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Embodying the Stereotype: Orientalist Prejudice and Counter-Tactics by Arab Gulf States
By John Yohwan Kim

Abstract

The rapid growth of Arab Gulf States did not entirely remove Western investors and consumers of exoticism and prejudice towards the region. This orientalist notion of the Middle East, as famously conceptualized by Edward Said, often served as the theoretical framework for analyzing the skewed Western biases towards the region. When looking at the various promotions for the region, such as tourism commercials, ads for the 2022 Qatar World Cup, or architectural endeavors, an ironic relationship between Westerners and the Gulf States unfolds. This paper aims to analyze how the Arab Gulf States openly embrace exoticism and stereotypes about the region to promote themselves to Western consumers and investors, using the prejudice to their advantage in order to advance in the stage of global economy.

Introduction

The dazzling cityscape of Dubai or the daunting economic scale of Aramco occasionally appear on TV screens or YouTube videos, impressing outsiders with gentle reminders of how rapidly and vastly the Gulf States have grown economically. Notwithstanding this stunning economic growth and geopolitical importance, the Gulf States and the Middle East as a whole are still exotified as the "other", a non-Western entity inherently different from the dominant Western mode of life. This contrast between the West and the East, where the West serves as the ideological protagonist of the narrative, is a clear example of orientalism. Literary critic Edward Said has defined Orientalism as an identifier for both people from the West and the Middle East, where "thoughts, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West". (Said, *Orientalism*, 5). During the age of imperialism, as British and French colonization efforts reached the Middle East, the depiction of the region in Western scholarship and literature has often been either "barbaric" or "exotic". According to Said, the Middle East is either "barbaric" or "exotic" because it serves as the opposite to the West, which is, apparently, rational and moral. This binary is ultimately rooted in Western confidence: the confidence that they know the Orient and how the Orientals operate, which are often negative and the opposite of Western ideals (Said, 43-49). Western stereotypes and imagery are thus projected onto the real Middle East, where real people and real societies function instead of Arabian Nights or Disney's Aladdin.

The rapid economic growth of Arab Gulf States and their role as major producers of petroleum both intrigued and concerned Westerners for decades. On the one hand, the Gulf States are an indispensable part of the global economy. On the other hand, the imagery of the Gulf States as exotic, mystical, yet barbaric and backward still grips the Western mind. In modern Gulf, however, the preconceived notion of the Middle East as the "exotic other" thrived in various commercials and tourism adverts to promote tourists, especially Western tourists, to come visit and spend money along the shores of the Gulf. Modern tourism adverts in the Middle

East openly embrace orientalist stereotypes that Said detested. Intersecting between the expectations and reality, these commercials shed light on contemporary Orientalism. Often used to demean Middle Eastern culture, these nations have instead decided to take advantage of this prejudice to attract Western tourists.

The Gulf and Orientalism

Although the Gulf States, such as Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, experienced both contact and conflict with Western nations since the 19th Century, their strong economic ties with the West only began during the 1940s. As the British Empire exited from the Middle East in the 20th Century, the United States replaced it as a regional "policeman", forming strong relationships with various Gulf States. The US entrance into the Gulf began when the United States recognized Saudi Arabia as a key ally right before its entrance into the Second World War, when oil consumption for shipping and military vehicles rapidly increased compared to the First World War. The US would gain control over the vast oil reserves of Saudi Arabia, while guaranteeing its security with military bases. Other Gulf states soon entered the fold of the US as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution in 1979 threatened US security in the Gulf. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 further brought US presence in the Gulf region. (Roberts)

The petroleum industry among the Gulf States especially experienced a boom in the beginning of the 1970s, and this period marks the peak of the Gulf States' economic growth. Yet, their ascendancy in the global economy wasn't always welcomed by the neoliberal Western economies. Benjamin Smith has noted that there lies a cultural hierarchy in economics when assessing the successes of the Gulf States, where Western observers were often hostile or negative towards their success. Smith has thus coined the term "Market Orientalism", which "explains the power of the processes that produce the gap between the acknowledgment of a place's new status and the realization and incorporation or defeat of economic diversity that this new actor represents." According to the lens of market orientalism, the wealth of the Gulf States is perceived by neoliberal Westerners as "unfair". Smith brings up similar prejudice and panic towards the growth of non-Western economies in recent memory, such as the rapid growth of the Japanese economy in the 1980s (Smith, 2-10). In both cases of Japan and the Gulf, Westerners were shocked and threatened by prominent non-Western economies and thus reacted with hostility or fear-mongering. Ever since the Gulf States struck oil, Western visitors saw the sudden new wealth of the Gulf as something undeserving to the Arabs who lived on the very oil reserves. Smith exemplifies market orientalism as binary elements between the foreigner and the Gulf Arab. The foreigners are experts who develop the Gulf's oil, while the Arabs are still living in their "primitive" state, drinking traditional coffee or tending to their camels (Smith, 120). This juxtaposition between the modern and the primitive, sophistication and barbarism

Embodying the Stereotype

Rather than fighting these orientalist prejudices, the Gulf States seemed to have embraced these stereotypes to their advantage. The Dubai Tour advertisement is a great example of modern exploitation of Orientalism. In *Dubai: If You Go, You Know*, the narrator explains and displays various scenes and activities in Dubai (Dubai: If You Go, You Know). Throughout the commercial, the video depicts countless snapshots of Dubai, including various food and activities they can experience when visiting. At the same time, the subtle usage of "Middle Eastern" images reflects their purpose in fulfilling the Western audience's biases. These hints are portrayed through the constant appearance of outdoor events in desert scenery, including desert safaris, sand boarding, as well as riding camels. Back in the city area, tourists are seen at the souks, traditional Arab marketplaces selling elaborate carpets, textiles, and jewelry. The stereotypical and exotic Middle Eastern imagery offered by the Dubai Tour implies who the designated audience is and the main purpose of commercializing this representation of Dubai.

In other words, this promotional video wouldn't be advertising the 'Middle Eastern' aspect of Dubai to the domestic audience. In fact, when the video exhibits beautiful scenery throughout the city, the narrator repeatedly stresses, "Dubai is home. Home for many". (Visit Dubai). It is evident that the protagonists of the commercial are supposed to be foreign tourists, written to represent Dubai as 'home' for both foreigners and locals alike. Much like Said's *Orientalism*, the narrator presents the Western perspective on Middle Eastern culture, reflected through the Western tourists. Though some aspects, such as the emphasis on outdoor activities made for tourists, were exaggerated to appease Western audiences, the depiction of traditional architectural designs and Arab merchandise shown through the bazaar scene corresponds to the stereotypes Westerners hold in perceiving the Middle East. As such, this commercial takes advantage of Orientalism, weakening the strong boundary between reality and the mirage that is the Middle East (Said, 1-4).

Similarly, yet different from Dubai's futuristic landscape, Saudi Arabia pursues constructing modern infrastructure. This vigor towards construction can be shown through the recent Neom project, a futuristic megaproject in northwest Saudi Arabia that aims to build a high-tech, sustainable planned city (Neom). At the same time, the nation sustains its fame as the birthplace of Islam and home to Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. Saudi Arabia is thus a great case study of Said's Orientalism in its modern applications. This representation can be mirrored through the tourism commercial of Saudi Arabia. As a sentinel of the two holy cities with a rapidly growing modern economy, Saudi Arabia seeks to flaunt both its "oriental" heritage and the ability to build massive infrastructure. In *Welcome to Saudi Tourism and Saudi Arabia*, the promotional video emphasizes ancient ruins, bustling modern cities, and snapshots of various biomes within the kingdom. The narrator revolves around the notion of innovation as well as delving into exotic areas of Saudi Arabia the audience has never experienced. The scenery shown in the commercial, including deserts, oceans, and mountains, highlights Saudi Arabia as not just a desert, but a place of beauty, diversity, and adventure. Shifting to the cultural aspect of the advertisement, the history of the kingdom is imbued within the video through the entrance of various ancient sites, such as Hegra, Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Additionally, blending with the cultural heritage of Saudi Arabia, the commercial successfully promotes the urban sophistication of the kingdom. This harmony between the past and the future is portrayed through the scene where Western tourist couples are having a fine dining experience with an ancient ruin as a backdrop. Through the demonstration of various landscapes of the kingdom, this blend rebrands Saudi Arabia as not a closed conservative monarchy it is in reality, but a place that holds both ancient heritage as well as contemporary accommodations for tourists (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, bestdestination).

