(s) but rather “more as an additional important part of the rhetorical and democratic process” (p. 209). Kunde affirms the value of the comic frame, which “calls for a deeper analysis of the situation and its various motives rather than an acceptance of a simple causal chain or single actor” (p. 210).

From this dialogue a question emerges: if tragedy cannot get to the heart of social unrest, and if the comic frame lacks potency for redressive action in the absence of collaborative dialogue and mutual introspection, what alternate frame or frames might be more appropriate for purposes of formulating a tactical satirical counterstatement against a non-dialogic antagonist? This intriguing discussion is rooted in political rhetoric; it has yet to be applied in the sphere of popular media. The following section considers Milford’s concept of cheap grace through a close reading of *South Park*’s satirical messaging on Trump’s 2015-16 political rise and election as president. The analysis reveals that as tactical satire, addressing the proposition of a Trump presidency through the comic frame resulted in a misguided and insufficient response to the exigency.

Cheap Grace: South Park’s Comic Framing of Trump’s 2015-16 Campaign

South Park’s first substantive statement on the possibility and eventual reality of a Trump presidency spans Seasons 19-20, with first evocation on September 23, 2015, one week after Trump’s dominating performance in the second Republican national debate advanced his once-fringe candidacy. *South Park*’s satirical treatment of Trump’s candidacy became a dominant recurring storyline throughout Season 20, mirroring Trump’s political rise in the national consciousness from amusing curiosity to apocalyptic agent. Ultimately, Seasons 19-20 extend cheap grace to Trump and MAGA, addressing the future president and his supporters via a comic framework that gestured toward meaningful social analysis but failed to articulate the maximum consciousness that the comic frame theoretically promotes. Though the following critique is not a rejection of the comic frame or its merits, it supports ongoing scrutiny of comedy’s utopian ideals in the absence of shared ethical frameworks or impetus for unrepentant wielders of repressive power to embrace comic introspection.

South Park’s 2015-16 Trump arc begins with “Where Has My Country Gone?” in which Mr. Garrison, South Park Elementary’s

crude, ever-transgressive fourth-grade teacher, becomes frustrated by an influx of illegal immigrants from Canada in his class and around town. Within *South Park*'s fictional universe, Garrison is the ideal character to serve as Trump avatar, for *South Park* has historically employed Garrison as a storytelling device to "engage and critique multiple levels of culture at once in order to denaturalize their rhetorical construction" (Gournelos, 2009, p. 102). When *South Park*'s writers require a vessel to symbolically contain the poles of political division—gender identity, human sexuality, evolution vs. creationism—in order to exaggerate and lampoon them, Garrison is their default character to stretch the debate to ludicrous extremes; thus, Garrison-as-Trump signifies to the knowing audience that his dialogue and behavior should be received as comically irrational.

Annoyed by Canadian immigrants' (fictional) customs and enraged by P.C. Principal's³ mandate to introduce bilingualism into the classroom, Garrison refuses to comply and is fired for disrupting a school assembly celebrating Canadian history. Garrison attempts to unite South Park against Canadian immigration, riling up the town's faction of predictably reactionary "rednecks" by proposing the following solution, clearly satirical hyperbole of Trump's "build the wall" rhetoric that helped supercharge his candidacy:

I'm suggesting we round them all up, pull down their pants, and fuck them until their spirits leave their bodies. And then after we've fucked every last one of them to death, we build a big wall. If anyone comes over the wall, we fuck them to death, too!

Garrison rallies his mob to the Canadian border only to discover Canada has already built a wall to keep Americans out. Livid at being denied discovering what "cool shit" Canada is hiding from its southern neighbor, Garrison ironically breaks into Canada by going over Niagara Falls in a barrel, only to find Canada's streets deserted.

³ P.C. Principal's arrival in South Park constitutes the other recurring plot of Season 19. A parody of encroaching political correctness channeled through an ironically hypermasculine character, P.C. Principal and plots surrounding him constitute a season-long satire on so-called P.C. culture as its associated symbolic outgrowths—transgender awareness, personal pronouns, safe spaces—clash with conservative-libertarian values traditional to South Park.

Back in South Park, fourth-grader Butters Stotch learns from his Canadian girlfriend Charlotte's family that they emigrated from Canada to escape its new president. Charlotte's father laments:

There were several candidates during the Canadian elections. One of them was this brash asshole who just spoke his mind. He didn't really offer solutions; he just said outrageous things. We thought it was funny. Nobody ever really thought he'd be president. It was a joke, but we let the joke go on for too long. He kept gaining momentum, and by the time we were ready to say, "OK, let's get serious now; who should really be president?" he was already being sworn into office.

"Gee, how bad can a president be?" the ever-innocent Butters wonders as Charlotte's father sobs. This is the first time *South Park* misinterprets Trump's candidacy as mere folly from which voters will eventually tire before getting serious.

Back in Canada, Garrison confronts the foul-mouthed, abrasive Canadian president, an unambiguous Trump caricature. A fight ensues in which Garrison sexually violates "Mr. President" to death. When news of Mr. President's demise reaches South Park, the Canadian immigrants return to Canada, which a returning Garrison misinterprets as validation of his anti-immigration solution. Garrison vows to take his crusade to Washington D.C., leaving town with his running mate, the show's cruel caricature of Caitlyn Jenner. Despite Garrison's misguided declaration of victory, the discerning viewer decodes a clear moral from "Where Has My Country Gone?": Trump is not a substantive presidential candidate; his campaign-trial histrionics are hollow and merely attempts to garner attention.

Following one brief reappearance of Garrison-as-Trump in Season 19, *South Park*'s satirical statement on Trump's 2016 candidacy resumes in earnest in September 2016's Season 20 premiere "Member Berries." Here, *South Park* fully embraces the comic frame to satirize Trump as is evident in two rhetorical strategies: (1) depicting Garrison as privately vulnerable and self-aware that running for president threatens the country, and (2) introducing the agentic member berries as an allegory for the corrupting force of nostalgia being the root cause behind Trump's appeal to MAGA voters.

"Member Berries" begins with an intertextual callback to Season 8's memorable "Douche and Turd" episode, which presented South Park Elementary's vote for a new school mascot between a giant

douche and a turd sandwich as a nihilistic allegory for the 2004 election between George W. Bush and John Kerry. Garrison, now sporting a clownish orange face to visually mark him as a Trump avatar, is referred to by media and townsfolk as Giant Douche, with Hillary Clinton the Turd Sandwich. Backstage before a public address, an increasingly distressed Garrison admits to Jenner that he has no plan for governing and spirals into despair as he rises in the polls. Admitting he cannot lead but that his ego will not permit him to concede, Garrison decides to tank his campaign to ensure Clinton's victory. Here, *South Park* evokes the popular conspiracy that Trump ran for president merely for publicity or vanity before finding himself in over his head prior to somehow winning. This discourse was supported by political insiders such as Trump's former lawyer Michael Cohen, who testified to Congress Trump "never expected to win the primary. He never expected to win the general election. The campaign for him was always a marketing opportunity" (Gibbs, 2025). This myth's evocation supports the comic notion that Trump is merely a naïve showman whose lies and more abhorrent campaign rhetoric can be absolved because he did not understand the gravity of his predicament or merely sought to exploit mass-media sensationalism to promote his brand. *South Park* extends Trump cheap grace by bestowing Garrison self-awareness and humility in privately acknowledging his campaign rhetoric is empty and, again, presuming the rational voting public would reach the same conclusion.

If a comic mindset encourages us to view Trump as merely mistaken, it also hails us as observers to seek root causes that enable his foolish behavior and supporters' attraction to his candidacy. *South Park* proposes two factors facilitating Garrison-as-Trump's upward failure despite his increasingly farcical attempts to tank his campaign. The first root cause is "Turd Sandwich" Clinton, whose singularly inept, unpalatable candidacy made her the only candidate with whom Garrison, therefore Trump, could possibly compete.

Clinton's complicity in Trump's ascension is advanced during Garrison's backstage meltdown in "Member Berries" when Garrison laments, "Why did the Democrats have to elect such a turd sandwich?" Garrison's initial plan to torpedo his campaign comes at a football game in which he plans to disenfranchise conservative voters by remaining seated during the National Anthem, satirizing the 2016 protests in which athletes such as Colin Kaepernick knelt during the Anthem to protest state-sponsored violence. Though in reality Trump made political hay off the NFL's kneeling controversy, Garrison's gambit fails when *South Park*'s new politically correct dogma results in the crowd being permitted to sit, stand, or kneel as they like.

Significantly to *South Park*'s extension of cheap grace to Trump, the episode (via an in-booth commentator) suggests that both Clinton and Garrison are equally repellent to voters: "There you can see the turd sandwich, waving to all four people excited by her. And there's the giant douche doing the same." Given the show's legacy of negative messaging on Clinton—most notably the 2007 episode "The Snuke," a 24 parody in which Clinton's campaign visit to South Park threatens the town via a bomb implanted in her vagina, the latter presented as more threatening than the former—*South Park*'s habitual "both sides are equally bad" rhetoric weighs disproportionately on Clinton in light of the audience's likely familiarity with Parker and Stone's distaste for her.

The theme of Clinton's singular ineptness returns in "The Damned." Backstage prior to a televised debate, we see Clinton's handlers advising her to forcefully refute what they presume will be another string of Garrison's Trumpian lies. Garrison instead comes clean to the audience:

I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. I have to come clean. I had no idea I would get this far, but the fact of the matter is I should not be president, OK? I will fuck this country up beyond repair. I am a sick, angry little man. Please, if you care at all about the future of our country, vote for her, OK?

Unable to think on her feet, Clinton mindlessly regurgitates her script: "My opponent is a liar, and he cannot be trusted. What he is saying is simply not true. Do not believe it." When an exasperated Garrison praises Clinton's experience and integrity, Clinton again brands him a liar. The implication is clear: Clinton's putrid debate performance and flawed candidacy are facilitating Trump's ascent despite his own terminal failings. "Oh my god, she is such a turd sandwich," her advisor cringes during Clinton's on-stage implosion.

As the show that introduced Giant Douche vs. Turd Sandwich into the cultural lexicon as shorthand for the futility of participating in U.S. electoral politics, *South Park*'s participation in the discourse that Clinton vs. Trump was a clash between two uniquely abysmal candidates is consistent with its ethos. Yet the implication that Clinton and the Democratic Party facilitated Trump's resilience despite his botch-filled campaign constitutes a faux-comic gesture blaming the U.S.'s two-party system as being at root of Trump's ascendance. Though Clinton's unpopularity and its contributing factors have been documented and scrutinized (Deckman, 2016), crediting Clinton's

ineptitude for Trump's popularity extends cheap grace to Trump and absolves his exploitation of racism, sexism, and anti-immigrant hostility as merely palatable by default, rhetoric the public would otherwise have rejected or ignored if granted a non-Clinton alternative. Postmortem analysis of the 2016 election reveals that racism, sexism, and xenophobia were significant factors that swayed many voters to pick Trump (Shook et al., 2020.) To excuse Trump's exploitation of those rhetorical strategies, or voters' embrace of them, moves the audience further from maximum consciousness of the conditions that facilitated Trump's rise. Trump's well-documented exploitation of culture-war divisions did not become comparatively palatable when stumbled upon by voters shopping for a Clinton alternative; this reality was confirmed in 2024 when Trump reprised similar rhetorical strategies against Kamala Harris.

More substantial yet to *South Park's* satire of Trump's candidacy is the plotline involving the member berries: a grape-like strain of sentient superfruit that constantly [re]members pop culture references from the 1970s and '80s. South Park's adults consume member berries to "mellow out" in nostalgia indulgence, but it is revealed that while member berries mostly prattle on 'membering pop culture ("member *Ghostbusters*"? "member Chewbacca"?), they surreptitiously mix in appeals to right-wing politics, appealing to what punk-rock iconoclast Jello Biafra dubs "nostalgia for an age that never existed" (Biafra & Nixon, 1994): "member when there weren't so many Mexicans? ... 'member when marriage was just between a man and a woman? ... 'member feeling safe? ... 'member no ISIS?' ... 'member Reagan'?" Season 20 utilizes the member berries as a cautionary metaphor for the dangers of relinquishing critical thought to indulgence in nostalgia, which South Park's adults consume, or are forced to consume via projectile vomit ala John Carpenter's *Prince of Darkness*, to distract them from threats facing the community.

Season 20's comic threads converge in "Douche and a Danish" when Garrison, at last succeeding in alienating his followers by delivering a vulgar, misogynistic standup comedy routine at a rally, flees a vengeful mob of rallygoers and advisors enraged by his self-sabotage. Garrison seeks refuge in South Park, ducking into a support group attended by Randy Marsh and other adults addicted to member berries. When Garrison confesses the folly of his candidacy, Randy informs him that member berries are to blame for his campaign's imperviousness. Having researched the member berries, Randy connects the seductive fruit to the fall of the Roman empire, implying the U.S. sits at a similar crossroads between progress or regression:

Once too many Romans ate the member berries, there was no more growth. They rested on their laurels, eating and ‘membering all the good stuff.... You see, we all want to go back to when we were kids. Simple ideas like a big man to protect us, keep us safe. Instead of a fresh new Star Wars,⁴ we want the old, just recycled and plopped in our tummies.

Here, *South Park* embraces comic framing to attempt making sense of Trump’s popularity, suggesting lazy but pleasurable nostalgia has seduced voters to the point of trading sovereignty for Trump’s authoritarian promise of paternal protection. This is a compassionate moral that seemingly nods toward deconstructing Trump’s appeal, but *South Park*’s laudable sentiment cannot close Burke’s comic circle because it is predicated upon self-awareness and introspection from Trump and MAGA that never manifested. Garrison’s vulgar, misogynist rally satirizes Trump’s “grab them by the pussy” controversy, the recording of which was released twelve days prior to the airing of “Douche and a Danish.” Though *South Park* depicts women rejecting Garrison en masse for his vulgar sexism, history reveals no parallel revolt among Trump’s base; likewise, there is no evidence suggesting Trump was chastened or had any incentive to reflect on his actions. Though women voters preferred Clinton to Trump 54-to-42 percent, Trump’s support with women did not significantly differ from prior Republican candidates Mitt Romney and John McCain (Tyson & Maniam, 2016). “Fort Collins” arrived thirteen days prior to election day. The episode concludes with a down-the-lens monologue from Garrison that constitutes *South Park*’s summary and closing argument: an unambiguous appeal to vote against Trump:

My fellow Americans, we live in an unprecedented time of uncertainty. I want to speak to you human to human because with God’s grace, this will be the last time you ever hear from me. When I started this campaign, I was saying a lot of shit because I was

⁴ *South Park* symbolically interweaves the member berries with recurring criticism of 2015’s *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, J.J. Abrams’s then-recent revival of the *Star Wars* canon. *South Park* equates enjoying *The Force Awakens* with sacrificing critical thought for lazy, hollow nostalgia. To reject *The Force Awakens* and Donald Trump, *South Park* suggests, is to commit to creativity and ingenuity to advance as a civilization.

angry. And then I turned that anger into pushing buttons by being more and more outrageous. Slowly, people started paying attention to me, and I guess it made me feel powerful. Well now the chickens have come home to roost.... The choice is yours, America. Please make the right one.

For audience members following along since “Where Has My Country Gone?”, all rhetorical threads converge, and Garrison’s speech suggests the imminent closing of Burke’s comic circle, thus promising to affirm the corrective elements of the comic frame. Garrison has named his transgressions and repented, foreshadowing a chastened, defeated Trump recognizing the folly of his vulgar campaign and relinquishing the spotlight. Despite Clinton’s imperfections as a candidate, voters will realize that the hollow pleasures of nostalgia for the false memory of an uncomplicated white hypermasculine utopia represent not strength but decay and spoilage. With MAGA’s mask slipping once and for all, voters will, *South Park* joined so many in presuming, wake from their collective delusion and reject Trump’s appeals to Americans’ resentments and basest urges.

History reveals, of course, none of that happened. A famous-last-words press release from Comedy Central on Monday, November 7 announced November 9’s episode would be “The Very First Gentleman,” a reference to Bill Clinton becoming the U.S.’s first “first gentleman” after Hillary Clinton’s presumed victory (“The Election Results Are In,” 2016). The episode the public received, retitled “Oh, Jeez” after a phrase Garrison repeatedly muttered in anxiety or exasperation as his campaign failed upward, was hastily rewritten after election night (Miller, 2016). For Season 20’s remaining episodes, *South Park* abandoned the comic frame. In “Members Only,” a vindictive Garrison returns to South Park as president—apparently skipping over the president-elect phase, as he is immediately handed the nuclear football—to force enemies such as P.C. Principal to fellate him in humiliation.

Through President Garrison would occasionally reappear, *South Park* committed to circumventing President Trump directly, focusing instead on the scenic elements of Trump-adjacent firestorms such as 2016’s Unite the Right rally or 2017’s North Korean nuclear tests. For some *South Park* viewers, including those frustrated with the show’s experiments with serialized storytelling, the receding of Trump from *South Park*’s weekly exploits was welcome, permitting Parker and Stone to lighten up and address other topics. For others, pivoting away from Trump represented television’s proudest equal-opportunity

offenders betraying their ethos and the moment. “You could argue whether this is a moral and ethical failure, but it’s certainly an artistic one,” argued Zarum (2017), a self-identified *South Park* fan who suggested Parker and Stone’s avoidance of Trump was disappointing considering their legacy of bashing Clinton. “Think of the potential of Parker and Stone using their platform to seriously challenge the toxic strain of jocular white male contempt that Trump’s campaign and election has unleashed in this country and beyond.” Audiences would have to wait eight years to behold this potential, but when Parker and Stone embraced the challenge of confronting Trump and MAGA’s weaponization of hypermasculinity, they would do so from a different Burkean frame than the comic approach that in hindsight failed to dent their infamously Teflon target.

Burlesque: Reframing Trump’s Second Term

“If the king is well thought of in many quarters,” Burke (1959) writes, “the [hu]man who would build his [*sic*] frame to accept the necessity of deposing the king is almost necessarily, by the tactics of the case, shunted into a negativistic emphasis” (p. 22). In contrast to frames of acceptance such as tragedy and comedy, Burke identified frames of rejection, including burlesque, grotesque, elegy, satire, and didactic. As opposed to its 2015-16 excursion into comic framing, *South Park*’s default frame for its satirical humor has long been burlesque, in which rhetors utilize strategies of magnification and exaggeration to draw the audience’s attention to the flaws and shortcomings of the antagonist to the point the target and the symbols it contains are rendered untenably absurd. As Burke (1959) explains, the burlesque rhetor:

[C]onverts every “perhaps” into a “positively.” He [*sic*] deliberately suppresses any condition of the “mitigating circumstances” that would put his [*sic*] subject into a better light. If the victim performs an act that would appear well when done slowly, he [*sic*] performs the same act at top speed; if the act is more appropriate for speed, he [*sic*] portrays it in slow motion. hilariously, he [*sic*] converts a manner into mannerism. (p. 55)

In contrast to the comic frame, rhetors utilizing the burlesque frame forsake attempts to identify with their antagonist and refuse to partake in shared rituals of culpability or contrition. The burlesque rhetor is

“concerned primarily with the depiction of the very despicable, forlorn, and dissipated people” (Burke, 1959, pp. 52-53).

Burlesque rhetoric steamrolls over nuance, yet unlike tragedy its intended outcome is not destruction but degradation of the opponent in the discursive marketplace. The burlesque frame, Appel (2018) explains in his analysis of Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, “reflects conditions and purposes where tragic destruction of foes is too extreme, yet mere reproof, along with short-term, comic-frame social distance from opponents, is inadequately mild as dramatic response” (p. 159). Appel’s analysis reveals that Trump himself embraced burlesque framing in his campaign to secure the Republican nomination, gaining favor among conservative voters with his social aggression toward opponents such as “Little Marco” Rubio, “Lyn” Ted Cruz, and “Low Energy” Jeb Bush before shifting to a more vicious tragic frame for his campaign against “Crooked” Hillary Clinton. It was during Trump’s burlesque period that *South Park* first broached his candidacy in “Where Has My Country Gone?”, accurately assessing his stance during the period as that an unserious “brash asshole who just spoke his mind” and “just said outrageous things.”

Setting aside its rare forays into comic framing, *South Park* has relied consistently on burlesque framing to satirize its targets. Its “both sides are equally stupid” shtick relies on identifying and magnifying perceived rhetorical overextensions of passionate actors with whom *South Park*’s writers disagree, then exaggerating their perceived foibles until their positions can be dismissed as unserious. *South Park* exemplifies this burlesque humor in pillorying environmentally conscious hybrid car drivers as huffing their own farts to the point of causing an environmental near-apocalypse, in Jesse Jackson declaring himself “emperor of Black people” and forcing Randy Marsh to kiss his naked buttocks in exchange for forgiveness for saying the N-word on *Wheel of Fortune*, and in Paris Hilton casually coughing up semen and evangelizing the virtues of being a “stupid spoiled whore” to preteen girls. Along the way, *South Park* consecrated disaffection and dismissal as virtuous; its protagonists are typically portrayed as superior to either side of a hot-button issue by virtue of their indifference and refusal to engage. “*South Park*’s laddish libertarian ethos,” Zarum (2016) critiques, “shields it from complaints about insensitivity, of course; as many an alt-right acolyte could tell you, criticism slides off like milk on Teflon when you’re only in it for the lulz.” It is not surprising that *South Park* would reembrace burlesque satire when confronting a renewed Trump exigency. The acclaim and attention its execution attracted suggests this strategy resonated with the zeitgeist in 2025 in ways 2015-16’s foray into comic

framing did not. Instead of comic consciousness, *South Park*'s tactics shifted to dehumanization and degradation.

Season 27 premiere "Sermon on the 'Mount'" begins with an uncharacteristically subdued depiction of South Park. Eric Cartman, the show's iconically bigoted font of hyper-transgressive behavior, is crestfallen that "woke is dead" and the liberal voices he loves to ridicule (i.e., National Public Radio) have been silenced. In an apparently meta comment on *South Park*'s capacity to transgress in Trump's America, Cartman doubts his own capacity to shock and offend when his most taboo attitudes have become mainstream. "You can just say *retarded* now; nobody cares," he bemoans. "Everyone hates the Jews. Everyone's fine with using gay slurs." At South Park Elementary, P.C. Principal has rechristened himself "Power Christian" Principal and now espouses conservative evangelical values after resigning himself that the P.C. left lost the culture wars: "I just realized that the side I was on was hopeless, and in times of hopelessness one finds Christ."

After P.C. Principal threatens to expel Stan Marsh, the main ensemble's voice of reason, for not letting hall monitor Jesus Christ⁵ sit with him at lunch (the table was full), Stan's liberal father Randy airs his grievance over his son's treatment at the town bar, finding that his conservative neighbors share his anger toward the president. "Yeah, I voted for him, but all I've seen him do is arrest and sue people," one complains. Darryl Weathers, South Park's resident "pissed off white trash redneck conservative," agrees: "I voted for him to get rid of all the woke stuff, but now that retarded faggot is just putting money in his own pockets." The mob vows to confront the president, breaking into Garrison's house to find him lounging with his partner Rick watching *White Lotus*. To the mob's surprise (and that of the at-home audience), former President Garrison has abandoned politics. "But if he's here," Weathers wonders rhetorically, "who's the retarded faggot in the White House?"

Only after *South Park* has verbally slandered him and unambiguously declared opposition to abuse of presidential power does the audience meet President Donald J. Trump. The episode wastes no time in erecting *South Park*'s crudest caricature of a public figure yet: immediately insulting Trump's penis (Satan: "I can't even see

⁵ Jesus was a recurring character in *South Park*'s early years, hosting a call-in cable access TV show and occasionally waging battle against human and supernatural forces. He was killed in Iraq in Season 6 but was resurrected in Season 11 and appeared occasionally before becoming a recurring character in Seasons 27-28.

anything; it's so small"), foregrounding his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein (Satan: "It's weird that whenever [Epstein] comes up, you just tell everyone to relax"), and mocking his predilection for litigiousness when Trump threatens to sue a portrait artist rendering Trump with his accurately small (in-universe) penis, later threatening to sue Satan for deflecting his incessant sexual advances. When South Park's citizens call the White House demanding answers about the direction of the country, Trump sues the city for five billion dollars, rallying South Park's citizens to unite in bipartisan public protest.

Viewers pondering what inspired Parker and Stone to reverse their stated intention to abstain from Trump receive symbolic cues into their motivation when the plot shifts to criticism of *South Park's* parent company Paramount, which was in the process of being purchased by Skydance Media, run by Trump ally David Ellison. In addition to capitulating to a Trump lawsuit with a \$16-million settlement and canceling *The Late Show* in an apparent move to silence Colbert's criticisms of the president, CBS would appoint Trump ally Kenneth R. Weinstein as ombudsman to assure "fairness" to Trump, a move rendered moot by the subsequent hiring of Bari Weiss to oversee CBS's pro-Trump pivot. If there is perfect good in *South Park's* worldview, a "God term" in Burkean terminology, it is free speech, with censorship being *South Park's* perfect Devil. Both as a media artifact and as an ethos established through Parker and Stone's public personae, *South Park* has for decades espoused unfettered free speech as a bedrock of good, with its greatest controversies and most pointed political stances responding to threats to constrain free expression, theirs or others, through internal or external censorship.

In Act 2, as *South Park's* townsfolk unite in demonstration against Trump, attending reporters, including those from CBS's *60 Minutes*, struggle to cover the protest while trembling at the prospect of being perceived as criticizing the president. As in its depiction of Trump, *South Park* utilizes a burlesque frame for CBS's news operation, portraying its reporters as nervous cowards who fall over themselves disingenuously praising Trump while distancing themselves from principled opposition. Though the reporters attempt to mask their cowardice with juvenile bluster—"Just to be clear, we don't agree with them. No, no, no, we think these protestors are total retards"; "I don't know why [protestor] is questioning the president. He's probably a faggot or something"—their anxious demeanors convey to the audience they are to be loathed for abdicating their duty to the First Amendment in craven self-preservation.

The scene climaxes when Jesus descends from the sky to deliver his titular sermon. As the townspeople gather before Him, Jesus

discloses through clenched teeth that He does not wish to be present at South Park Elementary but is forced to comply because Trump is suing him in a lawsuit connected to Paramount. Jesus warns the townspeople:

The guy [Trump] can do whatever he wants now that someone backed down, OK? You guys saw what happened to CBS? Yeah, well guess who owns CBS? Paramount! You really want to end up like Colbert? You guys gotta stop being stupid.... If someone has the power of the presidency and also has the power to sue and take bribes, then he can do anything to anyone! It's the fucking president, dude. All of you, shut the fuck up, or South Park is over.

By framing Trump as a mortal threat to free speech, invulnerably powerful and corrupt, *South Park*'s rhetors put him in bed with both its in-universe Satan and its symbolic Devil: censorship facilitated by power and diffused through fear. That Parker and Stone would target Trump just days after signing a 50-episode, \$1.5 billion agreement with Paramount constitutes not merely a rejection of Trump but a symbolic stance against attacks on the First Amendment and the very real threat of censorship facilitated by the heavy hand of Trump's executive branch.

In contrast to Garrison's climactic Season 20 speech that dismissed Trump as a soon-to-evaporate mass delusion, Jesus's anxious sermon frames Trump as an apocalyptic threat to freedom, a force before whom even Jesus cowers and Satan submits in bed. *South Park* ends the scene hinting at a shift to a tragic frame. Had it fallen back on tragic framing, rallying its audience to pick sides between Free Speech and Trump's corruption and censorship, *South Park* likely would have fallen in line as another unremarkable voice in a miasma of pro-Trump/anti-Trump culture warriors. Instead, *South Park* dekes away from tragedy and pushes the burlesque envelope to limits likely never breached on cable television.

Following Jesus's sermon, town lawyer Gerald Broflovsky settles Trump's lawsuit for a mere \$3.5 million but with a catch that foreshadowed the fate of *South Park*'s parent company: *South Park* must agree to do "pro-Trump messaging." The scene then cuts to a black title card: "Pro Trump-PSA 01 of 50." A new scene opens not in *South Park*'s animated style but in a photorealistic desert landscape

where a bulbous, red-faced Trump⁶ plods in exhaustion before stripping off his suit and tie, shirt, and pants to stumble naked across the desert. “Who walked through the desert for you?” a mocking narrator (Parker) intones as Trump meanders, his flabby, naked body on full display. “When things heat up, who will deliver us from temptation? Donald J. Trump. No matter how hot it gets, he’s not afraid to fight for America. With conviction, discipline, and trust in God, he survived the desert.” As Trump collapses in exhaustion, his micropenis emerges past his bulging belly, greeting the audience with animated googly eyes. “I’m Donald J. Trump,” Trump’s penis says in a cartoonish voice, “and I endorse this message.” “Trump,” the narrator concludes: “His penis is teeny tiny, but his love for us is large” before the screen fades into a parody of the controversial “He Gets Us” ads: “He Gets Us. All of Us. HeTrumpedUs.com.”

Rather than attempting to escalate its excoriation of Trump—the Pro-Trump PSA motif is never revisited—the remaining nine episodes of Seasons 27 and 28’s arc portray the president as an oblivious, narcissistic gadabout rather than a malignant threat to *South Park*. Season 27-28’s arc centers upon Satan’s revelation he is pregnant with Trump’s “butt baby” and his resolve to carry the Antichrist to term despite his desire to leave Trump. Though the Antichrist is never born, choosing death by hanging in the womb (a visual reference to Epstein’s in-prison suicide), *South Park*’s satirical rejection of Trump and MAGA unfolds via a parade of dehumanizing caricatures of various Trump allies, portraying MAGA figureheads as pathetic, undignified sycophants debased by their roles in Trump’s orbit. The substance of *South Park*’s burlesque deconstruction of Trump and MAGA is the rhetors’ rejection of their opponents’ media-curated hypermasculine strength and leadership. *South Park* argues instead that Trump and his allies are weak, inauthentic, and ineffective non-threats who despite their immense power can be easily confounded and subdued by regular citizens.

Vice President Vance is portrayed as Trump’s tiny-bodied, mouth-breathing familiar, a parody of Tattoo to Trump’s gladhanding Roarke in Trump’s unserious *Fantasy Island*-esque White House. Vance attends to Trump’s basest needs and urges, but his motivation to convince Trump to abort the Antichrist is revealed to be duplicitous because Vance does not want the Antichrist to usurp him as Trump’s

⁶ Initially speculated to be fully AI-generated, the effect of creating a photorealistic Trump was revealed to be a live actor with Trump’s face replicated via deepfake technology (Stenzel, 2025).

successor, which leads him to conspire with Trump ally and Antichrist enthusiast Peter Thiel and to seduce Trump into a sexual relationship to keep the president's favor. DHS secretary Noem is portrayed in a dehumanizing caricature of her "ICE Barbie" persona, alternating between shooting dogs and staging photo ops as her "Mar-a-Lago face" periodically melts and slithers away. Thiel is portrayed as a ghoulish idiot baffled by the viral "6-7" meme and obsessed with the Antichrist to the point of attempting to exorcise and later abducting Cartman, whose hysterical reaction to "6-7" causes him to projectile vomit in Thiel's face. Department of War secretary Pete Hegseth is portrayed as a social-media obsessed poseur beholden to his selfie stick, preening "like a little teenage girl" for web content and struggling to complete a pull-up. Hegseth is dispatched by Trump to South Park to retrieve Thiel from jail but despite his hypermasculine blustering is embarrassed and dominated by South Park police; he is jailed alongside Thiel for conducting a siege on South Park's 5K Turkey Trot, which he confuses for an antifa rally. Attorney General Pam Bondi's dogged praise of Trump manifests in literal brown-nosing. FCC chairman Carr is portrayed as a pratfalling clown repeatedly injured by wandering into Trump's boobytraps set to induce Satan to miscarry, including burial in soiled cat litter Trump hoards when he learns toxoplasmosis can lead to miscarriage.

South Park reserves enmity for MAGA-friendly civilian media and tech figures who capitulate to Trump. Fox News's shameless pundits fawn in ecstasy over Trump's relationship with Satan. "Come on, President Trump," one gushes in the style of tabloid television, "with everything you've been doing, pretty much the whole country thinks you're fucking Satan now," utilizing a recurring double entendre in which Trump "fucking Satan" is simultaneously an act and a descriptor. When Satan reveals he is pregnant with Trump's baby, Kid Rock is moved to joyous tears during an interview: "I just honestly didn't think the president was fucking Satan, but now knowing that he has been this whole time, I'm just so happy." Tech billionaires such as Apple's Tim Cook and Meta's Mark Zuckerberg debase themselves by traveling to a militarized Washington D.C. to purchase Trump's favor with gaudy gifts, each praising Trump and assuring him he does not have a small penis. Even Trump sees through their shameless groveling and treats them with disrespect: "Thanks so much for the gift, you little bitch," Trump snarls at Zuckerberg, "now get out of here."

South Park's season-long counterstatement on Trump, MAGA, and those who bend the knee in pursuit of power or enrichment is clearly articulated across ten episodes: they are not to be feared, respected, or taken seriously. Their façades of hypermasculine

virility and idealized feminine beauty mask sniveling, degraded idiots. Beneath Trump and MAGA's media-curated personae, *South Park* argues, are vain, pathetic men and grotesque inauthentic women whose attempts to mobilize the power of Trump's executive branch can be easily defused by rational, principled resistance. In the case of Hegseth, a literal kick in the butt will suffice.

Conclusion: On the Redressive Potential of Burlesque

Recalling Burke, when faced with adverse social conditions, we adopt policies on how to comprehend and address our obstacles and antagonists. Given a second chance in 2025 to address the exigency of a Trump presidency after their misreadings yielded cheap grace in 2015-16, Parker, Stone, and the writers of *South Park* set aside the comic frame. Despite acknowledging Trump as a serious threat to free speech, *South Park*'s response to Trump 2.0 eschews the tragic frame and instead articulates a burlesque reduction of Trump and MAGA through a series of dehumanizing caricatures converging in a defiant rejection of Trump and MAGA's media-cultivated façade of hypermasculine strength and fearless leadership. Rather than strong, virile, and savvy, *South Park* brutally denigrates Trump and MAGA as weak, ineffective idiots whose bluster and posturing evokes neither fear nor respect from *South Park*'s citizenry. Unlike the cheap grace extended to Trump in 2016, when *South Park* fantasized about Trump (via Mr. Garrison) finding self-awareness and discovering the root of his transgressive behavior, 2025's burlesque framing of Trump obliterates nuance and rejects identification, embracing distance rather than empathy and mockery rather than dialogue.

This analysis argues that *South Park*'s satire on Trump 2015-16 political rise was inadequate despite its laudable embrace of the comic frame Burke and many Burkean scholars, including this author, will and should continue to promote. The logical rejoinder to this conclusion is whether *South Park*'s burlesque rejection of Trump constitutes a more desirable or effective response. It is beyond this study's scope to posit an objective mechanism for quantifying satire's impact on the opinions of audiences. Though metrics such as viewership ratings, media coverage, critical esteem, and online fan discourse suggest *South Park*'s anti-Trump messaging in 2025 captured the elusive cultural zeitgeist in ways few fictional programs can in today's fractured media landscape, quantitative measures of viewership suggest interest in Seasons 27-28 waned as the Trump arc progressed in a pattern consistent with past seasons. An unscientific survey of online audience response suggests that as many *South Park* fans enjoyed Season 27-28's extended mockery of Trump and MAGA, a vocal

portion of fans grew tired of the arc and expressed annoyance of its hyperfocus on Trump.

As a limitation of the study, it must be acknowledged that time and further analysis are necessary to discover if and how *South Park*'s burlesque satire on Trump and MAGA meaningfully translates to change in public opinion. Though it is often problematic to attempt distilling change in public opinion to any specific agent, it is important to acknowledge that *South Park*'s relationship to its substantial and passionate audience grants it noteworthy potential to meaningfully persuade that audience. As *Rolling Stone* explains:

Parker and Stone's long history of making fun of earnestness in many ways makes them the ideal delivery system for an episode like ["Sermon on the 'Mount'"]. Colbert was canceled because the president has thin skin and despises anyone who tells jokes about him, but Colbert was also preaching to the converted. That it was *South Park* bringing this savagery—not just making fun of Trump, but being so blunt and unsparing in its critique of him—is going to have far more impact, and get more attention, than a famously and unabashedly liberal TV host saying the same things (Sepinwall, 2025).

If *South Park* ultimately can be credited with impacting public perception on Trump and MAGA, it is prudent to ask whether its dehumanizing rhetoric enriches the conversation. *South Park*'s satirical message almost certainly won't and was not formulated to sway staunch MAGA supporters it may count in its audience: its handling of Christian symbolism would alienate a great many theoretically potential converts, and few public figures garner more loyalty from fans than Parker and Stone, but Trump is among that few.

One potential bellwether of such a brand of incendiary satire's substantial impact may be Trump's popularity with *South Park*'s key demographic: young men. Among voter trends that propelled Trump's 2024 victory was a spike in support from men 18-29, who swung thirteen points more for Trump than in 2020 (Draeger, 2024), many attracted to Trump's media-constructed hypermasculine charisma and his framing of the political left as weak and hostile toward masculine values. Trump's weaponization of hypermasculinity was amplified in collaboration with influential "manosphere" figures such as Joe Rogan, Andrew Tate, and Adin Ross, all of whom promoted Trump to their audiences as a strong, fearless patriarch who would subdue the weak,

anti-masculine left. One year later, polls indicate Trump's support among men 18-29 has diminished sharply (Schneid, 2026) and began declining sooner among young voters than the general population (McHardy, 2025).

It is yet to be ascertained how Trump's legacy of wielding hypermasculinity as a culture-war cudgel plays out in 2026 and beyond. It is transparent that Trump and MAGA allies see hypermasculinity as a load-bearing pillar of the president's public image, as evidenced most baldly by Trump and the White House's ongoing commitment to circulating large-language-model fabrications of Trump draped in the iconography of hyperbolic masculinity: Trump as impossibly muscular Jedi, Trump as *Halo's* Master Chief, King Trump on the cover of *People Magazine*, Trump suiting up for the New York Knicks and dunking a basketball over political opponent Kathy Hochul, Trump stoically riding a lion through the jungle, riding a motorcycle through the streets of India, and planting a flag on the moon. If this outwardly juvenile construction of hypermasculine symbolism is indeed vital to Trump's relationship to voters, *South Park* wielded its equally juvenile burlesque satire against it like a sledgehammer, symbolically inviting other media satirists to follow suit. If Trump's capacity to contain the symbols of hypermasculinity eventually falters, it will be worth interrogating if and how mediated satirical deconstruction contributed to its collapse. The burlesque frame lacks the capacity to close the comic circle, but its capacity for pushing the envelope of good taste may prove tactically effective.

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Ideological Women and Pursuit of Political Attitude and Opinion Change in Serial Arguments within Heterosexual Marriage

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Abstract: Despite the present state of political animus in the U.S., relatively little research has examined how spousal political differences along ideological lines influence marital communication and conflict. This study examines wives' perception of marital political conflict from the lens of serial arguments. Using a national sample of heterosexual married women, we examine interrelationships among perceived spousal ideological conflict and serial argument goals. We find that both wife's own political ideology and wife's perception of husband's political ideology influence pursuit of serial argument goals. Specifically, the greater degree of self-rated conservatism, the less wives report expressing negativity or dominance/control. The greater the degree of wife-rated partner conservatism, the less likely wives report a serial goal of change. Implications for conceptualizing recurring spousal political conflict are discussed.

Introduction

Underrepresentation of women's perspectives on political issues is perspicuous as women are often relegated to coverage of opinions on domestic issues (Heldman et al., 2005; Lee, 2004). Men are seen as more competent on public issues (Armstrong, 2004; Kim & Weaver, 2003; Ross, 2007) like military and defense areas (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1992), although this gendered stereotype is confounded by party (Holman et al., 2016). Women are stereotyped as merely 'passive observers' of politics (Ross, 2011), not the least because ideal women candidates are portrayed as having specific gendered personality traits (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1992; Schneider & Bos, 2019). Although it should be said that some findings indicate this gender bias is divided along party lines (Dolan, 2010). Burrell (1996) states, "Politics has been a male domain and political leadership as a masculine endeavor" (p. 15). In this "man's world" framing, we are left with a pessimistic view of women's ability to influence political attitudes and opinions (O'Brien, 2014). Lawless and Fox (2010) contend:

Nearly all of the research that addresses gender and U.S. politics, therefore, tends to begin with the

justification for studying women and elections. Invariably, the normative underpinnings to which scholars refer is women's underrepresentation. Although this justification has become almost cliché, it remains a potent reflection of reality; women's presence in our political institutions bears directly on the issues of substantive and symbolic representation. (p. 5)

Given the relative dearth of female representation still present today and the gendered political bias rampant in the media, we feel compelled to investigate the contextual factors that influence the ways women pursue political conflict in various arenas to influence others' attitudes and opinions. One of the most obvious potential sites of this influence is within marriage (Foos & Rooij, 2017; Hayes & Bean, 1992; Zuckerman et al., 2012).

Marriage is a unique and important context for the study of political conflict communication in close relationships. The marital relationship is one of the most impactful on individual well-being (Johnson et al., 2011), and in contemporary Western cultures is assumed to represent a space in which individuals' values and opinions are freely expressed and validated (Finkel et al., 2014). Moreover, research suggests we are most likely to have political disagreements with those we speak to the most (Morey et al., 2012). Thus, inter-spousal conflict over political issues may be felt deeply and have far-reaching consequences, not the least of which may be manifest political behaviors (Foos & Rooij, 2017). Nevertheless, marital conflict about political difference is one of the least explored areas of marital communication (Afifi et al., 2020; Goode et al., 2021; Hayes & Bean, 1994; Hayes & Jones, 1992). This gap in existing research is particularly troublesome given the increasing weight of political similarity in partner and mate selection (Huber & Malhotra, 2016), and strife resulting from political dissimilarity between romantic partners (Fangmeier et al. 2020; Wakefield, 2017).