Interestingly, the commercial *Welcome to Saudi Tourism and Saudi Arabia* operates in an inverted Orientalist mode. Instead of portraying the kingdom through a Western Orientalist lens such as the mystical desert and Oasis, Saudi Arabia curates the authentic aspects of the nation by focusing on its natural scenery and ancient ruins. Yet, similarly to Orientalism filtering reality to create a fantastical "East", the Saudi tourism video filters its own reality, presenting a curated blend of heritage and modernity while avoiding social or political complexities. The commercial repackages Orientalism rather than holistically rejecting stereotypical imagery. The video invites Western tourists to consume a Saudi Arabia that is carefully crafted by both exotic elements, such as ancient ruins and vast terrains, and familiar elements, including modern applications and culinary means.

2022 Qatar World Cup

The 2022 Qatar World Cup also saw the usage of orientalist Middle Eastern imagery to the advantage of a Gulf state amid various controversies. In 2010, Qatar won the bid to become the host of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. This successful bidding was a huge deal within the country as Qatar became the first Middle Eastern country to host the World Cup. The event itself surprised the world as Qatar had a population of only two million people and never made it through World Cup qualifiers. Yet, for the Qataris, hosting the World Cup was an opportunity to promote their nation to the world audience. (Al Jazeera). The reaction from outside Qatar, however, was mixed at best. Even before the opening ceremony of the Qatar World Cup, the choice of Qatar as a host was surrounded by a myriad of controversies. Issues of human rights violations of foreign workers in Qatar as well as allegations of corruption and bribery in the bidding process arose. Former FIFA president Sepp Blatter even admitted it was a "mistake". Reported by NPR, Blatter said, "I was responsible for that as president at the time". (Pflughoeft). In response, Qatar and FIFA maintained that there was no evidence for their wrongdoing, but the concerns remained about Qatar being the host country for the 2022 World Cup. In response to this controversial bribery, protests from various clubs and countries arose around the world. However, the journalists Tariq Panja and Kevin Draper reported, "after years of investigations and indictments, the United States Department of Justice on Monday said for the first time that representatives working for …Qatar had bribed FIFA officials to secure hosting rights for the World Cup in men's soccer". As an account, they posited that the crucial determining factor in Qatar's bidding process was billions of dollars that were already invested to build the World Cup stadium over other competing nations such as the United States. This revelation of Qatar's

bribery resolved one of the many controversies surrounding the 2022 World Cup (Tariq Panja and Kevin Draper).

Human rights violations also came to public attention as the opening of the 2022 Qatar World Cup approached. The issue has been persistent throughout the 2010s, since Qatar won the bid and far before the World Cup. A 2021 Guardian analysis reported that more than 6,500 migrant workers, mostly from South Asia, have died since Qatar was announced as the host in 2010 (Pattison, McIntyre, et al.). As a noticeable number of foreign laborers passed away from harsh weather conditions as well as from poor living conditions, the outside world began to call out Qatar over these abusive working conditions. Qatar's human rights violations didn't end on that note. Pardoning themselves for religiosity, Qatar banned the audience from expressing their sexual identities, clearly showing their hostility towards the LGBTQ+ community. On this issue, Al Marri and Hind Al Ansari note, "while the Western media considered the banning of alcohol and the refusal to display the slogan 'OneLove' to be violations of the individual's freedom of expression, many members of the Arab and Muslim audiences considered these same [issues] to represent a firm commitment to their religious beliefs and cultural values" (Al Marri, Al Ansari). These controversial convictions of Qatar and its citizens are attributed to the dilemmas that surrounded the 2022 World Cup.

Qatar was thus facing a great marketing disaster for their upcoming World Cup. And their effort to obscure these issues is evident in their promotional ads. In "The Official FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™ Theme| FIFA World Cup 2022 Soundtrack", the commercial begins with the entrance of a flying magic carpet emerging from the dunes. After the appearance of the carpet, the scene shifts to Qatari boys playing soccer surrounded by desert with Arabic scripts engraved in the sand. Subsequently, the traditional Qatari architecture appears with the locals celebrating the World Cup, while flags of various countries are displayed in the background. After the magic carpet visits the 2022 Qatar World Cup stadium, the advertisement ends with the appearance of "FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022" (FIFA). While Qatar may emphasize the authenticity of their culture in this commercial, the country also curated aspects of fictionalized Arab culture that would feel exotic or mystical to the outside audience, especially Western audiences, echoing deeply rooted orientalist tropes. These usages can be clearly shown through the image of the desert, falcon, conventional Arab architecture, and the flying carpet. Qatar strategically used the World Cup to not only showcase football and promote the event itself, but also exaggerate authentic Arab culture with fiction to create an exotic image for the world audience, putting the controversies under the carpet.

Conclusion

Said's Orientalism provides a piercing interpretation of the imagery portrayed in these various efforts by the Gulf States to attract Western tourists. The irony lies in the "Middle Eastern" Gulf States using stereotypical imagery to promote themselves to the Western audience. The Gulf States are "buying into" Orientalism, so to speak. Alluded to throughout the video, the Dubai Tour advertisement exemplifies Said's notion by the appearance of anticipated Middle

Eastern imagery, including camel riding in the desert as well as depiction of traditional souks. This archetype reaches its pinnacle in the 2022 Qatar World Cup commercial. Amidst the controversy over human rights violations in the country, Qatar was in need of rehabilitating its national image. Their promotional video starts and ends with the appearance of the flying magic carpet, painting a fantastical view of the country, accompanied by a grain of reality with traditional Qatari architecture in the background. Subtly deviating from the previous advertisements heavily conceding to Western perspective, *Welcome to Saudi Tourism and Saudi Arabia* posits a different approach, with Western tourists enjoying various heritage of the kingdom as the centerpiece of their advert. While Said criticized the Orient featured in Western literature as a place to be conquered by the Western protagonist, these tourism commercials invert Said's critique on its head. The varying interpretations of the Gulf States tourism commercials thus exemplify a modern application of this mirage to the advantage of these countries. The Orient is now a land of exotic scenery and culture not to be conquered, but to spend the summer vacation on.

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Rewriting Asexual Representation: Examining the Intersection of Asexuality, Gender, Race, and Disability through Critical Analysis and Creative Reimagining By Emma Bolch

Abstract

If I had seen an asexual character on TV as a child, I would have realized I was asexual much sooner. Unfortunately, most asexuals' experiences are similar, as they have to rely on informal internet research to understand their lack of sexual attraction. To address this representational gap, this research focuses on the depiction of asexual characters in film, TV shows, and literature while examining two written works: *Being Ace: An Anthology of Queer, Trans, Femme, and Disabled Stories of Asexual Love and Connection* (ed. Dyer 2023) and *Let's Talk About Love* (Kann 2018). I analyzed these works to determine the difference between good and bad representation, arguing that additional dimensions of asexuals' identity need to be fully fleshed out. I propose a critical reframing of representations considered "bad": rather than disposing entirely of flawed characters, I argue that there is a great need to re-envision and enrich elements of their portrayal (disability, aromanticism, race). This study concludes with a creative writing exploration of what a realistic representation could look like, based on my lived experiences and addressing the intersection of underrepresented gender(s), race(s), and disability. Rather than erasing stereotypes, this research aims to find ways to create future portrayals that are relatable and informative while normalizing asexuality.

I. Introduction

Due to the growth of queer representation, people wouldn't need to look up on the internet to know what gay or bisexual means. However, if you heard the word "asexual," most people wouldn't even know what it means. This research examines the portrayal of asexual characters because representation is scarce, leaving many unaware that asexuality exists. When it appears, it is often inaccurate or based on harmful stereotypes. This study analyzes fictional works to show that asexual characters need more fully developed identities, particularly regarding gender, race, and disability. I propose a critical re-framing of flawed representations, as some of their elements remain valuable despite being flat or stereotypical.

This study concludes with a creative writing exploration of a more realistic and nuanced asexual character based on my lived experiences. Ultimately, I hope to answer how asexuality should be written in the future to help showrunners, authors, filmmakers, and others create accurate and positive portrayals to increase awareness and legitimize asexuality.

I use several terms throughout the paper. By *asexuality*, I mean a sexual orientation of little to no sexual attraction and I use *ace* as shorthand. Because asexuality is a spectrum, I also use terms such as *demisexual* (experiencing sexual attraction only after forming a close bond) and *graysexual* (experiencing sexual attraction infrequently). I use *aromanticism* to describe little to no romantic attraction, *aro* as shorthand, and *aroace* to describe someone who is both asexual and aromantic. I also use *biromantic* to describe someone who is romantically but not sexually attracted to two genders.

II. Literature Review

1. Gender

Most asexual characters in TV shows are men, such as Dexter (Manos, James, Jr., 2006-2013), Sheldon Cooper (Lorre, Chuck, and Bill Prady, 2007-2019), and Sherlock (Moffat, Steven, and Mark Gatiss, 2010-1017). Although the creators haven't confirmed these characters as asexual, it is still more common to find a male character in TV or movies who is hinted to experience low sexual attraction than a woman. In addition, sexuality researcher Tokheim argues this representation supports stereotypes of asexuality as these men are often depicted as being unemotional, autistic, and suffering from trauma (Tokheim, 2018). Since not having sexual attraction is an idea non-asexuals have a hard time understanding, they come up with reasons for asexuality, such as medical or psychological issues, creating the stereotypes that asexuals are "broken." One gap that Tokheim didn't consider, which I later address, is that some asexuals in real life are less sociable and have in fact experienced trauma. Despite that, he is right that these stereotypes are harmful because they make viewers assume that sexual attraction is linked with humanness and that those who do not experience sexual attraction are therefore abnormal.

In contrast, asexual characters in young adult and children's literature are predominantly female. Examples are Georgia from Loveless and Clariel from The Old Kingdom series. However, Hernandez noticed that these characters, similarly to male characters in the media who are asexual, are also usually white and cisgender (Hernandez 1). Most of these female protagonists are also aromantic. Always writing characters who are both asexual and aromantic implies that an asexual person is also aromantic and an aromantic person is also asexual. This is false, as asexuals can experience romantic attraction and aromantics can experience sexual attraction.

My theory as to why there is a lack of asexual women in film is that, for centuries, women have been sexualized, leading to a Western ideology that a female character who isn't a sexual or romantic interest serves no purpose in the story. Conversely, women are not often in production positions for this medium; instead, they are the majority of writers and readers of asexual literature, because most of these books, like Alice Oseman, who wrote Loveless, are aroace themselves and have more individual freedom to tell their own story based on their own experiences. This is unlike TV creators, 80.6% of whom are male (Kuznikov 2024) and are limited in how they tell their stories as companies focus on gaining viewers through action or sex.

Unfortunately, there is also a lack of male asexual representation in literature. Researcher Hernandez explains the lack of male representation stems from the belief that men aren't "masculine" until they have sexual intercourse with a woman, unlike women who are discouraged from having sexual intercourse with multiple men; otherwise, she'd be viewed as a "whore." This also explains why it is "less likely (for a man) to identify as asexual because they fear having their masculinity challenged" (Hernandez 4), as according to the Asexual Community Survey, only "11%" (Winer, Canton, and Hannah 2024) of those identified as

asexual are men.

2. Race

Across different media forms, Hernandez, Tokheim, Humphreys-Lamford, and Scherrer note that most asexual characters are white, reflecting stereotypes that portray white people, especially women, as "sexually pure," because society pressures them to be, and Black and Latino people as "hypersexual" (Hernandez 5).

These stereotypes may also contribute to the exclusion of non-white people from predominantly white asexual communities. For example, AVEN's community census found that only about 25% of respondents identified as Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, or another non-white identity. Similarly, Scherrer's survey, conducted from asexuality.org, found that 84 of 102 participants identified as white or Caucasian (Scherrer 2026). At the same time, non-white asexual people may also face homophobia and acephobia within support groups centered on their racial communities. Black women, in particular, often experience exclusion because of their long history of sexualization in film and magazines (Manzoor 2025).

3. Disability

Tokheim says the media justifies asexuality by giving characters "nonnormative bodies, specifically fat, disabled, Asian, and nerdy bodies" (Tokheim 3). This reinforces the idea that asexual people cannot be attractive or physically have greater difficulty having sex.

Tokheim also notes the frequent association between autism and asexuality in fiction. Because autistic people may struggle with socializing or dislike physical contact, they are often stereotyped as asexual, reinforcing the misconception that asexual people are unsociable and uninterested in sex.

According to Gault's research, disabled people are similarly assumed to be asexual in real life. As a result, they are often excluded from comprehensive sex and health education because caregivers and educators feel uncomfortable teaching them (Goulden and Kattari 2023). This denies them information about safe sex, consent, boundaries, and healthy relationships (Gault 2023) increasing their risk of sexual or domestic violence.

However, these authors do not address the intersection between disability and queer identities, including asexuality. Both groups experience similar pressures surrounding compulsory heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and coming out.

4. "Good" versus "Bad" Representation

Poor asexual representation often relies on stereotypes. However, increasing diversity doesn't mean eliminating white, male, and disabled asexual characters. Instead of giving fewer examples of what asexuality is, there need to be more examples in the media that are thoughtful and inclusive.

However, representation does become poor when it relies on common tropes. Of the approximately 42 traditionally published YA novels featuring asexual protagonists, about

two-thirds use the “asexual exile trope” (O'Connor 2026), in which asexual characters are ostracized or exiled for being seen as inhuman. While this reflects the real experiences of many asexual people living in a heteronormative society, the problem is not the trope itself but how often it is used and how it ends. If the character ultimately accepts their identity, the representation is positive. If they remain isolated and ashamed of their asexuality, it reinforces harmful messages.

Some critics also label representation as poor simply because a character struggles with their identity. Brown argues that Clariel, from *Clariel* by Garth Nix, is a poor representation because she fears how others will react to her lack of sexual desire, portraying asexuality negatively (Brown 9). Simelane disagrees, arguing that Clariel is a strong representation because her struggles with asexuality and desire for independence make her relatable to both asexual and allosexual readers (Simelane 81). I agree with Simelane. Expecting a character to immediately embrace a newly discovered asexual identity is unrealistic. What matters is whether they grow to accept themselves, making their representation ultimately positive.

Positive representation comes from avoiding harmful stereotypes—such as portraying asexuality solely as a response to trauma—while creating complex characters with meaningful flaws and growth. While stereotypes by definition aren’t always harmful, they suggest that all members within a certain group share the same characteristics, whether by race, gender, or culture, which can lead to biases or misconceptions which are often untrue (Momentous Institute 2023).

Whether they are white, non-white, male, female, or disabled, well-developed asexual characters who learn to accept themselves can encourage greater understanding and acceptance of asexuality. However, scholars are right in their belief that stereotypes can be harmful, even if certain characteristics are important, since they reinforce misbeliefs about asexuality.

III. Theoretical Framework

1. Intersectionality

So far, I have discussed how race, gender, and other identities affect asexuality individually, but not their intersectionality (Kang, Miliann, Donovan Lessard, Heston, and Nordmarken 2017). Intersectionality helps explain how overlapping identities can increase the challenges of being asexual. For example, while people of color are often excluded from predominantly white asexual communities, women of color face additional barriers because of both race and gender. By contrast, white women may be more accepted within asexual communities but still face societal expectations to pursue romantic relationships. This reflects the additive model of identity, in which a person's experiences are shaped by both privileged and marginalized identities (Kang et al. 2017).

Asexual support groups should be welcoming, yet many remain exclusionary toward non-white people by either not allowing them to join in the first place or treating them differently than white members. More inclusive communities could foster cultural competence by bringing

together asexual people from diverse backgrounds to challenge oppression such as conversion therapy (the discredited practice of attempting to change a queer person's sexual orientation or gender identity, often causing depression and isolation) and corrective rape (the sexual assault of queer people intended to “fix” their sexual orientation, exposing asexual people to severe violence) (Slayter, Singh, and Johnson 2023).

However, awareness alone cannot eliminate structural inequality. Kang argues that achieving critical cultural competence requires self-reflection and recognizing one's own biases to promote equity (Kang 2017). This applies to both allosexual people, who must examine assumptions about asexuality, and privileged asexual people, such as white asexuals, who can help make asexual communities more inclusive.

If groups of different backgrounds came together, they can both obtain their goals on inclusivity, such as the queer and disability movement (Borum, Valerie, and Elspeth Slayter 2023). Historically, disabled and queer communities have supported one another because both have experienced discrimination through ableism and homophobia. This shared history has led to organizations such as the Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf (RAD) and Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR).

2. Crip Theory

Crip Theory argues that both asexual people and disabled people experience discrimination through compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer 2026). Compulsory heterosexuality assumes heterosexuality as the norm within a patriarchal system, while compulsory able-bodiedness privileges able-bodied people over those with disabilities. These systems have also reinforced stereotypes linking asexuality and disability, including the belief that one causes the other. Gault argues that these assumptions make it more difficult for queer people with intellectual disabilities to come out because they may struggle to advocate for themselves (Gault, Wetmur, Plummer, and Findley 2026). Johnson and Sweet further note that women with physical disabilities are often stereotyped as asexual, while women with intellectual or emotional disabilities are stereotyped as hypersexual (Johnson and Sweet 2026).