Much of the previous research on political communication in close relationships has focused on familial interactions (Ledbetter, 2015; Scruggs & Schrodt, 2021; Stattin, et al., 2021; Warner et al., 2020), with particular attention to interactions at periodic holiday gatherings (Chen & Rhola, 2018; Frimer & Skikta, 2020; Johnson et al., 2019). However, in the marital context, conflict over political differences are not one-off arguments, nor are they contained to ritual celebrations. Amidst ever-changing information environments (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Jerit et al., 2006), political discourse has the potential to

seep into daily life and give rise to regularly recurring political conflict. The present study heeds calls to explore political communication in the everyday (Eveland et al., 2011; Moy & Gastil, 2006) by examining political conflict in marriage through the lens of *serial arguments* (Johnson and Roloff, 1998). Serial arguments refer to conflicts among the same parties, on the same issue, that recur or are ongoing (Johnson & Cionea, 2017).

Our investigation examines the aims women pursue in serial political arguments with their marital partners. In the sections below, the gendered nature of political engagement is reviewed, and intersections among couple-level political difference and wives' serial argument goals are discussed.

Literature Review

For nearly fifty years, scholars have observed gender differences in political attitudes, opinions, and behaviors (Barnes & Cassesse, 2017; Campbell & Winters, 2008; Hartevelt et al., 2015; Howell & Day, 2000). The gender gap in politics is not static, but evolves in response to social conditions, policies, and governmental action (Alvarez & McCaffery, 2003; Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2004; Van Duyn, 2018). Within the gender gap literature, a smaller portion has been devoted to investigating how, when, and with whom women seek to communicate about their political views. A modest collection of research has examined when women choose to engage in political discourse in the public sphere. Study results diverge, with some finding women more reticent to voice political differences (Peacock, 2019), avoidant of political conflict (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2016), and others finding women equally engaged in disagreeable discussions (Herring et al., 2020).

One major throughline appears to be that women are at least as likely as men to engage in political conflict when it concerns issues in which women are highly invested (Heger & Hoffmann, 2019; Lyons & Sokhey, 2014; Pennington & Winfrey, 2021; Wells et al., 2017). Another line of research suggests that particular traits present among some women are more predictive of political discussion and participation, such as employment status and level of education (Manza & Brooks, 1998; Howell & Day, 2000).

For all this concentration on how women speak in public formats, there is a dearth of scholarship on how women pursue political talk in close relationships. If public discourse influences women's political life, surely how one communicates to alter the attitudes, knowledge, and opinions of those closest to them is of some importance. Recognizing the relevance of sex and gender to political

engagement and discussion, this study aims to illuminate the communication practices of women in cross-sex marriage as a window into how women pursue political ends communicatively in heterosexual marriages.

Women's Pursuit of Political Influence

Spousal partisan congruity has increased steadily in the past half century (Iyengar et al., 2018). Individuals are likely to choose romantic partners who are fundamentally similar regarding core values and beliefs (Alford et al., 2011; Botwin et al., 1997), and similarity in political dispositions is a strong predictor of relational partner selection (Huber & Malhotra, 2016; Iyengar et al., 2018). That said, political attitudes do not always align in romantic partnerships (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). Researchers estimate that 1 in 3 marriages crosses party lines (Hersh & Ghitza, 2018), in part because women tend to be more left-leaning and take more left-leaning issue positions (Barnes & Cassese, 2017) and economic perspectives (Campbell & Childs, 2013; Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; Ondercin, 2017).

Furthermore, given that parties are “big tents” with positionality (and ideology) along a spectrum of belief and with real and measurable differences among sub-groups (Clarke, 2020) even couples who occupy the same general side of the partisan aisle may find room for micro-differences regarding the hundreds of policies and issues salient at any given moment. Only a modest literature has focused on the microlevel implications of political conflict (Cowan & Baldassarri, 2018; Goode et al., 2021) specifically examining communication behaviors within marital or family political disagreements (Afifi et al., 2019; Warner et al., 2020). For example, Calarco et al. (2020) find that political differences between spouses increase arguments about COVID-19 precaution-taking, and that husbands engage in dismissive behaviors and wives tend toward self-blame and accommodation. Goode et al. (2021) observed that the degree to which women identify with the plight of other women, an attitude referred to as gender-linked fate, the more likely they are to pursue political conflict in heterosexual marriages.

Each of these studies suggest the potential for seemingly intractable political conflict within the family unit, and the cross-sex marital domain specifically. To the extent that political issues “circle back around” due to intractability, the increasing ubiquity of political debate (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Jerit et al., 2006), and/or the politicization of mundane marital conversations, marital couples may find they are unable to resolve political differences within isolated conflict episodes and therefore revisit political conflicts repeatedly.

Serial Arguments

Continuously recurring or cycling disputes, enacted over time and without resolution, are referred to as *serial arguments* (Bevan, 2014; Johnson & Roloff, 2000; Trapp & Hoff, 1985). Serial arguments often emerge in romantic relationships due to features including frequent contact, interdependence, and self-disclosure (Johnson & Roloff, 1998). The recurrence of serial arguments may be temporally immediate (e.g., weekly) or dispersed (e.g., every six months) and can persist over the lifetime of a relationship (Trapp & Hoff, 1985).

One advantage of a serial argument frame for the study of persistent marital political disagreement is that, like other conflict research, it conceives of conflict practices as goal-directed (Worley et al., 2021). Sparse research has examined goals or motivations for political talk (Morey & Yamamoto, 2020), yet in the few studies that have investigated motivations, the objectives of persuasion and opinion expression have consistently predicted individuals' engagement in political discussion (Conover et al., 2002; Eveland et al., 2011; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016; Morey & Yamamoto, 2020). The serial argument lens permits for studying these and other motives in recurring marital political conflicts.

According to Bevan and colleagues' (2008) model, the serial argument process originates with relational members' endorsement of positive (constructive) or negative (destructive) serial argument goals. Positively-valenced goals include those such as seeking mutual understanding or resolution, whereas negatively-valenced goals include dominance/control, expression of negative affect and/or hurting the relationship or partner.

Serial Argument Goals and Ideological (Dis)similarity

Discrepancies in political views may not be overtly apparent in marriage. For instance, some politically liberal women intentionally occlude their political views or partisan identity from more conservative spouses (Van Duyn, 2018). However, enacted incongruity in marital partners' political orientations (e.g., voting behavior) has been shown to impede relational harmony, in part via diminished sense of couple identity (Afifi et al., 2020). Several contextual factors potentially influence interactants' goals at the outset—and during the unfolding—of a conflict (Worley & Samp, 2018), including features of the parties' relationship, outcomes of previous conflict discussions, individual dispositions, emotion, and cultural differences (Cupach et al., 2009; Merolla, 2014).

For serial arguments based in political disagreement, partisanship is often the variable of interest. For instance, Hopmann et

al. (2020) found in a quasi-experimental study of interpersonal political communication that individuals were more likely to dominate, and less likely to compromise or yield, the greater the discrepancy of partisan preference between their self and a hypothetical interlocutor. Similarly, Warner et al. (2020) found that the greater the perceived political differences, the less likely individuals were to use accommodating behaviors.

However, a potentially influential factor on conflict goals is political *ideology*. Political difference between spouses may reflect identity discrepancies and/or difference in issue positions, both of which affect individuals' approach to conflict enactment (Considine, 2015; Ramsbotham, 2021). The degree to which conservative and liberal women differ in gender role belief structures influences the perceived role of women in relationships and politics. Evidence suggests that traditional gender role ideologies influence mate choice, to the degree that individuals seek partners with congruent beliefs about familial roles (Eastwick et al., 2006). More conservative women hold more traditionally moral attitudes (regarding religious commitment and sexual conservatism; Eagly et al., 2004) and have positive views of family labor (Erickson, 2005).

Thus, conservative women may position themselves differently in arguments with spouses based on gender role expectations. These positions might mirror gender expectations as they relate to female candidates. Both men and Republicans (male and female) see men as superior in the political arena (Dolan, 2010). In experimental data, Republican men and women are less likely to vote for female candidates and, of more concern, female candidates are seen as less conservative (King & Matland, 2003). While female candidates might have some slight advantage on certain issues where warmth and compassion appear to be key (e.g., health care, education; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Dolan, 2004), the lack of perceived decisiveness and decision making clearly hurts female politicians among Republicans. It is entirely possible that conservative women utilize these stereotypes within household arguments.

Complicating this further is research that argues that partisans expect varying levels of adherence to party principles, with Republicans more likely to demand "doctrinal purity" and Democrats more likely to accept a wider range of views (Grossman & Hopkins, 2015). Mason and Wronski (2018) contend that social sorting has been more influential within the Republican party. They argue, "Republicans are generally more sensitive to who does and who does not 'belong' in the party" (Mason & Wronski, 2018, p. 272). Wives who are more liberal leaning, yet still on the more conservative end than their

husbands, may endorse goals of changing or dominating a partner to a lesser degree than more liberal wives, as maintaining in-group status as a unit and social conformity may be more important (Van Duyn, 2018).

We, thus, pose the following hypotheses concerning the influence of political ideology on wives' pursuit of serial argument goals for political disagreeable discussions.

H1: Wives' reported conservatism associates negatively with their endorsement of the goals of (a) *dominance/control* and (b) *changing the target* during an episode of political conflict.

H2: Wives' reports of their husbands' conservatism associates negatively with wives' endorsement of the goals of (a) *dominance/control* and (b) *changing the target* during an episode of political conflict.

Of the remaining serial argument goals, it is unclear whether ideological dissimilarity would influence endorsement of said goal. One might assume that mutual understanding and resolution would be critical in instances of ideological disalignment. However, given that ideological congruity is valued more highly amongst conservatives, one might also expect ideological differences in pursuit of these argument goals.

Similarly, we could envision potential positive or negative relationships between the serial argument goal of expressing negative affect and wives' perception of their own and their spouse's political ideology. On one hand, it stands to reason that more conservative wives, and those with more conservative husbands, may be less likely to endorse the goal of expressing negative affect during marital political disagreements. Doing so risks running afoul of more traditional gender role expectations, which associate with conservative ideology (Christopher & Wojda, 2008). Further, political conservatism among women is associated with endorsement of benevolent attitudes toward men (Russo et al., 2014) which may make them reluctant to openly express critical or negative affect during disagreements.

On the other hand, expressing negativity in recurring political arguments may function as a rather innocuous "release valve" whereby tension or frustration is voiced but without attempting to actually change the behavior of the partner. In such a scenario, conservatism among wives, and their perception of conservatism among their husbands, may render the goal of negative expressiveness a more viable and acceptable aim.

To explore these potentialities, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: Does wives' reported political ideology associate with endorsement of (a) *expressing negative affect* or (b) *mutual understanding / resolution* during an episode of political conflict?

RQ2: Does wives' estimation of husbands' conservatism associate with endorsement of (a) *expressing negative affect* or (b) *mutual understanding / resolution* during an episode of political conflict?

Methods

Participants

A nationally sampled Qualtrics panel of 169 heterosexual, married women completed an online survey designed to address our hypotheses and research questions. The median length of participants' relationship was 15 years. Participants' age ranged from 19 – 79 years ($M = 46.61$, $SD = 15.66$.) The largest group of participants identified as Caucasian ($N = 100$, 59.2%), followed by Latino/a ($N = 25$, 14.8%), African American ($N = 22$, 13.0%), and Asian American ($N = 11$, 6.5%). Approximately 21% of the women sampled reported a high school diploma or GED as their highest level of education completed. Roughly one-third (32%) had completed some college, and one-quarter of respondents (26.6%) had completed a bachelor's degree. Smaller percentages possessed a master's degree (16.6%) or a terminal degree (1.8%).

Procedures

Surveys were administered one week before the November 2018 midterm election, as part of a larger study about U.S. women's political communication engagement. Most of the participants reported they had voted or intended to vote in the 2018 general election ($N = 146$, 86.4%). Participants were paid a small amount of money through Qualtrics to complete the online questionnaire. Respondents were asked to describe the most common (ongoing) issue or topic of political disagreement with their spouse (Table 1). Participants reported disagreements such as which candidate is more trustworthy; whether a particular candidate is racist; whether one's party is good/bad, etc. They were then asked to respond to questions about a typical episode of this serial political argument. Only respondents who indicated they had recurring/ongoing political conflicts with their husbands, yearly if not more frequently, were included in the analysis.

Table 1*Major Political Disagreement or Difference of Opinion (N = 169)*

	<i>n</i>	%	Cumulative %
Political party	17	10.1	10.1
Ideological	22	13.0	23.1
Candidate or election specific	26	15.4	38.5
Participation (e.g., voting, campaigning)	54	32.0	70.4
Social issues (e.g., health care, marijuana legalization, gun laws)	12	7.1	77.5
Economic issues (e.g., taxes, campaign finance reform)	8	4.7	82.2
Identity politics (e.g., LGBT issues, Black Lives Matter)	8	4.7	87.0
Other	22	13.0	100.0

Measures

Political Ideology. Ideology was measured on a seven-point scale such that higher scores correspond to greater conservatism (1 = *Extremely Liberal*; 7 = *Extremely Conservative*). Wives were asked to indicate their own political ideology ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.85$) as well as their perception of their husband's ideology ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.98$). Some scholars have questioned the accuracy of partner reports of political orientations (Jennings & Stoker, 2001), however, objective or "real" differences are not the focus of this analysis. Instead, it is the perception of difference related to other assessments of relational communication and outcomes that is central to our investigation.

Serial Argument Goals. A 14-item subset of the Bevan et al. (2008) Serial Argument Goal Importance Scale was used to measure endorsement of specific goals during a typical episode of ongoing political disagreement. The first subscale, *dominance/control*, was comprised of four items. (e.g., "To change my partner's behavior," "To feel some control of the situation"; factor loadings .67-.88). The second subscale, *mutual understanding or resolution*, encompassed four items (e.g., "To reach a mutual agreement"; factor loadings .72 - .89). The third subscale, *change target*, contained three items (e.g., "To change my partner's behavior"; factor loadings .60 -.95). The fourth subscale, *express or venting negative affect*, contained three items (e.g., "To release my frustration"; factor loadings .68-.81).

Data Analysis

Our hypotheses and research questions were analyzed using SPSS version 31. Table 2 contains the zero-order correlations among dependent and independent variables.

Table 2

Correlations among Spouses' Political Ideology and Serial Argument Goals (N = 169)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Wife Conservatism	--					
2. Husband Conservatism	.68***	--				
3. Dominance/Control	-.24**	-.18*	--			
4. Change Target	-.22**	-.30**	.70***	--		
5. Express Negative Affect	-.25**	-.19**	.60***	.52**	--	
6. Mutual Understanding	-.18**	-.23**	.22**	.25**	.40***	--

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Results

A series of nonhierarchical regression models were conducted to evaluate our hypotheses and research questions. In separate models, each serial argument goal was regressed on wives' reports of their own and their husbands' political ideology. Because we observed a strong zero-order correlation among wives' perception of their own and their husbands' political ideology ($r = .68$; Table 2), we examined the variation inflation factor (VIF) to index potential multicollinearity concerns. The VIF value across models was 1.86, well within a common conservative cutoff value of 4.0 (Hair et al., 2010) and satisfying a more stringent threshold suggested by Jeng (2023) specific to a model's number of independent variables and observed correlation magnitude. Table 3 displays the standardized and (bootstrapped) unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors for each model.

Table 3

Summary of Regression Analyses Predicting Wives' Serial Argument Goal Endorsement by Spouses' Political Ideology (N = 228)

Serial Argument Goal	Political Ideology						R^2	F
	Wife Conservatism			Husband Conservatism				
	B	SEB	β	B	SEB	β		
Dominance/Control	-.11	.05	-.22*	-.01	.05	-.03	.06	5.12*
Change Target	-.01	.06	-.02	-.14	.06	-.29**	.09	8.41**
Express Negative Affect	-.12	.06	-.23*	-.01	.05	-.03	.06	5.60*
Mutual Understanding	-.02	.06	-.04	-.10	.05	-.20	.05	4.70*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

associate negatively with the goal of *dominance/control* during an episode of political conflict. The overall model was significant ($R^2 = .06$, adjusted $R^2 = .05$, $F(2, 166) = 5.12$, $p = .007$). Wives' own conservatism emerged as a significant negative predictor, but husbands' conservatism was not a significant predictor of the goal of *dominance/control*. Therefore, only H1a was supported.

Hypotheses 1b and 2b predicted that wives' conservatism (1b) and wives' reports of husbands' conservatism (2b) would associate negatively with the goal of *changing the target* during an episode of political conflict. The overall model was significant ($R^2 = .09$, adjusted $R^2 = .08$, $F(2, 166) = 8.41$, $p < .001$). Wives' own conservatism was not a significant predictor, but wives' reports of husbands' conservatism was a significant negative predictor of the goal of *changing the target*. Therefore, only H2b was supported.

Research Questions 1a and 2a asked how wives' perception of their own and husbands' conservatism associate with wives' endorsement of *expressing negative affect* as an argument goal. The overall model was significant ($R^2 = .06$, adjusted $R^2 = .05$, $F(2, 166) = 5.60$, $p = .004$), with only wives' conservatism emerging as a significant predictor. Wives' perception of husbands' conservatism did not associate with the goal of *expressing negative affect*.

Research Questions 1b and 2b asked how spouses' political ideologies associate with wives' endorsement of *mutual understanding or resolution* as an argument goal. The overall model was significant ($R^2 = .05$, adjusted $R^2 = .04$, $F(2, 166) = 4.70$, $p = .01$). However, neither variable emerged as a statistically significant predictor.

Discussion

This study contributes to the modest but growing literature on interpersonal political conflict and the gender gap by examining how wives' perceptions of spouses' ideological predisposition influence serial political arguments with their partner. Specifically, we examined whether wives' goals in serial political disagreements related to their own political ideology and the perceived ideology of their husbands.

This study confirms that ideology plays a role in women's positioning in marital political conflicts. Wives' conservative political ideology significantly influenced the communication goals of expressing negativity and gaining dominance/maintaining control. This association is negative, meaning that the more conservative wives were the less likely they were to report these goals. This could be explained by the greater tendency of conservative women to hold traditional views of sex roles (Eagly et al., 2004; Eastwick et al., 2006). Similarly, when wives reported having more conservative husbands, they were

less likely to report a goal of changing target. Conflict goals depend in part on what parties believe is possible to accomplish in a conflict interaction (Considine, 2015; Ramsbotham, 2021). The rigidity of conservative ideology (Grossman & Hopkins, 2015) makes it less likely that conservative husbands would be open to change. What is more, to the degree that conservative women have lower levels of political efficacy (Heger & Hoffmann, 2019), it is plausible that more conservative women believe they are less capable of changing their husband's mind.

Additionally, control/change goal is typically conceived as a negatively-valenced goal in serial argument literature (Cionea et al., 2019). Thus, outspoken negativity would be seen as less appropriate womanly behavior. Further, as women would hold a supporting role, rather than a leadership role, particularly as it relates to politics, conservative women would be less likely to attempt to gain dominance in an argument with their spouse. Given that perceptions of husband's conservatism did not predict these goals lends further evidence to the argument that wives' internalized gender norms of marital roles were the key factor.

Ideology and Political Marital Conflict

This study complicates the extant literature by adding ideology as a factor in the dynamic puzzle that is the gender gap in politics. Campbell and Childs (2013) state there is an "historic over-emphasis of gender and politics research on left-wing women" (p. 1). Our research is one of the first studies to link ideological stance to perceived gender roles which influence political behaviors within the household. Specifically, so-called traditional gender role expectations might be more rigidly internalized (Diekmann & Schneider, 2010) by conservative women and these gender roles influence political attitudes and behaviors (Schneider & Bos, 2019). Just as conservative women (and men) hold women to gender stereotypes as they run for office (King & Matland, 2003; Schneider & Bos, 2019), conservative women appear to perform that same gender stereotypic role in political conversations with regard to spouses.

In addition to contributions to theory building, our study offers practical insights for practitioners working with married women or couples. Clinicians may find that married individuals encounter increasing relational strain as they negotiate political differences in a rapidly evolving political environment.

Limitations & Directions for Future Research

This study focuses on wives' serial argument goals in marital political disagreement. Naturally, a single-source data collection in family conflict research is not without concerns. For one, wives' perception of husbands' political ideology may or may not correspond to the experience of the spouse. However, we do not view a focus on wives as solely a drawback of the study. Although a growing body of research examining women's political communication has proffered several theories to explain somewhat less persistence in political argument and more aversion to disagreement (Coffé & Bolzendahl 2010; Peacock, 2019; Wolak, 2020), our research highlights the goals and objectives married women seek to accomplish when they do choose to engage in political conflict with their partners.

Additionally, our research has made oblique reference to—but has not directly incorporated—the question of perceived resolvability in political serial arguments. Perceived resolvability is depicted as an outcome of conflict interaction in the serial argument process model (Bevan et al., 2008) and has been found to associate with goal endorsement and goal trajectories during serial argument episodes (Worley & Samp, 2018). Further research ought therefore to consider directly whether estimated partisan or ideological dissimilarity moderates the relationships between conflict communication during a given argument episode and judgements of the resolvability of a spousal serial political argument.

Further, our data focus on a “snapshot” (Worley & Samp, 2018) of wives' goals reported at a single point in time. Additional research with data collected dyadically and across multiple phases of an argument episode will further advance theoretical development of marital serial arguing in the political realm.

Finally, although our study focuses on serial arguing within the political conflict domain (i.e., political disagreement), we do not parse our findings according to particular political issues. There is evidence that wives' experience of political conflict in marriage differs according to the nature of the issue under debate, and their engagement is heightened for issues salient to gender consciousness and gendered spheres of influence (Barnes & Cassesse, 2017). Thus, it would be worthwhile to also examine patterns of wives' goals and communication practices in serial arguments pertaining to a specific and defined political issue, position, or candidate.

Conclusion

That politics in this country continues to be seen as a man's domain and that women continue to struggle for representation is

undeniable. Yet, what we might miss when investigating this big picture are subtle ways that our pursuit of political ends play out in micro-interactions. This study adds to a growing body of scholarship investigating the influence of ideology and party affiliations within relational communication. We built upon decades of research that demonstrate women political candidates are at times benefited and at others harmed by the gender stereotypes men and women hold. Our research provides evidence that these stereotypes, encapsulated by political ideology, exude influence even within marital communication conflicts.

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Liar Stereotypes Among Deaf College Students in the United States

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Abstract: This article reports the findings of a study exploring liar stereotypes held by college participants who are Deaf. Inspired by the findings of the Global Deception Research Team's (2006) study on liar stereotypes across the globe, the authors conducted an exploration of beliefs about liars in a sample of college students who are Deaf and hard of hearing in the United States. For comparison purposes, a hearing sample of college students was also surveyed about their beliefs on this topic. This study further confirms the findings of the World of Lies project in that the pan-cultural belief that liars avert their gaze was also expressed as a folk belief about the behavior of liars by this group of signers. Additional findings reveal that the culture of a person (i.e., hearing vs culturally Deaf) may influence the beliefs about what cues to deception are expressed during communication. Implications for lie stereotypes that are driven by other social demographics and future directions for research in this arena are discussed.

Introduction

Lying is a part of communication that exists in all languages and cultures across the world, and is defined by Levine (2014, p. 379) as “intentionally, knowingly, and/or purposely misleading another person.” All communicators must navigate deceptive communication within their own cultures, but also when engaging in intercultural communication. Deception across cultures has garnered the interest of communication scholars seeking to highlight similarities and differences in the motives for lying (Levine et al., 2016), in-group vs. out-group deception (Bessarabova, 2014; Fan et al., 2022), held liar cue stereotypes (Al-Simadi, 2000), and acceptability of the use of deception across social situations (Kim et al., 2008). Griffin and Bender (2019) provides a thorough review of these topics.

Inspired by the work of The Global Deception Research Team [GDRT] (2006) this study set out to examine stereotypes about cues to deception in a sample of Deaf college students in the United States who are fluent in sign language. The GDRT is a highly cited study in deception and has been replicated within and across several cultures, most recently the study inspired research on lie cue beliefs in Australia

(Wilcoxson et al., 2025; Katta et al., 2026). While the current study examined college students fluent in American Sign Language (ASL; Valli & Lucas, 2000) in the United States, it is important to recognize that there are over 130 distinct and recognized signed languages across the globe (Fenlon & Wilkinson, 2015).

Deaf signers are visual communicators (Muir & Richardson, 2005) and are commonly bilingual and bicultural (Padden & Humphries, 2009), thus they often hold different stereotypes about liars stemming from their two (or more) cultures (Griffin & Frank, 201). Deaf individuals must code-switch (Molinsky, 2007) or rely on cultural frame switching (Benet-Martínez et al., 2006) when encoding and decoding messages in their cross-cultural environments. While many people who are Deaf or hard of hearing may identify with a larger Deaf community in the United States (Kolb, 2025), there is no one way to be d/Deaf. Lim (2026, p. 1) states, “There are as many deaf experiences as there are deaf people owing to the incredibly vast range and diversity of human life.” Lim’s concept of deaf liminality is important because it challenges traditional monolithic conceptualizations of Deaf culture, and instead captures the blends of cultural and life experiences of people (see Anzaldúa, 2007).

Lying is a communication context where cultural code-switching may be activated during interpersonal exchanges. The most extensive cross-cultural analysis of stereotypes about liars surveyed people in 75 different countries in 43 different languages (GDRT, 2006). The findings suggest the existence of a pan-cultural stereotype that liars avert their gaze. Other beliefs about liars were common across cultures such as the idea that liars shift their posture and stutter more than truth-tellers. All 43 languages included in the study were from oral-aural speakers, with no sign languages being included in their samples. Therefore, to extend the work of GDRT to a group of sign language users, we sought to explore the research question:

RQ: Do sign language users in the United States rely on the pan-cultural stereotype that liars avert their gaze?

Since sign language relies so heavily on the visual channel, we predicted that *Deaf signers will cite more cues accessible via the visual channel* than those who are hearing and not fluent in sign language. Based on previous research that individuals hold beliefs that others’ culture/language will influence reported lie behaviors based on cultural perceptions (Bond & Atoum, 2000; Cheng & Broadhurst, 2005) we approached this study with the prediction that *liar culture will influence beliefs in lie stereotypes*.

Method

Institutional review board approval at two university campuses allowed for Deaf and hearing undergraduate student participants to be recruited using an in-class research announcement in ASL or in English presented by a bilingual member of the research team. Participants included Deaf undergraduate students ($n = 100$) from a research university that predominantly serves Deaf and hard of hearing people, and undergraduate hearing students ($n = 100$) attending a large public research university; both universities are located in the Northeastern United States. Access to participants was gained through the permission of course instructors via personalized email correspondence to the instructors' school accounts; an in-class research announcement and small gift card incentive encouraged participation.

Two versions of a vignette about a liar (a Deaf signer or hearing speaker) in a crime scenario were randomly distributed to participants via paper questionnaires. Written prompts, as opposed to using sign language, were chosen for the stimuli as a form of experimental control and to allow data to be collected from several participants simultaneously. The Deaf-serving university's mission emphasizes a balanced bilingual learning environment, and reading and writing are common experiences for students in their daily academic settings. The narrative contained details of a theft of a laptop and the interview of a student suspect who was lying to a campus police officer. The liar and officer were portrayed as both being from the same culture/language orientation—note that the Deaf university has sworn Deaf police officers. To maximize the possibility of activating and capturing stereotypes about liars cross-culturally, participants were only provided with one of the scenarios. Additionally, to avoid any doubt of guilt or veracity, a statement was used to provide ground truth: “evidence from surveillance cameras confirms the student stole the laptop and was lying during the interview.” Participants were asked to imagine that they witnessed the interview and to provide in open-ended fashion, “any clues they believe would have been present indicating the student was lying to the officer.” To avoid limiting or biasing responses, a blank half of a page was provided for participants to provide their written responses.

The coding procedure used an inductive content analysis technique based on a grounded theory approach to analyze the open-ended response data. A bottom-up process was chosen to code the data so that any new categories could emerge from the data and prevent any restrictions in new stereotypes that preexisting categories might have caused from previous research about believed cues to deception (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Lie stereotypes organized by category

	Name	Description	# of Ps citing		Total	χ^2	<i>p</i>
			Deaf	Hearing			
Head and face	Hair touching	Playing with or touching hair	0	2	2		
	Head scratching	Scratch head	0	1	1		
	Raised eyebrows	Lift or raise eyebrows	2	0	2		
	Blushing face	Face changes color	5	11	16		
	Crying	Crying	1	0	1		
	Facial expressions	Global mention of facial expressions	24	14	38		
	Fear face	Face shows fear	0	1	1		
	Nervous face	Nervous facial expression	3	5	8		
	Touch nose	Scratching or touching nose	1	0	1		
	Touch face	Touching the face	1	3	4		
	Curled lip	Lips curled to show anger	1	0	1		
	Biting fingers	Biting the fingers or fingernails	2	3	5		
	Yawning	Yawning	1	0	1		
	Cover mouth	Covering mouth as to prevent speaking	1	1	2		
	Relaxed jaw	Jaw relaxes, jaw drops	1	0	1		
	Hard swallow	Difficulty or a lot of swallowing	1	0	1		
Eye	Blinking	Increase or decrease in blinking	5	1	6		
	Dilated pupils	Pupils dilate or eyes widened	1	0	1		
	Eye contact	Too much or avoids eye contact	49	62	111		
	Look around	Eye gaze moves around the room	7	10	17		
	Look down	Eyes or head position downward	1	2	3		
Content	Look up-left	Looks left and/or up and to the left	2	1	3		
	Amount of detail	Too much or little detail	5	1	6		
	Content	Answers or details of response	9	5	14		
	Contradictions	Responses are wrong or non-factual	11	7	18		
	**Denial	Blaming others or denying guilt	18	4	22	10.01	.002
Paralanguage	Equivocation	Not answering questions directly	2	2	4		
	Inconsistency	Story is inconsistent or changes	13	10	23		
	Rehearsed	Rehearsed or rigid responses	1	0	1		
	Withholding	Withhold details or information	5	5	10		
	Agitated	Agitation, hostile, or impatient	6	5	11		
Upper Body	Confidence	Overly confident	3	0	3		
	Disfluencies	Speech errors such as "umm" or "uhh"	2	0	2		
	Laughing	Laughing	0	1	1		
	Nervous speech	Nervousness or tenseness in voice	2	2	4		
	Response time	Pausing before answer or quick reply	13	17	30		
	*Slurring	Unclear words, mumbling	0	4	4	4.08	.043
	Speech rate	Slow or fast speech	8	6	14		
	*Stalling	repeating questions or answers	0	4	4	4.08	.043
	Stuttering	Stumble on words or pronunciation	11	19	30		
	Tone	Tone is insincere or sarcastic	7	6	13		
Hands & Feet	Voice trembling	Shaky, unstable, or rattling voice	3	4	7		
	**Body language	Global mention of body language	20	7	27	7.24	.007
	Closed-off	Crossed arms or body oriented away	3	3	6		
	Comfort	Unaffected by accusations	2	0	2		
	Fidgeting	Shifty or jittery	21	19	40		
	Heavy breathing	Breathing more than normal	1	3	4		
	Nervous Body	Body language reveals	12	10	22		
	Posture	Stiff or relaxed sitting position	11	5	16		
	**Shaking	Shaking or trembling	3	13	16	6.79	.009
	Shrugging	Lifts shoulders	1	0	1		
Hands & Feet	**Sweating	Global mention of sweating	14	34	48	10.97	.001
	Twitching	Twitching or nervous ticks	2	6	8		
	Adapters	Touching the body	1	1	2		
	**Rubbing hands	Rubbing hands or fingers	0	7	7	7.25	.007
	Fidgety hands	Nervous or trembling hands	6	8	14		
	Raising hands	Lifts hands and arms up	1	0	1		
	Sweaty palms	Palms are sweaty	2	3	5		
	Tapping fingers	Tapping fingers on table	1	1	2		
	Feet moving	Nervous movements in the feet	3	1	4		
	Foot tapping	Tapping foot on the ground	3	5	8		
Hands & Feet	Leg moving	Leg moving or leg shaking	3	1	4		
	Clothing	Way the person is dressed	1	0	1		
	Gut reaction	Follow your intuition – not cues	1	0	1		
	Heart rate	Increased heart rate	0	1	1		
			340	347	687		

(n = 200)

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Results

Number of Reported Cues

Overall, across the individual participants' responses, there were 687 total cues reported with a relative equal proportion of cues being cited by the Deaf (340) and hearing (347) participants. On average, each participant cited three cues to deception ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.42$). A between subjects two-way ANOVA revealed that there were no significant differences between the number of cues provided by the Deaf ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.49$) and hearing participants ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.35$), $F(1, 196) = .04$, ns . The influence of whether the hearing or Deaf suspect portrayed in the vignette did not impact the number of cues reported by participants and the comparison across these conditions was not significant, $F(1, 196) = 2.94$, ns (hearing suspect, $M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.36$; Deaf suspect, $M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.46$). However, there was a significant interaction effect of the participants' own identity with that of the hearing/Deaf status of the suspect in the vignette they read, $F(1, 196) = 4.07$, $p < .05$; where hearing participants reported more cues when citing a hearing suspect from the vignette ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.24$) than when discussing the Deaf suspect vignette ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.37$), $t(98) = 2.83$, $p < .01$, $r = .27$.

Most Cited Cues

When accounting for all the participant responses collapsed into the coded categories, *eye contact*, *sweating*, and *fidgiting* were the three most cited stereotypes of a liar. The Deaf participant group cited significantly more instances of non-specific *body language* and *denial* while the hearing group mentioned significantly more non-specific *sweating* and *non-specific shaking*. Ranking the top cues for the Deaf participants revealed that *eye contact* was the most cited cue followed by *facial expressions* and *fidgiting*. The rankings for top cues mentioned by the hearing participants revealed that *eye contact* was also the most cited cue followed by non-specific *sweating* and *fidgiting*.

Cue Categories

Cues were further organized by the superordinate categories: *Head/Face*, *Eye* cues, *Content*, *Paralanguage*, *Upper Body*, and *Hands/Feet* cues. A proportion score was calculated for each participant related to their mentioning a cue from the six categories so that meaningful comparisons could be made. To examine the study prediction that Deaf participants will cite more visual cues than hearing participants, comparisons were conducted across the groups for mean proportions of cues across the six categories. A two-way between

subjects MANOVA test was conducted across the two participant groups and the two suspect groups in the vignette as the independent variables to examine their effects on the proportion of the six categories of cues. The results indicated that the groups only differed in one of the major cue categories. The Deaf participants mentioned significantly more cues in the *Content* category ($M = .178$, $SD = .204$) than did the hearing participants ($M = .105$, $SD = .159$) revealing a main effect of the hearing/Deaf status of participants on this particular set of cues, $F(1, 196) = 7.767$, $p < .01$, $r = .20$. The participant groups did not differ significantly by mean proportion for mentioning cues in any of the remaining five major cue categories. These results fail to support the prediction and instead contradicted our assumption that the Deaf participants would cite more visually accessible cues than the hearing participants.

Differences in Cues

To examine if Deaf and hearing participants differed in the specific cues they reported, we utilized a Pearson chi-square analysis. The participant groups differed on the amount of reported cues for seven of the categories. Specifically, Deaf participants mentioned more instances of *denial* and non-specific *body language* than the hearing participants. The hearing participants mentioned more occurrences of *slurring*, *stalling*, *shaking* in the body, non-specific *sweating*, and *rubbing of the hands*. Overall, the Deaf participants cited 16 unique cues not described by any of the hearing participants. Viewing these 16 cues by group shows that Deaf participants mentioned seven *Head/Face* category cues, two were under *Content*, two of the *Paralanguage* type, the *Upper Body* category accounted for two unique cues, one *Hands & Feet* cue, and two of the cues were idiosyncratic and did not fall under a superordinate category. For the hearing participants, they exclusively mentioned seven unique cues. Breaking down the cues mentioned by this group by the categories shows that they mentioned three *Head/Face* category cues, none under *Content*, two under *Paralanguage* type, none under the *Upper Body* category, one from the *Hands & Feet* cue, and one idiosyncratic cue not described by the larger categories. These findings may suggest that there are unique beliefs about liars across these different languages, or perhaps that individualized beliefs exist within every language group.

Effect of Suspect Language on Categories

To examine the prediction that the language of a suspect will influence the beliefs in lie stereotypes, the proportions of cues were examined across the two language user vignettes. The results of a

MANOVA test revealed a main effect for suspect language on the proportion of cues mentioned by participants under the category for *Head and Face*. By proportion, participants exposed to the scenario portraying the Deaf suspect mentioned significantly more cues in the *Head and Face* category ($M = .166$, $SD = .210$) than they did in the hearing suspect scenario ($M = .089$, $SD = .148$), $F(1, 196) = 7.767$, $p < .01$, $r = .21$). There was also a significant main effect caused by the suspect's language on the proportion of *Hand and Feet* cues cited. Those participants exposed to the hearing suspect scenario cited more cues under the *Hand and Feet* category ($M = .077$, $SD = .144$) than participants exposed to the Deaf suspect scenario ($M = .035$, $SD = .099$), $F(1, 196) = 5.617$, $p < .05$, $r = .17$. Comparisons focused on the language of the suspect lend support to the prediction that a liars's language use may influence liar stereotypes.

Discussion

From the findings of this study, and those of the GDRT (2006), and more recent studies of cue beliefs (e.g., Katta et al., 2026), it is probable that the most widespread and cited stereotype about liars is that they avoid eye gaze. Interestingly, meta-analyses have revealed there are no relationships between eye contact and actual veracity, nor is there strong evidence for cue theories in general (see Levine, 2018) that are based on the premise that liars show certain nonverbal behaviors that may leak their true intentions. In the context of culture, Levine et al. (2016) proclaimed a decade ago that "there is relatively little research on cross-cultural differences and similarity in deception across cultures" (p. 4). However, there is ample evidence from a review of all of the studies on deception and culture (Author, 2019) that ethnicity, race (Lloyd et al., 2017), and culture do impact perceptions (Bond & Atoum, 2000; Cheng & Broadhurst, 2005) and motives (Levine et al., 2016) of lying. Other deception research has examined how theoretical predictions of truth-default theory hold up across cultures (Levine, 2023). Furthermore, the current study is but one application of a cross-cultural analysis of believed (but likely erroneous) cues to deception.

The results reveal that the widespread stereotype that liars avert gaze is also held in this sample of Deaf sign language users in the United States. However, the findings also show that the language of a liar, and in this case one who is Deaf, may impact the beliefs about the verbal and nonverbal behavioral cues that indicate deception. Racial and ethnic relations are extremely relevant to social and political change, and deception research that explores how racial biases (e.g., Lloyd et al., 2017) and other biases driven by perceptions of ethnicity,

culture, language, and gender which may be driving judgements of deception are vital to better our understanding of cross-cultural interactions in a global world. Fan et al. (2022) found that cultural in-group, as opposed to out-group members, held a stronger truth-bias of their conversational counterparts, and that proponents on a social political issue also tend to view their conversational partners as more truthful.

As with all research, the current study is limited by its scope and the samples who participated in the research. Future research exploring deception beliefs across these two populations should include diverse people with different life, language, and academic/professional experiences. Overall, the scope of this study is limited to the sample of college students included in the research. It is also likely that the particular design of the study, including a written vignette of a person(s) accused of stealing and lying about the transgression, limited and biased the participants responses to what we found. Future research should consider the use of ASL in sharing the deception scenario/stimuli and also designing data collections in such a way that participants may share their opinions/perceptions through ASL—as this may illicit unique findings that were missed in the present study. The present study may have tapped into dominant hearing cultural stereotypes by asking Deaf participants to read and write in English about the cues they believe are present during deception. Researchers should also explore how other contexts involving lying, such as interpersonal deception in close personal or romantic relationships may yield different results about believed cues of deception in those interactions.

However, the findings of the current research still hold important implications for professional and organizational contexts. When working with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, including people who are Deaf, perceptions of honesty and deception will likely be influenced. A person who appears truthful in one culture may seem deceptive (or less honest) in another group setting because of contrasting cultural expectations for behaviors, biases, or different normative communicative expressions.

Uono and Hietanen (2015) found that Eastern and Western cultures differ in their use of and judgments of others direct eye gaze. In Deaf adults, direct gaze at faces during communication is essential and more common, as compared to hearing non-signers, because the face provides social information and contains grammatical language cues of ASL (Letourneau & Mitchell, 2011). One of the study authors has their own individualized anecdotal experience reflecting on their life in a bilingual Deaf/hearing household, and has observed that eye

contact can be more common among signers (even when engaging with non-signers) as it continues to be socially diagnostic for improved communication. In this way, cross-cultural or cross language interactions may suffer from erroneous veracity judgments or biases in perception of the other in contexts where veracity may come into question (e.g., job interview, legal settings).

Recognizing that different language and cultural groups may have their own specific or individualized expectations or behavioral norms is vitally important for better communication in general, but a lack of language or cultural competency can also lead to misdiagnosis among Deaf patients (see Anglemyer & Crespi, 2018). More broadly, research has found that behavioral cues driven by cultural norms can lead to poor diagnoses in other clinical settings such as language competency/assessments, reading achievement, and disparities in autism diagnosis (Zuckerman et al., 2013). Improving our general understanding of behavioral differences in language and culture groups and providing specialized and accessible services also leads to improvements in psychological diagnoses and mental health outcomes for those groups (Schafer et al., 2026).

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Reproducing Audiovisual and Representational Dissonance: Translating Foreign Telenovela into Twinovela

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Abstract: This article examines the production processes and cultural implications of adapting foreign telenovelas into "Twinovela"—serialized foreign dramas dubbed into Akan—on Ghanaian television. Focusing on Adom TV and United Television (UTV), the study explores how dubbing practices challenge traditional notions of indigenous media by merging global and local cultural narratives. Using ethnographic research methods, including interviews, participant observation, and institutional discourses, the analysis delves into recruitment strategies, translational practices, and the creative process of dubbing. The study highlights the sociocultural dynamics of Akan language use, the role of linguistic norms, and the integration of Ghanaian cultural motifs to ensure audience resonance. It also addresses the audiovisual and representational dissonance created by the adaptation process, emphasizing the interplay of sound and visuals in fostering cultural identification. The findings reveal that twinovela is not merely a replication of foreign content but a creative adaptation that incorporates Ghanaian cultural motifs, linguistic norms, and audience preferences. It emphasizes that twinovela represent a complex interplay of cultural, economic, and ideological dynamics, showcasing how global and local influences merge to create a unique media format. This dubbing process not only revitalizes indigenous languages in media but also challenges traditional notions of cultural representation and identity.