Because the media frequently portrays disabled people as uninterested in relationships or sex, this makes them vulnerable to abusers when they are in relationships. Survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual abuse who are queer, non-white, and disabled are also less likely to be believed because of their intersecting identities (Gault, Wetmur, Plummer, and Findley 2026). Since asexual individuals with disabilities do exist, there is no issue portraying asexual characters who are also disabled, just as long as it’s not implied that their sexuality is a result of their disability or vice versa.

3. Media Studies

George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism suggests that media influences human behavior, meaning greater asexual representation can increase public acceptance (Sylvia

2024). Agenda-setting theory also suggests that media shapes what people think about, so increased representation could help questioning asexual people discover their identities and encourage closeted asexual people to come out. Television is especially influential because, since the 1950s, it has informed audiences about social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and LGBTQ rights (Sylvia 2024). Unlike books, television reaches broad audiences simultaneously, and many young people rely on it for information about sexuality. In fact, "two-thirds of adolescents turn to the media first when they want to learn about sexuality" (Sylvia 2024).

However, television, publishing, and other media are not always accurate, making careful research essential for creators portraying asexuality (Sylvia 2024). Public advocacy is also important because production companies often hesitate to include asexual characters, believing that "sex sells," which can result in straightwashing, where asexual characters are rewritten as heterosexual.

Most research on asexuality has focused on television, such as *BoJack Horseman* and *Sirens*, while fictional literature has received less attention. This study addresses that gap by analyzing two literary works through the lenses of intersectionality, Crip Theory, and media studies. I first examine *Being Ace: An Anthology of Queer, Trans, Femme, and Disabled Stories of Asexual Love and Connection* to examine the intersections of disability and gender with asexuality, as well as how to create three-dimensional asexual characters whose identities extend beyond their sexuality. I then analyze *Let's Talk About Love* by Claire Kann to explore how race, gender, and romantic attraction intersect with asexuality through a biromantic Black woman.

IV. Analysis of Literature

Book 1: Being Ace: An Anthology of Queer, Trans, Femme, and Disabled Stories of Asexual Love edited by Madeline Dyer

What is Being Ace?

Being Ace contains fourteen short stories by authors including Kat Yen, K. Hart, and Jas Brown. Its introduction is written by Cody Daigle-Orians, also known as Ace Dad on YouTube, who reflects on his journey of discovering his identity. At 16, he identified with the character Paul in *A Chorus Line*, whose fear of his parents' reaction helped him realize he was gay. Nearly twenty years later, he discovered he was also asexual through Tumblr. This experience inspired him and the anthology's contributors to help questioning readers better understand their own identities through these stories.

Although my research focuses less on the variety of individual asexual experiences, it shares this goal of educating readers about asexuality and exploring its intersection with race, gender, and disability. Like the anthology, I aim to portray asexuality realistically by showing both its challenges, such as ostracism for rejecting sex or relationships, and its joys, including finding support and embracing one's identity.

The Lack of Masculinity

In the introduction, Daigle-Orians notes that *Being Ace* has no cisgender male main characters. The only cisgender male characters are side characters: Dale in "Nylon Bed Socks" by Madeline Dyer and Felix in "The Hazards of Pressing Play" by Lara Ameen. He explains that this lack of asexual masculinity is partly because he was the only cisgender male author in the anthology, and the 2019 Asexual Community Survey found that only 13.9% of respondents identified as male (xi).

Daigle-Orians connect this to the idea discussed earlier: Many men struggle to come out as asexual because of the misconception that asexuality is "unmasculine." Rather than being more common among women, men are often unaware of asexuality due to the lack of education and representation, and may feel pressured to remain closeted. Most main characters in the anthology are women, aside from a few non-binary and agender characters. The small number of openly asexual men—especially authors—helps explain why asexual masculinity remains limited in literature.

Why is Everyone a Teenager?

All of the main characters in *Being Ace* are around 18 years old or attending college. This reflects a larger trend in which many queer characters, not just asexual ones, are teenagers. While many people discover their sexuality during adolescence, this is not true for everyone. Some people realize their identities later in life, as shown by Ace Dad, who did not discover he was asexual until his late 30s due to the lack of awareness and information about asexuality when he was younger.

Despite this experience, none of the stories depict someone discovering their asexuality later in life. This is likely because the anthology, like many books about sexuality, is YA, and readers may prefer characters closer to their own age. However, future stories should include older asexual and queer characters and expand beyond the YA genre. Otherwise, the media may reinforce the idea that queerness is limited to teenagers or is only a phase. In addition, it may benefit teenagers to read stories about older queer characters to gain insight into how they may struggle as queer individuals as they get older, such as dating and experiencing possible discrimination. Adult queer books might also appeal to older audiences. Queer adults who might have struggled with their identity in the past would appreciate stories with characters like them who grew up in an environment less accepting of queerness. These books may also help older heterosexual readers understand queerness by reading the point of view of a character their age instead of a teenager.

Invisibility of Race

Most of the authors do not explicitly state the main characters' races. The characters whose races are mentioned are Xianying in "How to Love a Sidewinder" by Kat Yuen and Nee-chan in "Moonspirited," by Anju Imura who are Asian; Cass in "Give Up the Ghost" by Linsey Miller and Violet and her girlfriend Nova in "The Hazards of Pressing Play," by Ameen

who are white; and Felix in "The Hazards of Pressing Play," who is Egyptian American but only a side character.

Although explicitly stating a character's race is not always necessary, describing physical features such as skin color can help make racial identities visible. Without these details, readers may default to assuming characters are white because of the prevalence of white characters in mainstream media.

When race is implied, it is through names, such as how Latinx characters are given Spanish first and last names or how Indigenous characters are given Indigenous first and last names. Xiangying and Nee-chan, who are Asian, were the only characters in Being Ace to have an implied race due to their names. If these characters live in their ethnic regions, like how Nee-chan is implied to live in Asia, then it is understandable to use ethnic names. However, constantly giving people of color ethnic names, even when they are American or do not live in their region, can unintentionally characterize these characters as being the "Mexican character" or the "Asian character" instead of allowing the audience to see their other characteristics that do not involve their race. While there is nothing wrong with ethnic names, more should be done to imply what a character's race is without making them stereotypical racial representations.

Sexuality Beyond Asexuality

One area of diversity that these stories handle well is showing characters with sexual and romantic orientation beyond asexuality. Many characters have additional identities, such as Xianyong and Orion, who are aromantic; Freya and Violet, who are biromantic; and Cass and Dallas, who experience romantic attraction. While aromanticism is still represented, these stories effectively show that asexuality and aromanticism are not the same identity.

For example, in Ameen's story, the protagonist Violet is asexual and biromantic and is in a romantic relationship with Nova, who is also asexual. Representing asexual characters who experience romantic attraction is important because it challenges the assumption that all asexual people are aromantic. Although some asexual people may face challenges in relationships, such as Halcion's abusive relationship with Chris, who criticized them for not wanting sex, asexual people who are not aromantic can still form romantic connections and relationships.

Addressing Serious Issues

Another strength of these stories is that they are not solely focused on asexuality but also explore issues such as sexual assault, drug addiction, eating disorders, and abuse. Importantly, these topics are portrayed without suggesting that asexuality results from trauma, a common misconception about asexual people.

For example, in Dyer's story, Amelia faces multiple struggles. While her boyfriend tells her he can "fix her" for lacking sexual attraction, she is also bullied for her weight and told by him that she would be "so much hotter if (she) lost weight" (75). These experiences contribute to her eating disorder, hospitalization, and suicidal thoughts. Some may argue Dyer's portrayal links asexuality to trauma, but she is learning that Amelia's asexuality is a part of her identity,

not a result of trauma.

Disability

One common stereotype is that asexual people are more likely to be disabled. However, the disabled asexual characters in these stories, such as Sylver's character Orion, who is autistic, and Ameen's character Violet, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, are not defined by this stereotype. In "The Third Star," the author Sylver presents Orion struggling with autism-related sensitivity to sound but learns that it is not a weakness because it allows them to hear things others cannot, such as the Fenris Stellaris. By hearing the wolf's cries, Orion discovers that the station's dark matter harvesting is harming it and warns Cadet Vela to stop. Although Vela refuses, resulting in the station's destruction, Orion's ability to communicate with Fenris Stellaris helps save them and their friends. While disability should not always be portrayed as a strength, as disabled people also face challenges and need support, like how Orion receives support from his friends, Syler shows Orion overcoming obstacles while still acknowledging their struggles.

Orion's asexuality and aromanticism are also explored separately from their disability. When Leo and Brenna fight, Orion fears losing their friend group and being alone because they are asexual and aromantic. However, their friends reassure them that they will always be supported. This is an important message because many asexual and aromantic people fear isolation without romantic relationships, despite many maintaining long-term friendships and queerplatonic relationships.

Although asexuality and disability are sometimes connected through stereotypes, Sylver's portrayal of Orion shows that these identities can be represented together as long as they are explored individually.

Asexuality Across Genres

The stories by S.E. Anderson, S. J. Taylor, and Emily Victoria explore asexuality in different ways. In some, a character's lack of sexual attraction is central to the conflict. For example, in "Smells Like Teen Virgin" by S.E. Anderson, the main character Artemis is forced to lose her virginity because, as a monster hunter, her virgin blood attracts monsters and threatens her family. Anderson writes, "But when you're a young, virginal Slayer like moi, it has the bonus of making you smell like a total snack to every monster within a hundred-mile radius… the further we get into adulthood with our V-card still intact…the better we taste" (139).

However, as a sex-repulsed asexual, Artemis struggles with the expectation to have sex: "But, I happen to be an asexual Slayer, more specifically a sex-repulsed asexual Slayer, which means the very concept of sex is more disgusting to me than dismembering and burning a Hellhound" (139).

Even when she tries to have sex with Brett to break this curse, she freaks out and tells him to stop even though she notices he is attractive: "Despite Brett hitting every aesthetic point on the supposed checklist…it's not doing anything for me (139-140)".

She then reflects on how it feels to be asexual, especially when the rest of her society and family expect her to lose her virginity: “It’s difficult, not knowing what sexual attraction feels like. Just how much control you lose when caught in its web. Some days, I want to feel that want, just to understand it” (141).

Anderson’s story is compelling not only because of its fantasy elements, but because she realistically depicts the experience asexuals go through with the expectation to lose their virginity. Due to this being a fantasy set in modern times, the author does use the word asexual, and asexuality is the main theme of the story as Artemis is forced to lose her virginity to break this curse. However, instead of having sex, Artemis challenges the council and scares the monsters away, showing that there is nothing wrong with being asexual and that nobody should have to have sex if they do not want to.

In contrast, stories that are also fantasies set in more historic times portray asexuality more subtly by not mentioning the word “asexual” and choosing not to center conflict on asexuality. For instance, S.J. Taylor’s “The Witch of Fresta Falls” is a fantasy set in pre-modern times in which Briga is ostracized by her town for not being in a romantic relationship, with people claiming she traded “natural desires” for magic (308). Although the main plot revolves around stopping the fossegrim that killed Briga’s cousin Runa, her representation is meaningful because Briga’s lack of sexual or romantic attraction does not prevent her from being important to the story. She is essential to saving her village, challenging the idea that characters without romantic or sexual roles lack purpose.

However, some stories do not clearly indicate that their characters are asexual. In “Sealights” by Emily Victoria and “No Cure for Doubt,” by Jas Brown, there is no mention or suggestion of asexuality, meaning readers would not know these characters are asexual without knowing "Being Ace” is an anthology about asexuality. In other cases, asexuality is introduced abruptly. For example, in Imura’s “Moonspirited,” Nee-chan’s frustration about the “laws of companionship and touch” (210) appears suddenly and is not connected to the story’s earlier focus on protecting her sister and resenting the gods who abandoned them.

Another important aspect of representation is explicitly using the word “asexual.” While this may not always fit fantasy or historical settings, modern stories should not avoid the term. Naming asexuality helps audiences understand that it exists, normalizes the identity, and may help closeted asexual people feel more confident coming out.

Friendship over Romance

A common misconception is that asexual and aromantic people will eventually end up alone and that friendships cannot replace romantic relationships. However, these stories included in Madeline Dyer’s *Being Ace* challenge this idea by showing the importance of platonic relationships.

In Rosiee Thor’s “Well Suited,” Brindle’s friend Fig supports her throughout the story. When Brindle does not want to find a romantic suitor because she is asexual and aromantic, Fig creates a suit of armor named Sir Guy to accompany her to the ball. When Sir Guy later attempts

to assault Brindle, Fig protects her and destroys the armor despite risking their own safety. Fig explains that they and Brindle are "meant for a life together—not romantically, not physically, but platonically" (48).

Another important friendship is between Halcion and Sinthe in Hart's "No Such Thing as Just." Halcion initially hides their asexuality because they fear Sinthe, their highly sexual best friend, will not accept them. However, after ending their relationship with Chris, Halcion tells Sinthe they are asexual, and Sinthe responds that they "don't need fixing" and that she wants to remain their friend. When Halcion asks, "Just friends?" Sinthe replies, "There's no such thing as just" (128).

These friendships emphasize that while platonic, they are still centered around love and can be just as valuable as romantic relationships. This is a message other people, regardless of sexual orientation, need to hear, because culture has emphasized that romantic relationships are superior to platonic relationships, which isn't true and leads those who are single to feel alone.

Asexuals Need to Tell Their Stories

Cody Daigle-Orians emphasizes in the introduction that asexual stories should not only provide representation but also be written by asexual authors. This is important because asexual people are best able to share their own experiences and explain what a world without sexual attraction feels like. For example, in Yuen's "How to Love a Sidewinder," Xianyong struggles to hide her asexuality and aromanticism from her mother, who wants her to be in a relationship. The story is based on author Kat Yen's own experiences as an asexual and aromantic person navigating a world that expects romance. While non-asexual authors can write about asexuality, it is more difficult to fully capture these experiences. Asexual authors are essential not only for educating others but also for sharing their own perspectives and showing how asexuality has shaped their lives.

Book 2: Let's Talk About Love by Claire Kann

What is Let's Talk About Love About?

"Let's Talk About Love" by Clair Kann is a Young Adult (YA) novel centered around a biromantic Black college student, Alice. Throughout the book, Kann shows Alice's troubles finding romance again after her ex-girlfriend Margot broke up with her for being asexual. At her library job, she meets Takumi and starts developing feelings for him. However, as they get closer, Alice struggles with whether or not to tell Takumi she's asexual, as she worries that he'll not only not understand but will be rejected for not wanting to have sex.

Race

The fact that Alice is a Black woman provides important representation, as most asexual characters in media are white. Kann's novel not only explores the discrimination Alice faces for being asexual but also examines how race and asexuality intersect, making it more difficult for

her to come out.

For example, when Alice's ex-girlfriend Margot asks why she is uncomfortable with sex, Alice explains that she does not need or think about sex. Margot responds, "but you're Black" (4). This comment is both acephobic and racist, as Margot dismisses Alice's asexuality while assuming that Black people are inherently interested in sex.

Alice also experiences racism unrelated to her asexuality. At a party, a man tells her she is "... pretty cute for a Black girl" (116), and she recalls a time when a roommate told her she would likely rank lower on dating apps because "Black girls and Asian guys are always ranked the lowest on dating sites" (146–147). Although framed as compliments, these comments reinforce the racist idea that Black women are less attractive.

Kann also explores broader experiences of being Black through Alice's family. After Alice decides not to attend law school and instead study interior design, her parents cut her off. Later, her father explains that they pushed her toward a stable career because "Black people have to be perfect, inhumanly good at everything, and even then we can fail, because that's how the system is set up" (258). His explanation shows how systemic racism creates pressure for people of color to work harder to succeed.

Gender

Another important aspect of Alice's identity is that she is a woman. As discussed earlier, film and television often portray men as asexual to make them seem mysterious or detached, while women are typically expected to serve as sexual or romantic partners. In contrast, asexual women are more common in literature, likely because many asexual women write these stories, such as Claire Kann, who is herself a Black woman.

While Alice's gender is not the main theme of the story, it is still significant. Her identity as a woman seems most evident in her sapphic relationship with Margot and in her interactions with men, such as when she is harassed at a party or approached for her number at the beach. If Alice were a man, these situations would likely play out differently, as the people pursuing her may be less persistent, as women are more likely to be sexually harassed than men. However, Alice's struggles being a woman are more subtle because it is not just because she is female but because she was also "black, female, and queer"(258). Due to these intersecting identities, she has a harder time fitting into communities both online and in real life. While changing Alice's gender doesn't seem like it would greatly alter the story, Kann's choice to make her a woman represents real-life struggles of both queer and non-white women not only having to deal with sexism but racism and homophobia as well, even sometimes from other women.