Introduction

Foreign content on Ghanaian television has significantly reshaped the local broadcasting landscape. Unlike the radio sector, which predominantly features locally produced content, television offers a diverse range of domestic and foreign programming. Historically, Ghanaian local television stations had been broadcasting foreign serialized dramas, prominently English soap operas and Spanish telenovelas. Most of these foreign shows were from the USA, and a few from Europe, Asia, and other African countries. Some notable shows included *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Cosby Show*, *Tom and Jerry*, *CNN*, *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, *Gillette Sports*, *Oshin*, and *Journey to the West* (Ussher & Ollennu, 2023; Nuviadenu, 2005).

However, over the past decade, telenovelas have become the most popular form of foreign content on Ghanaian local television stations, attracting a substantial audience due to their relatable storytelling and dramatic appeal. For Ghanaian television companies and their executives, the combined low cost of acquiring telenovela rights and dubbing them presents a significant economic benefit. What makes telenovelas unique is the process of indigenization, which results in their reproduction into what is known as twinovela. The lexicon twinovela, just like telenovela, is a portmanteau that blends the words Twi (an Akan language) with novela. Thus, twinovela articulates the (re)production of foreign serial dramas/soap operas through dubbing, translating them from their original language of production into Twi (an Akan language). In simple terms, twinovela involves the linguistic adaptation and translation of serialized dramas from origin countries such as Brazil, Dubai, Mexico, India, the Philippines, South Korea, and Turkey for the Ghanaian audience.

While dubbing television shows is not a new concept in Ghana, twinovela is quite novel. Prior to 2013, all non-English foreign shows were broadcast in English, either through dubbing or subtitling. Since then, two of Ghana's most competitive and popular Akan-language television stations, Adom TV and United Television (UTV),¹ have been recognized as pioneers of twinovelas at different periods in time and at varying levels of popularity. While UTV aired English-dubbed Mexican telenovelas with pre- and post-discussion segments that summarized and narrated episodes in Twi, in 2015, Adom TV started broadcasting Akan-dubbed telenovelas. Through the innovative efforts of these broadcasting stations, twinovela has captivated viewers and sparked discussions about the relevance of local-language programming in an age dominated by foreign media influences.

Meanwhile, indigenous Akan language television stations airing Akan-dubbed telenovelas present several contradictions that are inimical to some mainstream perceptions of indigenous (language) media as ideologically opposed to mainstream media's production,

¹ Adom TV and UTV are subsidiaries of the two leading Ghanaian-owned commercial media corporations: Multimedia Group Limited (MGL) and Despite Media. Both media organizations are competitive and popular, holding a significant audience share in Ghana. These corporations operate multiple radio and television stations in English and Akan, particularly Asante Twi. MGL's local language radio stations include Adom FM, Asempa FM, Nhyira FM, and Adom TV, while Despite Media operates Peace FM, Okay FM, Neat FM, Hello FM, and United Television (UTV).

circulation, and storage of indigenous/ethnic expressions and representations. Some of these contradictions include the displacement of indigenous content and images, reinforcement of cultural imperialism, and a reduction in the production of indigenous/ethnic worldviews and knowledge. Considering these contradictions in the localization of foreign serial drama, which has nonetheless achieved immense popularity, audience appeal, and media company support, this study examines the production processes and operational dynamics of adapting telenovelas into twinovelas to understand how the conflation of local and global flows creates a dynamic interplay of multiple voices and cultural expressions. The question this study examines is how Akan indigenous language media (ILM) dubbing practices in localized telenovelas, also known as twinovela, offer insights into local and global discursive flows. I argue that the practice of dubbing foreign telenovelas into the Akan language challenges traditional ideas of indigenous media and reflects the complex interplay between local and global cultural narratives, highlighting the role of local languages in fostering cultural representation and audience engagement in a rapidly globalizing media landscape.

Significantly, analyzing dubbing production offers insight into the intertwining discourses, voices, and cultural and socioeconomic contexts that shape the poetics and aesthetics of telenovelas in Ghana. Further, the analysis unravels the layers of seemingly contentious representational ideas about local and global, foreign and indigenous, and how media creatives and executives navigate and negotiate these tensions to create a unique form of programming that challenges normative ideas about indigenous (language) media. Exploring the production of twinovela demonstrates how multiple voices and cultures merge, contributing to broader discourses about identity and representation in indigenous television. Additionally, examining twinovela production offers a critical perspective on the contradictions in the ideological foundation of indigenous (language) media, which is rooted in resistance to non-indigenous influences.

In the following sections, I present socio-cultural factors that influence media companies' preference for telenovelas aside from economic benefits, as well as the gap in analyzing the production practices and processes of dubbing. Following, I contextualize the study within postcolonialism, showing how Ghana's media system has been shaped by translational and colonial structures, and how these structures affect programmers and audiences. Finally, I present a descriptive analysis of the adaptation and translation involved in dubbing, focusing on the strategies, cultural influences, and linguistic choices.

Framing Telenovela in Localized Contexts

The literature on telenovelas highlights their significance in social life, as they enhance social bonds, foster shared experiences, and promote participatory storytelling, while also challenging and redefining social conventions. For instance, themes of love, marriage, and sexuality help test the limits of social norms in a given period. Moreover, studies suggest that telenovelas offer audiences a perspective on the world. They explain why people engage with this genre, reinforcing the motivation for Ghanaian television stations to include telenovelas in their programming.

Research shows that telenovelas and foreign films resonate with local audiences, providing alternative narratives to Western modernities. For instance, Brian Larkin's (1997) study of the pervasiveness of Indian Films in Northern Nigeria demonstrates that Indian films strike a balance between Nigerian tradition and Western modernity, depicting acceptable attitudes toward love and sexual relations. Larkin argued that Indian films offer Hausa viewers traditions that differ from their own, while presenting a form of modernity free from ideological and political constraints.

Meanwhile, the impact of telenovelas on Ghanaian audiences has been documented, showing that telenovelas serve as educational, cultural, and psychological tools that shape viewers' experiences and insights. Additionally, telenovelas serve as socializing tools that cater to the audience's idealistic expectations. This perspective becomes clearer when one examines the reasons people watch telenovelas. According to Adia (2014), viewers are motivated to watch telenovelas because they identify with the characters and connect with themes such as love and the fulfillment of their intrinsic desires. Ussher and Ollennu (2023) argue that audiences in Ghana prefer to watch telenovelas in local languages because these shows serve as both stress relievers and educational tools. As a source of education, viewers learn about global fashion trends, foreign cultures, social issues such as love and marriage, and acquire new lexical items. Other reasons include escapism, relaxation, a sense of belonging, identification with characters, and sharing opinions, lifestyles, and experiences (Adia, 2014; Ussher & Ollennu, 2023).

Other studies by scholars like Asiamah and Ofori-Birikorang (2018) demonstrate the transformative role of telenovelas in viewing practices. Focusing specifically on the Indian drama series *Kumkum Bhagya*, the authors concluded that viewing sites transformed into platforms for information sharing, social interaction, display of power between site owners and viewers, and peer discussions on social life, including morality, fashion, general life experiences, and marriage.

Besides appropriating telenovela narratives, the audience becomes narrative agents, recapping previous episodes and analyzing them to speculate about future developments.

The studies reviewed demonstrate that telenovelas have significant socio-cultural and economic implications, offering valuable insights into the impact of foreign content on local cultures. They provide a foundation for exploring the tension between foreign content and indigenous media. Nonetheless, these studies reveal a significant gap in academic research regarding the production process of imported telenovelas. This analysis seeks to bridge this gap by examining how cultural products are tailored to local audiences, especially through dubbing. Dubbing, as a mode of audiovisual translation, is a recognized aspect of media content localization in which the original-language soundtrack of a media text is replaced with a target-language soundtrack. In the case of Twinovelas, the telenovela's source language and dialogue are replaced with dialogue in Akan (predominantly Asante Twi). Thus, dubbing constitutes a process of adaptation and translation, encompassing the complexity and ideological implications of translation. Analyzing dubbing production helps scholars gain a deeper understanding of the implications of localization practices on the indigenous broadcasting industry and cultural exchange. Furthermore, identifying production practices in localized contexts could help develop frameworks that enhance audience accessibility, foster deeper cultural connections, and expand our understanding of indigenous (language) media. Moreover, the sonic and visual parallels create an audiovisual and representational dissonance that is both alluring and tenuous. Thus, addressing this gap in the production process could be instructive for enhancing programming strategies for content creators and broadcasters across multilingual contexts.

Postcolonial Entanglements: Language, Indigenous Language Media and Translation

In postcolonial African contexts like Ghana, there are various entanglements “shaped by colonialism, multilingualism, globalization, and diverse ethnicities” (Henaku, 2023, p. 3). Presently, these entanglements are heightened by transnational, translational, technological, local, and diasporic formations that influence broadcasting programmers and audiences. For instance, historically, Ghana had an English-dominated broadcasting system, despite being a multilingual country with 30 to 90 languages spoken (Frimpong, 2023). The introduction of Ghanaian languages into broadcasting was limited to the periphery, as local-language media programs consisted mainly of translations of English-language programs. Additionally, local

languages were allocated 18 hours per week, while 58 hours were devoted to English programs, including BBC relays (Ansah, 1985).

A significant element of the introduction of local languages in Ghanaian broadcasting is translation, since it has been argued to function as an instrument and a central component of colonialism. In fact, Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) argued that translation is at the heart of colonialism, happens in a continuum, “is not an isolated act,” and constitutes “an ongoing process of intercultural transfer” (p. 2). Some scholars have even theorized that colonies were translations or copies of Europe, highlighting their intimate linkage through memory, spatio-temporal connections, and absence of mutual exchange (Bassnett, 2013; Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999). Hence, translation as an instrument becomes a colonial tool to establish systems and structures, “extend the hegemony of dominant cultures,” shape texts into the target culture’s acceptable textual forms, and “disempower individuals and cultures” (Bassnett, 2013, p. 349). It operates on the basis of power inequities arising from unequal standing between cultures and languages. In Ghanaian broadcasting history, translation has led to the establishment of major systems, including multilingual broadcasting, English textualization of programs, and content localization.

The introduction of Ghanaian languages into broadcasting was intended to advance the colonial propaganda agenda, aimed at promoting the empire's ideologies and countering any resistance threatening the colonial administration. Post-independence, the use of local languages was focused on national development. However, in the nineties, the economic value of local-language media prompted English-speaking stations to establish local-language stations alongside their English-language counterparts. For example, Multimedia Group Limited, the owner of Joy FM, one of Ghana’s leading private English-speaking radio stations, established Akan-speaking radio stations (e.g., Adom FM) and a television station (Adom TV). Meanwhile, others established stations that broadcast entirely in Akan. For example, “Despite Group of Companies” operates radio and television stations that broadcast entirely in Akan, such as Peace FM and United Television (UTV). The preference for Akan stems from it being the language of the dominant ethnic group and the most widely spoken language, representing 45.9% of Ghana's 30.8 million population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021a). This led to the proliferation of local-language radio and television stations. Besides multilingual broadcasting systems, the introduction of local languages expanded local-language programming and geographic coverage, broadening access to broadcasting in Ghana.

Significantly, the practice of Ghanaian-language translations of local and/or foreign English programs persists in various programming contexts, particularly as local programming continues to be composed/produced in English. For example, on local-language radio and television stations, it is common practice for programs like news to be initially composed (scripted) in English before being broadcast in a local-language translation. The English textualization phenomenon shows that in postcolonial contexts, language is a central point of negotiation and tension. The enduring influence of English has created a dynamic in which media content production privileges English textualization and relegates indigenous languages to oral and aural forms. Additionally, globalized/western professional norms have continued to shape the assessment of ILM without due consideration for Indigenous linguistic systems, contemporary formations, and colonial legacy influences.

Translation also implies movement, transformation, recreation, rewriting, and difference. Misrahi-Barak and Ravi (2017) observe these various ideas when they argue translation as a “constellation of points of conjecture and disjuncture where author, text, and reader are continually engaged in the transaction of differences within and across linguistic and national limits” (p. 7). Adding to the cultural understanding of translation, Gazzalie (2018) defines translation as the “communication of meaning of a source language text by means of an equivalent-target text” (p. 229). This suggests that dubbing as a translational discourse revoices (rewrites) texts. Speaking of translation as one of the most influential types of rewriting, the literary Scholar Andre Lefevere (1992) states that it can project the image of an author... in another culture, lifting that author and/or those works beyond the boundaries of their culture of origin...” (p. 9). Consequently, dubbing enables the crossing of audiovisual texts across cultures and borders for diverse audiences.

Lefevere identifies three elements that determine and shape translators’ strategies. These are ideology, poetics, and the universe of discourse. First, ideology dictates the basic strategy a translator uses, as well as the solutions to problems in the original source’s discourse and language. Translators can be motivated to work in the service of an ideology or be influenced or constrained by it. Second, poetics refers to both social systems of the work of literature (in this case, the industrial context of indigenous local language media) and what I will summarize as style, which includes literary devices, genre, theme, motifs, symbols, etc. Third, the universe of discourse is the objects, customs, beliefs, and thoughts unacceptable either in the culture of the original text or the translator’s culture. At any point in translation, these three elements are

employed, shaping the translator's choices. Translation, therefore, is both a material practice and a cultural phenomenon (Gazzalie, 2018). This duality underscores the necessity for a comprehensive understanding of both source and target texts, while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of the technical systems that facilitate the translation process.

Translation's duality, as well as its complexity and ideological implications, prompts producers of twinovela to undertake a careful systemic pre-production process of planning, language analysis, audience analysis, and cultural appropriateness, and the production process of implementing the revisions and dubbing the show in the Akan language, adhering to this target language's ideological and moral worldview. For example, because dubbing is predominantly linguistic, aural, and oral, the translation from English to Akan draws on the Akan communicative and linguistic framework. Agyekum (2011) writes that Akans place great importance on politeness, etiquette, and respect for status - deference, age, chieftaincy, and traditional political systems that impact their speech forms and communicative events. It is expected that speakers will use appropriate registers in any communicative act. Consequently, directors of twinovela consider Ghanaian society's sociocultural milieu when dubbing. They are careful not to use language that would offend their audience's cultural sensibilities, as it could lead to being labeled uncouth or uncultured. Conformity to these linguistic rules is expected to avoid embarrassment or humiliation (Agyekum, 2011).

Another important point to raise about language use is that, according to Agyekum (2011), there is a direct link between Akan linguistic norms, routines, and morality. He argues that individuals' moral character is judged by their degree of politeness in their speech. Hence, what is spoken (oral) and heard (aural) and the manner of their execution in dubbing must correspond with these ideological imperatives about language and morality. Producers are cognizant of these nuances, and as will be explained later in this article, they apply the target language's universe of discourse to approximate the meaning the original language's universe of discourse intends. This understanding is consistent with heteroglossia, which emphasizes linguistic diversity and variations as well as the "coexistence of different competing ideological points of view within a single language" (Lähtenmäki, 2010, p. 28). Clearly, linguistic choice shapes the translation process by highlighting Akan's communicative beliefs and behaviors. At the same time, it shows the stratified discourses that dialogically influence production routines in dubbing.

Clearly, (Akan-)dubbing as an audiovisual translation method is material and ideological, as it involves various sociocultural and linguistic imperatives (e.g., Akan linguistic frameworks), multiple agents/roles (including translators, dubbing directors, voice actors, quality controllers, sound engineers, and project managers), and technologies (recording consoles). These three constituents correspond to Stuart Hall's (1980) code structures for the construction of messages and meanings in the production of a television program: frameworks of knowledge, structures of production, and technical infrastructure. According to Hall, production constructs the message and is discursive, framed by meanings and ideas, including "knowledge-in-use about production routines, technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about audience, etc." (1980, p. 129). This is exemplified in Akan dubbing, which involves a multistep process of planning, language analysis, and audience analysis to deliver culturally appropriate content. A fascinating aspect of Hall's encoding and decoding theory is that it concisely helps position twinovela producers as simultaneously decoder-receivers (audience/readers) and encoder-producers, thereby highlighting the complexity of Akan-dubbing. As decoder-receivers, Twinovela producers must employ English and Akan language significations and rules, their company's "production practices, networks, organized relations and technical infrastructure" (Hall, 1980, p. 129) to interpret and translate the telenovela. It is this decoded meaning that is applied to the translation of the show and ultimately dubbed into Akan to produce the twinovela, positioning these producers as encoder-producers. As decoder-receivers and encoder-producers, twinovela producers employ systematic approaches throughout the dubbing process, which requires a deep understanding of Akan sociocultural dynamics as well as the program's content and aesthetics. Aligning appropriate registers with cultural expectations and assessing the moral weight of language shows the intricate relationship between culture and language.

Evidently, translation is a key point of interrogation in postcolonial contexts. Hence, this study focuses on the production of translation, specifically Akan dubbing of telenovelas. The English-to-local-language translation phenomenon, as a by-product of colonialism, is foundational to understanding local media companies' practice of importing foreign programs and localizing them for broadcasting. The phenomenon also shows that foreign content has become a key component of Ghanaian television practice. Hence, twinovela, as an audiovisual translational text, interpellates postcolonial discourses on multilingualism, cultural texts, their agents, and the institutions of

production. The concept *twinovela* conjures postcolonial historical imperatives, situating indigenous language media (ILM) as both a nexus and disjuncture between historical and contemporary iterations of media, political and cultural systems, and their assigned values, while highlighting ILM as a product of a linguistic struggle between the colonial administration and the colonized by emphasizing the problems created by such tensions. As argued by Shobat and Stam (2014), contemporary postcolonialism focuses on “cultural contradictions generated by the global circulation of peoples and cultural goods in a mediated and interconnected world, resulting in a commodified mass mediated syncretism” (p. 42). This contemporary interpretation of postcolonialism implicates and articulates past, present, and future as interlocked, highlighting the mutual influence of the Global South and Global West. Therefore, within the postcolonial context, we can extrapolate the economic, political, and cultural nuances of colonialism and its aftermath, allowing us to interrogate identities, subjectivities, knowledge production, violence, power, geopolitical relations, and their construction and conditions.

To fully understand the processes and practices of Akan-language dubbing, I employed descriptive analysis and ethnographic research methods. Descriptive analysis uses an inductive approach to break down data into meaningful patterns, categories, and themes, highlighting recurring actions considered ideal or legitimate by the group being studied (Naele, 2021; Angrosino, 2007). This analytical framework informed the data collection techniques employed in this study, including participant observation, practitioner interviews, and informal conversations. The observation settings were the recording studios of Adom TV and United Television's telenovela production, where I observed dubbing sessions focusing on language use, social interactions, space setup and organization, studio equipment, procedures and practices, and both human and non-human interactions. Additionally, I conducted both formal and informal interviews with personnel from Adom TV and UTV, including the Channel Manager, the Channel Coordinator, and the Program Coordinator at Adom TV, as well as the Director of Telenovelas at UTV, and informal conversations with sound and visual engineers and voice actors. These methodological techniques helped me identify the dubbing procedures and practices organized into two major phases: Pre-production and Production. The subsequent section discusses dubbing production, focusing on recruitment and translational strategies of adapting telenovela into *twinovela*.

Pre-Production Phase of Dubbing: Studio Setup and Recruitment

Adom TV and UTV each own a soundproof dubbing studio with a dedicated department responsible for producing twinovelas. The organizational structure for Akan-language dubbing is similar for both television stations. This twinovela department comprises the director, casting director, the cast (voice actors), video editor, and sound and visual engineers. The studios of Adom TV and UTV are equipped with audio and visual technologies and accessories, including microphones, TV monitors, computer monitors, consoles, and furniture. These computers are equipped with various software for audio recording, video editing, and audio-visual integration and synchronization. The studios also have various hardware devices that connect microphones to computers and TV monitors, ensuring a seamless, clear dubbing process.

Most of the planning occurs in the studio. Once distribution rights to a telenovela are acquired, the show's original, unmixed package, including audio (dialogue and sound effects), visuals, ambiance, and an English script, is sent to this department for processing. Whether the series is available in English or the text's original language, an English script is added to the unmixed content. This script serves as a vital resource for directors as they make informed decisions about their pre-production and production plans.

The pre-production stage includes previewing episodes, script adaptation, casting, and selecting voice actors. Previewing the episodes helps the director gain direction and understanding of the plot, prepare for the dubbing process, and ensure continuity in the dubbing. Additionally, previewing helps the director adapt the script by identifying and planning the degree of transformation from the original. This kind of transformation is predominantly linguistic, primarily dialogue, and often involves three interlinked strategies: substitution, insertion, and omission. As cultural production institutions, Adom TV and UTV use these practical, creative, and adaptation strategies to achieve aesthetic values that resonate with Ghanaians. Aesthetically, sound is a significant element in the reproduction process, enabling cultural resonance, aural comprehension, identification, and representation. As such, employing linguistic adaptation strategies, such as substitution, insertion, and omission, enables Twinovela producers to remain true to the telenovela's premise and plot while achieving cultural relevance. Each strategy allows the directors to focus on the text (dialogue) and the visual layout, enhancing the synchronization and synthesis of audio and visual compositions to assert oral and aural alignment for the audience. The most apparent substitution involves replacing the original sound-characters' voices,

including both language and dialogue, with speakers of the target language, Akan. But more importantly, dubbing telenovelas is not just translating from the original language into Akan; it involves navigating the complexities of cultural context, communication, linguistic rules, and audience reception. Hence, during the viewing, the director annotates the English script, marking specific lines and scenes that require transformation, and develops a directorial concept document outlining name changes, casting assignments, Akan dialect substitutions, and a recording schedule.

Casting assignments and recruitment strategies differ between Adom TV and UTV. At Adom TV, voice actors are recruited from both internal and external sources. Although the production studio is owned by Multimedia Group Limited (MGL) and located on its premises, the dubbing production is outsourced to contractors, reinforcing the claim of providing job opportunities. Different directors are contracted to work on various telenovela projects simultaneously. These contracted directors are responsible for casting, producing, and delivering twinovelas on time. The Adom TV channel coordinator expressed a preference for outsourcing dubbing production, citing increased efficiency and reduced scheduling challenges that could delay the dubbing process.

In contrast, UTV adopts a different approach, focusing solely on internal recruitment. UTV's production crew consists of employees from Despite Media, including a casting director and a general director. The casting director finds and hires voice actors while the general director coaches actors on their vocal performances and provides context and understanding of the story. According to the UTV twinovela director, when UTV started Akan dubbing of telenovelas, they used Ghanaian (Kumawood) actors and actresses fluent in Akan. However, due to scheduling conflicts, absenteeism, artistic challenges with actors and actresses, and convenience, UTV gradually began recruiting voice actors internally. Consequently, dubbing has become a supplementary occupation for employees of Despite Media. Nevertheless, employment at Despite Media does not inherently qualify an employee as a voice actor for dubbing. Potential voice-over artists must audition to qualify for roles in the twinovela production. For UTV, internal voice actor recruits are desirable because they are skilled in dubbing, accessible, and need little to no training.

While internal recruitment is preferred by UTV and used by Adom TV, both TV station directors acknowledged that internal recruitment has drawbacks, the most prominent being scheduling and availability conflicts, in which the official work of internal recruits interferes with recording sessions. In both studios, I observed some

voice artists rush through and cut a recording short because they were due to be on air for a news presentation. Such disruptions during recording sessions put significant pressure on the directors and delay the dubbing process. If a voice-over actor rushes through a recording session, the recorded dialogue is likely to be discarded and redone, causing delays and wasting time. For Adom TV, these instances justify their preference for external recruitment. However, for UTV, the internal recruits' linguistic acumen, proximity, and expertise in voice-over make them ideal candidates.

As cultural institutions, Adom TV and UTV's different recruitment strategies for dubbing production significantly impact job opportunities. While UTV's past recruitment strategy contributed to job creation in Ghana's local entertainment industry, its current internal recruitment strategy limits opportunities for local actors and actresses. UTV's internal recruitment strategy significantly impacts the talent pool for voice-acting roles, hindering the development and enhancement of voice-over skills for these actors and actresses. This justifies criticisms that twinovelas threaten the survival and growth of the Ghanaian film industry (Offei, 2025; Daily Guide Network, 2019). Not only have twinovelas led to a reduced demand for Ghanaian films, but they have also limited opportunities for local artists by excluding them from voice-acting roles. Meanwhile, the case of Adom TV presents a different outcome, since their recruitment strategy expands voice-over role opportunities beyond the company's employees. Hence, the case can be made that Adom TV's production of twinovelas creates job opportunities.

A key criterion for voice casting is the voice artist's ability to speak Twi or any of the Akan dialects. My interactions with voice actors suggest that they are heteroglots who are either bilingual or multilingual. Informal conversations with a few voice actors showed that they could speak one or more Akan dialects, two other Ghanaian languages, and English, which could be useful during the dubbing process. This means they could play more than one voice character in a show. Moreover, directors utilize this bi/multilingual character in their interpretations of telenovelas and in the casting of voice actors. Since Ghanaian languages are associated with ethnic groups, twinovela directors utilize Ghanaian ethnic stereotypes when assigning voice-over characters and selecting the appropriate Akan dialect. Deciding on the Akan dialect for a character is usually associated with popular ethnic

stereotypes.² For example, the Fantes are characterized by a stereotype of Englishness stemming from their historical association with Europeans and their ability to code-switch between English and Fante within a single sentence, thereby bestowing upon them an air of sophistication and elitism. Asantes (Asante Twi) are seen as proud, wealthy, bossy, ambitious, and boastful. Akwapims (Akwapim Twi) are perceived as respectful and polite. Therefore, directors identify original characters' traits and attributes that closely align with the specific traits associated with the various Akan ethnic groups and assign these dialects to them. The ethnic associations and dialect assignments to original characters reinforce particular Ghanaian cultural and social ideas about identity and ethnicity, and serve as a medium where production, aesthetics, and ideology interact. At the same time, by using Ghanaian stereotypes, directors seek to foster identification with these characters.

In addition to Akan proficiency, voice suitability and emotional aptitude are critical factors in the casting process because they help address the audiovisual dissonance caused by replacing the original characters' language and sounds. As Michel Chion (1994) explains, audiovisual dissonance refers to a relationship between audio and visual elements that contradict or oppose each other. Audiovisual dissonance is recognized only at the exact point of meaning, influencing how text is interpreted, and it stands in opposition to convention (Chion, 1994). When voice actors have a good vocal fit and convey the right emotions, they help alleviate the dissonance between the image on the screen and the sound one hears. Additionally, a good vocal fit and the right emotions help build emotional and cultural resonance with the audience, thereby reimagining the narrative by aligning sound and visual elements.

In dubbing, creators are aware of the geo-contextual and cultural shifts accompanying the purchase of distribution rights for telenovelas. As such, the geographical and cultural shifts place the purchased media form in a liminal position between two continents and cultures. Twinovela producers are aware of the shifts and linguistic displacement, thereby adopting translational strategies of substitution, insertion, and deletion. The ambiguity inherent in this liminality reinforces double-voicedness, highlighting the layers of voices, meanings, and expressions present in this media form. As Baxter (2014) explains, double-voicing is "when a person speaks, they have a

² See Lawson et al. (2015) "Exploring Ethnic Stereotypes and Prejudice Among Some Major Ethnic Groups in Ghana" for more details about ethnic stereotypes in Ghana.

heightened awareness of, and responsiveness to, the concerns and agendas of others, which is reflected in the different ways in which they adjust their language in response to interlocutors” (p. 3). Hence, the adaptation strategies employed during dubbing prioritize both the speaker's (in this case, the producer's) and the interlocutor's (the recipient/audience's) perspectives. The English transcript (which is often a translation), sound, and visual manifest the voice, intentions, meanings, expressions, and narratives of the original creators. The translation from English into Akan introduces a second voice, also overlaid with socio-ideological belief systems. As Jordan (1995) explains, double-voicedness in everyday speech is at once the language of the speaker and the language of others. Similarly, the production of twinovelas creates dual ownership, in which this media form simultaneously serves two distinct intentions, resulting in two voices, two expressions, and two meanings. Consequently, we find in twinovela a dialogue of languages, intentions, meanings, and aesthetics.

Production Phase of Dubbing: Recording and Translation

The production phase involves voice recording of the show in Akan and carefully mixing the recorded voice with other audio elements and visuals. It is also the stage where the actual language translation occurs. At the start of any audio recording session, there are the director, sound/visual engineer, and the voice actors. The recording session can be done individually or in groups. Before the dubbing starts, the television monitor is set to the specific episode and scene(s) to be recorded. Each voice actor is given a script of the show in English and informed about the episode and scene number. Voice actors read the portions of the script (dialogue) relevant to their scene and watch either the whole episode or the scenes of their characters. Usually, they watch the relevant scenes multiple times to familiarize themselves with the content, story, visuals, ambiance, emotions, and performances of the characters they are playing. Reading and previewing episodes/scenes enables voice actors/performers to bring their interpretations of the characters to life, guided by the director's insight into the drama.

Voice actors rehearse with the visuals several times until the director is satisfied with the voice performance and lip synchronization. The rehearsal helps them familiarize and embody their characters, making the dubbing believable and relatable. Through this process, voice actors assume dual roles: spectators and actors/performers. Different scholars have written about audience engagement with film in terms of their viewing experiences, practices (such as ways of looking), or position. Solanas and Octavio (1976) theorized that spectators could

be active participants, actors, protagonists, and accomplices of revolutionary cinema. Stuart Hall's (1980) subject positioning gives the audience agency in relation to media consumption, where the audience's social, political, economic, and historical relations shape their reading of a text as dominant/preferred, negotiated, or oppositional. Other scholars talk about spectatorship as resistance. For example, Scott (2005) argues that interpretation is a basis for activism.

Meanwhile, Hooks (1992) and Diawara (1993), taking a gendered perspective on black spectatorship, argue that black individuals' looking practices are political, stratified, a site of resistance and contestation, interrogative, and transgressive. Shobat and Stam (2014) talk about the looking practices of spectators who, through hostile looks (looking) and critical comments (speaking), return the gaze. During the production of twinovela, cast members, as spectators, not only look and speak but also imitate and perform. Here, their "looking" is not hostile, nor is their "speaking" critical, as suggested by Shobat and Stam. Instead, they look to learn and speak to translate. They engage in observational learning to model and translate what they see and hear. As spectators, they are observers who interpret onscreen bodies and their actions and concurrently translate their understanding of those bodies, their actions, the script, and the director's vision into their voice acting. Ultimately, voice actors as spectators speak for source characters. The goal of this level of spectatorship (observation, interpretation, and performance) is to be able to carry that character through voicing in the Akan language. However, there is another level of spectatorship whose goal is not to observe, imitate, and perform, but to engage with the show as audience members who are emotionally and intellectually invested. In both Adom TV and UTV twinovela studios, I observed times when cast members, directors, and sound engineers discussed and debated themes and characters in the dramas. This engagement reflects a complex spectatorship dynamic in which participants concurrently occupy dominant/preferred, negotiated, or oppositional positions in their interpretation of the narrative, as posited by Hall's theoretical framework.

While screening relevant scenes, voice actors read the script and, together with the director, discuss the appropriate translation of the dialogue. With the director's guidance, the voice actor performs what I have termed a sight-extemporaneous translation. Sight-extemporaneous translation is a collaborative process that involves the oral translation and performance of dialogue from one language to another using an annotated written script. This terminology combines elements of sight translation, which involves orally translating a written text from one language into another, and extemporaneous translation. While

extemporaneous denotes an action without much preparation and is thus synonymous with impromptu, in public speaking, extemporaneous connotes a speech that has been prepared. When applied to dubbing, the English script serves as a prepared document from which the translation is produced and performed. As already indicated, during the planning phase, the director marks specific lines and scenes that require transformation and develops a directorial concept document. The director uses the annotated English script and the concept note to guide voice actors in maintaining dialogue continuity, ensuring that omissions and insertions are appropriate and incorporated into the delivery. Also, the director and the voice artist ensure the translation is culturally and narratively appropriate, thereby upholding the integrity of the script.

Furthermore, a sight-extemporaneous translation means that no transcribed/written word-for-word translation of the English script into the Akan dialects exists. Rather, there is a concurrent reading and translation of the script. Both Adom TV and UTV twinovela directors acknowledge that direct or literal translation may be inimical to audience acceptance. For broadcasters, ignoring the generally accepted values and norms of the Akan language would be economic suicide. For instance, in Akan culture, plain and blunt language is frowned upon. As such, proverbs, euphemisms, similes, metaphors, and personification are used when speaking about sensitive subjects like death or criticism to ensure politeness. This highlights one of the qualities of the Akan language: indirection. For example, the quotation below identifies indirection in the dubbing process, the complexities of direct translation, Akan communicative norms and values, and the need to maintain the integrity of the script.

Dubbing is a lot of work; once people accept it, you are good, and once they don't, you are closed. There is a lot to be done before it [referring to telenovela] goes on air. You have to be careful about the kind of language you choose. In our part of the world, some words are very abominable; you don't say some things. Sometimes, the script says, "That is nonsense." You cannot say "NKwasiase na woka" [translated as foolish talk, stupidities, or idiocy] in our local dialect. No. You have to find a way. So, we do a lot of word changes, but we don't go off track. (Channel Coordinator, Adom TV, Multimedia Group Limited)

The quotation shows how the phrase “That is nonsense,” when translated into Akan, hurts the cultural and linguistic sensibilities of the audience. The phrase conveys a sense of disrespect that does not align with the Akan communicative value of politeness and deference. As such, elements of indirection, such as euphemisms and proverbs, may be used to effect word changes and achieve the same meaning as the original English script intended. Apart from the cultural value, adhering to the Akan linguistic routine is important because the economic value is tied to audience acceptance. As such, dubbing as a communicative event is culturally sensitive to audience dynamics and demography.

Aside from following linguistic routines and norms, as part of the word changes, the director focuses on substituting specific locations, names, expressions, and phrases in the original script with those that are culturally relevant, identifiable, and resonate with the target audience. The channel coordinator for Adom TV explains this substitution process:

First of all, we are trying to make the show very interesting for us Ghanaians. So, how will they identify with Mumbai Forest? Nobody even knows it. There was a forest scene in one of the episodes and we said Kakum forest just to identify with the forest. So, just for local identification, you mention some of these local names. But they are not in original script. We adopted it ourselves, and we did it. It was for fun and people really enjoyed it.
(Channel Coordinator, Adom TV, Multimedia Group Limited)

It is common to substitute towns, cities, and popular tourist locations in the original dialogue with names of towns, cities, and tourist sites in Ghana. As indicated in the quote from the Adom TV channel coordinator, the Mumbai forest is unknown to Ghanaians. However, Kakum National Park, one of Ghana’s most popular tourist destinations, is well-known. Thus, Ghanaians can easily identify that forest.

Changes to characters' names, places/locations, and expressions are not arbitrary. There are rules for the name change. For instance, a character name change is based on familiarity with the name, whether the name is an English name or not, and the phonetic similarity between the original character name and the corresponding name in the target language. There is also an understanding that certain

names become familiar and ubiquitous over time. The audience grows accustomed to them, so those names are retained. An example of an accepted name is Fernando. The director of the dubbing department at UTV explained this name-change phenomenon below:

Sometimes, we change the names, too. We write them down so that we don't forget. There is Oduro, and Dr Raymond Ofori (These are Akan names). Instead of Henan, we use Nana; Megerete, we use Margaret; Solace, we use Solange; and Helberto, we use Raymond. Some of the names are normal English names. So we just maintain those ones like Gabriel. We just keep the name Gabriel like that. There is Fernando... You know, for Fernando, we have other series with Fernando. So, we know Ghanaians are okay with Fernando. Cecilia is normal. Nicholas is normal. And then we have Dante Ferrer. You know Ferrer is not a familiar name. But Dante sounds like a Twi name. So instead of doing Dante Ferrer, you will make it Mr Dante. Over time, Dante will take over. So that is how we do it (Director, Dubbing Department, UTV, Despite Media).

These practical adaptation strategies reinforce the director's professional experience and understanding of the audience. They also show an understanding of creating audiovisual dissonance/counterpoint, transcending aesthetics, and challenging the idea that the tension between what is seen (image) and what is heard (sound) is simple and one-dimensional. Moreover, audiovisual dissonance tends to dismiss the complexities of meaning in favor of simplistic, one-dimensional meanings (Chion, 1994).

Nonetheless, audiovisual dissonance demonstrates a sophisticated representational ambiguity that is hyper-visible and exotically pleasing. The layers of substitution recall memories of representation, advertiser interests, audience identification, cultural symbols, brand identity, and fidelity between source material and cultural resonance. The element of counterpoint-as-contradictory in audiovisual dissonance demonstrates levels of stratification: production, aesthetics, and ideology. The production relations presented are unconventional in the sense that with twinovelas, there exists a transnational co-production transaction that is mediated economically and culturally and linguistically re-presented. This transnational co-production shows remediation and re-representation

independent of the individual cultural institutions involved. The origin country of production is not only geographically distinct from the target country of reproduction, but also the cultural sensibilities, narratives, and aesthetic values can be significantly different, leading to a more complicated interpretation of cultural artifacts like film and media production practices. Additionally, production spaces and settings differ significantly. Reproduction of imported dramas takes place in a closed, soundproof studio rather than across multiple locations. As such, audiovisual dissonance mirrors production dissonance, in which the agents of production differ from those of reproduction, leading to a highly autonomous creative process.

Sometimes, directors encourage adding lines that are not in the original script for economic reasons, lip-syncing, or purely comedic reasons. For instance, ad insertions (brand names) into the script are common. Sponsors' names can be incorporated into the script. The UTV director confirmed that they usually incorporate their sister companies under the Despite Group of Companies into the dialogue for promotional purposes. During dubbing, brand names are inserted into the storyline within the boundaries of a sponsorship agreement. The insertion of brand names is intentional and not arbitrary. Brand name incorporation is based on the appropriateness and relevance of the product to the narrative context. For example, when a character in a scene offers a drink, mentioning a product like "This Way Chocolate Drink" or "Special Ice Mineral Water" enhances the scene's realism and relatability. This brand-name insert also serves to promote the commercial interests of the sponsors and the media company, as explained in the comment below:

If someone is sponsoring this show, we mention their brand. Sometimes, we do ad mentions. But most of the time, we mention "This Way Chocolate Drink." We would add something like "Should I serve you This Way, Chocolate Drink?" We also mention "Special Ice." We mention those brands... Mentioning these products is not an instruction from the top. It is a department decision. We mention the ad only if it relates to the storyline or dialogue. But we don't mention brands that are not sponsoring the show. We only mention a brand if they are our sponsor. (Director, Dubbing Department, UTV, Despite Media).

The mention of a brand or product enhances the audience's viewing experience and connection, not detracting from the narrative. Further, product mentions help create a seamless blend between advertising and storytelling. As the quotation shows, there is no direct instruction about including brand names in the show. The decision to incorporate advertisers' products is solely the prerogative of the dubbing production crew. In this way, creators' creative freedom is reinforced. Significantly, it also shows how creators are aware of the importance of advertising to the production, helping expand advertisers' interest. By inserting brand names into the dialogue, the directors reinforce resonance between the audience's and the advertiser's interests through storytelling.

The final stage of the dubbing process involves editing and mixing the visuals and sounds. The audio recordings are sent to the sound editor/engineer for editing and mixing. Their job is to ensure that the visuals and sounds are properly synchronized. The completed work is previewed by management before it is aired. A team then reviews the final product to determine its appropriateness before being approved for airing on television. There are times when the final product is sent back for corrections. The UTV telenovela director gave examples of times when the completed dubbed episode was sent back because, during dubbing, they mentioned a competitor's brand instead of the telecommunication brand sponsoring the drama. She states,

I know one of the telecommunication companies that sponsored this show. There was a time when we mentioned the name of a competing telecommunication company instead of the one sponsoring us. The dubbed show was brought back... Or maybe you say something negative about the sponsor or product. You have to change it. It will be returned for correction. (Director, Dubbing Department, UTV).

The dubbing process and quality control mechanism illustrate the relationship between creative freedom and commercial considerations. It also demonstrates a commitment to accountability and a high level of scrutiny in striking a balance between creativity and commercial obligations.

Conclusion

The cultural impact of telenovelas in postcolonial contexts, such as Ghana, highlights the parallels that make this media form

appealing to audiences. Consequently, media executives capitalize on telenovelas' appeal to continue purchasing and showing telenovelas. Foreign content on local Ghanaian television did not start with Adom TV or UTV. However, the adaptation of telenovelas into twinovela has transformed indigenous broadcasting practices in Ghana, integrating foreign content in a new way. This evolution in the integration of foreign content has shaped the identity of indigenous-language television in Ghana to the extent that Adom TV and UTV have established dubbing departments. The practice of foreign content acquisition and dubbing production has made both Adom TV and UTV highly competitive, to the extent that these two indigenous language television stations have consistently ranked among the top three television stations in Ghana since 2014 (Elliot, 2014; GeoPoll, 2019; GeoPoll, n.d.). As such, the production of twinovela has enhanced ILM's marketability and strengthened the Akan language's position as a powerful medium of expression accessible to the majority of Ghanaians.

Twinovela, as a television format, has revitalized indigenous languages in the media, helping redefine indigenesness in programming. By examining the production practices of twinovela, we gain insight into how creatives navigate and negotiate global and local influences. The adaptation process requires producers to maintain the essence of the original script while incorporating Ghanaian cultural motifs that resonate with the audience. Producers demonstrate the potential of merging two contrasting representations (visuality and sound), showcasing avenues for intercultural connections through their content. These strategies by creatives and producers reinforce ILM's translational density and bi-/multilingual discursivity.