Alice's Love Life

Despite being asexual, Alice is not aromantic; she is biromantic. This challenges the stereotype that asexual people cannot have romantic relationships or sex. Alice has dated both Sam in high school and Margot in college. While some asexual people are sex-positive or sex-neutral, Alice is more sex-negative, which contributes to the end of both relationships.

Alice explains that her previous partners believed her lack of interest in sex meant she did not love them, but her understanding of love is based on emotional connection rather than physical intimacy. She describes love as spending time together, feeling comfortable, and knowing someone will support you (9). This challenges the assumption that sex and romance are inseparable and shows that many asexual people value emotional intimacy in relationships.

After breaking up with Margot, Alice develops feelings for Takumi, recognizing his attractiveness through her ("Cutie Code™"). This shows that asexual people can experience aesthetic attraction and develop romantic feelings. Alice initially struggles to understand these feelings because she has rarely experienced crushes before and previously confused attraction with expectations from others.

When Alice discusses Takumi with her friend Feenie, Feenie suggests that Alice should have sex with him and consider whether she is graysexual (52). While questioning one's identity is valid, Feenie's suggestion that Alice needs sex to understand herself is harmful because it reinforces the idea that asexuality can be changed by finding the "right person." Instead, Alice needs support and acceptance rather than pressure to prove her identity.

Alice is initially afraid to come out to Takumi because of her past relationships, but when she tells him she is asexual, he responds that anyone who sees her differently because of it does not deserve to be in her life (210). His reaction shows the importance of validating asexual people when they come out. Later, when Alice asks Takumi out, he hesitates because he is unsure if he can be in a relationship without sex (254). Although this hurts Alice, Takumi's response reflects a realistic challenge between asexual and non-asexual partners: Differences in sexual needs can affect compatibility without making either person wrong.

Eventually, Takumi realizes that his feelings are not dependent on sex and tells Alice he wants to be with her even if they never have sex (267–269). Their relationship challenges the belief that love requires sex, showing that asexual and non-asexual people can have healthy relationships based on care, trust, and emotional connection.

Takumi is also notable as a Japanese-American love interest. Although he is not asexual, his character provides representation because non-white male romantic leads are less common in media. His relationship with Alice also offers representation of an interracial relationship between two non-white characters, which is rarely portrayed.

Personality

A common misconception is that asexual people are cold, aloof, and unsociable. However, Alice challenges this stereotype through her warm and affectionate personality. She is described as loving cute things, decorating, and enjoying affection, as "Alice (a steadfast believer in the power of hugs) loved affection" (7). This challenges the belief that asexual people dislike touch simply because they may not experience sexual attraction.

Alice also challenges the stereotype that asexual people are unemotional. She cries easily, such as when she is confused about her feelings for Takumi and when she cries after his rejection (30, 256). Alice not only challenges stereotypes about asexual people but also challenges

stereotypes about Black women. Black women are often portrayed as loud or angry, reinforcing harmful ideas that women of color cannot be gentle or friendly. However, Alice shows that personality and kindness are not determined by race.

Other hardships

Throughout the book, Alice faces challenges beyond her sexuality and relationship with Takumi. These side plots are vital because Kann expresses that asexual people are not two-dimensional and have struggles other than being asexual. This way, the audience may relate to these characters whether or not they're asexual and therefore be more willing to empathize with asexuals in real life.

One major struggle is feeling like the third wheel between her close friends and roommates, Ryan and Feenie. Although they are some of the only people who know Alice is asexual, Alice often worries about being left behind when they spend time together as a couple. This fear began when Feenie chose to move in with Ryan instead of Alice and continues when Ryan and Feenie leave Alice alone at a party to have sex during their planned "Family night."

After Alice begins spending more time with Takumi, Feenie becomes upset and believes Alice is choosing him over them. However, Alice feels that Feenie and Ryan have excluded her for years. She eventually tells Ryan, "You do. You have for years. I just don't say anything because I don't want us to fight, but the second I find an actual friend on my own, you two act like this" (201–202). This reflects a fear many asexual and aromantic people have of being left behind when their friends enter romantic relationships.

While Feenie eventually acknowledges that she hurt Alice and admits they did not spend enough time together (246–247), their conflict could have been resolved through better communication earlier. Feenie should have expressed her feelings instead of blaming Alice for spending time with Takumi, and Alice should have advocated for herself rather than taking responsibility for the conflict. Their storyline shows the importance of communication and boundaries in friendships.

Another major subplot is Alice deciding her career path while managing her family's expectations. Throughout the book, her family pressures her to pursue law because they are a family of lawyers, even though Alice does not want that career. Although she wants to make her family proud, she knows she wants to follow her own interests. With Ryan's encouragement, Alice realizes she wants to study interior design. However, when she tells her parents, they stop supporting her financially because they believe law would provide more stability.

Despite being hurt, Alice chooses to pursue her passion and creates a plan to support herself. Later, her father explains that their pressure came from their experiences as Black people facing greater barriers to success. Although her family did not initially understand her choice, they still loved and supported her, with her father offering financial help and inviting Alice and Takumi home for Christmas.

Hardships of being ace

While *Let's Talk About Love* explores themes of friendship, family, and romance, its central focus is Alice's experience as an asexual person. Before discovering her identity, Alice often felt like an outsider because she did not experience sexual attraction. For instance, as a child and teenager, she pretended to have crushes to fit in:

> In elementary school, while all of Alice's friends had talked about boys they liked, she had kept quiet. In middle school, she had pretended to have a crush on Patrick Furlong so she would have someone to talk about, too…In high school, Alice had gone all out, pretending to be hopelessly in love with Sam Oliphant. (31)

Like other asexual teenage girls, Alice felt like she had to lie about being attracted to others to avoid being judged and excluded from her friends: "Normal felt like a constant state of despair, but they had stopped teasing her. Had stopped giving her pitying looks, calling her "innocent" and excluding her from sleepovers because she had nothing romantic to gossip about" (31-32).

However, even when she fitted in when she was dating Sam she still struggled figuring out why she was not having sexual attraction: "Alice had been trying to sort out the difference between romantic attraction (which she felt) and sexual attraction (which she didn't)" (31).

Eventually, as she started having sex with Sam, he started spreading rumors about Alice's displeasure with sex: "She's dumped with a new nickname. The Corpse. Because kissing him had been an ordeal to overcome. Because she never seemed interested in touching him … Because she had just lay there while Sam had sex with her, and he had told everyone" (32). Another instance of the rumors was "Francine Loren's mock whisper in the locker room: 'I heard she didn't moan. Not even when he went down on her'" (32).

However, Feenie defended Alice when someone mocked her, allowing Alice to trust her. Later, Alice confessed she thought something might be wrong, so one day, after health class, they had talked to their teacher, who then said the word: asexual. Everything had finally made sense" (32). Feenie's showcase of support is important because many asexual people feel pressured to pretend to experience attraction, date, or have sex to fit in, while supportive friends allow them to be themselves. Alice's experience of finding out she's asexual in health class is also common, as many discover their identity through education and learning about different sexual orientations.

However, discovering her identity does not eliminate Alice's struggles. She previously hid her asexuality from Margot and had sex to please her, but Margot eventually asked her why she was uncomfortable with sex:

> "Have you gone to a doctor?"...
> "I don't need to."...
> "Were you abused? Is that it?"
> "No."...

> "Are you saving yourself for marriage?"
> "I hope that's a joke."
> "It was," Margot admitted…. "Then what? Tell me. People don't just not like sex without a reason. It's kind of not natural, don't you think?" (4-5).

Margot's belief that people do not dislike sex "without a reason" (5) reflects harmful misconceptions that asexuality is unnatural or caused by something negative. Margot finally says, "And I can't be with someone who doesn't desire me. You could never love me as much as I would love you. You understand that, don't you?"(5).

While Margot was not wrong for wanting a relationship with someone who shared her sexual interests, she should have respected Alice's boundaries rather than making her feel that something was wrong with her. She is also inconsiderate in thinking that Alice couldn't love her the same way she loved her just because Alice doesn't feel sexual attraction. This is false, as asexuals are capable of experiencing love like everyone else, whether romantic or platonic.