The description of twinovela production helped identify the social forces that shape ideologies and value judgments, enabling the proliferation of twinovelas. It also allows us to see iterations of indigenizing frameworks that have historically offered a simplistic perspective on difference and representation. Rather than viewing differences and representation in indigenous contexts as oppositional and peripheral, dubbing demonstrates the complexity and diversity that coexist in a media format like twinovela. Thus, the dubbing production process presents a thought-provoking paradox that neither detracts from the original narrative nor fully replicates the experiences of local cultures, but rather creates a dynamic interplay of multiple voices and cultural expressions. This paradox suggests that dissonance, often perceived as discordant, can lead to a harmonious coexistence, while harmony emerges from the contrasting and contradictory symphony of ideologies and value judgments, reflecting a multifaceted

understanding of intercultural interactions. Building on this concept of harmony through dissonance, future research can examine the relationship between dubbing and spectatorship in twinovela (re)production and indigenous (language) media. How might dubbing affect spectators and their looking practices?

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Mass Media Refugee Discourse in Bangladesh: A Case of Rohingya in Post-US Funding Reduction

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Abstract: The Rohingya are a Muslim minority community from Myanmar's Rakhine State and are recognized as one of the most persecuted communities in the world. In the recent past, in August 2017, the Myanmar military launched an attack on the Rohingya, which led over 700,000 people to flee to Bangladesh. Since then, over one million Rohingya refugees have been living in Bangladesh. To help this population, international aid, especially from the US, plays an important role. According to the UN, of the total \$852.4 million requirement for 2024, the US provided \$301 million. However, the US administration's decision to suspend or freeze US-funded projects starting in 2025 has significantly affected the community. In this study, we examine how the Bangladeshi popular press has covered the Rohingya issue since the US funding cuts. We qualitatively analyzed Rohingya-related news from three newspapers—the Daily Star, the New Nation, and the Daily Prothom Alo—using critical discourse analysis. The findings show that newspapers emphasized the victimhood of the Rohingya, framed the funding cut as an urgent humanitarian crisis, and criticized the donor communities for their financial withdrawal. The newspapers prioritized the voices of international actors as primary information sources, were heavily reliant on international news agencies for news outsourcing, and lacked original, in-depth reporting.

Introduction

Reductions in foreign aid, particularly the cuts to U.S. funding since January 2025, have strained already vulnerable refugee populations around the world. Reports suggest that overall support fell by 40% in July 2025 compared with the same period the previous year. Consequently, humanitarian assistance systems are reportedly at a “breaking point” now. (Humanitarian Aid: The Most Vulnerable Already Severely Impacted by Budget Cuts, 2025; Schmidtke & Di Santo, 2025). The Rohingya refugee community in Bangladesh, located in the world's largest refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, is also hit hard due to the financial cut (Shankar, 2025). In this study, we examined the latest public perception of Rohingya refugees, particularly after U.S. funding cuts, through a critical discourse analysis of Bangladeshi popular press coverage.

The Rohingya are a Muslim ethnic minority from the Rakhine state of Myanmar, who have long faced persecution, ethnic cleansing, and forced displacement (Ahmed & Hassan, 2024). The crisis received international attention in 2017 when the Myanmar military unleashed a mass persecution (Irom et al., 2022). Over 700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh at that time. The United Nations described the event as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” (Safi, 2017). Bangladesh opened its border as a humanitarian response and has been providing emergency shelter and aid to the Rohingya population since August 2017. Support from international donors, including the United States, has played a crucial role in providing the Rohingya people with food, healthcare, education, and other essential services (Karin et al., 2020). However, over time, the Rohingya have become “forgotten” by the Western world, as attention to the humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh has waned (“The Guardian View on the Forgotten Rohingya Refugees: Lives without Futures,” 2023). Following the shift in US foreign aid policy in January 2025 and onwards, funding cuts to USAID and other humanitarian causes increased insecurity for the Rohingya population (Chowdhury, 2025). How are the funding cuts and increased insecurity of the Rohingya population portrayed in the Bangladeshi mass media? We qualitatively examine media discourses to explore the representation.

Mass media discourse plays a crucial role in representing public crises. Mass media reflect the public understanding as well as shape people’s outlook on a given issue (Berk, 2025; de Vreese, 2014; Druckman & Nelson, 2003). This role is particularly significant in the case of the Rohingya refugee crisis. Studies observed that Bangladeshi media’s narratives about the Rohingya crisis have shifted over time, from humanitarian sympathy in 2017–2018 to narratives emphasizing burden, security threats, and international negligence in later years (Ahmed & Hassan, 2024). Local sentiment towards the Rohingya, along with the media representation, has become increasingly negative in recent years (Abbas, 2024; Ahmed & Hassan, 2024; Al-Zaman & Rashid, 2024). Since the US’s decision to slash major funds is a new addition to the overall Rohingya crisis, we aimed to qualitatively investigate how the decision has had an impact on Rohingya coverage in popular newspapers in Bangladesh. Drawing on Fairclough’s (1993) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis, we found that the media emphasized the victimhood of Rohingya refugees, framed the funding shortfall as an urgent concern, and criticized donors for their inaction.

Literature Review

The Rohingya Crisis

The Rohingya are Sunni Muslims, making up one-third of the total population of the Rakhine State of Myanmar (formerly known as Arakan). Myanmar, which is an ethnically diverse country with 135 officially recognized ethnic groups, does not recognize nine ethnic groups, including the Rohingya. The Burmese government not only continuously denied the recognition of the Rohingya but also decided to keep them away from the census unless they identified themselves as ‘Bengali’ (Warzone Initiative, 2015). Politically charged Buddhist monks and nationalist organizations, aided by the military regimes in Myanmar, mobilized the anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya sentiments among the public and contributed to the exclusion, persecution, and genocide of the Rohingya (Bakali, 2021). After facing persecution and genocide, Rohingya fled their lands and mostly took refuge in Bangladesh, as well as in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Thailand, and Malaysia (Warzone Initiatives, 2015; Bakali, 2021). This makes them the world’s largest stateless population (Parashar & Alam, 2018).

The Rohingya persecutions had taken place in multiple episodes starting from 1978. They were first forcibly pushed into Bangladesh in 1978–1979. The first major influx involved approximately 250,000 Rohingya refugees (Minority Rights Group International, 2016). In 1991-1992, the Rohingya, facing mass hatred from the local monks and the military, were subjected to summary execution, rape, and forced labor. Approximately 270,000 additional Rohingya took refuge in Bangladesh (Asia Watch, 1992). During the political reforms of 2011-2015, their fate saw no change, and they experienced another episode of violence and ethnic cleansing in 2017, which caused the most recent refugee influx in recent times (Parashar & Alam, 2018).

Statelessness has also made the Rohingya worthy of expulsion alongside the exclusion of their existence in the state fabric of Myanmar (Parashar & Alam, 2018). Historically, three main factors contributed to this situation: (i) exclusion of the Rohingya from the socio-political institutions of Myanmar, (ii) (re)construction of an ambiguous status of the Rohingya, and (iii) unfolding a socio-economic insecurity encircling the Rohingya (Pugh, 2013). Apart from the legal jeopardy, MacLean (2018) argued that the ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya is a state-sponsored “spacio-cide” which caused a “systematic dispossession, occupation, and destruction of an ethnic group’s living space” (p. 90). MacLean (2018) also assessed that destroying Rohingya homes, villages, infrastructure, and other structures contributed to their removal from Myanmar.

The strategic location of Rakhine State is another important factor in the Rohingya crisis. The region is rich in natural resources and has significant economic potential. According to the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (IIFMM, 2019), Rakhine has attracted investment from several countries, such as Singapore, South Korea, China, Japan, Malaysia, and India. The Myanmar government has promoted development as a solution to what it describes as the region's 'underdevelopment'. However, these development projects have also displaced the Rohingya and made it difficult for them to return (IIFMM, 2019). Therefore, understanding Rakhine State's strategic importance and natural resources are important for understanding the broader Rohingya crisis (Debnath et al., 2022).

In this discussion, we shed light on the historical complexities of the Rohingya refugee crisis and how social, political, and strategic geographic factors have contributed to it. Mass media discourse also plays a role in everyday public perception of the Rohingya refugee crisis. The following section discusses the role of mass media discourse in the Rohingya crisis.

Media Discourse on Rohingya Refugees

Media coverage for Rohingya refugees shows a gradual shift of discourse from a sympathetic tone to a growing compassion fatigue. The sympathy was at its peak during the height of the displacement and persecution of the Rohingya. Gradually, sympathy declined as the crisis became normalized (Islam & Hasan, 2021; Kamruzzaman et al., 2024).

Following the initial influx in 2017, the host community members, such as the media and civil society of Bangladesh, viewed the Rohingya community's vulnerabilities from a humanistic perspective; they were welcoming and sympathetic to the Rohingya (Ubayasiri, 2019). However, the views toward the Rohingya changed after a few years, and different derogatory connotations were being used against them (Mojid, 2024). As the crisis grew protracted, local communities developed a sense of being outnumbered within their own state, which caused a growing negative attitude and anger toward the Rohingya refugees (Kamruzzaman et al., 2024).

Studies argued that Rohingya media narratives are influenced by ideological and policy stances, as well as a country's diplomatic position. For example, Islam and Hasan (2021) analyzed the portrayal of the Rohingya in Bangladeshi newspapers and observed that the newspapers, independent of the government, practiced peace journalism, focusing on the escalation of the crisis and calling for solutions. On the contrary, the pro-government newspapers were

dehumanizing the Rohingya and depicted them as a threat to the national security of Bangladesh. The pro-government media's discourse was influenced by the shift of the government's policy from welcoming victims to antagonizing them, according to Islam and Hasan (2021). Several cross-cultural studies also showed a similar pattern. For example, the newspapers from China and Myanmar favored the Myanmar government and criminalized the Rohingya for their fate. However, the UK and the USA emphatically presented the Rohingya by calling it a humanitarian crisis (Abbas, 2024). Likewise, another cross-cultural study by Isti'adah (2019) outlined that Myanmar's newspaper portrayed the Rohingya as militants, while the Indonesian, Malaysian, and Bangladeshi newspapers focused on their victimhood.

Based on the above discussion, we argue that understanding media coverage of the Rohingya crisis requires looking beyond what different media outlets report. A critical discourse approach helps us examine how the media portray the crisis and how sociopolitical and cultural contexts play a role in media coverage.

Critical Discourse Theory for Refugee Studies

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines how language is connected to power, ideology, and society. The theory treats language as more than a neutral means of communication and examines how discourse can shape, reinforce, or challenge social realities and power relations (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993). Discourse analysis provides a valuable theoretical and methodological framework for examining how media constructs refugee identities through language, framing, and the interplay of political and institutional power.

A number of refugee studies scholars found the CDA method and theory helpful for their research. For example, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) alongside quantitative content analysis, Cooper et al. (2017) examined Australian newspapers and found that regional newspapers portrayed refugees more sympathetically and fostered community-building narratives. In contrast, national newspapers adopted predominantly negative frames, relied heavily on government sources, and reflected official policy positions. Similarly, Gale (2004) conducted a discourse analysis of media coverage of the refugee crisis in Australia and found that the refugees were constructed as "boat people" (p. 335). By promoting popular nationalism and the politics of fear, media narratives echoed government discourse and reinforced perceptions of refugees as the "other", according to Gale (2004). CDA helped these studies take a closer look at how different media outlets and political contexts shape the discussion of refugee

issues. The theory also helped us understand how the Rohingya are represented and who gets to tell the story.

Method and Sampling

We examined Rohingya narratives following US funding cuts in January 2025. The sample timeframe covers news reports published between January 2025 and October 2025. Three newspapers, namely The Daily Star, The New Nation, and Prothom Alo English, were selected.

For data collection, we followed two complementary methods. First, we searched the Nexis Uni database and found two English newspapers from Bangladesh— The Daily Star and The New Nation. Searching the keywords “Rohingya refugees” and “U.S. fund cut” within the timeframe, we found 14 news articles (13 from The New Nation and 1 from The Daily Star). As Prothom Alo English was not available on Nexis Uni, we searched its official website and Google for cross-verification. We found 6 articles from Prothom Alo English. Altogether, we had a dataset of 20 articles. We analyzed the headlines and body text of each news article as units of analysis.

We used Fairclough’s (1993) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) for data analysis. The model includes (1) description of textual features, (2) interpretation of discursive practices, and (3) explanation of the socio-cultural context. This is a useful framework for the study because the model connects textual representations to the processes through which media discourse is produced and interpreted and to the broader social and political contexts in which these representations are situated (Fairclough, 1993). We read the news articles several times and took detailed notes on these three aspects. Both of us coded the articles independently and then discussed and revised the coding during several Zoom meetings. This process helped us maintain consistency and identify common language and themes. Our reflective discussion also helped us identify the pattern of media coverage and connect it to Bangladesh’s social and cultural context. In the following section, we present the findings thematically.

Findings

The newspapers portrayed the Rohingya as vulnerable, needing help from foreign donors. They also emphasized that without humanitarian support, the refugee community, especially the children, would have to suffer severely. The newspapers generally adopted an empathetic outlook towards the Rohingya. A critical position towards the donors who cut funding, especially the US, was prominent. Based

on the CDA, we found three prominent discourse patterns: a) Rohingya as victims, b) Prevalence of urgency narratives, and c) The international community as failing the Rohingya. We also present our analysis of who holds agency in telling Rohingya stories and of the media outlets' coverage style.

Media Discourse on Rohingya

Rohingya as Victims

The first prominent theme found in the analysis was the portrayal of the Rohingya as victims. The news coverage across the three newspapers depicted the Rohingya as vulnerable, victims of a lack of sufficient financial assistance, and in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Women and children were depicted as the most vulnerable. Reports also discussed the severe consequences of the funding cut on them. One of the reports noted the refugees as containing “the majority of whom are women and children (UN aid for Rohingya, 2025),” which expressed the vulnerability and further legitimized the need for dependence on humanitarian aid. Another example, a UN “warning” about consequences of funding cut covered by the Daily Prothom Alo on October 14, 2025, mentioned, “its [UN’s] ability to help children in the sprawling Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh was rapidly shriveling and would soon fall off a ‘funding cliff’.” The article quoted UNICEF’s private fundraising and partnerships chief Carla Haddad Mardini, who mentioned, “It was disheartening to watch classrooms close, services shrink, and the futures of hundreds of thousands of children that are hanging by a thread....but we’re running out of option” (UN aid for Rohingya, 2025).

The metaphors and rhetoric used for Rohingya victimhood were emotionally charged. For example, a headline, “Aid cuts could be paid in children’s lives (Aid cuts, 2025),” suggested the brutal exchange rate of dollars against the deducted lifespans of Rohingya children. The report also discussed how the US-imposed funding freeze sent “shockwaves through the humanitarian community.” The news quoted Rana Flowers, UNICEF’s representative in Bangladesh, “An aid funding crisis risks becoming a child survival crisis....More than 500,000 children live in the camps of Cox’s Bazar. Over 15 percent are now malnourished -an emergency threshold”. By quoting a witness to the atrocities, “The Military are starving us to death. They are killing us without bullets (Weaponising starvation, 2025),” and employing metaphors like “slow-motion genocide (Weaponising starvation, 2025),” the newspapers compared the funding cliff and the absence of actions as equal to the stature of violence and war crimes. A report by

Prothom Alo, “WFP’s ration cuts risk” (March 15, 2025) quoted António Guterres’s, United Nations Secretary-General, speech during the Rohingya Camp visit on 14 March: “We are at risk of cutting the food rations in this camp. That would be an unmitigated disaster that we cannot accept because people will suffer, and even people will die.”

We also observed that the newspapers used statistical rhetorical strategies in validating the Rohingya victimhood. As examples:

- Ration Cut: from “\$12.50 to \$6” per person per month (WFP requires \$15m, 2025).
- Malnutrition Rates: “15% of children are now malnourished” (Aid cuts, 2025).
- Severe Acute Malnutrition: “27% increase” in cases (Aid cuts, 2025).
- Funding Shortfalls: “\$151.2 million shortfall” against requirements (UN convenes, 2025).
- School Closures: “4,538 schools” affecting “228,000 children” (Interview: UNICEF representative, 2025).

Overall, we found that in the post-funding cut timeframe, the Rohingya community was represented with victimhood discourses where suffering, vulnerability, and aid-dependence were emphasized. The numeric rhetoric was presented as supporting materials within the news articles. The news coverage positioned the Rohingya population as aid recipients whose well-being was largely dependent on external actors. The reports also frequently spoke about children and women, and rarely mentioned Rohingya men’s experiences.

Prevalence of Urgency Narratives

Prevalence of urgency is defined here as the framing of funding cuts as an immediate humanitarian emergency, in which news articles emphasize the risks posed by a lack of funds and the need for urgent intervention to protect Rohingya refugees. In our analysis, frequent use of moral-urgency narratives was observed. For example, an article warns that without “urgent intervention, these recent cuts would have catastrophic consequences, (Interview: UNICEF representative, 2025), including “increasing child mortality” and “growing desperation in already overcrowded camps (WFP’s ration cuts, 2025)”. A New Nation report on August 17 quoted the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Prof. Muhammad Yunus, former Chief Adviser to the Bangladesh government, who said, “..the situation is worsening. Worst of all, the US has cut off all funding to maintain them. So that is

[Rohingya] a huge problem for us (Bangladesh taps Malaysia, 2025).” Interestingly, none of the articles in our sample discussed the impact of the political changes in Bangladesh following the July 2024 uprising and the country’s subsequent economic situation.

The urgency narratives also introduced moral responsibility frames. Citing a Human Rights Watch report on the Rohingya education crisis in Bangladesh due to funding cuts, an op-ed termed the situation “a moral failure” and emphasized that denial of education could create room for regional instability and criminal activity. The op-ed stated, “...we are laying the groundwork for long-term instability in the region. Disaffected, disenfranchised youths are vulnerable to criminal networks and extremist groups that thrive in precisely these kinds of environments (Rohingya refugees’ future, 2025)”. Other reports asked the international community to take “immediate action (Aid cuts, 2025)” and to provide “urgent, flexible, adequate humanitarian aid (Interview: UNICEF representative, 2025)”. Overall, the newspapers described the funding cuts as an urgent humanitarian crisis and emphasized the need for immediate attention and intervention.

The International Community as Failing the Rohingya

Portraying the international donor community as a failed actor was also notable in our analysis. Under this theme, we discuss instances where the donor community was represented as a failed actor that had abandoned its humanitarian responsibility toward the Rohingya. We observed that newspaper coverage outlined the withdrawal of the funds as negligence and criticized their actions. Headlines explicitly link Western countries’, including the US, policy to worsening conditions, such as “aid from several Western partners has dropped, which will worsen the Rohingya crisis (Delayed Rohingya return, 2025)”. A Daily Star report on August 25 quoted Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) Mizanur Rahman, who said, “In January, funding cuts by a major US donor increased the strain on the interim government (of Bangladesh)...We are facing challenges on multiple fronts for reasons that aren’t our responsibility (Rohingya influx, 2025)”. Another report by the New Nation described how the funding freeze by the US halted Rohingya children’s access to education. “The International Rescue Committee (IRC) is alarmed by the abrupt closure of learning centers in the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, which will leave nearly 500,000 children without access to education by the end of September (Foreign aid freeze, 2025)”.

We also observed that a few reposts mentioned political choices and failures. An op-ed published in the New Nation in July

2025 titled “Weaponising starvation against Rohingya” summarized how the deadly consequences of the slash of funding were a political choice “..aid is disappearing. US funding for Rohingya humanitarian programs has been slashed...the consequences of this neglect are immediate and deadly. Starving children...are victims of deliberate political choices.” Tun Khin, president of Burmese Rohingya Organization UK, said, “This is a complete failure of the international community (Rohingya influx, 2025).” Together, the coverage pattern presented the funding cuts as a failure of political responsibility toward the Rohingya.

Who Holds the Agency?

Under this theme, we discuss the unequal distribution of agency in newspaper coverage and information sourcing. The expert quotes were mostly sourced from humanitarian organizations, UN officials, and foreign donors, who were presented as agents of action. However, the Rohingya communities, the Bangladeshi government, and similar stakeholders were minimally visible as expert voices.

The newspapers relied heavily on information and statistics provided by international organizations such as UN agencies, WFP, UNICEF, IRC, ICG, and Human Rights Watch (See Table 1).

Source	Key Actor	Function in Discourse
UN Agencies	UNICEF (Rana Flowers), WFP (Dom Scapelli), UNHCR (Carla Haddad Mardini)	Providing data, validating crisis status, issuing warnings
International NGOs	Human Rights Watch, IRC, International Crisis Group (ICG)	Moral condemnation, framing long-term strategic risks.
Bangladeshi Officials	Chief Adviser Dr Mohammad Yunus, Foreign Ministry	Expressing frustration, demanding burden sharing.
Rohingya Refugees	Noor Begum, Sufiya, Jannat Bibi	Emotional validation, human interest, victimhood

Table 1: Hierarchy of Sources in Analyzed Media Discourse

The Rohingya were presented as the objects of action on many occasions. For examples, terms used like, “run with US funding have suspended operations (Aid cuts, 2025)”, “aid is delivered to them (Bangladesh taps Malaysia, 2025)”, “rations are cut for them (Delayed

Rohingya return, 2025)”, “crises hit their camps (UN aid for Rohingya, 2025)” put the Rohingya in a backseat and passive stakeholders. The Bangladesh government’s voice was also presented in a passive form, with a very few officials’ quotes expressing concerns about aid. On some occasions, we found leaders from the Rohingya community and the beneficiaries were quoted. For example, Tun Khin, president of the Burmese Rohingya Organization UK, was quoted in the Rohingya influx (2025) report. Another report quoted children supported by the IRC’s Education, including Jannat Bibi, aged 14, and Abul Hassim, aged 10 (Foreign aid freeze, 2025). However, they had a limited representation in the media.

This pattern was also reflected in how the newspapers produced their coverage. The three newspapers analyzed in this study can be broadly described as part of Bangladesh’s liberal media (Bin Ali & Muurlink, 2022; Farhanaz & Hossain, 2025). Their coverage generally reflected international norms around refugee protection and human rights. Much of the coverage, however, relied on international news agencies such as Reuters and AP. Only a small number of reports were produced by the newspapers’ own journalists.

Discussion and Conclusion

We observed three prominent discourse patterns in our analysis: a) Rohingya as victims, b) Prevalence of urgency narratives, and c) International community as failed. It was also found that the international humanitarian agencies and NGOs hold more agency than the Rohingya community and the host country, Bangladesh.

The finding on the victimhood of the Rohingya corresponds with several previous studies. For example, Mojid (2024), Obaidullah et al. (2024), and Islam & Hasan (2021) found that, during the initial phase from 2017 to the near-term timeline, the media had adopted a sympathetic tone towards the Rohingya. However, the narrative shifted to framing refugees as security threats and economic burdens for Bangladesh and as sources of social instability in later years. Our findings show that in the first year of the US funding cut, the Rohingya communities were getting a more sympathetic narrative style once again. However, understanding the shift in narratives over time was beyond the scope of this study and could be explored through comparative analysis in future research.

The media used metaphors, discursive devices, and urgency framings in discussing the potential consequences of funding cuts on the already vulnerable Rohingya community, especially children. Urgency narrative style was also used to criticize the donors who stopped funding. The newspapers portrayed the funding cut as a

potential humanitarian crisis and highlighted both moral urgency and global responsibility. This part of the findings is consistent with a previous study on the portrayal of suffering, especially those focusing on children, which aim to create a sense of urgency and innocence and to link it to requests for urgent interventions (Joye, 2015).

We observed a pattern in which UN and INGOs dominated news sourcing. Rohingya refugees were more passive and in need of help, rescue, and salvation. Bangladesh, as the host country, was largely sidelined as an active information broker in the news coverage; rather, the country appeared as a benevolent yet powerless host with limited capacity. This pattern aligns with Ubayasiri's (2019) argument that media framing often privileges foreign stakeholders. This tendency reproduces unequal global power relations. This study confirms and extends Ubayasiri's (2019) argument that the limited agency portrayal of Bangladesh somewhat normalizes the country's constrained agency regarding the funding cut decision and helping the Rohingya community. More importantly, the representation of the Rohingya voice and their agency was very low. Echoing Ubayasiri's (2019) observation that media framings of statelessness exclude questions of belonging and identity, this study found that Rohingya representation was confined to their refugee status, portrayal as a passive actor, and focus on biological survival. As Ticktin (2006) said, humanitarian discourse elevates institutional voices over those of the victims. Thus, despite adopting pro-refugee tones, the analyzed newspapers ultimately reproduced the silencing of the Rohingya by showing them as passive recipients.

The news articles were primarily sourced from international news agencies, such as AP and Reuters, and then reproduced/republished in their own outlets. These articles heavily relied on international sources. Several other studies have also found that media houses rely heavily on international agencies, INGOs, and government institutions for quotes and information (Ahmed & Hassan, 2024; Irom et al., 2022; Lee, 2021; Lynn, 2020). This study also observed how Bangladeshi newspapers relied on international news agencies to report on a local issue with global significance. When the local media adopt the Western voice, they reflect Western ideologies in themselves (Shahin, 2023). A study found that the media in foreign aid recipient countries echo the voices and quotes of World Bank and IMF officials, which creates pressure on their own governments to treat Western neoliberal policy as the legitimate way of development (Shahin, 2023). Therefore, when the local media reproduce news from the international agencies, they tend to emphasize the foreign perspective as a matter of prominence. In our findings, we noticed that

the newspapers may have paid less attention to important local perspectives. For example, we did not find any discussion of Bangladesh's changing political and economic context, particularly the July 2024 uprising and the ensuing political, economic, and diplomatic complexities and their impact on the Rohingya communities living in Bangladesh. Since these events occurred during the period covered by our study, we believe the absence of these issues from the Rohingya news coverage is noteworthy.

We focused on a temporal response moment in this research and did not capture longer-term shifts or differences in refugee news coverage. Future research could adopt a longitudinal or comparative design to examine how sourcing practices and agency distribution evolve across different political phases and across media systems.

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Amplifying African Immigrant Women's Voices: Self-Advocacy and Competency in Maternal Healthcare Communication in the United States

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Abstract: This qualitative study examines African immigrant women's access to maternal health information (MHI), resources, and services in the United States (U.S.), the barriers and challenges they encounter when accessing and utilizing these resources, and strategies for overcoming these challenges. The study explored how African immigrant women access and share MHI, the degree of agency they exhibit in accessing maternal care, and how their participation in the study's focus group discussions (FGDs) shaped their perceived competence and advocacy regarding maternal healthcare in the United States. Fourteen African women currently living in the United States participated in FGDs. Through these FGDs, the participants were given the valuable opportunity to share their own experiences and voice their concerns, while receiving guidance and MHI which best prepares them to advocate for themselves, exercise agency in seeking maternal care, and become active disseminators of accurate and credible MHI within their communities¹.

Introduction

Maternal health is a pressing public health concern that requires a comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges faced by various demographics (American Public Health Association [APHA], 2024; Crear-Perry et al., 2021). In the United States, Black and African immigrant women encounter significant barriers in accessing timely and adequate maternity care, leading to increased risks of adverse outcomes such as preterm births, neonatal mortality, postpartum depression, and maternal death (Adu-Boahene et al., 2017; Crear-Perry et al., 2021). While it has been recorded that Black and African immigrant women face significant barriers, African immigrant mothers are most often excluded from dominant maternal health narratives.

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African immigrant women face numerous obstacles when attempting to access and utilize maternal healthcare in their new environments (Azugbene, 2023; Pandey et al., 2021). These barriers can include language and communication challenges, cultural differences in health beliefs and practices, lack of familiarity with the local healthcare system, limited health literacy, socioeconomic constraints, immigration status, and perceived discrimination or bias in healthcare settings (Adebayo et al., 2021; Azugbene et al., 2023; Grand-Guillaume-Perrenoud et al., 2022).

Additionally, religious beliefs and cultural differences may lead to misunderstandings and the rejection of certain medical interventions (Azugbene et al., 2023; Crear-Perry et al., 2021). The length of stay in the country and familiarity with the healthcare system can also significantly impact healthcare utilization (Adu-Boahene et al., 2017). These barriers contribute to a state of heightened uncertainty, which can significantly impact an immigrant woman's ability to make informed decisions about her maternal health care. Despite the growing body of research on African immigrant women's maternal healthcare in the United States, there is still a need to center these mothers' voices by highlighting their communicative patterns about maternal health and foregrounding how they exercise agency while navigating maternal health systems. Finally, it is equally crucial to examine their perceptions of limitations and the coping strategies they employ. Filling this knowledge gap through the women's lived experiences underscores the significance of this study.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how African immigrant women access and share maternal health information, the degree of agency they exhibit in accessing maternal care, and how their participation in the study's focus group discussions shaped their perceived competence and advocacy regarding maternal healthcare in the United States. The FGDs served as a platform for providing participants with information and resources needed to navigate maternal healthcare in the United States and share MHI within their social networks. This study is significant in ensuring immigrant women's equitable access to maternal healthcare and available resources to promote positive birth outcomes. Equipping participants with critical MHI and maternal care resources in the United States ensures that these women, in turn, share authentic MHI within their social networks.

An Overview of Social Support

Major life transitions such as pregnancy and childbirth can be highly stressful for women, highlighting the crucial need for support

from their social relationships. Social support is defined as the process by which social relationships enhance health and well-being (Leahy-Warren, 2014, p. 85). According to Reid and Taylor (2015), social support can be understood as either the perceived availability of resources or the actual assistance provided by individuals within a person's social network.

Social relationships or networks serve as channels for delivering support and may include a spouse, siblings, friends, neighbors, online communities, and religious groups. These networks are essential in providing various forms of support that help individuals navigate challenging periods such as pregnancy and childbirth. Leahy-Warren (2014) identified four primary types of social support:

Informational Support: This involves providing information, advice, and guidance from one's social network, aiding individuals in problem-solving and decision-making. Leahy-Warren (2005) argues that consistent informational support from healthcare providers can improve infant care practices, especially among first-time mothers. Nonetheless, most women also rely heavily on their mothers and other close networks for their informational needs (Leahy-Warren, 2005). This study relies on the significance of informational support in maternal health as the purpose is to examine how African immigrant women's access to and share of MHI shapes their experiences.

Emotional Support: Manifests through love, esteem, empathy, and encouragement, which helps individuals feel valued and understood.

Instrumental Support: This type of support involves providing tangible assistance with daily responsibilities, such as babysitting or helping with household chores.

Appraisal Support typically refers to feedback that enables individuals to evaluate themselves or their situations, thereby contributing to more effective coping strategies.

Social support plays a significant role in reducing maternal stress, including the risk of postpartum depression. However, its effectiveness may depend on the type of support and the nature of the support network. For example, research by Emmanuel et al. (2011) found that mothers value social support because it enhances their self-efficacy, helps them cope with the stresses of pregnancy and childbirth, and improves their overall well-being. Jiang and Zhu (2022) also found a positive correlation between social support and individual well-being,

especially in maternal mental health. The next theory used in this study is the situational theory of publics.

Situational theory of publics

The situational theory of publics (STP) explores how individuals communicate to manage problematic situations when an immediate solution is unavailable (Chon et al., 2023; Grunig, 1997). STP explains how individuals engage in communication behaviors and make decisions based on *Problem recognition*: Perceived discrepancy between an individual's expectation and their experiences" (Chon et al., 2023, p. 63); *Level of involvement*: "People's perceived connection of themselves to the problematic situation" (Chon et al., 2023, p. 63) and; *Constraint recognition*: "People's perception of obstacles in a situation that limits their ability to take action in the situation" (Chon et al., 2023, p. 63). These factors influence individuals' information-seeking behavior and information processing, helping predict and explain communication behaviors (Grunig, 1997). For this research, we focus on constraint recognition.

Constraint recognition is the process by which individuals perceive barriers that hinder their freedom and ability to address a recognized problem or issue, potentially discouraging communication behaviors (Illia et al., 2013). Aldoory and Grunig (2012) identified three dimensions of constraint recognition: barriers to communicative behaviors, obstacles to personal avoidance or mitigation, and systemic-level barriers. For this study, constraint recognition will help analyze the factors that limit African immigrant women's access to and sharing of MHI among their social networks.

Additionally, self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's perception of their ability to control a situation, plays a significant role in constraint recognition. Thus, Anderson (2009) maintains that boosting self-efficacy through persuasive communication can significantly enhance confidence in communicating or sharing information about issues such as drunk driving, and, in the case of this research, MHI. Regardless, individuals may refrain from active communication due to perceived constraints, even in situations with high problem recognition and high levels of involvement (Illia et al., 2013).

Communication and agency in maternal health

Like many other human endeavors, communication remains indispensable in maternal health. It shapes how women seek and receive care during this critical phase of their lives. Studies on mothers' communication reveal that most women actively seek and share MHI

during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period (Guerra-Reyes et al., 2016; Kassim, 2020; Loudon et al., 2016). While these studies are significant, few have explored factors that influence how these women access, use, and share MHI within their social networks. Moreover, limited attention has been given to immigrant mothers, even though immigration and pregnancy are significant life changes that require strategic navigation on the part of the mothers and critical scholarly assessment.

Similarly, access to essential information regarding maternity care and available resources empowers women to build self-confidence, maintain resilience in the face of challenges, seek maternal healthcare, and make informed decisions regarding their pregnancy and birth (Altman et al., 2019; Khamis & Agboada, 2023; Nasrabadi et al., 2015). Providing essential MHI to African immigrant women is primarily facilitated by close relations, acquaintances, and healthcare providers (Khamis & Agboada, 2023). These sources of support offer valuable guidance on the changes to expect during different trimesters, signs of a healthy pregnancy, and early warning indicators (Office of the Surgeon General (OSG), 2020). Importantly, this information is disseminated through various channels, including interpersonal communication, phone calls, and digital media, such as social platforms (Zhu et al., 2019).

However, since most women often base their maternal healthcare decisions on the quality and quantity of information accessible to them, it is crucial to examine the types of MHI they receive, the sources of this information, and what information they also share within their social networks.

Research Questions

RQ1: What factors influence African immigrant women's access to and exchange of MHI within their social networks?

RQ2: What degree of agency do African immigrant mothers exhibit when accessing maternal healthcare services in the United States?

RQ3: How did African immigrant women's participation in the FGDs shape their self-perception of their competences and advocacy regarding maternal healthcare?

Research Method

Procedures and sampling

Recruitment of participants for this study commenced after we received research ethics approval (approval number 2077239-1) from

the Institutional Review Board of the University of Maryland. In all, fourteen participants who met the study's eligibility criteria, being an African immigrant woman living in the United States having given birth in the United States, being eighteen years old or older to provide informed consent, and speaking and understanding English, were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling enabled the selection of information-rich participants who are essential for the study's phenomenon (Creswell & Baez, 2021). Snowball sampling enabled the identification of equally eligible participants based on recommendations from previous participants (Tracy, 2019), which facilitated the recruitment process and boosted trust and rapport.

The participants were recruited through Facebook, WhatsApp, personal contacts, and referrals from other participants. Interested participants contacted the principal researcher, who ascertained their eligibility through scheduled phone calls, WhatsApp chats, or emails.

The fourteen participants were divided into two groups, each consisting of seven members. Each group participated in the first and second FGDs, resulting in a total of four FGDs. This ensured that all participants had enough time to talk and share their ideas during each FGD. Verbal consent was sought and obtained before recording, and again after recording began, to capture participants' consent to participate in the group discussions.

To increase the diversity of responses and findings, the participants included immigrant women from Uganda, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Ghana who resided in eight different states across the United States. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities and safeguard their privacy (Tracy, 2019). Table 1 represents the participants' demographic data.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Profile

Pseudonyms	Home country	Years in the United States	Location in the United States	No. of children	Employment status
Toyosi	Nigeria	2	New Mexico	1	Unemployed
Kissa	Uganda	5	Ohio	2	Employed
Evelyn	Ghana	1	New Mexico	1	Unemployed
Ama	Ghana	2	Texas	1	Unemployed
Sophia	Uganda	6	Ohio	2	Unemployed
Ava	Uganda	4	Ohio	1	Employed
Mia	Nigeria	2	Georgia	1	Unemployed
Toku	Nigeria	2	Maryland	1	Employed
Nana	Ghana	5	Indiana	2	Employed
Grace	Ghana	5	California	2	Employed
Tobi	Nigeria	1	Maryland	1	Unemployed
Agnes	Zimbabwe	3	Indiana	1	Unemployed
Amara	Nigeria	7	Texas	3	Employed
Esi	Ghana	4	Oklahoma	1	Employed

Focus group discussions

This qualitative study relied on focus group discussions (FGD) to collect data from fourteen African immigrant women residing in different states in the United States. Focus group was the preferred data collection technique in this study because it helped participants recall important information and experiences, and it stimulated nuanced descriptions of jointly experienced events (Hennink, 2014). Additionally, the FGDs facilitated deeper interactions that addressed a broad range of questions related to maternal healthcare in the United States (Belzile & Öberg, 2012; Hennink, 2014).

Two FGDs were held online at separate times to cover the study's goals and objectives. They were held via Zoom, which facilitated reaching geographically dispersed participants in different parts of the United States, stimulated recall, ensured a rich and thorough discussion about participants' maternal health experiences, and reduced social anxiety among the participants (Tracy, 2020).

A female medical doctor of African descent, specializing in family medicine, has been an advocate for Black immigrant mothers in the United States, co-facilitated the FGDs to provide much-needed medical expertise, guidance, and MHI to the participants. Apart from being Black and an African immigrant, the medical professional is also a certified family health practitioner who has worked extensively with immigrant women, mainly from Africa. She serves as a point of contact for most of these women navigating the maternal healthcare system with or without health insurance. She also provides them with valuable information regarding maternal healthcare and available resources they could explore to boost their pregnancy experiences and birth outcomes. This medical professional's shared demographic profile with the participants boosted credibility and enhanced rapport during the FGDs.

The first focus group took place in August 2023 to assess participants' level of awareness (MHI and knowledge about available resources), agency, and experiences with maternal healthcare. It focused on listening to participants' reflections on their experiences.

The second FGD took place in October 2023, focusing on providing participants with useful information about maternal healthcare and available resources in the United States to help them navigate the unfamiliar U.S. healthcare system with greater confidence and agency to advocate for themselves and access the necessary resources. Providing participants with this information also ensured they are equipped with relevant maternal health knowledge that they can share with other women within their communities.

Data analysis

We used thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. This flexible, yet systematic, approach to qualitative data analysis enables researchers to discover, interpret, and report clusters of meaning within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ritchie et al., 2013).

We adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process to draw meaningful insights from the data. First, we thoroughly read and reviewed each FGD's transcript for accuracy and identified potential patterns. Second, we generated initial codes from the raw data and organized them into potential themes. Third, we reviewed all the codes and grouped similar ones into potential themes to reveal patterns within the data. Fourth, we reviewed and refined the themes, identifying standalone themes, potential themes that needed further development, and those that required consolidation or strengthening. Fifth, we defined the essence of each theme and discussed how it fits into the broader narrative. Finally, we produced a concise, coherent, and logical report that sums up the key findings, as discussed in the next section.

Research Findings

The findings from the data analysis indicate that the primary and most used source of MHI among the participants is close and social relationships, such as family, friends, community members, and, in some cases, coworkers, underscoring the importance of social networks in accessing and sharing MHI. Additionally, university health centers served as a helpful resource, especially for those whose spouses were international students or who were international students themselves. A few participants cited healthcare providers, such as doctors, nurses, and midwives, as their primary source of MHI, while others mentioned online sources, including the "Next Door Neighbor" application. The findings below include an examination of the factors that shape participants' access to and sharing of MHI, the factors that determine their ability to exercise agency in seeking maternal care in the United States, and how their participation in the FGDs influences their perceived self-efficacy in effectively navigating maternal care in the country.

RQ1: What factors influence African immigrant women's access to and exchange of MHI within their social networks?

The findings from the FGDs indicate that the MHI African immigrant women access and share are shaped by their social network,

previous experience with maternal healthcare, length of stay in the United States, and their location in the country. These findings are explained under the broad themes of social-cultural influence and support systems, previous maternal care experience, contextual factors, and location in the United States.

Sociocultural influence and support systems

The socio-cultural influences include unfamiliarity with the U.S. maternal healthcare system, language barriers, immigration status, and the type of social network these women belong to. These factors make most African immigrant women, especially those who are unfamiliar with the American maternal healthcare system and those who have not lived in the United States long enough, rely heavily on their social network for MHI.

These mothers seek information on health insurance issues, healthcare providers, eligibility for services, and available maternal health resources from their close relations and social networks. For instance, Tobi, a Nigerian woman living in Maryland, mentioned how she relied on her husband. She indicated:

I arrived in the country not long ago, and everything seems so confusing. When I got pregnant, I didn't know what to do. Luckily, my husband is a student, so he searched for information and resources online and from his school, and that helped me to get some support with my pregnancy.

Toku, who also lives in Maryland, discussed her difficulty starting prenatal care because of her limited health insurance. She shared, "It was difficult finding a healthcare provider who accepts my insurance plan. It is not like that in Nigeria, where you just walk into the hospital to receive medical care."

Aside from the socio-cultural influences that shaped these women's access to MHI and resources, their previous maternal care experiences also shaped the types of information they accessed and shared, as discussed below.

Previous maternal healthcare experience

Participants who have experienced the maternal healthcare system before knew where to access resources and relevant MHI sources. Most of the women who had access to resources like the WIC program, Medicaid, SoonerCare Oklahoma, Help-Me-Grow, and

YMCA, among others, in their previous pregnancies relied on these resources when needed and shared this information with their networks.

Sophia recalled how she relied on the resources from her previous pregnancy during her second pregnancy. Since WIC provided support for children up to five years, she was able to enroll herself in it when she got pregnant and added her newborn baby. Nana also indicated how she was able to help a pregnant woman start prenatal care by pointing her to available resources. She mentioned:

I advised one lady who came to the United States two months ago. She is pregnant and on an F2 visa. She doesn't have any means of getting insurance, according to her, because she's on a dependent visa. And she doesn't know what to do. She had three miscarriages in her home country. I advised her to attend a parenting class I previously attended at the YMCA. She did that, and she's currently enrolled. It has been helping her a lot.