Because of these experiences, Alice becomes insecure about sharing her identity. When discussing her feelings for Takumi with Dr. Burris, she avoids saying the word asexual and instead explains her lack of attraction. Dr. Burris tells her that she may need to educate others about asexuality because many people do not understand it (81). Although Alice finds this frustrating, his advice reflects the reality that coming out as asexual often requires explaining the identity to others. Unlike more widely recognized identities, asexuality is often unfamiliar to people, making asexual individuals more likely to face confusion or skepticism. This helps explain why Alice only comes out to a few people and not her family.

Alice is a realistic portrayal of asexuality because she experiences both the challenges of coming out and the support of people who accept her. Her story shows the importance of respecting asexual boundaries, as she does not force herself to have sex to maintain a relationship. While it would have been positive to see Alice become more confident and open about her identity, her hesitation is also realistic, as accepting one's identity does not always mean being ready to share it with everyone.

V. Addressing Need for Richer Asexual Representation through Creative Writing

Introduction

Since there is a lack of asexual representation, especially asexual characters who are diverse, I wrote a fictional short story as an example of what realistic and positive representation can look like. The story is about a closeted asexual girl, Ailani, coming out to her boyfriend, Noah. Though fictional, this story draws on my own experience as a teenager-struggling to find information, worrying about acceptance, and fearing others' reactions. While every asexual experience differs, this piece may help spread awareness and help asexuals feel seen.

This creative writing is important for this research as it addresses the intersectionality I previously mentioned, such as how race, gender, and disability affect asexual representation and

whether these representations are harmful or positive. This piece is also necessary because if more asexual representation is going to occur, writers and screenwriters need inspiration and knowledge about what asexuality is, the struggles asexuals go through, and how to create complex and interesting asexual characters instead of stereotypes. This short story is also meant to encourage other asexual writers to tell their own stories, as the only way more people are going to know what asexuality is is through awareness. While this work is prose, this could also be used as a basis for a TV/ Film script.

Creative Writing Reimagining: A Fictional Short Story by the Researcher

Ailani fiddled with her hands as she looked through the car window. The sun melted like honey over the ocean, the last of its rays gleaming on her walnut skin. Purple streaked the sky like paint, and gray ashen clouds drifted above. The sun was about to die. Tired of the cold air blowing raven hair in her face, she rolled the window up. Through the glass, she saw Noah's reflection. His coal-black ropes covered his face, unbothered by the wind. She needed to tell him. She turned around. While his eyes were on the road, he sensed her gaze. "Is everything alright?" He asked without looking at her.

"Yeah," she said, looking away, as she gripped her knees. She sighed. "Actually," she looked back at him, and his eyes followed hers. "I need to tell you something."

"Okay…" he turned the car. After parking it on the side of the railing by the edge of the cliff, he released the steering wheel and faced her. "What's up?" Ailani bit the inside of her lip as she held her hands in her lap. *Do I just say it or...* Her eyes wandered around the car. The crinkled open bag of chips between her feet. The Lakers sticker on the outside of the windshield. The dumb Hawaiian bobblehead whose head kept bobbling despite the car no longer moving. Anywhere but him.

"Is this about last weekend?" Ailani's eyes darted up. "I'm really sorry, Ailani. I didn't mean to–"

"No!" Noah startled, jumping back against the driver's seat. "It's not that…or actually…." She looked away. Last weekend they were hanging out at his place. They were in his room, one second playing video games. The next, lying in his bed talking about anime. And then they started making out when… Back in the car, Ailani stiffened, wrapping her denim jacket tighter around her waist.

That night in Noah's room, they were making out when…he grabbed her breast. She freaked out and pushed him off. Noah immediately started apologizing over and over again while she kept assuring him it was fine. *It wasn't*. She then made some excuse about forgetting to feed her cat Daisy and left. The next few days, her phone wouldn't leave her alone as Noah called her with non-stop apologies. But she kept brushing them off. Until now. Ailiani exhaled as she looked up at the rear view mirror. Noah was watching her.

I'm asexual. He couldn't hear her thoughts.

She actually knew she was asexual for a while. Most of her friends were gay, so she was exposed to a lot of queer comics and TV shows in middle school. She figured she was just

straight until being traumatized by Sex Ed in eighth grade. After that, she secretly started going through her friends' comics and YA novels to see if she could find anything to explain why she was so freaked out by naked people. Once while hanging out at her friend's place, Vivian ran out of the room to grab the pizza. She slammed the door so hard a book fell out of her shelf. With no one looking, Ailani picked it up and read: A Guide on Asexuality.

Most of her friends knew she was ace. She told her parents, but they just said that she's too young or that she hasn't found the right person. And then when she started dating, most of the guys she saw said they were fine with her being ace, but when they wanted to get more physical and she didn't, they were no longer fine. When she refused to have sex with her last boyfriend, he told her something that still rang in her head today: *"No one is ever going to love you for being broken."* Four months later, when she'd met Noah at a party, she'd decided it would be best if he didn't know.

"Ailani?" Her head pivoted. Noah was staring at her. Umber eyes soaked her in. Her hands started to shake. She couldn't lie to him anymore. What was going to happen the next time his hands grazed over her? What was going to happen when he asked what was wrong and she said nothing. What's going to happen if she tells him? She studied the boy across from her. Trying to hold onto his oak eyes and the dimples on his cheeks. Instead, she saw the face of every other boy she's dated before, telling her she's broken.

"I'm…." she stammered. She grabbed the seat between her thighs, breathing in the salty air. "I'm asexual!" She covered her mouth. Noah stared at her, blinking for a few moments.

"Asexual?"

"Yeah," she nodded. She pulled out her phone from her pocket and typed the word asexual. She showed him the screen. "It means I don't feel sexual attraction."

"Oh," he said, looking at the purple-black flag on the screen and then back at her. "Well…thank you for telling me! Did you just find out you were asexual?"

"Noo…" she said, lowering her phone. "I knew I was asexual for a while."

He tilted his head. "How long?"

"Like…" she brushed her braids behind her ear. "Five years." His face dropped. He didn't furrow his eyebrows or clench his jaw, but he became a statue. Blank and unmoving. She waited for him to say something, but he didn't. She started to hate the silence that stretched over them and wished he would just yell at her. Yell at her for lying to him. Yell at her for not being normal.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He asked.

"I… I wanted to but..." She looked out the window, watching the waves crush over the rocky shore. "I was worried that if I told you, you wouldn't want to be with me anymore." She couldn't look away from the window. Outside, seagulls were digging their beaks in the sand. Pulling out small clams and catching them in the air. A large wave hit the shore, chasing the birds away. They yelped, flapping their wings and hovering over the water. She wished she had wings to fly away.

"I'm sorry," she sniffed, wiping a tear from her eye. "I should have told you."

Noah frowned, but there was no anger in his face. "Look…Ailani," he placed his hand on

hers. “I wish you didn’t keep this from me, but…” he took both her hands and held them in his lap. “I love you. And I still want to be with you. Even if that means missing out on some things.” Another tear fell down Ailani’s cheek as she wiped it off. *He’s not angry?* she chuckled.

“Wow. I think that’s the first time you ever said you loved me.”

“Oh.” He released her other hand and scratched the back of his neck as his cheeks grew red. She leaned over the armrest and kissed him on the cheek.

“I love you too.” The last of the sun’s rays shone over Noah’s braids as Ailani felt it too, brushing the back of her neck. Around them, night started to fall. The last embers were fading over the horizon as midnight velvet stretched over the sky.

“So…” Noah grinned. “There’s still a lot about asexuality I don’t know. Can you tell me?” She smiled as she cupped his warm face in her hands.

“I will,” she said before kissing him.

Analysis of Creative Work

Ailani is a positive portrayal of asexuality for several reasons. First, she is a Black woman, which is a demographic usually excluded in asexual communities. While literature often portrays asexual women, most asexual representation in television and film features men. Ailani also challenges the stereotype that asexual people are automatically aromantic or cannot have relationships, as she is dating Noah and has had previous relationships. Additionally, she does not fit the stereotype of asexual people being cold or unsociable, as she has many friends and enjoys spending time with them.

However, what makes Ailani a strong character is that she has flaws beyond her identity. Her main flaw is insecurity, which developed after past relationships ended because of her discomfort with sex. Throughout the story, she must overcome her fear of coming out to Noah because she worries he will leave her if she does not want a sexual relationship. By coming out, Ailani becomes more confident in herself and strengthens her relationship with Noah, who reassures her that he loves her even without sex. Her insecurity is relatable because many people struggle with self-confidence, allowing even non-asexual audiences to connect with her.
I also chose to write in limited third person to convey Ailani’s feelings and thoughts so readers can empathize with her insecurity about being asexual and fear of what will happen if she comes out.