In terms of sharing MHI, most participants, especially those who have had children in the country, felt compelled to share MHI with other women as a responsibility to their fellow African immigrant women. Most of the information they shared was from their previous experiences. Ava, a Ugandan woman who has lived in Ohio for four years, mentioned how she encouraged and helped the spouses of two international students on an F2 visa to access healthcare by providing them with information. She said:

There are two F2 (dependents of F1 students) wives in my community. Their insurance coverage was minimal, and they were unaware of the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) program. The other lady was so scared about even having a baby in the hospital. So, I convinced her to seek medical care. I told her to apply for Medicaid to cover the cost. I also told her if she doesn't want to go to the hospital afterward, there is a Neighborhood Clinic which is very affordable. She now has a baby girl.

Another factor that shaped immigrant women's access to and sharing of MHI was contextual factors and demographic variations, as discussed below.

Contextual factors and demographic variations

Contextual factors, such as one's location in the United States, the maternal healthcare policies and services in various states, and immigration status, influence African immigrant women's access to MHI and the kind of information they share with other women within their social networks. For instance, states like New Mexico provide doula services to pregnant women and new mothers regardless of immigration status. Moreover, the Neighborhood App, which connects pregnant women with other women and to resources in their community, is common in most parts of Ohio but absent in other areas.

Other contextual factors include the availability of a community that the woman could rely on for social support and acquiring MHI. For instance, Toyosi, who was receiving \$59 from WIC, shared this information with another woman out of state, only to realize that she could receive \$11 only. This example illustrates how one's location can influence the type of service one can access.

Other demographic factors, such as educational level, digital literacy, and immigration status, determine African immigrant women's access to MHI and the kind of information they share. Findings indicate that the participants who are educated and digitally savvy are capable of independently researching and getting the MHI they need in their specific states. Esi from Oklahoma recounted how she got providers and accessed other resources in her state from internet research. She said:

I have relied on the internet for all my information needs since arriving in this country. I have no one to ask for information. So, when I got pregnant, I knew the internet would be my best friend. I found a health provider close to me through my internet searches. I also had a lot of information on the BabyCenter app and so on.

Kissa, a student in Ohio added:

I just found out that I was pregnant just a month ago and I already have two kids, but I didn't give birth to them here in the US. So, I am still in the process of getting antenatal care. Apparently here in my state is quite slow and my school unfortunately does not have a health care center. So, I'm finding it a little bit

difficult. I'm just relying on the research that I have been able to do on my own and what people from other states have told me.

Thus, the immigration status of these women, such as being a student, a dependent of a student, holding a working visa, or being a permanent resident, affects the type of insurance they have and the services for which they are eligible. The second research question examined the factors that determine African immigrant women's ability to exercise agency in navigating maternal care in the United States.

RQ2: What factors shape the way African immigrant mothers exercise agency when accessing maternal healthcare in the United States?

African immigrant women encounter many challenges that affect their utilization of maternal healthcare services and the degree of agency they exercise in this process. These barriers include cultural differences and years in the United States, access to MHI, or the lack thereof, resulting in a lack of knowledge about the healthcare system, and fear of discrimination (e.g., fear of being turned away for not having insurance).

Cultural differences and years in the United States

These factors include a person's cultural background, the number of years spent in the United States, and cultural differences in healthcare between home countries and the host country. The findings suggest that the culture of humility and respect for authority limited most of the participants' ability to speak up and advocate for themselves. The idea that the physician knows what is best for the patient makes most women defer decision-making to their doctors and tend to accept their recommendations without question, which results in many instances of medical paternalism. For example, Agnes, a Zimbabwean woman living in Indiana, recounted how she could not seek clarification about most of the procedures she was asked to undergo because she did not want to appear as if she was challenging the doctor's authority. She said:

I feel the doctor knew what was right for me. So, I agreed to whatever procedure they recommended for me. There were many things I needed more clarification on, but I decided to trust their judgment and follow their instructions. Who challenges a

doctor? They are here to care for you, and I did not want to disrespect them.

Similarly, the different approaches to maternal care delivery in many African countries and the United States limited participants' agency. Many participants mentioned how healthcare is delivered in their native languages to enhance understanding, and how prenatal care came with a lot of demonstrations from nurses and midwives. Grace, who had her first child in Ghana, mentioned how the group approach to prenatal care adopted in most public hospitals in Ghana enables women to share ideas and have their symptoms explained in a group setting without necessarily having to ask the doctor.

The absence of this approach in the United States meant that immigrant women who lacked English proficiency and those who were uncomfortable having one-on-one interaction with health providers remained silent, even when they were dissatisfied with the care or information provided to them. Sophia from Uganda mentioned how she goes blank anytime she meets her doctor. She narrated:

It is a lot of stress having to think about how to describe your symptoms in ways that the doctor understands. There are some symptoms that are better explained in the local language. Sometimes I forget to ask questions or seek clarification from the doctor. I leave the office before I remember I even wrote some of the questions down. There is just something about talking to health providers in this country that makes me uncomfortable.

Additionally, the number of years spent in the United States influences how individuals interact with the maternal healthcare system. In most instances, women who have been in the United States for a considerable amount of time are able to rely on their previous experiences and acquired knowledge to navigate the system, identify issues of neglect and discrimination, make informed decisions, express their preferences, and advocate for themselves more openly. For those who are new in the United States, they rely on the experiences of mothers who have lived in the country longer to help them make informed decisions. For instance, Ava narrated how visiting her husband's friends' wives helped her select a healthcare provider:

My husband has two of his friends that their wives also already gave birth before I got pregnant here. So,

I went to the hospital to visit them. From interacting with them, I got to know which hospital they attended, how they were being taken care of. So, when I got pregnant, I also went to that hospital as well to register for my prenatal visit.

Those sharing MHI with other women also relied on their previous experiences and told new maternal care service users what to look out for and how to advocate for themselves. Lack of information also limited participants' agency in seeking maternal care as they did not know what to say, expect, or how to assert their rights. This is discussed in depth below.

Limited Maternal Health Information

Lack of knowledge about the healthcare system and maternal care resources hinders immigrant women's ability to navigate services effectively. Limited access to information or the lack of it reduced some participants' agency in making informed decisions about their maternal healthcare. Mia, who lived in Georgia, mentioned how she struggled to care for herself during pregnancy and her newborn baby because she lacked money and did not know about available resources. She explained:

I got pregnant at a time when I did not have any good job. It took so long to start prenatal care at a small clinic near me. I had my baby in that same clinic, and I owed them a lot. I never heard about WIC until now. It was when I could not pay my medical bills that the hospital advised me to apply for Medicaid. If I knew about WIC or any other resource, I wouldn't have suffered so much.

Other participants also spoke about how they resolved not to have any more children and even advised other women against giving birth in the United States because of the cost and the lack of social support. These sentiments were chiefly due to a lack of information about available resources in their states. Toyosi explained how her negative experience with maternal care made her vow not to have any more children. She narrated:

I saw hell with my pregnancy in this country. There was no help from anywhere, and that was how I swore not to have any more children. I am quick to

advise any woman who asks about childbirth in the United States against having any children here. Now that I know where to look for help, I may revise my notes and stop scaring other women from having children.

Unfortunately, the lack of information also made some participants accept mistreatment as normal since they were unaware of their rights and the services they could demand from their care providers. Kissa, a Ugandan woman who has lived in the United States for five years and has two children, indicated how she could not reject some procedures like an epidural because she did not know she could. She also mentioned instances of neglect that she could not report because she was unaware of her rights at the time.

Fear of Neglect

A significant finding has to do with some participants deciding to remain silent and endure mistreatment due to fear of being neglected. Some of the women were privy to the widely documented negative experiences black women have with maternal care in the United States. Hence, knowing their status as immigrants and black women, they tended to please healthcare providers by obeying them and desisting from questioning their decisions as a strategy to avoid being mistreated or discriminated against. For instance, Nana from Indiana had this to say:

I did everything I was asked to do to ensure a safe delivery. I knew some of the procedures were unnecessary since I already had a child. But this is Indiana, and almost all the providers in that hospital were white. I didn't want to court any hatred from them and be treated like other Black women. I just had to keep quiet and go with the flow.

Agency in maternal care among African immigrant women in the United States was limited by cultural differences in doctor-patient interaction, which result in medical paternalism, a lack of information that limits these women's ability to advocate for themselves, and the fear of being neglected and mistreated if they spoke up against mistreatment. These barriers to agency negatively influenced participants' maternal care experiences.

However, a significant purpose of this study was to provide participants with important information about MHI and available

resources in specific states and across the country, thereby increasing their knowledge, enabling them to share this information with other women, and improving their maternal care experiences in the country by boosting their self-efficacy in navigating the healthcare system. The following research question examined how the women perceived their participation in the FGDs and the key takeaways from them.

RQ3: How did African immigrant women's participation in the FGDs shape their self-perception of their competencies and advocacy regarding maternal healthcare?

The women participated in FGDs, where they were equipped with relevant MHI that could help them navigate maternal care in the United States and become leading voices in sharing accurate and adequate MHI with their social networks. According to the participants, the discussions improved their maternal healthcare knowledge, gave them a renewed sense of agency for navigating maternal health in the United States, and enhanced sharing of accurate and uplifting MHI. These themes are discussed in detail below.

Enhanced maternal healthcare knowledge and engagement

This theme encompasses the increased knowledge of maternal healthcare in the United States. Participants were given essential information about the maternal healthcare system and a wide range of resources available to immigrant women of various immigration statuses. The purpose was to equip the participants with enough information that they could use and share within their networks. Evelyn recounted the lessons from the FGDs. She remarked:

HERSA was a new thing I learned from this discussion. It is helpful, particularly because I'm still navigating and trying to relocate to another state. As a family woman, I have been thinking about where I can move to and get resources that can support me as well. Knowing that other states also have resources, like what I am already receiving in New Mexico, is a significant factor for me. It will help me focus on finding the kinds of services I can get and enable me to plan my life.

Nana added that she got encouraged during the discussions to continuously seek information. She said:

For me, I have come to realize that there are many resources available in my city. It's just a matter of finding the correct information. So, what I'm planning to do is to ask and ask till I get what I'm looking for. That's one thing I've learned, and I'll pass it on. Don't keep quiet. Ask someone who will lead you to where you can get information. Knowing where to go for help is one of the things I'm very happy to learn from here.

Access to MHI is one of the most critical resources immigrant women needs during pregnancy and birth in an unfamiliar environment. The participants also noted that they perceived an increased sense of agency in using maternal care services due to the information they received. This is discussed below.

Increased agency in maternal healthcare utilization and MHI sharing

Most participants reported experiencing a renewed sense of agency and control over their maternal healthcare, as well as the sharing of MHI because of the FGDs. It underscored the importance of mothers feeling empowered to make informed decisions and actively participate in the exchange of MHI. For Agnes, the information received will enable her to ask the right questions during maternal care, assert her rights, and actively participate in her care. This is because she now knew where to report mistreatment and abuse to and who (which offices and services) to contact when she encounters challenges. Evelyn mentioned that participating in the FGDs enhanced her confidence while interacting with her providers. She shared, "I've been more comfortable talking to my healthcare providers. I've been able to ask them questions. I've been more confident." Ama, a Ghanaian woman who has been in the country for two years and has one child, shared how she was going to encourage pregnant women in her church to start prenatal care by providing her with MHI and available resources. She said:

I met this woman in church, who I had always thought was going to the hospital. She said she was six months pregnant but had never been to the hospital. Because I was also pregnant, we just exchanged numbers and started chatting on WhatsApp. Based on what I've learned here, I will visit the websites, take screenshots of relevant

information, and send them to her. Additionally, I visit places where resources are available and share them with her. I tell her this is how I did it; this is a screenshot of it. Go and do it.

Sophia added:

I also met a lady who came to the United States in the last two months. She's pregnant, and according to her, she doesn't have any means of getting insurance because of her immigration status. With this information, I will advise her to attend a parenting class, contact the YMCA, and possibly consider WIC.

Agnes, a mother of one from Zimbabwe, shared:

I've been able to help the wife of our friend. The husband is here in America, and the wife is coming in January. So, I was just helping her and telling her what the situation is like here and what she should expect. I've been able to provide her with a lot of information and organizations that will help her like WIC and similar resources.

As mentioned previously, a significant aspect of the FGDs was to provide participants with enough MHI to enable them to become dominant voices in disseminating information among other women within their communities. Apart from pointing these women to the right resources, it will also help reduce misinformation that adversely impacts immigrant women's maternal health experiences.

Promoted sharing accurate and uplifting MHI

This theme highlights the need for sharing accurate, positive, and fact checked MHI, ensuring that mothers have access to reliable and empowering information about maternal healthcare. For instance, Toyosi, one of the participants who said she used to advise African immigrant women who come into the country not to get pregnant because of her own prior negative experience with the system, indicated how she has learned to share uplifting information. She indicated:

I remember mentioning how I used to tell people not to get pregnant due to my bad experience with maternal healthcare in this country. Now, I have learned not to spread fear, not to spread lies, and not to share incorrect or misleading information. I have also learned how to verify my information and ensure its accuracy before sharing it with others. I am very grateful to have been part of this study, as it provided me with the opportunity to see things from a different perspective.

Kissa also added:

I have learned that instead of spreading fear and panic about the healthcare system, we should be hopeful and share that hope with the community of people we provide information to. The fact that you have experienced something negative doesn't mean that they will also experience the same. I will also advocate for myself and help other women do the same.

Tobi mentioned:

So, one thing that I do is share my information, like what I went through, with you. But I put a "but" clause there. I say, "This is what I experienced," or "These are the resources that were available to me during that period." I don't know what is going on right now or what is available right now. So, this is where you can find verified information.

The FGDs fostered a sense of agency among the participants, making them more willing to share accurate MHI with other women within their social networks, more actively participate in their care and decision-making regarding their pregnancy and birth, and advocate for themselves when receiving maternal care.

Discussion

The study examined how African immigrant women access and share MHI, the degree of agency they exhibit in accessing maternal care, and how their participation in the study's FGDs shaped their

perceived competence and advocacy regarding maternal healthcare in the United States.

The findings revealed that African immigrant women primarily relied on their social networks for MHI, supplemented with sources such as online apps, healthcare providers, schools, and workplaces. The study identified various factors that shape the types of information and resources accessible to these women, including the types of social networks they were part of, their immigration status, duration of residence in the United States, state of residence, past maternal healthcare experiences, health insurance status, and digital literacy.

African immigrant women who share MHI exhibit leadership competencies that drive their motivation to do so. These competencies encompass a desire to cultivate communal support and sisterhood, as well as a commitment to assisting other immigrant women in navigating maternal healthcare resources in the United States. This finding highlights the communal nature of African cultures, which prioritize the needs of the group over individual needs. As noted by Idang (2015), Africans tend to form or seek out their community and provide mutual support wherever they find themselves.

For immigrants in the United States, pregnancy and childbirth are marked by uncertainties, especially for first-time mothers who are new to the healthcare system and who are yet to form close connections. Therefore, social support is critical in helping these women navigate maternal healthcare. Nonetheless, as revealed in this study, the amount and nature of support received by an individual are contingent upon the size and relevance of the support to the individual's needs (Cohen & McKay, 2020; Taylor, 2011). Access to MHI played a crucial role in alleviating barriers that previously hindered African immigrant women from utilizing maternal healthcare services and advocating for themselves. Adequate MHI encourages women to seek care and take charge of their health, especially for first-time mothers (Altman et al., 2020; Khamis & Agboada, 2023). As Anderson (2009) noted, effective communication and access to information enhance an individual's self-efficacy and confidence in seeking and sharing information. In this study, participants who had interacted with the healthcare system shared information and experiences with other women. Additionally, most of the participants felt a renewed sense of agency based on the information they received during the FGDs. It is safe to state that accurate and timely MHI gives voice to women navigating maternal healthcare, especially in unfamiliar environments.

Moreover, given that most African immigrant women obtained MHI information from their social circles, it was essential for them to

receive accurate information from reliable sources. Therefore, a key aspect of this study was to provide participants with enough information to enable them to become leading sources of MHI within their communities. Participants were equipped with information about maternal healthcare services and resources in the United States and the resources shared during the discussions were verified for accuracy.

Furthermore, participants were educated on how to share this information in ways that empowered recipients to use maternal healthcare and take control of their healthcare journey, rather than focusing on negative personal experiences that might discourage others from seeking healthcare services.

After the second FGD, participants shared how empowered they felt to advocate for themselves, fully participate in their maternal care, and continue sharing MHI, due to the abundance of information they had been exposed to. The study has significant theoretical and practical implications, which are discussed below.

Theoretical and practical implications

Using the social support theory and the constraint recognition variable in the situational theory of publics as a conceptual and interpretative model created a robust framework for a comprehensive examination of African immigrant women's access to and dissemination of MHI in the United States. Navigating unfamiliar territories poses numerous challenges for immigrants, causing significant uncertainties that hinder their ability to meet their needs. Immigrants often depend on social networks and other sources of information to address these uncertainties.

Therefore, the reliance on this integrated theoretical approach provided a solid foundation for developing targeted interventions and policies to enhance maternal healthcare outcomes for this vulnerable and often invisible population. By addressing the specific barriers this population faces and leveraging the support of their social networks, healthcare providers could provide more equitable and adequate maternal healthcare services and resources for this vulnerable and marginalized population.

Practically, this research offers valuable perspectives on the most effective forms of support needed for African immigrant women to better access MHI, the situational factors that encourage these women to seek and share MHI, the most effective channels and formats for delivering culturally sensitive and appropriate MHI, the role of local immigrant communities as essential resources for implementing interventions to improve maternal healthcare outcomes for this population. It is evident from the study that most of these women rely

on their social networks and relatives for MHI than their healthcare providers. Hence, it is essential to make accurate MHI available in these communities or equip community and religious leaders with adequate MHI that they can share with their members.

Additionally, this study emphasizes the need for reliable and objective MHI to be disseminated within these communities, as well as the need to develop effective strategies to empower recipients of such information to take control of their maternal healthcare needs.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

While this study offers valuable insights about accessing and sharing MHI among African women immigrants in the United States, it has some limitations that point to opportunities for further research.

To begin, the study specifically focused on MHI access and sharing, without considering participants' previous encounters with misinformation from their social circles or other sources of information, or the potential implications of such exposure on their maternal healthcare experiences. In the future, research should examine how misinformation exposure influences the maternal health behaviors of immigrant women in the United States.

Additionally, the study exclusively involved African immigrant women in the United States. Conducting a comparative analysis of MHI access and sharing among immigrants from different backgrounds and other parts of the world would provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the MHI needs of immigrants from other backgrounds in the United States.

Finally, adopting a mixed-methods approach and conducting longitudinal research that investigates the shifting patterns across multiple generations of immigrants could yield valuable insights into this understudied topic.

To conclude, the study highlights the significant influence of social networks and individuals' leadership capabilities on accessing and sharing MHI among African immigrant women in the United States. The findings underscore the vital role of social support in helping these women navigate maternal healthcare and mitigate the uncertainties associated with pregnancy and childbirth.

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Seeking Support After Miscarriage: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Semi-Anonymous Communication on Reddit

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Abstract: Miscarriage is a deeply stigmatized and emotionally complex experience, often leaving individuals feeling isolated and unsupported. Increasingly, people turn to online communities for connection and assistance after miscarriage, and this has been the focus of research for a while. However, little is known about how they seek support in the presence of anonymity. This study examines the strategies people use to seek social support in the r/Miscarriage subreddit, addressing a gap in both health and communication scholarship. While previous research has shown that individuals use online platforms following miscarriage to seek information, share experiences, and seek emotional validation, this study demonstrates how semi-anonymity shapes support-seeking communication. Specifically, it reveals that Reddit enables the disclosure of morally complex and socially difficult-to-share experiences, including jealousy, resentment, self-blame, loss of faith, and narratives of unmet support.

Introduction

Miscarriage is a common yet isolating health experience. Globally, researchers estimate that roughly 44 miscarriages occur every minute (Quenby et al., 2021). Despite its prevalence, miscarriage remains stigmatized; many people¹ who experience it report shame, and

¹ In this study, we use the general term *people* to refer to individuals who have experienced miscarriage. While miscarriage research and care have traditionally focused on cisgender women, it is important to recognize that pregnancy loss also affects transgender, non-binary, and gender-expansive (TGE) individuals. Among one study's participants who identified as men or fell under the broader TGE spectrum, 33% had experienced a miscarriage, and 0.5% reported a stillbirth (Moseson et al., 2020). In most studies, authors use the term *women* and we keep that terminology when referring to their findings. Moreover, for reporting the result, the pronoun "they" is largely used to refer to the user. Nevertheless, gendered pronouns are used only when participants directly or indirectly disclosed their gender. In all other cases, gender-neutral pronouns were applied to avoid excluding individuals, such as trans men, who may also share similar experiences.

fear of judgment (Buehler et al, 2019). These conditions constrain disclosure and highlight the value of accessible, validating support resources, particularly online communities that can buffer loneliness and depressive symptoms (Dubbelman et al., 2024).

Physically, miscarriage usually does not cause lasting health problems or prevent future pregnancy (Brier, 1999; Quenby et al., 2021). The emotional effects, however, can be severe. Many people feel grief, anxiety, depression, guilt, or shame, and some continue to struggle with fear of another loss (Farren et al., 2021; Geller et al., 2004; Séjourné et al., 2010; Luo et al., 2023). Because miscarriage often has no clear cause, people may blame themselves, feeling as though their bodies failed them, even when they did nothing wrong (Miller, 2015; Kilshaw et al., 2017; Omar et al., 2019). Miller (2015) argues that silence persists partly because acknowledging miscarriage as profound loss intersects with politicized debates about fetal personhood and abortion. She further suggests miscarriage strains conventional moral categories: the fetus is neither fully “baby” nor “nothing,” and the bereaved can experience simultaneous positions as moral patients (suffering harm) and moral agents (whose bodies “failed” them), producing self-directed guilt and betrayal.

Many studies show that social support plays an important role in protecting our mental health in stressful situations (MacGeorge & Zhou, 2022; Galibert & Cordelier, 2023). However, research shows that many people struggle to obtain adequate support from close friends and family after miscarriage due to stigma, lack of knowledge, or fear of judgment (Brashers et al., 2004; Rains & Wright, 2016; Pollock et al., 2021). Meyer (2016) also states that relatives and friends often use phrases that are completely unacceptable in other losses, such as “Good thing it happened now before it was a real baby”, “It just wasn’t your time”, and “It’s probably better off this way” (pp. 1426-1427). Additionally, some studies show that even healthcare professionals cannot effectively validate the emotional distress people experience after miscarriage (Séjourné et al., 2016, Dubbelman et al., 2024). One study shows that people who have miscarried often report that formal care networks cannot provide sufficient informational, emotional, esteem, or network support (Alqassim et al., 2022). A scoping review reports that in the US, health professionals often used overmedicalized terminology to describe miscarriage, which may result in people feeling their loss is invalidated (Lacci-Reilly et al., 2023). Another scoping review of 30 studies across 11 countries found that health professionals often used insensitive language, failed to acknowledge the significance of miscarriage, and rarely inquired about emotional wellbeing, while also providing insufficient information (Galeotti et al., 2022).

Similarly, an integrative review of 60 studies from diverse contexts revealed that many women were dissatisfied with the emotional support they received, emphasizing the need for empathetic acknowledgment of their loss and more comprehensive miscarriage-related information (Lee et al., 2023).

These reactions undermine the validity of their loss experience and highlight the value of other sources such as online miscarriage communities in support provision. Studies indicate that people who experience miscarriage turn to online platforms to share stories, seek emotional validation, and access information about coping and medical concerns (Freedle & Oliveira, 2022; Wright et al., 2013). These spaces are available at all times, free of cost, and foster connections among individuals with shared experiences, often compensating for the inadequacies of traditional support (Goh et al., 2016; Hiefner, 2020).

Given the growing reliance on online communities, it is essential to investigate how these platforms shape support-seeking strategies. To frame this investigation, it is important to consider existing models of support-seeking strategies. Barbee and Cunningham's (1995) model of support-seeking strategies focuses only on direct and indirect approaches. However, this binary does not capture the more complex and nuanced strategies that people use in online environments (Buehler et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2021). To fill this gap, Buehler et al. (2019) identified seven strategies on Facebook, ranging from direct requests to storytelling and humor. Later, researchers narrowed their focus to women in miscarriage communities on Instagram (Dubbelman et al., 2024), and Facebook (Callen & Oxlad, 2024) highlighting strategies such as storytelling and sharing medical information. However, these works do not account for the role of anonymity in online support-seeking. Whereas research shows that anonymity helps people be more open and honest especially in sensitive topics (Fiesler et al., 2018; Medvedev et al., 2019; Seiter & Brophy, 2022). Additionally, there is a gap in the literature on support-seeking in Reddit, a platform that differs from other social media application. As Davis and Love (2019) point out, "one major critique of social media data is that the data are not generalizable outside of the platforms from which the data originate" (p. 637). As a result, generalizing the findings of a specific platform to other platforms is problematic (Rains and Brunner, 2015). This shows that the models and taxonomies presented for support seeking strategies communicated in other platforms such as Facebook (Buehler et al., 2019) and Instagram (Dubbelman et al., 2024) cannot be generalized to Reddit. To address these limitations, the present study examines the following question:

RQ: In the context of the subreddit r/Miscarriage, what strategies do people who have experienced miscarriage use to seek social support in the posts?

Method

Reddit as a Data Collection Platform

Reddit is a large social media platform and online community where users contribute text posts, links, images, and videos, and engage in discussions across topic-specific “subreddits” (De Choudhury & De, 2014). Unlike platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, Reddit is pseudonymous, meaning users create accounts with invented usernames and are not required to disclose demographic details such as age, gender, or location. This structure allows individuals to range from semi-anonymous to fully anonymous, depending on how they present themselves (Kenny & Lynn, 2022). Importantly, Reddit also permits “throwaway accounts,” temporary profiles unlinked to a user’s main account, which enhance privacy and encourage disclosure of sensitive experiences (Leavitt, 2015; Andalibi & Garcia, 2021). Such affordances reduce the risks of social judgment, enabling users to share painful or stigmatized experiences, like miscarriage, that they might hesitate to disclose in identifiable or face-to-face contexts (Medvedev et al., 2019). As of March 2025, Reddit hosts over 401 million weekly active users, 108 million daily active users, and more than 100,000 active communities, including r/Miscarriage with 37,000 members (About Reddit, 2025). Its large global user base, combined with its semi-anonymous design, makes Reddit a uniquely valuable setting for studying how individuals seek and provide support in sensitive domains.

Data Collection

Data were collected using the `RedditExtractoR` package in R (Rivera, 2023). The data collection process was conducted twice, with a gap of several months between the two rounds. The `RedditExtractoR` package allows users to specify a subreddit, a time range, and a post limit for extraction, although the Reddit API limits the number of posts that can be extracted. The first round was conducted on August 12, 2024, and retrieved 996 threads posted August 8-12, 2024. The second round was conducted on July 23, 2025, and retrieved 996 threads posted July 20-23, 2025.

From each extraction, the 100 most recent posts were selected, resulting in a total dataset of 200 posts. This number was chosen in the goal of achieving qualitative adequacy, or data “richness and complexity” (Braun & Clark, 2021, p. 211). Initial examination of the

data suggested that this number of posts would balance the need for a diverse sample with that of close interpretive analysis.

Inclusion criteria required that original posts contain a personal narrative, experience, or request related to miscarriage, and that the author explicitly or implicitly identified as someone who had experienced a miscarriage. Threads were excluded if they were written by partners (6 threads), by family members (1 thread), by moderators suggesting that users who have a baby after a miscarriage are not allowed to share their stories in this subreddit (3 threads), or by individuals who were not sure whether they had miscarried (1 thread).

After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 11 threads were removed from the dataset and left a total of 189 threads for analysis. The unit of analysis in this study was the original post (thread) created in the r/Miscarriage subreddit, with each thread representing a distinct support-seeking act by one user and treated as an individual case for coding and thematic analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Miscarriage is a sensitive topic; therefore, this study took extra steps to follow ethical standards. A systematic review of ethical considerations in Reddit research revealed major disagreements about how such data should be handled (Fiesler et al., 2024). While some studies describe in detail the process of obtaining ethics approval (Salehzadeh Niksirat et al., 2023), others avoid the issue altogether, with evidence showing that many papers do not discuss ethics and instead assume that the public nature of Reddit data makes formal approval unnecessary (Stommel & de Rijk, 2021). This controversy is especially important when working with vulnerable groups, as some researchers give ethics careful attention while others provide only brief mention (Eschler et al., 2015). Another key concern is anonymity: although Reddit users usually post under pseudonyms, members may still feel they are part of a private community, so their information must be handled with care (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2010; Eynon et al., 2017). Since informed consent is usually impractical in large online studies, guidelines suggest protecting participants by anonymizing data and avoiding identifiable details (Franzke et al., 2020).

This study analyzed publicly available posts from the subreddit r/Miscarriage. Following the university's ethics policy, research involving publicly accessible online data that does not include identifiable information or researcher-participant interaction does not require Research Ethics Board approval. Nevertheless, given the sensitivity of miscarriage-related discussions, data were handled with care: usernames and identifying details were removed, and quotations

were paraphrased or shortened to preserve participants' dignity and privacy. Direct quotations, finally, were searched on Google to ensure that they do not retrieve the thread posted on r/Miscarriage.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) to examine how individuals sought support within the Reddit community *r/Miscarriage*. RTA is a flexible, six-phase approach involving familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, constructing and reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Following Braun and Clarke's (2019) interpretivist perspective, themes were actively constructed through the author's reflexive engagement with the data rather than discovered as pre-existing entities. This approach aligns with Merrigan et al.'s (2012) emphasis on researcher subjectivity and interpretation as central to evaluating evidence in qualitative inquiry, ensuring that meaning emerges through contextual and reflective understanding.

In practice, theme construction followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis. First, the author became familiar with the data by reading all 189 original posts twice and making short notes on common ideas. Second, each post was coded using short labels that described what the user was doing (e.g., "asks about symptoms," "vents anger," "shares timeline"). Third, similar codes were grouped into clusters that reflected shared purposes, such as seeking facts, releasing emotions, or telling the story of the experience. Fourth, these clusters were reviewed carefully to determine whether they formed clear and distinct patterns of meaning. When they did, they became candidate themes. Fifth, subthemes were created when different emotional functions appeared repeatedly within a theme. For example, within Emotional Expression, subthemes captured emotional venting (e.g., "I just need to scream this out"), ruminative self-questioning (e.g., Why did this happen to me?), socially difficult-to-disclose feelings (e.g., I feel jealous of pregnant women), unmet support (e.g., No one checked on me after it happened), and public appreciation (e.g., Thank you all for being here), and within Direct Emotional Support Seeking, subthemes captured users' explicit requests for reassurance and empathy. These included Hope Seeking (e.g., Please tell me it gets better, I need to hear from someone who's been through this and is okay now) and Validation Seeking (e.g., Am I overreacting for feeling this way?, Has anyone else experienced this?, I just need someone to tell me this is normal). Sixth, all themes were refined, named, and

defined through repeated checking and memo writing to ensure each theme was conceptually clear and distinct from the others.

Finally, some posts contained elements of multiple support-seeking strategies (e.g., emotional disclosure combined with requests for information). Therefore, the author retained all of those strategies and considered the post with its full combination of approaches. This ensured that no strategy was excluded and that the fluidity of support-seeking behaviors was acknowledged. This process led to four themes: Direct Information Seeking, Emotional Expression (emotional venting, ruminative self-questioning, socially difficult-to-disclose feelings, unmet support, public appreciation), Storytelling, and Direct Emotional Support Seeking (hope seeking, validation seeking) which demonstrate the different ways individuals seek support after miscarriage in online communities.

This study meets Tracy's (2010) eight criteria for qualitative excellence. It addresses a worthy topic by exploring online support-seeking strategies after miscarriage, a socially significant and under-researched experience. The analysis demonstrates rich rigor through the use of 189 emotionally expressive Reddit posts and detailed, iterative coding. Sincerity was achieved through reflexive journaling and transparency about the researcher's positionality. The author is a woman without personal experience of miscarriage, parenting, or clinical practice. This position allowed her to approach the data with empathy and openness, while maintaining analytical distance. The researcher remained attentive to how her positionality and perspectives, particularly regarding religion and spirituality, might shape the interpretation of participants' narratives related to anger toward God and loss of faith.

Credibility was supported by thick data extracts and coherent, well-developed themes. Resonance was achieved by illustrating how individuals use semi-anonymous online spaces to express emotions and seek support following a traumatic loss, helping readers connect emotionally and intellectually with participants' experiences. The study makes a significant contribution both theoretically by addressing a gap in understanding support-seeking strategies in semi-anonymous miscarriage communities, and practically, by offering recommendations for healthcare professionals and online moderators to foster more sensitive and supportive environments. The study maintained ethical practice in handling sensitive public data and achieved meaningful coherence by aligning its interpretivist framework, research aims, and reflexive thematic analysis approach.

Results

Figure 1 and Table 1 present a typology of support-seeking strategies identified through reflexive thematic analysis of posts in r/Miscarriage. The analysis revealed four overarching themes that illustrate how individuals communicate their informational and emotional needs in this semi-anonymous online space.

First, Direct Information Seeking represents the mostly observed strategy, where users request medical or factual information to reduce uncertainty about physical symptoms, treatment options, or recovery processes.

Second, Emotional Expression captures posts in which individuals externalize intense emotions to process their loss or connect with others. This theme includes Emotional Venting, Ruminative self-questioning, Expression of Socially Difficult-to-disclose Feelings, Narratives of Unmet Support, and Public Appreciation. Together, these subthemes illustrate a spectrum from unfiltered emotional release to expressions of disappointment when expected empathy or care was absent.

Third, Storytelling encompasses posts where users organize their experiences into coherent narratives, using structured accounts of the miscarriage to make meaning, share lessons, or commemorate loss.

Finally, Direct Emotional Support Seeking includes Hope Seeking and Validation Seeking, in which users reach out for reassurance, empathy, and encouragement from peers who have lived through similar experiences.

Collectively, these four themes highlight the diverse and layered ways people seek both information and emotional understanding after miscarriage within online peer-support communities.

Figure 1. Support-Seeking Strategies in Online Miscarriage Communities



Table 1. Support-Seeking Strategies in Online Miscarriage Communities

Theme	Subtheme	Subtheme Description
1. Direct Information Seeking	–	Looking for medical or factual information from others to reduce uncertainty about symptoms or care.
2. Emotional Expression	Emotional Venting	Sharing intense emotions in an unfiltered way to release pressure or connect with others.
	Ruminative self-questioning	Asking a series of questions that reflect internalized blame or helplessness.
	Expression of Socially Difficult-to-disclose Feelings	Voicing emotions like jealousy, bitterness, or anger that may be stigmatized or judged.
	Narratives of Unmet Support	Reflecting on moments where expected support from others was absent or disappointing.
	Public Appreciation	Openly expressing gratitude to others in the community as a way to affirm social support.
3. Storytelling	–	Organizing personal experiences into a structured story to create meaning from the loss.
4. Direct Emotional Support Seeking	Hope Seeking	Seeking emotional reassurance or uplifting stories from others to maintain hope after loss.
	Validation Seeking	Asking whether one's emotional responses are normal and acceptable, or how they emotionally recovered.

Direct Information Seeking

The most common theme in the subreddit of miscarriage was direct information seeking. This theme is called “crowdsourcing help” by Buehler et al. (2019, p. 2574). In these cases, the speaker focuses on asking specific questions about medical treatment, symptoms, or recovery. The emotional pain may still be present, but it is expressed through a practical tone. For example, one user explained that they took medication after the miscarriage but still had retained tissues. Although her doctor advised against surgery, they wanted a dilation and curettage, and asked others if they had the procedure and whether it caused any complications. This kind of post shows that the author is trying to make informed decisions about her body by hearing from others who have been through it. Another user asked about any tips or advice for hormonal cystic acne after a miscarriage.

Emotional Expression

This theme includes strategies where people express grief, confusion, and complex emotions following miscarriage. These expressions often reflect intense, raw, or socially stigmatized feelings,

and serve both as a personal release and a call for recognition from others.

Emotional Venting

Emotional venting is a strategy used by users to release overwhelming feelings related to miscarriage without necessarily seeking advice, validation, or interaction. These posts are often short, unstructured, and emotionally raw. The speaker may use phrases like *I just needed to get this out* or *I just needed to vent* to signal that the purpose of the post is to express pain, sadness, anger, or frustration. In these moments, the act of writing becomes a form of relief and a way to acknowledge the emotional weight of miscarriage.

Narratives of Unmet Support

Narratives of unmet support are a strategy used by people to express the emotional pain of feeling unsupported by those around them after a miscarriage. These posts often focus less on the physical experience of loss and more on how others responded or failed to respond to that loss. Speakers describe being met with silence, avoidance, or minimized emotions from family, friends, or partners. For example, a young woman explained that her family was highly conservative and unsupportive, saying they would rather kill her if they knew she was pregnant. Another woman shared that her father was very narcissist, never realizing what she was going through. By sharing these stories, people validate their own feelings of disappointment, anger, or isolation, and seek to understand why support was missing when they needed it most.

Expression of Socially Difficult-to-disclose Feelings

The second theme emerging for expression of the experience of miscarriage is expression of socially difficult-to-disclose feelings. Some people openly share some emotions that are often seen as negative or shameful, especially when talking about pregnancy loss. Some feelings such as loss of faith, jealousy, anger, resentment, etc. For example, one user admitted that they were jealous of friends or family members who had miscarriages but had babies after that, while they are still struggling. They said they are feeling terrible for feeling this way but *couldn't help it*. Another user wrote that she hated her friend because they both were pregnant and now, she was talking about her baby shower with other friends while ignoring her and not inviting her to the party. She added *how can women be so cruel to each other*. This type of emotional expression that consists of resentment, jealousy and bitterness is considered a taboo in other social media networks.

Another user wrote that *I no longer have faith in God* showing that their experience of loss has deeply affected their spiritual beliefs. These kinds of statements are not often shared openly because many people feel they should not question their faith, even during hard times. But here, this statement shows how the miscarriage has made them feel hopeless and disconnected from any higher meaning. Sharing this shows that miscarriage can shake not only a person's emotions, but also their beliefs about life, fairness, and the future.

Ruminative self-questioning

Ruminative self-questioning is a strategy used by users to express the overwhelming self-doubt, guilt, and confusion that often follows miscarriage. These posts are filled with rapid, emotionally charged questions that have no clear answers such as *Did I not rest enough? Were my pants too tight?* or *What should I do differently next time?* While the speaker may know logically that that healthcare professionals do not consider these behaviors to be causal factors in miscarriage, the emotional reality of loss often triggers intense self-scrutiny and self-blame. This strategy does not seek factual responses but instead reveals a pattern of repetitive, overwhelming thoughts that intensify over time for meaning, control, or something to blame. By posting these questions publicly, users invite others into the private, irrational grief that many experience but rarely share, making space for mutual recognition and emotional release.

Public Appreciation

Another strategy users use to express their miscarriage experience is public appreciation. This theme is called "shouting out" by Buehler et al. (2019, p. 2580) and "sharing positivity amidst miscarriage grief" by Dubbelman et al. (2024). This happens when a speaker returns to the online community to thank others for their support, share a positive update, and offer encouragement. For example, one user wrote a follow-up post after her dilation and curettage to say that the procedure went better than expected and to thank the people who had helped calm their fears. They also shared kind words for others going through similar pain.

Storytelling

This theme is called "sharing stories and memories" by Buehler et al. (2019, p. 2579) and "storytelling of emotional turmoil and grief after miscarriage" by Dubbelman et al. (2024). Instead of simply listing symptoms or asking direct questions, many users share their stories step by step starting with how they found out about the

loss, what they felt emotionally, and how their bodies responded. Through storytelling, people connect the physical and emotional parts of the experience, reflect on what happened, and share their fears, sadness, or confusion. It also allows them to reach out to others not just for advice, but for understanding.

Direct Emotional Support Seeking

This theme captures posts where users openly ask for emotional help, reassurance, or encouragement. They may be seeking hope, validation, or practical guidance for coping with grief. These posts highlight the need for community-based affirmation and the importance of peer support in recovering from loss.

Hope Seeking

Hope-seeking is a strategy used by individuals who turn to online communities after miscarriage to find encouragement, strength, or signs that a better outcome is still possible. These posts are often written during moments of fear, sadness, or uncertainty especially after multiple losses and include questions such as *Will I ever have a baby?* or *Has anyone been through this and gone on to have a healthy pregnancy?* Instead of asking for medical advice, the speaker is looking for emotional support and stories that offer reassurance. Hope-seeking allows people to share their pain while also holding space for future possibilities. It reflects the deep emotional need to feel less alone and to hear that others have made it through similar experiences.

Validation Seeking

Validation seeking is a strategy used by individuals who turn to online communities after miscarriage to ask whether their feelings, reactions, or experiences are understandable, acceptable, or shared by others. These posts often come from a place of emotional uncertainty, especially when someone has received confusing, dismissive, or minimizing comments from others in their life. The speaker may express sadness, guilt, confusion, or doubt, and ask questions like *Is this normal?* or *Has anyone else felt this way?* By doing so, they are not just looking for information, they are also looking for reassurance that what they feel is real and that it matters. Validation seeking helps users rebuild confidence in their emotional responses, especially when others around them fail to recognize the depth of their grief.

Discussion

The present study extends previous research on support-seeking behaviors in online miscarriage communities by illustrating

how semi-anonymity reshapes the ways individuals disclose, narrate, and regulate their emotions. Similar to the findings of Callen and Oxlad's (2024) and Dubbelman et al. (2024), this study found that individuals who have experienced miscarriage turn to online communities to exchange both emotional and informational support. However, this study makes three novel contributions. First, it demonstrates that the semi-anonymous design of Reddit enables users to share experiences with greater emotional depth and less self-censorship than on identity-based platforms such as Facebook or Instagram. Second, it develops a more nuanced typology of support-seeking strategies by identifying distinct forms of emotional expression, including narratives of unmet support, ruminative self-questioning, hope seeking, and validation seeking. Third, it highlights the moral dimensions of miscarriage communication by revealing how users navigate experiences of self-blame, jealousy, resentment, loss of faith, and perceived responsibility for their loss.

The first contribution is evident in the ways Reddit's semi-anonymous environment facilitates the disclosure of socially difficult-to-share emotions, such as jealousy, resentment, anger toward God, loss of faith, and even anger directed toward the baby. This aligns with Morini et al.'s (2025) finding that anonymity on Reddit makes it easier for individuals to open up, build trust, and share support in contexts marked by stigma. Anonymity also appears to encourage the sharing of narratives of unmet support such as stories involving narcissistic parents, conservative families who would reject or punish a pregnancy, or relationships that ended before the loss occurred, leaving individuals without partner support. Such narratives are rarely disclosed on more identifiable platforms and can be attributed to the anonymity spectrum that Reddit offers. This highlights the value of Reddit communities in providing a relatively safer environment for discussing stigmatized experiences and aligns with Grub's (2025) study, which suggests that anonymity can reduce fear of judgment and facilitate open self-disclosure.

The emergence of posts expressing unmet support aligns with prior research showing that many people feel that they do not receive the appropriate emotional or practical support from friends, family, or healthcare professionals following miscarriage (Bellhouse et al., 2018; Alqassim et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2025). In the data collected from the r/Miscarriage subreddit, some threads were posted by partners and family members seeking strategies to provide emotional support. People who have experienced miscarriage also acknowledged that their social networks sometimes attempt to support them; however, these efforts are frequently perceived as unsuccessful, largely because

women believe that others cannot fully understand the depth of the emotional pain and grief associated with miscarriage.

Furthermore, some posters admitted that because they had not told anyone they were expecting a baby, as the pregnancy was still in its early stages, they also felt unable to share their loss with others. This aligns with Mercier et al.'s (2020) study demonstrating that social conventions encourage parents-to-be not to share their pregnancy with others, which can result in not being able to share their loss as well. These findings also point to the pervasive role of stigma in shaping miscarriage experiences. Consistent with stigma theory (Link & Phelan, 2001), participants' narratives reflected feelings of shame, secrecy, and anticipated judgment, which often limited their willingness to disclose their pregnancies or seek support following pregnancy loss. In this context, online communities may offer an alternative space for discussing experiences that remain difficult to disclose in offline settings. As a result of these unmet support needs, another theme that emerged in this community was direct emotional support seeking. This finding aligns with prior research on Facebook miscarriage communities, where direct requests for emotional support were also found to be common (Callen & Oxlad, 2024).

Additionally, the identification of direct information seeking, hope seeking, validation seeking, narratives of unmet support, and ruminative self-questioning extends existing models of online support-seeking by providing a more detailed understanding of how individuals communicate informational and emotional needs following miscarriage. This confirms the findings of Blanc-Bisson et al.'s (2022) study stating that the most common theme in online health communities is information seeking. Our study shows that users actively ask for medical information and some even wondered what their doctors or professional healthcare providers prescribed was helpful for them and asked other users for medical advice. This shows that they may sometimes trust online peer advice even more than professional experts. This confirms the finding of Rueger et al.'s (2021) study stating that people value peer advice in online health communities more highly than advice from healthcare professionals, especially when it comes from people with similar experiences. Moreover, our findings that information seeking is the most common strategy in r/Miscarriage align with Callen and Oxlad's (2024) study of Facebook miscarriage communities, where information seeking also emerged as the predominant form of support-seeking. This consistency across platforms shows that people turn to online spaces primarily to address uncertainties surrounding medical and emotional aspects of miscarriage.

Our analysis also revealed a subtheme of hope seeking, in which users looked for stories of successful pregnancies following miscarriage. Interestingly, moderators in r/Miscarriage occasionally discourage the sharing of such stories, reminding users to keep those discussions in other subreddits. This moderation practice reflects a broader challenge identified in prior research, which shows that while social media groups initially provide solidarity and comfort, over time constant exposure to stories of loss can become triggering and may even intensify grief (Conroy et al., 2023).

Finally, the findings of this study highlight the moral dimensions of miscarriage communication and resonate with Miller's (2015) framework of moral agent and moral patient by demonstrating that women's miscarriage narratives often reflect both positions. These narratives also reflect broader pronatalist and ableist norms which frame reproductive capacity as a marker of bodily competence and motherhood as a moral responsibility (Rich, 1976; Thomas, 2007). Within this cultural context, miscarriage may be experienced not only as a loss but also as evidence of bodily failure, contributing to feelings of guilt, self-blame, and perceived responsibility.

Importantly, these feelings of guilt and responsibility do not emerge in isolation but are shaped by broader social and institutional responses to miscarriage. Narratives of unmet support in this study suggest that families, partners, healthcare professionals, and cultural norms may reinforce self-blame by minimizing grief, withdrawing support, or framing miscarriage as a personal failure (Bellhouse et al., 2018; Alqassim et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2025). From this perspective, the moral harm lies not in experiencing miscarriage itself but in the social and institutional responses that position those who experience pregnancy loss as defective, responsible, or overreacting.

Some people described their miscarriage as something that simply happened to them, using language that reflected powerlessness and lack of control. For example, one user wrote it just happened out of nowhere. Yesterday, I was pregnant, now I'm not. They did not even feel anything. This type of language positions the person as a moral patient, someone who is acted upon rather than acting. They do not describe making any decisions, nor do they assign blame. This shows that they identify themselves as passive.

However, other posts reflected elements of moral agency, especially when women expressed guilt or responsibility. For example, one user wrote they drank two glasses of wine believing that it does not affect the baby that early, but they felt that they killed their baby. Another user put the blame directly on themselves by stating that I could not keep my baby safe, in the place that was supposed to be

safest for them. Some people also move between roles, expressing both helplessness and guilt in the same post. For example, one participant explained that their partner had avoided having sex during the pregnancy, believing it could harm the baby. They shared that they had reassured their partner it was safe, but after the loss, they felt their partner had become emotionally distant and seemed to blame them for what happened.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study is that the data were collected solely from Reddit's r/Miscarriage community, which may attract users with specific demographic or cultural characteristics, such as younger, more tech-savvy, and English-speaking individuals. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the specific context of users in r/Miscarriage and may not be transferable to users of other platforms or offline support networks. Additionally, the anonymous nature of Reddit limits access to users' demographic information, such as age, education, cultural background, gender identity, and pregnancy history, which could provide valuable context for interpreting support-seeking behaviors. Moreover, because this study focused exclusively on online data, it may not capture the experiences of individuals who do not use Reddit, who are not active on social media, or who prefer to seek support through offline networks or other online platforms.

Implications

The findings of this study can help mental health professionals and therapists understand the emotional and relational dynamics involved in miscarriage that people may not express in formal sessions but might reveal online. They can use the findings of this study to reshape their design of the therapy sessions because many studies show that even healthcare professionals cannot effectively validate the emotional distress people experience after miscarriage (Séjourné et al., 2010; Dubbelman et al., 2024; Lacci-Reilly et al., 2023; Galeotti et al., 2022), meaning that some of them may not well trained and prepared to deal these people. It also suggests that clinicians and healthcare providers should acknowledge and integrate peer support networks into post-miscarriage care since many people seeking support from people with the shared experience.

Additionally, this study may also help Reddit moderators, especially of health-related or grief-focused subreddits, to better understand the strategies used to seek support in online communities. They can also think about the users who seek positivity and hope and try to balance hope and sensitivity. They may probably lead these users

to other subreddits in which some successful stories of pregnancy and living children after a miscarriage are shared.

Finally, our research indirectly tries to validate the lived experience of people who have experienced miscarriage, reduce their sense of isolation and give voice to them. This may lead to the society provides better support systems in both online and offline settings. This study, finally, helps the partners, families, friends and individuals who are close to these women to better understand the emotional stage they are in and see the ways to offer the support and empathy they need to receive.

Future Research

Future research should explore how members of miscarriage support communities respond to different support-seeking strategies. While this study identifies a typology of the ways women seek support online, it does not analyze the responses they receive. Examining how community members engage with various strategies such as emotional expression, storytelling, direct emotional support seeking, and direct information seeking would provide deeper insights into the dynamics of online social support.

Additionally, in this study, the threads posted by the partners of people who have experienced miscarriage were excluded from data analysis. However, it was evident that these partners significantly need attention, support and empathy. After miscarriage, the person who physically experienced the loss becomes the center of attention and is more likely to receive the offline and online support, while their partners are expected to be strong and even provide support to them. This shows that future research can focus on the lived experience of partners and hear their voices in miscarriage-related discourse.

Finally, the analysis revealed that some threads did not receive any comments. Future research could explore the factors that discourage users from responding to or providing support in these cases.

Conclusion

This study highlights the multifaceted ways in which individuals seek support following miscarriage in semi-anonymous subreddit community. By examining posts on the r/Miscarriage subreddit, we identified a typology of support-seeking strategies—emotional expression, storytelling, direct emotional support seeking, and direct information seeking—that reflects the complex interplay between emotional, social, and informational needs. Our findings show that semi-anonymity fosters authentic self-disclosure, including the

expression of socially stigmatized emotions, which is often limited in face-to-face interactions.

These insights extend existing models of support-seeking by emphasizing hybrid strategies that emerge uniquely in online environments and illustrating how anonymity shapes communication behaviors. Practically, this research shows the importance of online communities as vital support systems for those navigating miscarriage, providing emotional validation and shared understanding when traditional networks fail to meet expectations and needs.

By giving voice to the lived experiences of people after miscarriage, this study contributes to communication scholarship and offers guidance for healthcare professionals, therapists, and online community moderators to better recognize and respond to diverse support needs. Future work examining the responses to these support-seeking strategies will deepen our understanding of how online interactions can foster healing, empathy, and connection for those experiencing this profound loss.

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Dynamic Social Impact Theory and the Consolidation and Dispersal of Clusters in *Squid Game: The Challenge*

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Abstract: This study utilizes a dynamic social impact theory (DSIT) framework to analyze human influence on the popular Netflix television series Squid Game: The Challenge. A British reality competition, Squid Game: The Challenge is comprised of ten-episodes and features 456 contestants vying for \$4.56 million. As contestants self-organize into social alliances, their shared attitudes, beliefs, and values transform the physical space into a dynamic social space. The creation of clusters through these alliances, the correlation between contestant attitudes and behaviors, and the consolidation of contestant attitudes and behaviors reflective of alliance needs is reinforced by the physical proximity of contestants, the number of contestants participating in the competition, and the characteristic strengths of the individuals participating in the competition. As a cultural case study, Squid Game: The Challenge illustrates DSIT dynamics in a mediated social space by exposing the conditions under which social clustering, cluster consolidation, and cluster dispersal may occur.

Introduction

Comprised of four core concepts (clustering, correlation, consolidation, and continuing diversity), dynamic social impact theory (DSIT) theorizes that social structures are created by individuals' abilities to influence others in the social space (Latané, 1996; Latané & Liu, 1996). Beginning as a mathematical model (see Latané, 1981), DSIT has been well-tested through computer simulation (see Latané, 1996; Latané & Bourgeois, 1996; Nowak et al., 1990), experimental surveys (see Fink et al., 2015; Smith & Fink, 2015), and real-life situational scenarios (see Cullum & Harton, 2007). This paper aims to add to the literature through exposing the conditions under which social clustering, cluster consolidation, and cluster dispersal occur within the DSIT framework by utilizing a mediated situational scenario which plays out through the Netflix reality competition *Squid Game: The Challenge* (Ireland et al., 2023). The importance of social connectivity in relation to individual survival in the competition will be examined as will a focus on which members of a minority cluster are the most vulnerable both within and outside their clusters, what occurs when a member of a cluster betrays their alliance, and what happens when an influence agent is eliminated from a cluster.

Utilizing *Squid Game: The Challenge* as the case study and applying DSIT and the principles of persuasiveness in social structures, this study examines the effect of influence tactics in a competitive, situational environment. Consistent with prior research, influence agents exhibiting high eigenvector centrality and low betweenness centrality demonstrate stronger persuasive impact and connectivity within their clusters (Smith & Fink, 2015). This study further examines the effect of nullifying the influence agent with high connectivity to understand how a cluster's remaining influence targets compete for resources through the consolidation and potential dispersal of their clusters.

Based on the highly popular Netflix South Korean drama *Squid Game* (Dong-hyuk, 2021), *Squid Game: The Challenge* is a British reality television series that is comprised of ten-episodes and features 456 contestants vying for a \$4.56 million prize. A competition of luck, chance, skill, and strategy, *Squid Game: The Challenge* is set in an artificial environment in which real-world contestants work toward the same self-serving goal at the expense of other contestants. The contradiction between competition objective (only one contestant can win) and competition play (contestants cannot survive on luck, chance, and skill alone) is highlighted through the changing goals of contestants throughout the series.

The shared dorm as the series' primary location outside of game play is comprised of a large room with bunk beds, which ensures that contestants are almost always in each other's immediate environment. This immediacy, or physical closeness in time and space, is a factor necessary for social impact to occur as is the large number of individuals and individual characteristics, i.e., physical, social, and attitudinal strengths. Contestants create social clusters, or alliances, that correlate to their individual strengths and needs. In this manner, contestants are continually acting upon each other (Moscovici, 1988) in a way that is distinct to DSIT.

Differing from its predecessor, *Squid Game*, *Squid Game: The Challenge* incorporates social dorm tests as an elimination method within the competition. During these tests, contestants quickly learn the importance of social connections and a robust and resourceful social strategy is necessary for competition survival. Social connections to other contestants not only provide comfort during time in the competition but also helps to ensure contestants have the social support necessary to survive the tests if they are perceived as a threat to others.

In the first episode of *Squid Game: The Challenge*, an opening statement from a faceless voice assumed to be a contestant introduces the series as a competition that "has to be played with strategy, with

alliances, and with a little bit of conniving” (Ireland et al., 2023). This simple, yet succinct introduction is indicative of the importance of social ties over luck, chance, and skill in a competition based on children’s games and social tests. Through the lead up to the tests, contestants’ social strategies are the most critical.

Literature Review

This paper aims to add to the DSIT literature and influence process in which clusters consolidate and disperse by exploring *Squid Game: The Challenge* as a mediated case study. In applying social impact and persuasiveness in social networking, this study models the effect of influence tactics within clusters during consolidation and dispersal. The effect of nullifying the influence agent and their high connectivity within a cluster is examined to understand how a cluster’s remaining influence targets compete for resources through the dispersal of their groups.

Social Impact

As defined by Latané (1996), social impact occurs when an individual feels threatened and angered by another’s attack or loved and comforted by the support of another. A static metatheory, social impact theory (SIT) focuses on a single individual at a single point in time (Nowak et al., 1990). SIT is comprised of three factors which simultaneously impact an influence target’s response to the power of an influence agent’s social presence (Latané, 1981; Voinea, 2016). These factors include strength, immediacy, and number (Latané, 1981, 1996; Nowak et al., 1990; Voinea, 2016). The first factor, strength, is a constant and refers to the characteristics that aid an influence agent in effectively persuading an influence target through their social power. These characteristics may include but are not limited to an influence agent’s status, age, and socioeconomic status (Latané, 1981). Immediacy, also a constant, serves as the second factor and is defined as the closeness of an influence agent in space and/or time to an influence target (Latané, 1981, 1996; Nowak et al., 1990). As the only factor that varies (Voinea, 2016), number refers to the number of influence agents acting upon an influence target (Latané, 1981, 1996; Nowak et al., 1990).

According to Latané (1981), social impact can be understood as analogous to physical force. As gravity shapes physical structures, immediacy functions as a social force that shapes social structures. These structures, or social spaces, exist between the physical and psychological and reflect an individual’s needs, motives, and resources (Latané & Liu, 1996). As the medium in which social groups and social

networks develop (Latané & Liu, 1996), social spaces impact individuals' behaviors which in turn impact social spaces (Latané, 1996; Nowak et al., 1990; Voinea, 2016). As part of the overlapping social foundation, social spaces and the individuals within them continually draw on each other in the creation of the social structure (Latané, 1996; Nowak et al., 1990; Voinea, 2016). By examining this dynamic, a bidirectional relationship between individual and system, the social reality becomes evident (Moscovici, 1991).

Dynamic Social Impact Theory as an Extension of Social Impact Theory

Dynamic social impact theory (DSIT) serves as an extension of social impact theory. DSIT provides license for SIT's three factors to vary in such a way that individuals can be both the influenced and the influencer (Latané, 1981, 1996; Voinea, 2016). Encompassing cognitive, interactional, social, and cultural processes (Fink, 1996) as well as interpersonal communication (Huguet et al., 1998), DSIT recognizes culture as complex systems in which individuals self-organize (Latané, 1996; Voinea, 2016) and transform their physical space into a social space (Latané & Liu, 1996).

Within these complex social systems, the three factors of SIT generate the four forms of DSIT self-organization, including clustering, correlation, consolidation, and continuing diversity (Fink, 1996; Latané, 1996; Voinea, 2016). Influence agents possess the capacity to shape the attitudes, behaviors, and decisions of other group members and occupy the central position within a cluster. As central figures, agents serve as the source of resources, protection, direction, and social validation (Smith & Fink, 2010, 2015).

Clustering occurs when shared opinions form within a group. Based on human need, clustering emerges when individuals require a connection or comfort and other individuals are viewed as having the resources to fulfill that need (Fink et al., 2015). As "representation is...equated with collectivity" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 218), shared opinion or social space ensures an individual's representation in the overall social structures. Given immediacy leads to a rise in social impact, individuals are influenced by those nearby as opposed to those far away leading to consolidated local groups that share in specified subcultures (Latané, 1996). However, clustering is only successful when enough individuals share the same subculture and choose to self-organize (Latané & Bourgeois, 1996).

Correlation helps to explain the clustering of individuals' beliefs around once unrelated attitudes or behaviors (Fink, 1996; Latané, 1996; Latané & Bourgeois, 1996). Utilizing persuasive

communication and techniques, an influence agent utilizes their power to impact their neighbors' attitudes and/or behaviors and these neighbors begin to adopt the same attitudes and/or behaviors as the influence agent ultimately making them the influence targets (Voinea, 2016). As attitudes and behaviors become correlated, a majority opinion begins to consolidate among like-minded individuals, strengthening the group's similarity (Voinea, 2016). The majority opinion which tends to be that of the individual who is "least likely to change" (Latané & Bourgeois, 1996, p. 45), helps to reduce diversity within the group (Voinea, 2016). An influence agent's capacity to consolidate a majority within a community toward their opinion, however, will not lead to uniformity in opinion, and minority opinion or continuing diversity will persist within the group (Fink, 1996; Latané, 1996; Nowak et. al., 1990).

Reality television competition shows in which a large number of contestants vie for prizes may illustrate the three factors of SIT and four forms of DSIT. This is due in part to the shows' game play and social environment, such as that found in *Squid Game: The Challenge*. As such, the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: In what ways is social impact illustrated in *Squid Game: The Challenge*?

Social Networks and Persuasiveness

Influence agents hold positions with high eigenvector centrality and low betweenness centrality (Smith & Fink, 2015). Eigenvector centrality measures an individual's connection to more well-connected individuals (Bonacich, 1972), whereas betweenness centrality measures the efficient flow of social resources such as information, status, and obligation within a social network (Foa & Foa, 1972). Individuals with high eigenvector centrality or low betweenness centrality hold more power as their position provides greater access to influential connections that enable them to control social resources such as information and status (Fink et al., 2015).

As the smallest unit of measurement within a social network, a dyad is a connection of two individuals (Voinea, 2016). Influence agents within a dyad utilize their power through interpersonal communication and compliance encounters in order to gain submission from influence targets (Huguet et al., 1998; Smith et al., 2015). When influence agents are well connected, they can aid in the consolidation of clusters. To further understand the conditions of consolidation, Latané and Liu's study of DSIT (1996) provides empirical support that physical space shapes social structures by spatially constraining social

interaction and influence. The influence agent's location in a social network can have a significant role in the formation and diversity of social representation (Moscovici, 1988, 1991), which concerns the content of daily cognitive processes shaping individual beliefs and ideas (Huguet et al., 1998).

Comprised of two competing forces, persuasiveness consists of an influence agent's persuasive impact and an influence target's supportiveness impact (Nowak et al., 1990). As a means of influencing an individual's actions or cognitions (Van Dijk, 1993), persuasive impact is comprised of the influence agent's ability and success in affecting the held opinions and motivations of an influence target in favor of the influence agent's own opinion (Nowak et al., 1990; Voinea, 2016). Alternatively, supportiveness impact is an influence target's ability to evade an influence agent's impact due to the support received within their community (Fink et al., 2015; Nowak et al., 1990).

Despite an influence target's support, as an individual moves away from other minority influence targets and closer to the influence agent and the number of influence targets within the majority increases, the effects of the influence target's support begin to diminish (Latané & Liu, 1996; Smith & Fink, 2015; Voinea, 2016). Minority members who are supported by other influence targets are more likely to resist the majority but may be less likely to survive the majority pressure as a majority becomes more solidified (Nowak et al., 1990). This is particularly salient as the more the majority message is communicated, the more influence targets side for or against the majority's position (Moscovici, 1991), and the more an influence target has support from other influence targets within the minority, the less likely the target will be perceived as being compliant by the influence agent (Smith & Fink, 2010).

In addition to being affected by an influence target's supportiveness impact, an influence agent's ability to easily persuade an influence target is reliant on the individuals' shared attitudes, beliefs, and values (Latané, 1996; Latané & Liu, 1996), their shared physical environment (Latané & Liu, 1996), and their interpersonal communications (Huguet et al., 1998). An influence target faced with persuasive impact may also comply based on less tangible factors such as a comparison between themselves and other individuals (Latané & Liu, 1996). Individuals who hold the same standing in a network as others, for example, will often compare themselves to each other, compete with one another, and monitor the other activities (Fink et al., 2015). Ultimately, however, persuading their own friends as opposed to

the friends of their friends is easier for an influence agent (Smith & Fink, 2015), which could limit network growth.

For influence targets in the minority resisting the majority can be difficult, and they may become vulnerable to opposing views. Minority groups help to protect influence targets in the minority through consolidation specifically as they move away from their group's border with the majority group (Latané & Liu, 1996). Groups that are tightly knit work as a safeguard against influence from outgroup members (Fink et al., 2015) as ingroup members are primarily in agreement with one another (Latané & Liu, 1996). Groups of individuals who share the same attitudes, beliefs, and values can offer vulnerable others protection from outgroup influence agents (Voinea, 2016). In this regard, influence targets may seek supportiveness in threatening situations from their structural resources and powerful ingroup members (Fink et al., 2015). In order to resist persuasive efforts from external group members, there is often intragroup loyalty and intergroup rivalry (Fink et al. 2015). Based on this framework, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ2: In *Squid Game: The Challenge*, is making connections with others important for survival?

RQ3: When targeted by the majority for ousting, which members of the minority in *Squid Game: The Challenge* are the most vulnerable?

Individual representation within a social network is dependent upon group members' relations to one another (Moscovici, 1988). Individuals in a structured group, for example, are represented by that structure (Moscovici, 1988). Conversely, the representation of individuals in less structured groups may be a product of that group or may arise from social conflict or controversy (Moscovici, 1988).

A group may expect attacks by outgroup members. However, when an ingroup member attacks its group, this may produce anger leading to retaliation. This retaliation is carried out in order to alleviate the anger and increase satisfaction felt among group members (Mackie et al., 2009). This leads to the following research question:

RQ4: What happens when a member is perceived to betray their alliance in *Squid Game: The Challenge*?

As clusters form within a network, they develop into majority or minority groups. Each group regardless of stature has at least one influence agent. In the position of perceived power, the influence agent

is an opinion leader who is perceived to have a high-level of connectivity as the individuals they are connected to are also well-connected with others as opposed to being connected to different parts of the network (Smith & Fink, 2015). While previous research has examined how influence agents attain group member compliance through consolidation, less attention has been given to the consequences a group faces when the primary influence agent is removed. As agents serve as the central point of connection within a group, their elimination may disrupt the social structure, which could result in dispersal, reorganization, or absorption of the group into a different cluster. Consequently, the following research question is proposed:

RQ5: What happens to an alliance in *Squid Game: The Challenge* when the alliance loses its influence agent?

Method

In order to answer the preceding research questions and understand how DSIT is represented through *Squid Game: The Challenge*, a content analysis of the 10-episode first season was reviewed through an ethnographic and participant observation lens. Each episode was viewed four times. The unit of analysis encompasses both the interactions between contestants as well as statements contestants made in the confessional.

Contestant responses to game play and the social environment along with the persuasive and dominate discourse that influenced the power structures of influence agents and targets were noted and evaluated. Commentary both to other contestants and in the confessional where contestants spoke directly to a camera or other recording devices were recorded if the commentary related to a contestant's or another contestant's survival in the show as well as the formation of alliances. Additionally, notes were made based on contestant behaviors toward other contestants both when the behavior was self-serving or beneficial to another.

Results and Discussion

Dynamic social impact theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals consolidate into self-organizing social groups based on shared beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Latané, 1996; Voinea, 2016). This study extends the DSIT literature in three ways. First, it examines social impact within a naturalistic, high-stakes competitive environment rather than a controlled experimental setting. Second, it highlights the central role of the influence agent in both

cluster formation and stability. Finally, it extends the existing DSIT literature by examining how the removal of the influence agent can prompt cluster dispersal, reorganization, or absorption into other groups.

Throughout *Squid Game: The Challenge*, social impact illustrates how contestants cluster themselves into self-organizing alliances to survive the show's games and tests. While contestants share the same physical space during their duration on the show, spatial proximity is not enough to dictate why contestants would share their social time during times of rest. As a competition that not only requires luck, chance, and skill, social strategy is also necessary for contestant survival. That factor came from contestants' shared attitudes, beliefs, and values (Latané, 1996), and the self-organizing social groups they create which transformed the arena's physical space based on contestant motivations, resources, and needs into a social space for contestant alliances (Latané & Liu, 1996).

Clustering and Consolidation in *Squid Game: The Challenge*

The goal in *Squid Game: The Challenge* is individualistic with only one contestant being crowned the winner and receiving the \$4.56 million prize. However, game play necessitates the creation of clusters, or alliances, among contestants for their continued survival throughout the game. These alliances are often discussed by contestants both creating the alliances and viewing the alliance creation and illustrate the foundational tenets of dynamic social impact theory.

With 456 contestants at its onset and the spatial location of a dorm where contestants spend most of their time while not participating in games or tests, *Squid Game: The Challenge* fulfills the number and immediacy factors necessary for SIT. The dorm, as the series' primary location, is a large room with bunk beds which ensures that contestants are almost always in each other's environment. The series' first game, the children's game Red Light, Green Light, drops the number of contestants by an astounding 259 from 456 contestants to 197. The dorm setting guarantees the 197 contestants' closeness in both time and space, which provides enough contestants to self-organize into clusters (Latané & Bourgeois, 1996).

Clustering as a human need occurs when individuals require a connection, comfort, or emotional support and other individuals are viewed as being able to fulfill that need (Cai et al., 2012; Fink et al., 2015). In *Squid Game: The Challenge*, clustering takes place through the formation of alliances, small clusters of approximately 6 or fewer contestants. As "representation is...equated with collectivity" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 218), shared representation through individual

attitudes, beliefs, and values as well as opinions of other contestants ensures an individual's representation in the overall social structure through these alliances.

In at least two cases, small alliances of two contestants are created prior to onset of the series. For example, Trey, contestant 301, and LeAnn, contestant 302, are a son and mother alliance who bring their relationship to the series. While Trey and LeAnn are friendly with other contestants, they do not add others to their cluster beyond themselves. Trey does connect with another contestant, but before an alliance can be officially created the contestant is eliminated.

Stephen, contestant 243, and Chase, contestant 242, also join the series as an alliance. Stephen notes that he would not be a contestant on the series had his best friend since high school, Chase, not joined him. When Chase is eliminated during the first game, however, Stephen moves quickly to connect with other contestants, illustrating a second method of clustering which occurs when contestants seek out others with similarities to themselves. Correlation helps to explain clustering around shared beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and values. For Stephen correlation begins when he sees another contestant who has a mullet hairstyle like his own.

During the second game, Dalgona, contestants are required to remove a shape (circle, triangle, star, or umbrella) from a brittle piece of Korean honeycomb candy using only a sewing needle without breaking the shape. At the conclusion of the game, Stephen's newly formed alliance is leveled. However, as the influence agent within his cluster, Stephen makes a concerted effort to expand his alliance's membership. Through these efforts, Stephen reestablishes his cluster, and the new alliance adopts the name "Gganbu Gang," meaning best friends in Korean. Stephen's ability to attract, organize, and maintain alliance members demonstrates his role as an effective influence agent.

An influence agent's persuasive capability over influence targets is often shaped by their power and proximity within a social network (Smith & Fink, 2010, 2015). Individuals with comparatively less power will often seek out those with greater influence as well as those who possess the necessary resources to provide social benefits (Fink et al., 2015). Through this position, influence agent can shape the attitudes, behaviors, and decisions-making processes of other group members. However, influence agents are not necessarily the most dominant or visible within a group. They become central figures as other group members look to them for direction, resources, protections, and social validation (Smith & Fink, 2010, 2015). Consequently, self-organizing social groups often develop around individual needs, motivators, and access to resources (Latané & Liu, 1996; Ridgeway,

1991). While the emergence of an agent is shaped by the needs and resources of group members, the ability to influence others is dependent upon the strength dimension of SIT and DSIT

A tenet of SIT and DSIT, strength refers to the individual characteristics that enable an influence agent to effectively persuade influence targets through their social power. Occupying the central position within a cluster, agents often emerge through status attainment. Factors such as an influence agent's status, age, socioeconomic standing, and existing relationships with influence targets can shape an individual's position within a cluster (Latané, 1981). Additionally, influence may emerge through perceived competencies, confidence, group-oriented motivations, visibility, and gender (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Ridgeway, 1981, 1991). Influence agents are frequently perceived as capable, confident, and knowledgeable (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009), characteristics that help direct a group's attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, individuals with greater connections within a network, are more likely to hold a central position (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Ultimately, however, centrality and individual characteristics alone are insufficient to become an influence agent. An individual must also be socially recognized and validated by other group members to attain and maintain the role of influence agent (Ridgeway, 1981, 1991). Consequently, influence emerges not only from individual characteristics but also from how group members respond to and organize around an individual.

In successful clusters, individuals are drawn to both central positions and those who demonstrate compliance (Smith & Fink, 2015). As the Gganbu Gang consolidates, members increasingly look to Stephen as the dominant leader and to his unofficial second, Rick, contestant 232, for guidance and cohesion. As influence targets often prefer individuals who occupy the position between themselves and the influence agent (Fink et al., 2015), Rick provides a balancing role within the group. Rick also prefers this position, which falls in line with different individuals being drawn to different roles within a cluster (Smith & Fink, 2015).

Together, Stephen and Rick emerge as the central figures within their alliance, serving as a source of both protection and guidance in the competition. However, influence within a cluster does not always emerge through social validation as different group members might be drawn to different individual characteristics. In a competitive environment, for example, individuals may become agents when others view them as providing protection, resources, and advantages for survival through their prowess.

At the onset of the series, contestants assume *Squid Game: The Challenge* will directly mimic *Squid Game* in its games. Given this assumption, the third type of alliance in *Squid Game: The Challenge* is formed as a method of self-preservation through seeking out brute physical strength. While viewed as arrogant, Bryton, contestant 432 and a college football player, is seen as strong and overtly capable. Although Bryton has little interest in creating alliances, stating, “I’m not thinking about the other people here. At the end of the day, only the strong survive, and I am here for myself. I am the only person that truly has my back” (Ireland et al., 2023), other contestants seek him out as a way to limit their vulnerability and enjoy a level of protection from outgroup influence agents. Although Stephen and Bryton both possess the necessary characteristic of strength, as agents their influence differs as Stephen is more social and group-oriented while Bryton is individualistic and relies on his physicality.

The final type of alliance to transpire in *Squid Game: The Challenge* is one that occurs naturally. These alliances are not given much screen time but are occasionally acknowledged by other contestants. One such alliance is known as “The Corner.” This alliance is created by contestants who, in an effort to avoid the mass of other contestants, hang out in the corner of the dorm underneath the bunk beds. While the contestants in this cluster do not intentionally seek each other out, they are like-minded which helps to strengthen the alliance’s similarity.

The creation of clusters through alliances, the correlation between contestants’ attitudes and behaviors in regard to game play and goals, and the consolidation of contestants’ attitudes and behaviors to be reflective of their alliances’ is reinforced by the closeness of the contestants within the same dorm space, the number of contestants participating in the competition, and the characteristic strengths of the contestants. These characteristics are indicative of social impact, and aid in answering RQ1, “In what ways is social impact illustrated in *Squid Game: The Challenge*?”

Social Connections as Safety Measures and Threats

Despite *Squid Game* being a South Korean series, many contestants in *Squid Game: The Challenge* come from the United States. As US culture promotes discussion as a way of providing social and emotional support (Cai et al., 2012), for audiences a significant amount of *Squid Game: The Challenge* is watching contestant dialogue both with other contestants as well as in separate confessionals. Through this communication, the audience begins to identify contestants who serve as both influence agents and influence targets

within their alliances. Audiences also begin to understand the importance of personal connections in the competition's dorm tests and games.

To answer the second research question, "Is making connections with others important for survival?", we need to look no further than the dorm tests. The inclusion of these tests in *Squid Game: The Challenge* veers sharply from the *Squid Game* series. Introduced in the first episode, the first of these tests, the Decision Test, takes place when two contestants, Kyle, contestant 101, and Dani, contestant 134, are selected to eliminate or give an advantage to another contestant. The test is introduced to Kyle and Dani by a guard who informs them that, "These are tests of character. How you play is who you are. During these tests, you may have the opportunity to give other players an advantage to help them in the game. But be aware, these tests may also be the opportunity to eliminate other players" (Ireland et al., 2023).

Contestants are quick to recognize the importance of making social connections for survival in the games and tests. Connections to others help to ensure that a contestant has the support of other contestants during dorm tests and aids them in not being perceived as a threat to other contestants. Bee, contestant 018, for example, notes in episode 4 that, "People have now realized that just getting through the games isn't enough. This is the first time that our characters might really be brought into scrutiny. And everyone is panicking. These dorm tests force people to make decisions they wouldn't naturally make" (Ireland et al., 2023).

While most contestants recognize the benefit of being part of an alliance, several remain islands of one. These contestants are often eliminated through various methods, both during games and tests. Several contestants note the importance of creating alliances for survival. When his alliance is decimated after Dalgona, for example, Stephen notes that having an alliance is important in the event that the contestants get to pick their teams during tug-of-war, a game which takes place in *Squid Game* but not in *Squid Game: The Challenge*.

Given this importance of belonging to an alliance, some contestants begrudgingly join an alliance understanding the necessity for their survival in the competition. Case in point, the Glass Bridge game. Contestants must cross a raised two-lane bridge comprised of glass panels, and the order in which contestants cross the bridge is based on a number randomly selected and assigned to them. Only one of the glass panels, either the left or the right, is secure. If a contestant selects the wrong panel, the panel gives out and the contestant falls through the bridge and is eliminated.

Prior to beginning the game, contestants agree that the best way to cross the bridge so everyone has a fair chance of survival would be to have contestants take their turn. After a contestant either survives or is eliminated, the contestant immediately behind that contestant would move up to the first contestant's remaining panel and take their turn on the next panel. Contestants would continue game play in this manner until the bridge is safely crossed. While most contestants voiced their approval for the plan, Ashley, contestant 278, does not, and when it's her turn to select a panel, she refuses. Ashley survives the game, however, in the dorm test that follows, she is targeted by another player for not adhering to the group's agreement. Ashley survives the test but quickly recognizes she will need to create false-friendships for protection.

While social connections through the formation of alliances are viewed as necessary for contestant survival in *Squid Game: The Challenge*, being part of an alliance, particularly a strong alliance, can also lead to contestants being targeted for elimination during a dorm test. In the first episode of the series, LeAnn acknowledges this when discussing Bryton and his alliance. LeAnn states, "There is a group of guys I am now calling 'the bros.' Because they kind of all hang together. They're just always strutting around. 'Show how big and strong I am.' But I think it's so important to be careful about thinking as a group. It just puts a target on people's backs" (Ireland, 2023). In a later episode, Trey expresses a similar sentiment, acknowledging that as more contestants are eliminated, his alliance with his mother places a large target on their backs.

This tension is further illustrated when a contestant who is responsible for the ousting of three players recognizes that her decision to eliminate the contestants in front of the other contestants may have made her a target. Although she believes most contestants appreciate and understand her decision, only a minority is needed to eliminate someone during a dorm test. In this way, *Squid Game: The Challenge* illustrates that social connections are essential for survival while simultaneously posing as threat to that survival.

Member Vulnerability to Threats

In building on the threat finding in RQ2, RQ3 ("When targeted by the majority for ousting, which members of the minority in *Squid Game: The Challenge* are the most vulnerable?") finds that in *Squid Game: The Challenge* contestant vulnerability is contingent upon an individual being perceived as a threat to other contestants. When given the opportunity to eliminate a contestant, for example, Kyle, contestant 087, opts to eliminate a contestant who is part of an alliance

he feels is a threat to his alliance. This is in alignment with Latané's (1981) conceptualization of social impact, which includes the experience of "feeling threatened by the power of others" (p. 343).

Individual power is viewed in different ways throughout the series. In the Decision Test, Kyle (101) and Dani are chosen to select a contestant to either provide an advantage or to eliminate. Opting for elimination, the duo proceeds to weigh their option on which contestant to eliminate. They finally settle on Mothi, contestant 200. This decision may come as a surprise, particularly since Mothi is not part of an alliance nor does he exhibit brute strength. However, when Mothi walks into the dorm exclaiming, "Yes, the boys!...Let's form the alliance right now!" (Ireland et al., 2023) and talks to as many contestants as possible, he becomes a threat to others through his overt visibility. Mothi's bombastic and loquacious introduction to his dormmates made him immediately vulnerable and earned him the competition's first dorm test elimination. Kyle and Dani did consider other contestants before settling on Mothi, including Trey and LeAnn and the "big guys", i.e., Bryton's alliance (Ireland et al., 2023).

Bryton's self-aggrandizing and physical skill makes him vulnerable to elimination throughout the series. As contestants get to know one another on a deeper level, both Trey and another contestant note that given the opportunity they would eliminate Bryton. Trey explains, "You got to eliminate the guy that's winning all the challenge" (Ireland et al., 2023), and while Trey has his eyes set on Bryton for elimination, he also knows that both he and his mother having an unbreakable bond are also vulnerable for elimination. Bryton's ousting through a dorm test does not come to fruition. Instead, he is eliminated early in the competition through a game of chance, War Ships, a human-scale game based on the children's game Battleship.

Physical skill, false-friendship, and visibility are all reasons why a *Squid Game: The Challenge* contestant would be targeted for elimination. In Stephen and Rick's case, visibility is an issue, however, the strength of their alliance earned them their eliminations. During the Jack-In-The-Box test, a contestant was given the opportunity to eliminate three contestants. The contestant chose a contestant who had won an advantage in the next game as well as Stephen, the influence agent in his alliance, and Rick, Stephen's second. In a shock to Stephen, he does not realize his number has been called and in a later confessional states that he did not think the contestant who eliminated him even knew who he was.

Rick acknowledges that while he is not the leader in his alliance, he enjoys enabling the leader. Rick's position demonstrates

that network proximity to the influence agent may provide influence as individuals who are close to the agent are often viewed as being similar to that influence agent (Fink et al., 2015) and have a high level of importance in that cluster (Smith & Fink, 2015). While Rick's relationship with Stephen allows him to derive influence within the group despite serving as support to Stephen and not being an influence agent himself, his role as Stephen's second leads to his ousting. Alone, Rick, a 69-year-old physician, was not a threat. However, Rick's unrelenting devotion to Stephen, an influence agent, and what could only be viewed as a second-in-command status poses a threat to the other contestants.

Risk of Betrayal for Survival

By the very nature of the competition and game play, *Squid Game: The Challenge* sets contestants up to betray another contestant or their alliance. As such, RQ4 aims to answer, "What happens when a member is perceived to betray their alliance?" Given the extreme nature of betrayal, the response when found out can be significant. This falls in line with social influence, which argues betrayal can be catastrophic for substantial issues (Latané, 1996). During these situations, individuals are forced to reckon with the reality that their commitment and trust has been broken (Moscovici, 1991).

The first instance of overt betrayal to occur takes place in episode 2 during the game Dalgona. At the start of the game, contestants are not informed what game they would be playing but are instead told to form four lines. The contestants at the head of each line then enter a room with four shapes on the wall (a circle, a triangle, a star, and an umbrella) and told to select a shape for their entire line. The group realizes they are about to play Dalgona, a game that requires participants to remove a shape from a piece of brittle honeycomb candy using only a sewing needle. Due to the delicate nature of the game, contestants vie for simpler shapes. However, when each of the four contestants refuses to select the umbrella, they are all eliminated from the series and the next set of four takes their place. Spencer, contestant 299, is in the second set of contestants to enter the room. When Spencer agrees to select the umbrella to not be eliminated, his line ostracizes him. In the long run Spencer is not ostracized for long, however, as he does not survive Dalgona.

The fear of betrayal and elimination through the dorm games led to, according to Bee, "extreme reassurances" by contestants to their alliances (Ireland et al., 2023). While contestants yearn for the safety and comfort of others, extreme reassurances are a sign of weak bonds between contestants, and while the fear of ostracism is not

predominant, retaliation finds its role in the series. Attacks on a cluster that come from another cluster, i.e., an outgroup, are expected. However, an attack from within a cluster produces anger, and to remediate that anger, a retaliatory action is expected and executed (Mackie et al., 2009).

The most significant instance of betrayal and retaliation occurs in episodes 4 and 5 during the Vote and Jack-In-The-Box tests. During the Vote test all contestants are lined up in front of a panel of numbers. As contestants take their turn, they punch in the number of the contestant they feel should be eliminated from the show. The three contestants who receive the most votes are eliminated. Contestant 141, Dash, entered the number for Chaney, contestant 179, who serves as the influence agent of an alliance. In a confessional, Dash acknowledges that he voted for Chaney, but was lying to everyone, including Chaney, about who he voted for because he was afraid of retaliation. Dash then goes on to tell other players that he voted for Chaney trying to garner their support in eliminating Chaney in a future dorm test. Unbeknown to Dash, one of the contestants he tries to gain support from, Rachelle, contestant 080, is close to a member of Chaney's alliance. Rachelle tells Dash, "I don't know what you want me to say. You need to be careful in this place...Be careful because you do not want to have a target on you" (Ireland et al., 2023). Rachelle then goes on to tell Darius, contestant 176, a member of Chaney's alliance, "Dash. He was just talking about you guys' alliance. He basically just said that he voted for Chaney. He was basically saying that would've been our best strategy" (Ireland et al., 2023).

While Rachelle is not a member of Chaney's alliance, she is a part of Chaney's network. As a member of a tight knit group of contestants in which Darius is also a member, Rachelle has an indirect connection to Chaney. This cluster creates a social bond between Rachelle and Darius and is illustrative of DSIT, which postulates that clusters that are tight knit aim for compliance in an effort to manage distress (Fink et al., 2015). Darius, who feels anger towards Dash, opts to tell members of his alliance, including Chaney and Jesse, contestant 183, about the betrayal.

In the next dorm test, Jack-In-The-Box, five contestants are asked to volunteer, and Jesse volunteers himself. Each contestant is then told to stand behind one of six jack-in-the-boxes. In each jack-in-the-box is an instant elimination or a reward, including an advantage in the next game or the power to eliminate one contestant, two contestants, or three contestants. Jesse selects the jack-in-the-box that allows him to eliminate two contestants. Having avowed his continued support of Chaney in the previous test, Jesse's first elimination is Dash.

Alliance Future After the Loss of the Influence Agent

The final research question focuses on alliances which no longer have an influence agent by asking, “What happens to an alliance when the alliance loses its influence agent?” In essence, influence agents hold the central position in a network because they possess the social capital, perceived legitimacy, and persuasive abilities needed to shape the influence targets’ attitudes and behaviors (Smith & Fink, 2010, 2015). As clusters diminish in size and number, clusters which have lost their influence agent should be reabsorbed by the majority (Voinea, 2016). A renegotiation of the power structures between the majority and minority would be expected, with the majority appropriating the resources from the fractured clusters.

As witnessed by Stephen’s restructuring of his alliance not once but twice, an alliance which still has at its center the power of its influence agent may regroup and acquire new members. This is in line with research that illustrates that influence agents with greater persuasive impact are perceived to be more successful in gaining compliance from influence targets (Smith & Fink, 2015). Alternatively, when the dominance of an influence agent is eliminated, as is the case in Bryton’s alliance, the remaining members of the alliance without that central power position are absorbed by the majority. Rick summarizes this nicely when he states, “There’s several people out there that do have followers, and by removing them, the followers will scramble, and this might help the Gganbu Gang somehow get to the end” (Ireland et al., 2023). Unfortunately for Rick, as a competition, *Squid Game: The Challenge* was created to eliminate contestants until there is only one left.

Alternatively, in some situations when members of a cluster lose their influence agent and the membership of the cluster is still large enough, members might rally around another member of the cluster as the influence agent in order to regroup. After Stephen and Rick are ousted, Dan, contestant 204 and a member of the Gganbu Gang, continues to push for the Gganbu Gang’s survival. In this regard, Dan is ultimately attempting to take over the role of influence agent. In discussing the alliance with other remaining members, Dan notes, “The Gganbu Gang is absolutely rocked right now. The strategy is to regroup, pivot, redirect, and to not panic” (Ireland et al., 2023). Dan recognizes that the group is too visible and needs new members. However, by this point, Dan is without the eigenvector centrality and power of an influence agent or betweenness centrality and the number of influence targets to rebuild his alliance and to keep him protected and in the competition.

Squid Game: The Challenge and DSIT

As a case study, *Squid Game: The Challenge* illustrates the three factors of SIT and four forms of self-organization of DSIT. Though both SIT and DSIT have been tested and analyzed extensively via computer and mathematical models, this study aims to illustrate that the competition as a case study illustrates the effects of social impact. As the series starts, contestants cluster and consolidate into alliances based on correlations among themselves. The speed with which these alliances are created is due in part to the competition's limited time frame. However, the closeness of the contestants in the same dorm environment during the duration of the series as well as the number of contestants and strengths of personalities create an ideal atmosphere for the study of SIT and DSIT.

The research questions in this study seek to understand social connections, the creation and dissemination of clusters, and how individuals in clusters become vulnerable to both external and internal influences. As illustrated through *Squid Game: The Challenge*, when an influence agent is removed, a cluster may experience a dispersal event in which the influence targets are reabsorbed by the majority. In other circumstances, an influence target may step up and seek to hold the cluster together. However, the persuasive strength and power of an influence agent is necessary for a cluster's survival and influence targets' continued protection.

Limitations

Contrary to previous findings based on mathematical models, this study reinforces SIT and DSIT findings with a mediated situational scenario on how clusters are consolidated and disperse. *Squid Game: The Challenge* being a reality competition, however, is a significant limitation of this study as the series' directors and producers choose what they want the audience to see, which is often sensationalized. Without the series' raw footage, the audience is unaware of how much of what occurs is based in reality. For example, while the audience is aware that Bryton has a big personality, the events that take place in his alliance are unclear. As such, the audience does not know if contrary to his statements regarding looking out for himself if he sought out like minded individuals.

An additional limitation is related to contestant cultures. While the majority of the contestants are from the United States and this is a British series, there are several contestants from other parts of the world. Differences within these contestant's cultures were often not acknowledged or highlighted. Instead, the series focused on the actions

that were typical within US culture, such as extensive discussion as a means of providing social and emotional support (Cai et al., 2012).

The final limitation is the reality show's artificial environment. DSIT requires force as an influence tactic to consolidate the groups. However, the force in *Squid Game: The Challenge* is not necessarily a natural one and instead is created in response to the competition's game play and dorm tests. This requires contestants to behave in such a way that they may not behave otherwise. Mothi explains, "My game plan is to get to know as many players as I can. Making friends in here way faster than I do in the outside world because it's always good to be in a big group, and I really do feel it will just help me in here" (Ireland et al., 2023). This acknowledges the presence of social impact, while negating to recognize the unnatural competition environment.

Conclusion

Utilizing social impact theory, dynamic social impact theory, and persuasiveness in social networking, this paper explores social impact in a situational scenario by utilizing the popular Netflix reality competition *Squid Game: The Challenge* as a case study. An analysis of the series finds that SIT and DSIT are illustrated throughout the competition. The development of social connections among series' contestants is important for their survival and comfort throughout the competition. However, contestants who are too visible become a threat to other contestants and are vulnerable to elimination. Furthermore, in instances when a contestant betrays their alliance, retaliation against that contestant often takes place.

Within the series, an alliance's survival is contingent upon the status of its influence agent. If the influence agent is eliminated, the survival of the alliance is not guaranteed. When this transpires, members of the alliance are either absorbed by the majority or eliminated due to their failure to attain new social connections, ultimately dispersing the alliance. If an alliance experiences casualties and the influence agent is still a member, the influence agent can restructure, rebuild, and regroup. Supporting previous SIT and DSIT research, this case study demonstrates DSIT dynamics in a mediated social environment through its exposure of the conditions in which social clustering, cluster consolidation, and cluster dispersal may occur.

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Understanding Dementia Challenges in Rural Ghana: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: Dementia poses an escalating public health challenge in Ghana due to an expanding aging population, yet rural awareness remains critically low. Guided by Mohan Dutta's Culture-Centered Approach (CCA), this PRISMA-compliant qualitative systematic review synthesized ten peer-reviewed articles to examine cultural perceptions and lived experiences surrounding dementia in rural Ghana. The findings highlight that cognitive decline is widely misattributed to witchcraft or normalized as standard aging. Witchcraft misconceptions subject individuals—especially older women—to severe stigmatization, social exclusion, physical abuse, and banishment to "witch camps". Meanwhile, normalizing symptoms as ordinary aging delays critical medical care and shifts family decision-making away from patients. Furthermore, structural deficits and linear, top-down health interventions fail due to a lack of cultural grounding. Effectively addressing dementia in rural Ghana requires community-centered, participatory strategies that engage local populations to eliminate stigma and foster culturally appropriate geriatric care.

Introduction

Dementia encompasses a range of degenerative and terminal brain disorders with cognitive decline, including Alzheimer's disease, vascular dementia, and Lewy body dementia (Goodman et al., 2017). Globally, dementia has been a critical public health issue for many years, with the numbers rising drastically, especially within low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). A report by the World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that about 57 million people were affected by dementia globally, with over 10 million new cases every year, and there is a projection of an escalation to a staggering 158 million by 2050 (Nichols et al., 2022).

In developed countries, access to health care and information related to dementia is available, which ultimately leads to better care and management. Additionally, the burgeoning of scholarships from the Global North, along with a wealth of knowledge, contributes to a good understanding of dementia (Prince, 2000). However, in

developing countries such as Ghana, awareness is low and tends to decline among many people, including the youth (Spittel et al., 2021). There is limited knowledge on dementia, which eventually leads to a lot of problems, including stigmatization (Adebisi & Salawu, 2023). According to Adebisi and Salawu (2023), inadequate knowledge has led to many misconceptions about dementia, including the belief that it is witchcraft, leading to its stigmatization across Sub-Saharan Africa. Scholars have called for more efforts in creating awareness about dementia and its symptoms through campaigns to dispel myths linking the illness to witchcraft and demonic possession (Adebisi & Salawu, 2023).

Despite the increasing number of dementia cases in Ghana, awareness tends to be low, especially in rural Ghana. Many studies have linked dementia challenges to low literacy, which has contributed to various problems, including stigma, death, isolation, and more (Sasu, 2022; Spittel et al., 2021). Ghana's situation is worrying due to the expanding elderly population (Sasu, 2022). Aging comes with all forms of infirmities, including dementia, and there is a need for Ghana to identify workable strategies to safeguard the senior population. For instance, scholars such as Kpessa-Whyte (2018) argue that the lack of policy attention to medical care, coupled with the absence of training facilities for geriatric care, makes Ghana's preparedness towards a potential aging crisis questionable. Since 2010, cases of dementia have increased, with a record of over 976,000 in Ghana's population aged 65 years and above in 2020 (Sasu, 2023). According to Sasu (2022), Ghana reported over 8,000 dementia cases in 2019, which was an increment from 7,700 in 2018. These figures might look small, but it is important to note that hospital attendance is used to calculate them, which typically excludes those living in rural and remote areas of Ghana, where people do not have access to health facilities. Most rural Ghanaians with dementia do not report to hospitals due to a lack of information, financial hardship, and other social determinants of health (Agyeman et al., 2019).

Despite the emerging challenges concerning dementia within Ghana, especially in the rural areas, there is little research on dementia conceptions and care. According to Nyame et al. (2019), there is a need for dementia research in Ghana. Ghana has an intricate situation where dementia is ingrained in cultural practices, with a knowledge gap, and structural challenges that impact care, particularly in rural areas. Dementia in rural Ghana remains a poorly understood health issue, which has led to a significant impact on people living with dementia, their caregivers, and the healthcare system. The rationale for this study is to gain insight into how Ghanaians perceive and discuss dementia.

By doing so, this study will also understand the intricate nature of cultural beliefs, societal attitudes, and the various obstacles encountered by individuals with dementia and their caregivers. Additionally, it attempts to highlight areas where further research is needed and makes recommendations for advancing culturally appropriate solutions for dementia care in Ghana.

Understanding dementia in Ghanaian culture is essential for informing policies, shaping healthcare practices, and contributing to the global discourse on culturally informed dementia care by illuminating the influence of culture on dementia, reducing stigma, and enabling interventions that reflect Ghanaian society's diverse values and norms.

Literature Review

Concept of Witchcraft in Ghana

Opoku (2018) asserts that spirituality in Ghana has become an increasingly important and complex concept over the years. According to the author, the belief in spirituality has served as a means of creating meaning in one's life by fostering hope and faith in the unknown, thereby promoting an individual's general well-being. These beliefs have extended to attributing all life events, whether good or bad, to spirituality, encompassing gods, witchcraft, and other supernatural forces.

There are mysteries and superstitions surrounding witchcraft in Ghana. Ghanaians believe in the existence of witchcraft (Agyapong, 2020). According to the author, beliefs in the power of witchcraft are deeply embedded in Ghanaian culture, which significantly impedes both individual and national progress (Agyapong, 2020). The widely held belief in Ghana is that witches fly at night by leaving their bodies to operate in a different realm, like normal humans do during the day. A study by Onyinah (2002) suggested that the belief is, during the night, their *akra* (souls) leave their physical bodies and fly into meetings. Witches are often blamed for misfortunes, disasters, social instability, mishaps, illnesses, and other bad life events. Bekoe (2016), in this study, reveals that witches are also believed to celebrate and feast during Christmas, where they transform victims into animals before consuming them; in this case, their prey could die slowly or have an accident and die instantly. The issue is that some Ghanaians have abdicated all their responsibilities and roles, instead blaming witches when misfortunes occur. This erroneously renders Ghanaians powerless to address their problems because a power beyond their reach controls their affairs. The issue of witchcraft is prevalent in rural areas where there is a high illiteracy rate. Eventually, what happens is that when there is an elderly person in the family who becomes

demented, they are blamed for all the woes in the household. Witchcraft beliefs can generate uncertainty and disagreement among family members, churches, and society (Mutaru, 2019).

Over the years, dementia and other mental health ailments among the older population have been perceived as witchcraft in Ghana (Mabefam & Appau, 2020). People in rural Ghana, where health literacy is low, tend to perceive dementia as witchcraft or a punishment for evil deeds (Spittel, 2014). This negative perception, which is culturally ingrained, usually leads to practices such as marginalization, stereotyping, and isolation. These have been courted for criticism due to the bad treatment inflicted on older women who have been confined to witch camps (Amnesty International, 2025).

Cultural Understanding of Dementia in Ghana

Ghana has a long-standing history when it comes to dementia patients and the societal maltreatment meted out to them. Over the years, dementia and other mental health ailments among the older population have been perceived as witchcraft in Ghana (Spittel et al., 2019). This misconception has been attributed to a lack of awareness and education. In most cases, dementia patients are seen as suffering from a curse from the gods or punishment for their evil deeds during their youth that has come back to haunt them. This notion is prevalent in rural areas of Ghana, making it questionable what efforts have been made to eliminate this perception. For instance, people in the northern part of Ghana have what is called witchcraft camps, where older women who are suffering from various mental health issues, including dementia have been camped (Yakubu, 2022). There have been various news reports over the years that have critiqued the bad treatment inflicted on these old women who have been confined at the witchcraft camp in the Northern Region. According to a report by the Guardian (2010), a 72-year-old Ghanaian woman was burned to death for being a witch. Regrettably, there are many other occurrences in which Ghanaians continue to attribute dementia to witchcraft. Consequently, these people are compelled to live lives of societal marginalization in these witch camps, where they are often exposed to physical abuse (Spittel et al., 2019).

The role of Healthcare Providers in Shaping Perceptions of dementia in Ghana

Healthcare providers play a crucial role in the dementia discourse in Ghana. The Ghanaian dementia discourse is closely linked to healthcare practitioners' communication strategies, which shape public perceptions. Unfortunately, in Ghana, there are not many

dementia care providers such as geriatricians and gerontologist (Agyeman, 2019). Research conducted by Koduah et al. (2019) emphasizes the critical role of healthcare professionals in shaping the narrative around mental health, including dementia, in Ghana. According to the authors, how care providers explain health issues and educate the public significantly influences societal attitudes and responses to mental health conditions. Similarly, Owusu-Boakyewaa (2011) examines the cultural dimensions of communication within healthcare environments in Ghana, emphasizing the importance of employing culturally centered strategies when dealing with dementia and other similar conditions.

Understanding these cultural nuances is crucial for healthcare providers to effectively manage their communication. Additionally, Anakwenze (2022) underscores the importance of community engagement and education by healthcare professionals in dispelling myths and fostering a supportive environment for individuals with dementia. The pivotal role of healthcare providers in influencing public perceptions of dementia cannot be underestimated.

Existing Dementia Campaigns

Despite global acknowledgment of dementia as a public health issue, Ghana lacks dementia-specific campaigns and initiatives. Dementia presents unique obstacles, especially in communities with limited awareness and resources (Agyeman, 2019). Studies show that there has been woefully inadequate awareness of dementia in Ghana, which has led to the mysteries surrounding it (Spittel et al., 2021; Spittel et al., 2019; Appiah, 2017). Poor public awareness of dementia limits early identification and treatment on the part of both patients and care providers.

Over the years, there have not been many campaigns on dementia in Ghana (Appiah, 2017). The few campaigns have been from the World Health Organization and other development organizations (Appiah, 2017; Spittel et al., 2019; Spittel et al., 2021). These campaigns from donor organizations are usually not culturally centered, so they typically result in failure. Dutta (2018) contended that interventions, policies, and communication for development and social change usually fail due to inadequate representation of the poor, the subalterns, and the marginalized. This situation has been the bane of Ghana's dementia care. The lack of focused campaigns reinforces the stigma and misunderstanding of dementia (Swaffer, 2014).

Ghana's dementia campaign and intervention gap demands a multifaceted approach through destigmatizing dementia, spreading awareness, and supporting patients.

Theoretical Framework: Culture-Centered Approach (CCA) by Mohan Dutta

The Culture-Centered Approach (CCA), coined by Mohan Dutta, is a critical theory that examines structures, culture, and the agency of marginalized people (2007). CCA advocates community-based participation rather than the traditional top-down approach through a cultural sensitivity lens (Dutta, 2007). Dutta (2018) argues that communication for development and social change often lacks adequate representation of the realities of subaltern groups. CCA promotes community involvement and knowledge creation by identifying problems and developing solutions to address them. In this case, the people at the margins are active participants in knowledge creation. CCA promotes community-based participation above top-down approaches where communication is usually linear (Dutta, 2020). CCA claims that development and social change programs, policies, and communication fail to represent the poor, subalterns, and disadvantaged (Dutta, 2018).

CCA is rooted in three main concepts: structure, culture, and agency. Structure refers to the systems of organizing that enable or constrain access to resources (Dutta, 2014, p. 4). Structure examines how systems of organization enable or constrain access to resources (Dutta, 2014, p. 251). Structures can make certain changes in policy appear feasible, while making others seem impossible. This resource system includes economic, family, gender, political, and physical relationships that shape who in a community can access resources and who is excluded. Culture comes as a dynamic site for meaning making, entering into active negotiation with structures (Dutta, 2014, p. 251). Dutta (2007) claims that CCA recognizes culture as a dynamic, multidimensional element that significantly affects health behaviors, attitudes, and outcomes.

Since structure and culture are in constant contention, agency appears as the entry point for community members to navigate and negotiate structures and culture (Dutta, 2014, p. 251). Agency, therefore, offers communities a platform to express the structural challenges they encounter and to envision new possibilities that arise from their culture.

CCA proposes community engagement (Dutta, 2008) and addresses power dynamics (Dutta, 2013) as a community-centered approach. Local communities are included in healthcare design, implementation, and assessment to ensure community-led, culturally centered projects from the start. In a country like Ghana, where cultural practices are highly esteemed, interventions and policies must be

tailored to acknowledge the cultural intricacies of people to avoid facing challenges. It is important to understand the lived experiences of cultural members to provide solutions for them. The mistake of the dominant organizations is that they believe they know what is best for those who have lived the experience. Such erroneous stances bring program and intervention impositions which end up impacting its effectiveness. Participation and dialogue are key when it comes to cultural members. Evidence in the literature indicates that only a few dementia campaigns exist in rural Ghana (Spittel et al., 2019). Yet many programs and interventions have continued to fail over the years because they do not resonate with the people. Most campaigns are geared towards individual behavior change rather than tackling the structural factors that enable or constrain people. The literature reviewed helped to understand how dementia has been handled in Ghana and presents the opportunity to probe further questions to add to the knowledge of dementia:

RQ1: How is dementia perceived in the Ghanaian cultural context?

RQ2: What are the lived experiences of individuals with dementia in Ghana?

Methodology

Research Design

The research used a qualitative approach to analyze data. Data for this systematic literature review were gathered primarily through secondary sources, PubMed, BMC, Google Scholar, and Websites. A Boolean search was conducted for alternative terms such as 'dementia,' 'caregiving,' 'culture,' 'older adults,' and 'Ghana.' Due to the nature of the study, data were gathered using purposive sampling. We employed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) for the study. We then critically reviewed online resources from multiple journal publications on dementia to gain a comprehensive understanding of perceptions of dementia in Ghana and of lived experiences from the data. Given the research objectives, purposive sampling was more appropriate as it enabled the deliberate selection of articles that met the criteria for our study.

Data Collection Procedures

Identification of pertinent papers was achieved using the inclusion and exclusion criteria, as succinctly outlined in the PRISMA figure (Moher et al., 2009). The initial search on dementia in Ghana revealed 229 results. PubMed, 63; BMC, 77; Google Scholar, 89; and

Websites, 10. From the PRISMA Flow Chart, the databases were identified as n=229, and the websites as n=10; each abstract underwent screening. This was a critical step, as only a few papers focused on dementia in Ghana. Witchcraft was reported within the results of the study as an incidental finding. Full papers were then obtained (n = 10). The reasons for excluding databases: Reason1, studies were on other health issues with dementia mentioned in it, not specifically on dementia; Reason2, studies were conducted on dementia in Sub-Saharan Africa; Reason3, studies were on mental health with dementia sparsely mentioned in it, not specifically on dementia. For Websites, 9 out of the ten articles accessed did not fit into the criteria as the dates were beyond ten years.

Search Limits:

Date Limit: For this study, we decided to use articles from the past decade to ensure the issues remain relevant. It was appropriate to have up-to-date and most recent findings and an idea of the recent scholarly discussions on dementia in Ghana.

Language: We purposively selected studies that were conducted in English.

Publication limits: We sourced only academic papers, gray literature, peer-reviewed journal articles, and news articles. This was to ensure that the sources were reliable.

Population Limits: We sourced only articles specifically about dementia.

Geographic limits: This study used articles that were published in Ghana.

Data Analysis Process and Thematic Analysis Process

The generated data was analyzed using thematic analysis based on the study's objectives. This is a form of analysis with the theme as its unit of analysis, which looks across data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis was conducted inductively, deriving codes and building general themes from the collected data.

The study adopted the thematic analysis steps guide from Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive framework. In this case, the process begins by looking for patterns of meanings and issues of interest in the data. Each article was reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity, and line-by-line coding was conducted to identify recurring

patterns and meaning units related to dementia, caregiving, culture, misconceptions and structural issues. We first familiarized ourselves with the data, generated initial codes, which were then grouped into broader categories. We searched for themes, reviewed themes, defined and named themes, and produced the report.

To enhance analytic rigor and trustworthiness, multiple strategies were employed, including prolonged engagement with articles and emerging codes, checking with co-authors to validate thematic interpretations, triangulation across articles, and the maintenance of reflexive analytic memos throughout the analytic process.

Analysis and Discussion

This section analyzes cultural perceptions of dementia in Ghana and the lived experiences related to dementia. The analysis also highlights how dementia has been discussed in academia. Codes generated from ten articles were put together to create themes responding to the research questions. The themes are a) Misconceptions leading to poor care and management (b) Normalization of dementia (c) Stigmatization, and (d) Exclusion and Poor Care.

Research Question 1: How is dementia perceived in the Ghanaian cultural context?

Theme: Misconceptions and the belief that rural is witchcraft as part of Ghana's culture

Some of the codes include *bewitchment*, *witch*, *she does not sleep at night*, *talks to herself*, *sees things*, and *is strange*. It emerged from the various articles reviewed that there is a culture-related misunderstanding between dementia and witchcraft that has eventually become a challenge to correct, especially in rural Ghana. Two of the articles reviewed, which were Agyeman (2019) and Spittel et al. (2019) revealed a dearth of knowledge about dementia in Ghana due to low awareness. Studies show that dementia education and sensitization are very low, especially in rural Ghana, which has led to a lot of misconceptions (Spittel et al., 2019; Spittel et al., 2021)

Unlike the developed countries that have proper care and management for dementia, awareness is lacking in Ghana, with a high illiteracy rate contributing to a generational challenge of misconceptions about dementia (Agyeman et al., 2019). In their study, Agyeman et al. (2019) reveal that the prevailing viewpoint among some of their study participants attributed potential cognitive impairment symptoms of elderly individuals to being predominantly caused by

supernatural forces or witchcraft. This has been the norm over the years, especially in rural Ghana. When someone begins to show signs of dementia, they attribute it to witchcraft and proceed to a church, a traditional healer, or a deity for divine intervention.

I just remembered...hmmm...there are some things in this household that he cannot lift, but I noticed that sometimes he will be filled with some powers and lift those things like some easy thing...sometimes too he will run and climb very tall trees...I realized that something was wrong with him...I contacted my uncle at Baniantwe, and he said that at first, dwarves wanted to possess him, and he did not like it, so that is why he sometimes behaves like that...for me, I realized it was the devil's disease. I started looking for help early (Agyeman, 2019).

“Normally when dementia occurs in the aged, people often attribute it to witchcraft neglecting them. Most old people in Ghana with dementia are being classified as witches and are being maltreated at all times,” (Spittel et. al., 2019).

Such stories about older adults being possessed by evil spirits are very popular in rural Ghana, which unfortunately delays early care, as families would explore other alternative care before proceeding to hospitals. Research indicates that existing cultural perceptions and misconceptions continue to be a challenge, ultimately hindering timely diagnosis and care due to delays in hospital visits (Spittel et al., 2021; Yalley et al., 2024). The misconceptions and beliefs about witchcraft in Ghana is not news, but what is surprising is the lack of awareness among the youth who are educated (Spittel et al., 2021). According to Appiah (2023), superstition and ignorance are the factors that influence students' reactions toward dementia. He concluded that educating Junior High School and Senior High School students will be an effective way to promote awareness of dementia in the future.

These misconceptions about dementia have brought social stigma and isolation in rural Ghana (Abdulai, 2025; Agyeman, 2019). These include negative attitudes, shaming, and a form of social disapproval that people with dementia face. The belief is that because witchcraft is associated with evil, older adults who are suspected of being witches are feared, deemed as dangerous, and morally condemned. Spittel et al. (2021) called for urgent attention to be paid to the concept of witchcraft. We can infer, through a cultural centered approach, that these instances reflect more than a lack of medical

knowledge. Communication about dementia is integrated within a broader cultural and social context. Addressing it from these grassroots is important in reducing aspects of stigma and isolation.

Normalization of Dementia

Ghana is a country where respect for the elderly is a moral obligation that is instilled in everyone. Additionally, because respect is central in the Ghanaian culture, people are mindful of their words, especially when addressing older individuals (Van der Geest, 2002). In many Ghanaian households, age generally confers authority, and people are expected to behave in ways that command respect. Unfortunately, dementia comes with behavioral changes and disorientation, which undermine that status, as patients often act in questionable ways that can lead to ridicule and disrespect. Families of people living with dementia who notice early signs tend to dismiss them and interpret memory loss as part of aging, which reduces overt stigma but secretly excludes elders from decision-making (Agyeman et al., 2019; Dako-Gyeke & Asumang, 2013). The notion is that the person is no longer fit to be at the decision-making table, and as cognitive decline worsens, decision-making shifts entirely to family members, which is very normal in Ghana (Agyeman, 2019). For instance, Agyeman (2019) found that participants in her study could not distinguish between behavioral changes that were due to normal aging and those due to a medical issue, e.g., dementia. (Agyeman, 2019) Excerpts from one of the articles reveal:

You know when you buy something new and you use it for a long time it becomes old...it does not remain like you bought it. I think that is how the human brain is...when you are young it works well but when you grow old it does not work well...so when someone becomes old then every part of the body too becomes old (Agyeman et al., 2019).

Participants could not differentiate between behavior symptoms that were due to normal aging and those due to a medical issue, such as, dementia. Caregivers from all 10 households reported their older relative experience forgetfulness or memory loss in several ways (Agyeman, 2019). Changes in behavior and actions in elderly people were recognized but attributed to “normal ageing.” (Agyeman, 2019)

Normalizing signs of dementia as aging have become a common thing out of respect. People do not want to undermine or question the behavior of older adults when things are going wrong (Agyeman et al., 2019). Additionally, the culture of respect for older adults has often led to misattribution of mental health disorders among older adults and delayed help-seeking in Ghana. Therefore, when an older person starts getting confused, becomes irrational, or talks incoherently or ridiculously, people tend to disregard it out of respect for elders. In most rural parts of Ghana, memory loss is often viewed as a symptom of old age, driven by respect, good intentions toward the person, and the desire to maintain social identity within the family. This can lead to delayed health-seeking (Agyeman et al., 2019). This masking of impending cognitive challenges and the postponement of assessment tend to worsen the condition before patients visit health facilities (Abdulai, 2025). Surprisingly, Abdulai (2025) reveals that in the Northern Region of Ghana, some care providers also hold these perceptions about dementia being a supernatural illness and a normal illness associated with aging. This illustrates how deeply ingrained such beliefs are in the Ghanaian settings, thereby contributing to the delay in addressing dementia symptoms. For instance, Aryee (2024) has called for the need to integrate culturally appropriate communication approaches to raise awareness in Ghana. Other scholars, like Duodu et al. (2024) have called for a more person-centered communication approach to effectively interact and care for persons living with dementia.

Research Question 2: What are the lived experiences of individuals with dementia in Ghana?

Stigmatization

Over the years, dementia misconceptions have brought about social stigma, which has been a pervasive practice in rural Ghana (Abdulai, 2025; Agyeman, 2019). The belief is that because dementia is associated with witchcraft, which is evil, older adults who are suspected of being witches are feared, deemed as dangerous, and morally condemned. In rural Ghana, the widespread misconception, which associates dementia with witchcraft rather than a medical issue, causes humiliation to families, further stigmatizing those who are afflicted (Boateng, 2022). Conversations regarding dementia are frequently veiled and usually held in secrecy, as families are often worried about social repercussions and criticism if they admit their loved ones have the condition or seek assistance (Abdulai, 2025).

Families often choose to conceal the condition of their loved ones from the community to avoid stigma, mockery, gossip, and social shame.

Sometimes some of the young people tease him but they are not disrespectful. The way he speaks ... always calling death and saying he will die, he will die, something small then he will say he will die. I keep on telling him that he will not die. If he will die, then on the spot he will die ... right now we do not consider anything he says ... even when he is asking you for money he will say give him ‘Simpoa’ [previous currency that was being used]... so they make fun of him. Had it not been that he is old we will say he is mad.” (Agyeman et al., 2019)

“There is a mentality that when somebody gets the age of 60 the person is useless. The person should just go home and sit somewhere and wait for the time for them to die,” (Spittel et al., 2019).

Research indicates that existing misconceptions on dementia perpetuate stigmatization, ultimately hindering timely detection and proper care (Spittel et al., 2021; Yalley et al., 2024). Sasu (2022) argues that illiteracy in Ghana contributes to a multitude of dementia problems, including a lack of awareness, stigma, isolation, and death. For example, in northern Ghana, there are witchcraft camps where people suffering from various mental health issues, including dementia, are kept (Yakubu, 2022). Instead of seeking early attention, these people are left to their fate to suffer in loneliness, and those who are lucky enough to stay at home with their families are kept away from social interactions to avoid shame. Spittel et al. (2010) attributed the barrage of dementia challenges, including stigma, to a lack of awareness. This demands an urgent need for awareness creation on dementia through effective communication strategies that resonate with cultural members. The lack of public education on dementia contributes mainly to speculation (Appiah, 2023; Spittel et al., 2021; Spittel et al., 2019). The challenge of most health communication campaigns is the use of dominant top-down approaches and ideals that often do not work with cultural members (Dutta, 2016). Dementia stigmatization has been a generational practice which demands a participatory, culturally centered research and communication approach to understand the perspectives of people and identify workable solutions.

Social Exclusion and Poor Care

Social exclusion frequently results from accusations of witchcraft, which is usually caused by dementia. In some parts of Ghana, controversies about dementia may result in the expulsion of those accused from their communities and their forced relocation to secluded regions referred to as "witch camps," (Agazue, 2021). According to Agazue (2021), as of 2019, witchcraft camps still existed in Ghana, particularly in Northern Ghana. The reality is that most family and friends may choose to distance themselves from those who are accused of practicing witchcraft due to the stigmatization that accompanies such accusations. This is not a unique situation to Ghana. A study by Mkhonto and Hanssen (2018) from Tanzania revealed that homeowners feared leasing to individuals with dementia and their families due to beliefs in witchcraft accusations.

Also, when someone is sick with dementia, the person becomes dependent, so those who do not have close relatives are abandoned to die (Spittel et al., 2021). When a person shows signs of dementia, they are asked to stay home when there is a social gathering. The gatherings serve as inclusive environments that facilitate the restoration of friendships and promote psychological well-being, but dementia patients do not get that support. Adjei Gyimah and colleagues' article amplified how patients and carers can feel isolated because of society (Adjei Gyimah et al., 2019).

With the reaction from family, there is not any problem, but most of my friends insist that I should take my wife to her family house, because I have done my part in caring for her. With all the pressure from friends, I still believe that is not right to do because it is not her fault for this condition. So, I always become sad of the way my friend behaves and says about my wife. So recently they do not come and visit me again, even with Kotoko [A football team in Kumasi] meeting. I mainly go alone as we went together for years (Adjei Gyimah et al., 2019).

Some of these people are branded as witches and wizards and are left alone by their families. We turn to neglect them and call them witches. People neglect them due to problem associated with ageing and relate it with witchcraft (Spittel et al., 2019).

The situation of exclusion and isolation is worst in the Northern part of Ghana, where the witchcraft camps are located. For instance, in Dagbamba land, northern Ghana, people who were accused of being witches are banished by village chiefs and local elders (Mutaru, 2019). These people, primarily women, are left alone without support from their families and communities since it is the tradition.

Findings show that inadequate awareness, education, and campaigns on dementia in Ghana are prevalent, which is a structural issue, not an individual behavioral issue, as is often communicated by dominant organizations. Oftentimes, the poor cultural members at the margins are blamed for such systemic issues, rather than the structures that forced them to make hard choices and improvise. Therefore, international and donor organizations that implement campaigns and interventions must be aware that without considering the cultural context of the people they serve could ultimately render the projects ineffective. Consequently, the need to engage with the cultural members, understand their situation, and contextualize dementia campaigns and policies should not be underestimated. This is mainly because the realities of their experience are different from what outsiders perceive. Mutura (2019) suggested that there is a need for intervention and policies to understand the cultural dynamics. This is in tandem with the assertion of Dutta (2007) that advocates community engagement and participation against the dominant conventional top-down approach where policies are drafted at the top and implemented. Culture is at the core of every society, and it is usually challenging to get people to change their way of life because of entrenched beliefs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

After reviewing all ten articles systematically, this study found that many of the issues concerning dementia in Ghana have cultural underpinnings which bleed into the healthcare system. It is therefore imperative to understand how these misconceptions came into existence and identify the structural issues that enable or constrain them to provide workable solutions. Often, dominant and hegemonic structures tend to blame a community for their actions or inactions without context or evaluation of existing structural issues.

This study recommends the following approaches that can be useful to improve dementia care in Ghana. There is a need to increase dementia awareness in Ghana, especially in rural Ghana. As misconceptions continue to exist, it is important to highlight the use of culturally appropriate communication strategies when addressing dementia. The government should consciously provide all the necessary

resources for public education to reduce dementia misconceptions in Ghana.

Achieving social change is not possible when ordinary citizens have been sidelined in discursive spaces and culture has been relegated. Dementia is a complex health and social issue that is deeply rooted in Ghana's culture, especially in rural areas. It can only be tackled by recognizing the place of culture and traditions in finding workable solutions. The usual top-down approach to communication, research, programs, and interventions, which is often a one-size-fits-all, will not work in a setting where culture plays a significant role in health-seeking behaviors. A participatory approach to communication in which citizens engage in dialogue and are included in discursive spaces is necessary for social change.

Care providers are extremely important in offering care and attention to people with dementia and other mental health-related conditions. This requires appropriate patient-provider and caregiver communication training for care providers to better care for people suffering and their families. This is imperative to improve health outcomes and quality of life.

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Editors Forum

A Call for Collaboration Among Professionals: Opening Dialogues About Our Professional Organizations

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Introduction

Since entering the communication discipline I have always been told how important membership and participation in professional organizations is for all. However, in recent years I've questioned this logic. If our professional organizations are so important, why does there seem to be fewer members, less engagement, and higher dissatisfaction with services provided, especially our state professional organizations? I do not have this data, but it's something I feel. From what I can see, there seems to be a desire to serve in national positions such as with the National Communication Association (NCA), I imagine for building one's resume. There's even some desire to serve in senior positions in regional associations, but less desire to serve as a program planner for a small interest group or division or to lead state associations. My concern is what I perceive as a lack of participation and leadership within state level organizations. That's not to say that our state associations have poor leaders; it just seems like sometimes we rotate through people who will raise their hands after a fair amount of coaxing. Members, our colleagues and friends, need more from all of us, especially those in positions of power and privilege to serve.

State associations need to demonstrate that they serve the needs of their members, which was the inspiration of this Editor's Forum. What is the future of our state associations if it seems that there are fewer active members, particularly at a time of political and social challenge? The authors that have responded have given a clear indication that our state associations need to show they are serving member needs. While each have offered their own answer as to how, I wish to add one additional thing for our association members and leaders to consider; the labor of serving.

State associations need more active members and leaders. I've been a member in each of the state associations for which I state I have lived; Iowa, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and back to Iowa. In my experience, there seems to be fewer and fewer individuals that can step up and serve in leadership positions and fewer individuals showing up for state conferences in the past. While a graduate student, I thought serving as a program planner for the NCA would benefit my career

most, but I still submitted and presented at the state conference when I could. When I became a faculty member, I continued serving the NCA and the Central States Communication Association (CSCA) but decided to take on a leadership role in my state association. Without people to put in the labor, the value of our state associations is diminished, regional and national associations become weaker as a result from the lack of local networks, and members of our discipline that need the most support are left without the power to effect change in their classrooms, their research, or their institutions.

The work of state associations does not just happen; there is someone doing the work and giving of their labor. Too often, I see graduate students or newly minted teacher-scholars being pressured into taking on state association leadership roles because “it will be good for them,” or “it will help them build their resume.” Yes, both are valid arguments, but what happens when these individuals take on more than they can handle as many are apt to as they begin to build their career? Is it just for more privileged scholars to put the burden on the newest members or those in the most precarious positions? And when some inevitably are unable to do the full amount of work needed due to these material conditions, are members that are already financially at risk and have little time themselves going to keep paying or participating when they don’t get the value promised? Many have answered no. And what about more senior colleagues that say something like their duties with a regional or national entity are more important? The work of state associations needs to be taken more seriously and needs to be appreciated more.

I do not wish to be an extremist. What I am advocating for is a serious discussion about how to strengthen our state associations and recognize the work real people put into their success; into our success as a discipline. As noted by the authors in the forum, many state associations are doing an effective job or as effective a job as they can. Many of us that serve our state associations almost prefer serving locally because of the real human connections made between colleagues in our state or within our state associations. Labor is needed for our regional and national professional organizations too; this labor is also often unappreciated and done by vulnerable peoples as well. Service work is often unrecognized, but we can do better as a discipline and as leaders in our professional organizations.

To that end, please let me thank my colleagues in the Iowa Communication Association, our leaders and our members. They are what make the Iowa Communication Association such a great organization, and we are always pushing each other to grow. In addition, let me thank the editorial board members. Reviewers are often

perceived as adversarial to an author's intention to publish, and the work can be very arduous for very serious reviewers. I am very fortunate to have a group of dedicated reviewers; your work is appreciated. Finally, thank you to all the readers of the *Iowa Journal of Communication*. I hope that this issue meets the high standards of our association members and our readers. I also hope you find this Editor's Forum stimulating and perhaps inspirational. Our state associations are the foundation of our collective advocacy and the most direct line to support our colleagues and our students.

State Communication Associations as Local Advocacy Hubs: Reimagining Digital Presence in Service to Educators, Students, and Professionals

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Abstract: This essay examines how the public-facing presence of state communication associations, particularly their websites and social media accounts, shapes whether communication instructors and professionals perceive these organizations as relevant to their work. Drawing on a focused review of several state association websites and social media profiles, along with scholarship on professional associations, contingent faculty, K–12 professional learning, and nonprofit digital strategy, the essay identifies recurring patterns: visually dated sites, sparse or inward-facing information, and limited attention to K–12 teachers, contingent faculty, students, and practitioners. Rather than treating these features as evidence of apathy, the analysis situates them within the structural realities of small, volunteer-run, modestly funded organizations whose priorities have often centered on annual conferences. The essay argues that digital first impressions function as a key site where association missions, value propositions, and stakeholder commitments are communicated, or obscured. It then outlines feasible, low-cost strategies for improving alignment between public image and member needs, including revising audience-facing language, simplifying navigation, partnering with campus design or communication programs, and using social media for ongoing, two-way engagement. The conclusion contends that digital communication is not a cosmetic add-on but a central means by which state communication associations can clarify, enact, and sustain their purposes.

Introduction

For most of my thirty-five-year career in the communication industry and later in higher education, I never heard anyone mention a state communication association. I first became aware of them when I saw the call for papers for the *Iowa Journal of Communication Editor's Forum* special issue on this topic, which became my entry point into an unfamiliar layer of the discipline's institutional landscape. When I finally went looking for them, I did what most potential members would do first. I searched online. The results were underwhelming. Many association websites were visually dated and lacked sufficient industry information. They did not resemble organizations that specialize in strategic communication, nor did they immediately answer

the basic question a prospective member is silently asking, “Why should I care about this, and what would this do for me?”

The Importance of Value Proposition

Studies show that non-tenure-track and contingent faculty represent the group most likely to benefit from strong professional networks, yet they tend to have the fewest connections (Bain, 2026). Online and adjunct instructors say they value clear information about job opportunities, professional development, and ways to connect with colleagues. Still, they encounter real barriers, such as insufficient time, lower pay, and a lack of support from their institutions (Deuel, 2021; Janosik et al., 2006). Many communication instructors teach across multiple disciplines on several campuses, which further limits the time and energy they can devote to discovering and evaluating state-level organizations. Additionally, communication professionals working outside academia often seek associations that create networking opportunities, continuing education workshops, and visibility, but the existing literature offers little to suggest that state disciplinary associations are widely recognized in this role (Garrett, 2026).

This essay explores how state communication associations might better align their public presence, especially online, with the roles that professional organizations are expected to play. It focuses on four groups: K–12 instructors, undergraduate and graduate students, contingent faculty, and communication professionals outside academia. The central questions are what these groups need from a state-level association, how current public images fail to communicate that value, and what realistic steps could make associations more visible and relevant. The insights further examine the roles of professional associations, stakeholders' needs, the importance of digital footprint, and budget-friendly strategies to improve public communication.

In addressing these questions, the essay adopts a conceptual and reflective approach rather than reporting new empirical data (Burleigh et al., 2021). Literature reviews on professional associations and accreditation, scholarship, reports on contingent faculty and professional development, and research on nonprofit and academic digital presence provide insights (Sanders, 2025). The argument proceeds in four stages. First, how state communication associations typically operate, and how their structures and funding patterns shape what they prioritize. Second, the perspectives and needs of different stakeholder groups who are often underserved in association messaging are considered, drawing on existing research on faculty and practitioner development. Third, the function of digital presence is examined. Not as a cosmetic concern but as an indicator of whose interests the

association imagines itself serving and how it understands its public obligations. Finally, concrete, low-cost strategies are evaluated. Steps are identified for reimagining state associations' public image and clarifying their value proposition, consistent with the best practices identified in the literature on nonprofit and academic communication.

Although this essay is primarily conceptual and reflective, the analysis is informed by a small, illustrative review of publicly accessible websites and social media accounts for several state-level communication associations in different regions of the United States. This review focused on homepages, "About" and membership pages, and recent activity on at least one social media platform for each association, with attention to navigation, mobile responsiveness, audience address, and the visibility of opportunities for K–12 teachers, students, contingent faculty, and practitioners. The goal was not to produce a systematic content analysis, but to identify common digital communication patterns that could be interpreted in light of existing research on professional associations and nonprofit online presence.

Professional Associations and Their Intended Roles

Professional associations serve as vital organizational structures that support field advancement and professional integrity as well as establish collaborative networks that extend past individual institutions (Appedu et al., 2025; Fernandez & Castellanos, 2022). By convening diverse stakeholders, from newly practicing professionals to experienced experts, these organizations enable knowledge sharing, mentorship, and collective problem-solving (Hakvoort et al., 2022). This collaborative function strengthens the profession's capacity to respond to emerging challenges and evolving practice demands. The structured support that professional associations provide for continuing professional development demonstrates their critical importance as custodians of professional quality and practitioners' sustained excellence. Janosik et al. (2006), for example, emphasize that professional associations have an ethical obligation to "ensure the quality of professional preparation and practice" by offering continuing professional education and recognizing practitioners who invest in improving their knowledge and skills.

In addition to development and standard-setting, professional associations are frequently described as sites where members build a sense of belonging and a collective voice. Research on early-career professionals shows that associations can foster mentoring relationships, help newcomers navigate complex career paths, and provide platforms for recognition and leadership that may be unavailable within a single workplace (Janke et al., 2021). Within

higher education, commentators note that associations often play important roles in shaping policy conversations, organizing responses to emerging challenges, and representing their members' interests in broader public arenas (Freeman & Evans, 2016). When these functions are localized, state-level associations are positioned to translate broad disciplinary commitments into forms that make sense within specific regulatory environments, school systems, and regional labor markets.

However, experts in digital strategy and nonprofit communication warn that these responsibilities are increasingly dependent on how well organizations present themselves online (Višnjić-Jevtić & Bel, 2024). Although many academic groups carry out worthwhile work, Sanders (2025) contends that they have a brand issue. A website or social media profile serves as the main medium for communicating an association's mission, values, and possibilities, and for many prospective members, it is their first and perhaps only point of contact. Recent work on nonprofit and academic digital presence argues that an organization's web presence is no longer a "nice to have" but a core component of how it delivers on its mission, engages stakeholders, and supports advocacy and education. When professional associations aspire to foster community, provide development, and represent a field, the way they use digital tools becomes part of their professional responsibility, not merely a matter of aesthetics.

Key Stakeholder Groups and Their Needs

State communication associations must make themselves relevant to four key groups: K–12 educators, undergraduate and graduate students, contingent faculty, and communication professionals outside academia (Moore, 2026). K–12 teachers are central stakeholders because they are often responsible for introducing students to public speaking, debate, media literacy, and collaborative communication skills, even when these are embedded in English or social studies courses. Research on K–12 professional learning emphasizes that teachers value timely, flexible, and closely aligned development opportunities that support their curricular responsibilities and local standards. When professional development is disconnected from classroom realities, teachers are less likely to participate or to see it as worth their scarce time and resources. For state communication associations, this suggests that engagement with K–12 educators will be strongest when offerings are clearly tied to practical teaching needs, scheduled around school calendars, and recognized within existing professional learning systems.

Undergraduate and graduate students in communication also stand to benefit from well-designed association engagement. Studies of

graduate student networking and professional socialization highlight the importance of early connections to disciplinary communities through conferences, mentoring, and participation in professional organizations (Weidman & Stein, 2003; Duran & Allen, 2019). When associations create accessible entry points, such as reduced dues, student presentation venues, and targeted professional development, students can begin to see themselves as members of a broader disciplinary community rather than as isolated learners in a single program (Willis, 2026).

Contingent instructors frequently report having limited access to professional development opportunities and coordinated onboarding (Miller & Swanson, 2025; Stover, 2026). While they appreciate the training they receive, particularly in learning management systems and classroom technology, adjunct faculty perceive significant gaps in institutional support. Many agree that further preparation is necessary to succeed in their teaching roles (Arnold & Stroup, 2026). Earnshaw and Al-Sharif (2025) contend that online contingent teachers feel "off the radar" in their departments and programs due to a lack of pedagogical and technological support and inadequate inclusion in communications. These obstacles go beyond training. The hurdles include role uncertainty and feelings of loneliness and isolation (Waalkes et al., 2026). State associations are well-positioned, at least in principle, to offer shared resources, networking, and recognition that cross institutional boundaries, but only if their activities and communications explicitly address contingent faculty circumstances (Fernandez & Castellanos, 2022).

Professional associations are in a unique position to fill in the gaps left by individual practitioners (Ki & Wang, 2016). Specialized development resources aimed at communicators in industries such as public relations, higher education communication, and cooperative enterprises emphasize networking, practical skill building, and access to peer communities as core benefits of association membership (Marshall, 2025). Relevant professional associations are those that help these practitioners stay up to date, address common issues, and connect with peers who understand the requirements of their positions (Fernandez & Castellanos, 2022). If state communication associations aspire to bridge academic and professional communities, their offerings and public messages should signal clear value to practitioners by highlighting applied sessions, networking events, and opportunities to collaborate with educators and students.

Websites, Social Media, and Digital First Impressions

For many prospective members, a state association's website or social media profile is the first, and sometimes only, point of contact with the organization. Scholarship on nonprofit and academic communication increasingly treats digital presence as a core part of how organizations enact their missions, rather than as a peripheral technical concern (Seo & Vu, 2020). When an association's public-facing channels provide only minimal information, dated visual design, and limited cues about who is welcome, they risk undermining their stated goals of fostering professional development, community, and advocacy (Lepez et al., 2022).

Across a small set of state communication association websites reviewed, certain patterns recurred (*Mississippi Communication Association*, n.d.; *Louisiana Communication Journal*, n.d.). A simple logo, a succinct goal statement, links to conference programs or downloadable registration forms, and a few photographs, articles, or first-time visitor explanations were often seen on homepages. Some websites featured no visual assets (*Alabama Communication Association*, 2026). In several cases, sites relied on non-responsive templates that did not adapt well to mobile devices, even though many users now access organizational websites primarily on phones or tablets.

For example, one state association's homepage prominently features a mission statement describing the organization as "a scholarly not-for-profit" that promotes "the study, criticism, research, teaching, and appreciation of the artistic, humanistic, and scientific principles of communication," and it notes a goal of creating unity among high school, community college, and university communication departments in the state. Additional navigation links lead to resources, professional associations, calls for participation, and social media, but the site offers little audience-specific guidance for first-time visitors about what membership entails or how different groups, teachers, students, contingent faculty, or practitioners might benefit from involvement. The website also offers limited visual appeal or design features that might attract initial interest.

A similar trend surfaces on some associations' social media channels, where accounts exist but are not used in line with established best practices for nonprofit engagement. Research and professional guidance on nonprofit digital strategy emphasize that social media can help organizations tell compelling stories, highlight member achievements, and invite two-way interaction rather than simply broadcasting announcements. In contrast, many association feature limited graphic or multimedia content, are updated only occasionally,

and focus primarily on conference-date reminders. Potential members, particularly professionals and students accustomed to more dynamic online environments, may reasonably assume that the association is not actively addressing their problems when a Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram feed mostly serves as a low-volume notice board.

These digital patterns matter because they intersect directly with the needs identified in the literature on K–12 professional learning, student socialization, contingent faculty development, and practitioner networking (Schneiderman, 2023). If opportunities, resources, and benefits are not visible online, many potential members will not invest further time in the organization. However, research on academic and nonprofit digital presence indicates that these deficiencies make sense considering the structural reality of small, volunteer-driven organizations (Cukier, 2003). Digital workflows are routinely added to already busy volunteer portfolios, and under-resourced Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) usually lack specialized personnel or budget for web design, social media strategy, or content development. Scholars and practitioners, therefore, recommend incremental, mission-aligned improvements. Simplifying navigation around a few core questions (“Who we serve,” “What we offer,” and “How to get involved”), prioritizing mobile-friendly design, and using social media to highlight concrete member stories and resources, is more realistic than wholesale branding overhauls. For state communication associations, following these recommendations would mean treating websites and social media not as afterthoughts but as primary vehicles for communicating value to constituents and for enacting the supportive roles that professional associations are expected to play.

Strategies to Strengthen and Modernize Association Branding

State communication associations can strengthen and modernize their branding by aligning their digital presence with the core roles professional associations are expected to fulfill, such as supporting professional development, fostering community, and articulating the value of the field. Peer-reviewed work on professional organizations emphasizes that members engage when they see clear, concrete benefits tied to their own teaching, learning, or professional practice (Sides, 2024; Soito & Jankowski, 2023). For K–12 teachers, students, contingent faculty, and practitioners, this means that websites and social media should prominently answer who the association serves, what problems it helps them address, and how they can participate, rather than centering only mission statements, bylaws, and conference logistics. Even modest changes, such as revising homepage

language to be more audience-centered, clarifying membership benefits, and ensuring basic visual consistency and mobile-responsiveness, can meaningfully improve perceived relevance and professionalism.

At the same time, research on nonprofit communication and digital strategy suggests that branding is as much about ongoing engagement as it is about logos or templates (Kazanskaia, 2025). Sharing brief, human-centered stories about teachers, students, contingent faculty, and practitioners who have benefited from participation, and using social media for two-way interaction rather than only announcements, can help associations present themselves as active, supportive communities rather than static administrative entities (Cho et al., 2014). Because most state communication associations operate with limited budgets and volunteer labor, recommended strategies focus on low-cost steps, partnering with campus design or communication programs, simplifying site structure, and scheduling regular but manageable cycles of online storytelling and feedback so that branding becomes an attainable extension of the discipline's own emphasis on effective, audience-aware communication.

Conclusion

State communication associations can better fulfill their missions to educators, students, contingent faculty, and practitioners by treating digital communication as core infrastructure rather than as a peripheral technical task. The literature on professional associations and nonprofit communication makes clear that prospective members often encounter organizations first, and sometimes only, through websites and social media, and they decide whether to invest further attention based on how clearly these channels convey value and relevance. Even within real constraints of budget, staffing, and volunteer capacity, low-cost, incremental steps, such as clarifying value propositions, simplifying site structure, ensuring basic mobile-friendly design, and using social media to highlight member work and invite dialogue, can strengthen visibility, engagement, and perceived usefulness. If state communication associations expect their constituencies to practice strategic, audience-centered communication, they must apply those same principles to their own public presence. Doing so offers a pragmatic path toward more inclusive, responsive associations that are easier for potential members to discover, understand, and join.

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Building Value and Maintaining Engagement in State-Level Professional Associations

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Abstract: Engagement with international, national, regional, and state professional associations provides invaluable experiences for scholars at any level, and many scholars maintain several memberships throughout their careers. Each level of association offers different things to members, though, and not every association should be trying to fill the same role or to meet every need. Those interested in the future for a state association should identify what role that association fills, what it can provide, and for which audiences. State associations are best positioned to offer a high-value and low-barrier means of engagement, targeting students and junior professionals for membership and participation. Here, we consider the high-value and low-barrier version of state associations we envision and which we have worked to develop in our own state association. We relay insight about what motivates or prevents engagement from this and other disciplines. Several actionable steps can reduce barriers and increase value, encouraging engagement and sustaining these organizations into the future.

Introduction

A ‘Top Paper’ or ‘Top Book’ award from an international professional association is a focal point on any vitae. Even short of that considerable achievement, engagement with international, national, regional, and state professional associations provides invaluable experiences for scholars at any level, and many scholars maintain several memberships throughout their careers. Each level of association offers different things to members, though, and not every association should be trying to fill the same role or to meet every need. Within that ecosystem, those interested in the future for a state association should identify what role that association fills, what it can provide, and for which audiences.

Thomas Sabetta’s (2008) critical historical analysis of eleven state communication associations is a useful lodestar to guide our thoughts nearly two decades later. After documenting the history, functions, and evolution of each association, Sabetta concluded that they are not merely state level copies of regional and national associations but serve special and varied roles connecting with often different audiences in the discipline. They are “vital to the discipline of

communication if the agenda and influence of the national organization are to be carried out,” Sabetta wrote (p. 262). Having moved away from historic needs for state associations to establish speech in secondary schools, Sabetta proposed exploration of service to their current audience and creation of value for that membership in a changing education environment.

We submit that the way to meet that challenge is for state associations to offer high-value and low-barrier means of engagement. This can serve as an introduction to other levels of association, an accessible means of engagement for those with limited travel support, and as an ongoing part of broader professional engagement with several kinds of associations throughout a career. Such high-value and low-barrier offerings can serve various audiences, but we encourage state associations to recognize their unique value to serve students and junior professionals. As the future of research, pedagogy, and our discipline, this audience cannot be ignored, and state associations have the most to offer to them.

As academics invested in the future, and as active leaders supporting the mission of a state association in the South, we are understandably interested in how to maintain and grow engagement with state associations while also acknowledging the importance of role and that no association can be all things to all audiences. Here, we consider the high-value and low-barrier version of state associations we envision and which we have worked to develop in our own association. After detailing what motivates or prevents engagement from this and other disciplines, remaining cautious about over-generalizing (Hager, 2013), we offer several actionable steps that encourage engagement.

High-Value Participation

We often reflect on our time as young scholars, or even as students, with mixed emotions. We remember, in varying amounts, camaraderie, judgement, pride, and toil. We remember the joy of insight, the anxiety of sharing ideas, and the gradual feeling of confidence with earned expertise. We remember the professional associations we joined and those first few conferences we attended. We remember nervously chatting with established scholars, learning new techniques and methods for the classroom, and the collaborative work of sharing and improving ongoing research. Some of these experiences may have been more valuable than others. To support the growth of a professional association, we need to understand contemporary views of the value of engaging with such associations.

Consideration of the value of participation comes first because, as research shows, it guides decision making. Exchange

theory, for example, proposes that we tend to weigh the perceived benefits and costs of a course of action with the intent of maximizing rewards and minimizing costs (Adebo-Adelaja et al., 2019; Markova et al., 2013; Yeager, 1981). Expectancy value theory further argues that our motivation to act increases when we expect positive outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Organizational justice theory (Greenberg, 1990) illustrates how our perceptions of the benefits and value we receive from our membership in an organization based on its policies and practices influence whether we want to remain members of the organization (Bauman, 2008; Skarlicki et al., 2000). In short, scholars will be more likely to join an association and maintain engagement with it if there are clear rewards that outweigh the costs of participation.

Engaging with associations offers many clearly valuable things, not least among them exposure to new practices and skills. Case reports from interactions with grad student teachers in Texas emphasized the importance of skills building for any time investment in an organization (Dicke & Saitgalina, 2014). While some large conferences cannot program extended duration sessions or alternative programming formats, smaller regional and state associations may have more flexibility. At our state association, for example, we have used 90-120 minute 'immersive experience' sessions to give presenters time to work with attendees in-depth.

Resources for teachers are related deliverables: concrete, tangible, and quickly demonstrable. G.I.F.T.S. sessions provide targeted assignment ideas and roundtables offer lively discussion of current trends and challenges. According to a survey of hundreds of teachers, these kinds of resources for teaching should be a priority for professional associations (Ford & Lambert, 2023). Every level of professional organization has a version of this, but the state association is uniquely situated to meet this need. With a higher proportion of attendees that are earlier in their careers, state associations can program a significant amount of pedagogical content and know attendees will find it valuable.

Joining a professional association provides members with access to academic journals and professional resources, too (Kamp-Bush, 2016). Avenues to publication are not typically limited to members, but association membership provides a means to access the journal and learn expectations, style, and tone for a given publication. State associations with the resources to publish a conference proceedings or a niche topic e-journal offer an early accessible experience with publication for students and junior scholars.

Another such value that association participation offers to members is the potential for recognition, appreciation, and achievement. Social identity theory (Turner, 1982) suggests that our positive self-esteem needs motivate us to join and value groups that enhance our self-esteem. State associations offer an accessible entry to the scholarly version of this, providing a chance for even first-conference goers to be recognized. For example, the authors have seen students win state association film awards such as Outstanding Documentary, and cheered for first-time conference attendees that have won Top Student Paper recognition.

Finally, we know that professional associations offer value to members by providing them with a community in which to see themselves, interact, and with which to identify. Based on survey and interview data, researchers have argued that our overall experiences in professional work are related to our organizational identification, too (Lammers, Atouba, & Carton, 2013). Conaghan further (2023) points out that membership in professional associations, especially for students, provides benefits including networking and building a sense of community with others, among many others. State associations may be able to offer added value here, too, as the potential for networking and maintaining interaction with the community of members is higher based on simple geographic distance.

Ultimately, whether professional associations survive depends on their ability to demonstrate value to potential and current members. In 2018, researchers surveyed 13,299 members of 18 professional associations and found that member perception of whether the association met their needs and provided support was key to staying engaged (Wang & Ki, 2018). There are lots of ways to demonstrate value, as shown here, but state associations are best suited to targeting potential and current members early in their career, when other kinds of associations might be more inaccessible.

Barriers to Participation

Engagement with professional associations clearly has value, but such rewards must be weighed against the costs of participation. Three clear barriers drive away members: the information gap, the real financial costs of membership, and the time and distance barrier to participation in programming. State level associations are uniquely situated to minimize these barriers, when larger associations might have more challenges in doing so.

First, consider the information gap. Perhaps the most important barrier is that potential members just do not know about opportunities to engage or even the existence of the organization (Ford

& Lambert, 2023). Obviously, large professional organizations are best suited to overcoming this barrier. The National Communication Association, for example, is among the most widely known organizations in our discipline, and thus likely among the first that potential members are exposed to. NCA also uses weekly COMMNotes, formerly CRTNET, to raise awareness for its membership. State organizations, relying as we do on volunteer labor and limited funds, have more of a challenge. That said, state associations also have an advantage, in that the ideal service audience is smaller, local, and identifiable with targeted effort.

Assuming associations overcome the information gap, the real barrier to participation is financial cost (Bedini et al, 2022). 2026 membership in organizations like the National and International Communication Association is a considerable expense for students and junior professionals. Membership and conference registration total \$200-400 per year for each organization (ICA; NCA). If the conference is out of state, travel costs are a challenging additional barrier. Students, including graduate students, may especially struggle with the costs of membership, conference registration, or travel. Limited departmental support or access to competitive professional development grants often might only cover part of one out-of-state conference, and may not cover any membership costs at all. State associations are uniquely situated to overcome this. Membership and conference registration can be kept to low/no cost for students. State association conferences are small enough to be housed in low/no cost spaces at member institutions. Even the costs of meals provided during attended events can be offset by minimal charges to other members. Our state association has managed to break even while significantly increasing free student participation at our annual conference over the last several years.

Finally, the time and distance barrier are challenges that state associations can also overcome. Engagement with international and national associations at annual conferences typically requires significant travel distance, and even regional conferences can often be out of reach for students, graduate students, and junior professionals with limited departmental travel support. State association meetings are typically within several hours drive of most of their membership. These conferences are often shorter (one to two days), easing the time barrier for participation. At our state association in the South, we have worked to reduce this barrier even further by experimenting with programming year-round instead of only at our annual conference. This past year, we organized expert panels on various subjects, offered virtually each

quarter, to provide a zero-barrier means of connection and value for our members.

Not every state association will be positioned to reduce costs, time and distance barriers, and overcome the information gap. Some may have to take on these challenges, one at a time. That said, successful state organization plans will approach each of these challenges. Reducing barriers is as necessary as demonstrating the rewards and value of participation as means of maintaining and growing association membership and engagement.

Suggestions for Moving Forward

State associations need to be better prepared and more strategic to survive in challenging times. As scholars make choices about how to manage those same challenges, associations should attend to the value proposition they offer and the barriers to participation involved if they want to best serve the audiences they have. We conclude here with specific suggestions that leaders should consider moving forward.

First, state associations should work to raise perceived value of participation with the association. Perception is the operative word here. Potential members that stay on the wrong side of the information gap will not become members as they never hear about the great work the association is doing. Resolving this might mean special designation of an officer role for social media management and communication, new branding and design for association publications, and targeted outreach to low participation groups or institutions.

Second, the value they create should be specifically targeted to students and junior professionals. We have shown how important teacher resources, strategies, skills-building, and related content can be to the decision for scholars to join and stay active in an association, with evidence from a variety of disciplines. Encourage submissions of this kind, add dedicated tracks or sections to annual conferences, and consider bespoke sessions that put more established researchers and educators in 'Scholar to Scholar' sessions. Creation of a track of content specifically for undergraduate work and another for graduate work can give scholars at that level a space of their own, and special effort to recognize achievement and participation in those tracks is warranted. In short, create and maintain the kind of content that draws in new scholars.

Third, state associations are in a unique position to lower barriers to participation. Resist the urge to charge students anything, if possible, for membership and registration. Consider alternate sources of support to cover the cost of meals or awards so as not to entirely shift

the burden to long-term association members, such as sponsorship by the host institution or advertising in the program for departments and jobs. If a small fee is necessary, allow some students to volunteer instead. Selection of conference site hosts based on distance to members also matters, but host selection should additionally avoid large host institutions with mandatory and formalized cost schedules for everything from parking spaces to A/V support.

Finally, we offer the following: the content of this piece is based on insight from the literature in our and other disciplines, analysis of how it relates to state associations today, and what we learned from our work leading our state association in the South. Nothing here is *new*, in that most state associations are already doing some of these things. Others offered here may help, but some will not be a good fit for the varied state associations in our discipline. What matters most is that leaders of state associations are thinking strategically about their role, how best to serve the audiences they have, and what steps are feasible given limited resources.

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Close Enough to Know, Organized Enough to Respond: State Associations as First-Response Advocacy Networks

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Abstract: This essay argues that state communication associations are uniquely positioned to serve as first-response advocacy networks for the communication discipline. In a higher education climate shaped by declining public trust, program cuts, academic freedom concerns, enrollment pressures, and contingent labor, state associations can provide local forms of connection, support, and advocacy that complement the work of regional and national associations. Drawing attention to their proximity, relationships, and responsiveness, this essay considers how these associations can help members recognize emerging threats, share resources, coordinate responses, and communicate the public value of communication education. It also argues that effective advocacy requires more than crisis response; state associations must build stronger pipelines into the discipline, support contingent faculty as central members, and move beyond annual conferences toward year-round professional communities. Ultimately, this essay calls for such associations to become more visible and meaningful infrastructures for disciplinary advocacy, professional development, and collective action.

Introduction

Professional associations have long provided communication scholars, teachers, and practitioners with spaces for intellectual exchange, professional development, mentoring, and disciplinary belonging. Yet the current higher education climate underscores the value of associations as ongoing sources of connection, support, and advocacy. As academic programs face increased scrutiny, public trust in higher education becomes more fragile (Brenan, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2025), and contingent faculty continue to carry much of the instructional labor of the discipline (Mapes, 2019), communication associations must consider how to serve members in more immediate, visible, and locally responsive ways.

National and regional associations remain essential, but state associations occupy a distinctive and often underutilized position. They are close enough to members' institutional realities to recognize emerging threats, yet organized enough to coordinate shared responses. I argue that state communication associations should be understood as first-response advocacy networks: locally grounded professional

communities that connect faculty, contingent instructors, K-12 educators, communication professionals, and students around shared disciplinary concerns. In this role, state associations can respond to threats facing communication programs, build stronger pipelines into the discipline, support contingent faculty as central members, and communicate the public value of communication education.

Why State Associations Are Uniquely Positioned

State communication associations matter not because they replace national or regional associations, but because they occupy a distinct position within the discipline. National and regional associations provide broad disciplinary leadership, create important spaces for scholarly exchange, and help members connect across institutions and geographic areas. State associations can perform similar functions, but they are positioned closer to the local conditions shaping members' professional lives. Their value is rooted in proximity, relationships, and responsiveness.

First, state associations have the advantage of proximity. They are closer to the political, institutional, and educational climates in which members work. When communication programs are threatened, when state policies affect higher education, or when local schools and colleges experience budgetary pressures, these associations are often better positioned to understand the specific context and respond in ways that are timely, informed, and locally relevant. Because they are embedded in the state-level landscape, they can identify the institutions, policies, stakeholders, and decision-making processes involved; connect affected members with colleagues who have faced similar challenges; and help translate broad disciplinary concerns into language that resonates with local administrators, boards, legislators, and communities. For example, the Illinois Communication and Theatre Association (ICTA) offers a strong model of state-level advocacy infrastructure. By maintaining resources on speech communication legislation, dual credit, credentials, teacher licensure, advocacy practices, and legislative updates, ICTA demonstrates how state associations can provide members with practical tools for navigating policy and educational concerns within their states.

Second, state associations are uniquely positioned to build relationships across local networks. They can connect faculty across campuses, K-12 educators, undergraduate and graduate students, alumni, and communication professionals within the same state or region. These relationships matter because advocacy is rarely effective when it begins only in moments of crisis; collective action depends on networks of trust, reciprocity, and shared purpose that are built over

time (Diani, 1997; Putnam, 2000). They also strengthen the professional community of the discipline by supporting cross-institutional collaboration, mentoring, student development, teaching exchanges, and professional visibility. Because mentoring is associated with important educational and career outcomes (Eby et al., 2008), state associations can play a meaningful role in connecting students and early-career scholars with mentors beyond their home institutions. For students and early-career scholars, relationships with faculty and professionals beyond one's home campus can open doors to research opportunities, internships, graduate programs, and broader forms of mentorship. In this sense, state associations help build the relational foundation that makes both professional growth and collective advocacy possible.

Third, state associations can be responsive in ways that larger organizations may not always be able. Their scale allows them to act more quickly, speak more specifically, and address members' needs more directly, provided that this work is distributed responsibly and not simply added to the workloads of the most vulnerable members. These professional communities can host a timely conversation about a program closure, organize a teaching resource exchange for contingent faculty, convene K-12 and higher education partners, form a task force about statewide general education curriculum, or issue a statement about the value of communication education in a particular state context.

My experience in regional association leadership has reinforced for me that professional associations are most powerful when they create structures for belonging, recognition, and collective action. Yet regional and national associations cannot always see or respond to every local challenge. State associations can help fill this gap. Their size and scope allow them to be nimble, relational, and grounded in the lived conditions of their members. For this reason, these associations should be as important local infrastructures for connection, support, and advocacy.

State-level communication associations already exist in varied forms across the discipline and provide a foundation for this work. Some are communication-specific organizations, while others bring together communication, speech, theatre, debate, and related areas of study and practice. Their levels of visibility and activity vary considerably. Some associations maintain active conferences, journals, websites, awards, and leadership structures, while others appear less visible, less active, or historically documented but not clearly current. This uneven landscape further illustrates the need to reconsider how state associations can serve as local advocacy networks for the

discipline. Table 1 provides a list of identified state-level communication associations, organized by regional association.

Table 1

Active State-Level Communication Associations, Organized by Regional Association

Eastern Communication Association's Region

Maryland Communication Association
New Jersey Communication Association
New York State Communication Association
Pennsylvania Communication Association

Central States Communication Association's Region

Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota
Illinois Communication and Theatre Association
Iowa Communication Association
Kansas Speech Communication Association
Nebraska Speech Communication Association
North Dakota Speech and Theatre Association
Ohio Communication Association
Oklahoma Speech Theatre Communication Association
Speech and Theatre Association of Missouri
Speech Communication Association of South Dakota

Southern States Communication Association's Region

Alabama Communication Association
Arkansas Communication & Theatre Arts Association
Carolinas Communication Association
Florida Communication Association
Georgia Communication Association
Kentucky Communication Association
Mississippi Communication Association
Tennessee Communication Association
Texas Speech Communication Association
Virginia Association of Communication Arts and Sciences

Western States Communication Association's Region

Northwest Communication Association
Southwest Communication Association

At the same time, several states do not appear to have a clearly active state-level academic communication association. This does not necessarily mean that communication faculty, students, and professionals in those states lack support. Some may be served by broader regional associations, related speech, debate, or theatre organizations, or historically established associations that are no longer highly visible online. Still, the uneven presence and visibility of active state-level associations create a problem for the discipline. When state associations are inactive, difficult to access, or absent altogether, members may lose an important source of local connection, timely support, and coordinated advocacy. This makes the work of sustaining accessible and visible state associations more urgent, especially in a

higher education climate where programs, faculty, and students may need locally responsive support.

First-Response Advocacy: Responding to Threats Facing Communication Programs

By first-response advocacy, I do not mean that state associations should become unions, lobbying firms, or crisis-management agencies. Most associations do not have the authority, staffing, funding, or legal structure to serve those functions. Rather, first-response advocacy means that these associations can become organized networks that help members recognize threats, share resources, coordinate communication, and respond collectively when communication programs, faculty, students, or educational values are vulnerable. This emphasis on shared resources and coordinated response aligns with advocacy coalition scholarship, which highlights the importance of networks, shared concerns, and coordinated action in policy contexts (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018).

The need for this kind of first-response advocacy is not abstract. Communication programs, faculty, and students are already experiencing the consequences of budget-driven decision-making. In recent years, communication and communication-adjacent programs have been reduced, suspended, or eliminated as part of broader institutional restructuring. Missouri Western State University's 2020 retrenchment process affected speech communication, strategic communication, and journalism programs (Flaherty, 2020). Baldwin Wallace University announced the phase-out of Communication Studies and Public Relations (Salamone, 2024), Dickinson State University eliminated communication among several programs (Quinn, 2023), the College of Idaho announced the elimination of Communication Arts (Suppe, 2025), and Arkansas State University discontinued its Multimedia Journalism degree (TheAStateHerald, 2023). Even when programs are not fully eliminated, as in West Virginia University's reductions to Communication Studies faculty (Willingham & Raby, 2023), the discipline remains vulnerable to budget models that prioritize enrollment metrics, market demand, and short-term cost savings. These cases illustrate why state associations need structures that help members respond before, during, and after moments of institutional vulnerability.

This work begins with preparedness. State associations could create rapid-response committees focused on academic freedom, program protection, contingent faculty support, and communication education. These committees could monitor emerging concerns, gather information, connect affected members with relevant resources, and

determine when a broader association response may be appropriate. In many cases, the most immediate need is not a formal public statement, but a trusted network of colleagues who can help members understand what is happening, what options are available, and who else has faced similar challenges.

State associations could also develop practical advocacy resources for members. These might include letter templates for administrators, boards, legislators, or community stakeholders; talking points about the value of communication education; sample data that departments can use to demonstrate student demand, general education contributions, alumni outcomes, and workforce relevance; and guidance for responding to program review, restructuring, or retrenchment processes. These resources would be especially valuable for smaller programs, contingent faculty, and early-career members who may not have access to robust institutional support.

In addition, state associations can help members tell stronger stories about the discipline. They might collect examples from alumni, employers, students, K-12 educators, and community partners that show how communication coursework prepares people for civic life, leadership, collaboration, conflict management, media literacy, and professional success. These examples can help show what communication education contributes to students' personal, civic, and professional lives, claims that communication education scholars have long advanced (Morreale & Pearson, 2008; Morreale et al., 2017). These stories can help counter narrow understandings of the discipline and provide members with shared language when programs are questioned or undervalued.

The goal is not for state associations to speak for every member on every issue. Rather, the goal is to ensure that members are not left to respond alone. First-response advocacy gives these associations a clear and meaningful role in the current higher education climate: helping members recognize vulnerability, build collective capacity, and communicate the value of the discipline before, during, and after moments of crisis.

Building Stronger Pipelines into the Discipline

First-response advocacy cannot only be reactive. State associations also need to engage in the slower, developmental work of building the disciplinary pipeline. A discipline is easier to defend when students, teachers, parents, employers, and community partners understand its intellectual, civic, and professional contributions. In this sense, pipeline-building is not separate from advocacy; it is one of its most important long-term forms. State-level associations should not

only serve those who already identify as communication scholars. They should help people find their way into the discipline, see its relevance, and become advocates for it.

This work can begin well before students enter college. State associations can build stronger connections with K-12 instructors in areas such as speech, debate, journalism, media literacy, public speaking, civic communication, and theatre. These educators often introduce students to communication-related skills long before students encounter the discipline as a college major or general education requirement. They could invite K-12 educators into conferences, create teaching resource exchanges, offer professional development workshops, recognize outstanding teachers, and build partnerships around communication education in schools. At the undergraduate level, associations can create research showcases, top paper panels, student leadership roles, career panels, and mentoring opportunities that help students imagine communication as a field of study, a professional pathway, and a civic resource.

Pipeline-building should also extend to graduate students and communication professionals. Graduate students need spaces where they can develop scholarly identity, receive mentoring, discuss teaching, build research networks, and imagine professional lives both within and beyond tenure-track careers. Communication professionals are also an underused constituency for many state associations. Alumni and practitioners working in organizational communication, health communication, public relations, training and development, advocacy, nonprofit leadership, media, and human resources can help demonstrate the applied value of communication education. By bringing together K-12 educators, students, faculty, alumni, and professionals, state associations can make the discipline more visible, more accessible, and more defensible. This is advocacy not only in response to crisis, but through the ongoing work of helping people understand why communication matters.

Supporting Contingent Faculty as Central Members

If state associations are committed to serving the communication discipline, they must center the people who do much of the teaching that sustains it. Contingent faculty should not be treated as peripheral members of these associations; they should be understood as central stakeholders in the future of communication education. This is especially important because contingent instructors are often closely connected to undergraduate teaching, general education, introductory courses, and student access to the discipline. In many cases, they are the people who introduce students to communication studies, public

speaking, interpersonal communication, media literacy, argumentation, and other foundational areas of the field.

At the same time, state association structures are not always designed around contingent faculty realities. Contingent faculty may experience limited travel funding, heavy teaching loads, unstable contracts, restricted institutional voice, and fewer professional development resources (Kezar, 2012; Kezar & Maxey, 2016). These conditions can make it difficult to attend conferences, pay membership dues, present scholarship, participate in leadership, or build professional networks. If associations want contingent faculty to participate fully, they need to reduce barriers to participation. This could include reduced or waived membership rates, low-cost virtual programming, teaching resource banks, syllabus and assignment exchanges, mentoring networks, travel grants, and conference registration support. State associations could also create workshops on reappointment, promotion, documentation of teaching, and professional portfolios, as well as awards that recognize contingent faculty teaching and service.

To be clear, state associations do not have the authority to change employment contracts or institutional policy directly. However, they can provide visibility, legitimacy, documentation, networks, and collective voice. Those forms of support matter, especially for faculty whose institutional positions are often precarious. By creating leadership roles for contingent faculty, publicly recognizing their contributions, and including their concerns in advocacy efforts, state associations can signal that contingent faculty are essential members whose labor, expertise, and perspectives should shape the future of state-level association work.

At the same time, state associations must be careful not to frame inclusion as an invitation for already-vulnerable members to take on additional uncompensated labor. Leadership roles, mentoring programs, conference reviewing, teaching exchanges, and advocacy work can provide meaningful professional opportunities, but they can also reproduce inequities when the labor falls disproportionately on graduate students, contingent faculty, and junior scholars. For this reason, state associations should make service expectations transparent, time-limited, and appropriately recognized. This might include formal letters documenting service contributions, public recognition in association materials, reduced or waived membership and conference fees, small stipends when possible, and priority access to professional development funds. Associations should also avoid relying on graduate students or contingent faculty to perform labor that senior scholars are unwilling to do. If state associations are to function as ethical advocacy

networks, they must distribute labor responsibly, recognize it materially and symbolically, and cultivate senior scholars' responsibility to mentor, review, lead, and serve in ways that strengthen the association rather than simply preserve their own professional status.

Moving Beyond the Annual Convention

The annual convention remains an important part of state association life. Conferences create spaces for scholarly exchange, teaching development, student recognition, professional networking, and disciplinary belonging. They also provide important rituals of association membership, including awards, business meetings, leadership transitions, and opportunities for members to see their work as part of a larger professional community.

At the same time, the annual convention cannot be the only measure of association relevance. If state associations are to serve as first-response advocacy networks, they need to become year-round communities. This does not require every association to create large-scale programming or overextend limited volunteer leadership. Rather, it requires smaller, more sustained points of connection throughout the year. State associations could offer quarterly virtual workshops, monthly teaching exchanges, mentoring circles, rapid-response listservs, online communities, advocacy alerts, resource repositories, K-12 partnership days, undergraduate research showcases, contingent faculty roundtables, and professional communication speaker series. These efforts would help members experience the association not only as an event they attend, but as a community they can turn to.

The convention can remain the symbolic center of a state association, but it should not be the association's only meaningful point of contact with its members. A year-round model allows these associations to be more visible, more responsive, and more useful in members' professional lives. It also makes advocacy more realistic because relationships, resources, and communication channels are already in place before a crisis emerges. When members are connected throughout the year, state associations are better positioned to support programs, engage students, include contingent faculty, partner with K-12 educators, and communicate the value of the discipline beyond the conference itself.

Conclusion

State communication associations can function as local infrastructures for connection, support, and advocacy. Their proximity allows them to recognize emerging threats; their relationships allow them to build trust across institutions and career stages; and their

responsiveness allows them to help members act when programs, faculty, students, or educational values are vulnerable.

The future of state association work should not be measured only by annual conference attendance, but by the strength of the networks the associations build throughout the year. By developing first-response advocacy structures, supporting contingent faculty as central members, building stronger pipelines into the discipline, and communicating the public value of communication education, these organizations can become more visible and meaningful professional homes. In a time of heightened scrutiny and instability in higher education, state associations are close enough to know what is happening and organized enough to help members respond.

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Iowa Journal of Communication

Call for Submissions

**General Issue: Open to any topic in communication
(Volume 59 Issue 1)**

Deadline: April 30, 2027

The *Iowa Journal of Communication* (IJC), an award-winning journal, invites submissions for our next volume. Manuscripts may be philosophical, theoretical, critical, applied, pedagogical, or empirical in nature. Manuscripts may focus on any type of communication, including group, face-to-face, family, health, mediated, intercultural, interpersonal, public address, etc. We are particularly interested in unique approaches and voices. All communication scholars and professionals are encouraged to consider submitting high-quality work for publication; one does not need to be a member of the Iowa Communication Association to submit.

Editor's Forum

Additionally, we invite submissions to the Editor's Forum. Over the past decade, public discourse surrounding higher education has increasingly shifted toward market utility, return on investment (ROI), and ideological polarization. While scholarship frequently examines how this rhetoric affects institutional policy, state funding, and enrollment, less attention is paid to its interpersonal fallout. This issue of the *Iowa Journal of Communication* seeks critical reflections exploring how rhetoric regarding the purpose and value of higher education fundamentally reshapes key academic relationships. We invite contributors to investigate how macro-level debates manifest in micro-level interactions across diverse campus contexts. Potential contributors might address, but are not limited to, the following core questions, though they may offer other questions within the context of the forum topic:

- Pedagogical & Student–Instructor Dynamics: How has rhetoric framing higher education primarily as consumerism, workforce preparation, or ideological training altered relational boundary-setting, trust, and communication between students and instructors?
- Collegial Relationships & Campus Climate: How do shifting narratives about the academy impact peer-to-peer relationships among faculty? Where do we see evidence of solidarity, hyper-competition, or withdrawal?

- Faculty–Administrator Relations: How does administrative rhetoric—and the critical rhetoric surrounding administration—shape structural power dynamics, shared governance, and interpersonal trust across institutional ranks?
- Affective Atmospheres (Apathy vs. Empathy): When stakeholders engage in conversations about higher education’s modern purpose, what communicative patterns cultivate systemic apathy, cynicism, or disillusionment versus genuine empathy and institutional care?

Submission Guidelines

- All documents must be submitted as a Microsoft Word file, Times New Roman or Arial font, 12-point, double-spaced, and must utilize the APA Style Guide, 7th edition.
- Include a cover letter that includes author names and affiliations, indicates the corresponding author, notes that the manuscript is not currently under consideration with another outlet, indicates conflicts of interest if any, establishes ethical approval, and notes the history of the manuscript if portions of the manuscript have been previously published.
- Graphs, charts, figures, tables, and other visuals must be static images inserted (not linked) into the document, numbered, and captioned appropriately. Images must be high resolution and cited; captioned if they are author-generated.
- Manuscript must be submitted with any author identifying information removed from the manuscript text and digital properties. Include a 150-200 word abstract on the title page, follow article structure conventions (intro, lit review, method, etc.), and do not exceed 9,000 words inclusive of references for standard submissions, 3,000 words for submissions to the Editor's Forum.

Address any questions or submissions to Dr. Joshua E. Young, Editor, at joyoung@dwci.edu, making sure to note IJC (Iowa Journal of Communication) in the subject line.