To further develop Ailani, I could explore her struggles and interests outside of asexuality, such as her love for comics and video games. Overall, writers and producers should focus on creating characters who happen to be asexual rather than characters whose entire identity revolves around being asexual.

VI. Discussion of Results

While asexual representation is becoming more diverse, there is still a need for greater inclusion. For example, although previous research suggests that most asexual characters are men, the stories I studied mostly featured women, with all characters in my selected works being

women except for non-binary and agender characters. Additionally, many male asexual characters in television are only considered asexual through audience interpretation rather than being canon, such as Sherlock from *Sherlock*, whose creator confirmed he was heterosexual (Moffat, Steven, and Mark Gatiss, creators 2010–2017). In contrast, *Being Ace* included more trans representation, such as Halcion and Dallas, who are non-binary, and Orion, who is agender. It also included disabled asexual characters whose disabilities were portrayed separately from their asexuality rather than being used as an explanation for it.

My research also supports previous findings that most asexual characters are white. While Alice from *Let's Talk About Love* is Black, most main characters in *Being Ace* are implied to be white, except for Xianying and Nee-chan, who are Asian. More effort is needed from authors and creators to include asexual characters of different racial backgrounds. Additionally, many characters I analyzed were sex-negative, such as Alice, who does not want to have sex in her relationship with Takumi. While sex-repulsed asexual people exist, asexuality is a spectrum that also includes sex-positive and sex-neutral individuals, and the media should represent these different experiences.

This research has limitations because I could not analyze all asexual media due to the amount of existing representation. I also focused only on literature rather than television, film, or video games, where portrayals may differ. Overall, while asexual representation is improving and challenging harmful stereotypes, there are still areas for growth. Future representation should include more asexual men, non-white characters, and identities within the asexual spectrum, such as graysexual and demisexual people. More research should also explore aromanticism, as it appears to have even less representation and research than asexuality.

VII. Conclusions

Overall, asexual representation has grown through television, literature, and video games in recent years. However, asexuality remains widely unrecognized in society, causing both heterosexual and LGBTQ+ communities to sometimes question its validity. This lack of recognition can contribute to acephobia, leaving asexual people feeling isolated and increasing their risk of mental health struggles.

To increase awareness, education about asexuality must continue to spread in the following ways: (1) creating more asexual characters, (2) challenging harmful stereotypes that create inaccurate ideas about asexuality, (3) critically discussing stereotypes to help audiences understand why they are harmful, (4) including more diverse asexual characters and represent identities within the asexual spectrum, such as graysexual and demisexual people.

By increasing accurate representation, more allosexual people can learn about and understand asexuality. This can help create more accepting environments for asexual people, reduce harmful practices such as conversion therapy and corrective rape, and encourage closeted or questioning asexual individuals to embrace their identities. Greater research and education, especially from asexual professionals and community members, can help society develop a more accurate understanding of asexuality.

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The Import Broadway Musicals in Shanghai, 2017–2019 By Chucheng Wang

Abstract

This paper examines the introduction, development, and cultural impact of Broadway musical theatre in China, with a particular focus on Shanghai's evolution into the nation's undisputed musical theatre capital. Tracing the history from the translation of the term "yinyue ju" (musical) in 1980 to the landmark 2002 Shanghai premiere of the original *Les Misérables*, the study argues that Shanghai's success stems from a strategic interplay of market mechanisms and deep historical-cultural receptivity. The analysis begins by establishing the foundational "direct replication" period of the 1980s, followed by the "one-major-musical-per-year" strategy at the Shanghai Grand Theatre (2002–2010s), which cultivated a robust audience base. A subsequent shift to the Shanghai Culture Square as the primary venue facilitated a data-driven approach, characterized by the selective importation of productions based on established intellectual properties (IPs), musical appeal (including "jukebox musicals"), and comedic entertainment value. While these market-oriented strategies effectively mitigated financial risk and attracted a mass audience, the paper contends that they also reveal a market still reliant on pre-validated content. Furthermore, the study contextualizes these commercial phenomena within Shanghai's unique cultural disposition, or Haipai culture, forged through its history as a treaty port with foreign concessions. This legacy of cultural openness and hybridity, the paper argues, created an ideal environment for the reception and localization of Western performance genres. Ultimately, this historical and market analysis demonstrates how Shanghai's experience with Broadway imports not only transformed its local cultural landscape but also provided a crucial model for the ongoing development of China's original musical theatre industry.

Introduction: The Genesis of "Yinyue Ju" and Early Replication

It is generally acknowledged that the Chinese word "Yinyue Ju" (音乐剧), literally "music play" in Chinese, starts with Mr. SHEN Chenzhou, who published two articles in the journal *Music Correspondences* in August 1980 (Shen 2013), introducing American musicals, in which he translated "musical" to "Yinyue ju". From then on, the word has been recognized by the Chinese people and used to this day. China's attention to musical theatre and the development of its own musical theatre industry also took "a historic step forward" (Shen 2013), starting in the 1980s. With the advancement of reform and opening-up and the normalization of Sino-US relations, musical films such as *The Sound of Music* and *Singin'in the Rain* made their way to Chinese cinema and television screens in dubbed versions, serving as the first window for the domestic public to gain an understanding of Western musical theatre. While the 1980s saw China embark on the original creation of homegrown musicals and witness the emergence of a number of such works, this period also marked the earliest practice of direct replication of Western productions. In 1987, the China National Opera House staged the Broadway musicals *The Music Man* and *The Fantasticks* in Beijing, with the former becoming "the first Western musical performed in a fully Chinese-language version." (Shen 2019)

Due to constraints imposed by factors such as theatre infrastructure, import conditions, and the market environment — both objective and subjective — the arrival of original overseas musicals in stage form in China came relatively late, and it was not until the early 2000s that this was realized. In June 2002, after four years of negotiations, the Shanghai Grand Theatre brought the original English-language production of *Les Misérables* to the stage, creating an unprecedented record of 21 performances over 16 days, with nearly every show sold out. This marked the first appearance of a classic Broadway repertory production with its full original company in China (Fang), and has since been regarded as one of the significant milestones in the history of Chinese musical theatre development. The event was included in Shanghai's *Top Ten News Stories* of that year, as a compelling testament to "the growing prosperity of Shanghai's international cultural exchanges" (Lv) — a reflection of the production's significance and far-reaching impact.

From First Import to Market Maturity: The Shanghai Grand Theatre and Culture Square Era (2002–2019)

With *Les Misérables* setting a brilliant precedent, Shanghai continued to rely on the Shanghai Grand Theatre over the next decade or so, maintaining a rhythm of roughly "one major musical per year" — that is, staging one original world-class classic musical each year. In 2003, *Cats* gave 53 performances at the Shanghai Grand Theatre, drawing nearly 80,000 audience members into the theatre, and achieving an average occupancy rate of 86% despite the SARS outbreak. In 2004, the well-known *The Sound of Music* stepped off the screen and onto the stage, with 35 performances in Shanghai reaching nearly 100% box-office capacity. At the end of that year, *The Phantom of the Opera*, one of the "big four" musicals, took up residence in Shanghai for three months, with 100 consecutive performances; the official organizers even added extra seats and additional shows due to the overwhelming demand, making it "a major cultural event nationwide that year" (Fang). In 2006, Shanghai became the Asian premiere city for the original production of *The Lion King*, which concluded its run in the city with its 101st performance, timed around the end of the National Day Golden Week. The following year, *Mamma Mia!* had 32 performances at the Grand Theatre and became one of the hottest shows on Shanghai's performing arts scene that year. Over the next two years, *Hairspray* and *High School Musical* successively landed in Shanghai, each with over 20 performances, making the Shanghai Grand Theatre the first international venue for these two productions after Broadway and London's West End. Through this decade of pioneering efforts in introducing classic original productions, the Grand Theatre took a significant step in opening up Shanghai's musical theatre market and expanding its audience base.

With the restructuring of the Shanghai Grand Theatre and the growth of Shanghai's musical theatre market, the city shifted its focus for musical performances to the Shanghai Culture Square. In 2011, the newly rebuilt Shanghai Culture Square opened with *Ultimate Broadway*, a medley of classic musical theatre numbers, as its inaugural performance, signaling its market positioning with a primary focus on musical productions. A public survey conducted

in 2012 showed that 75.9% of audience members considered "classic repertory" to be the greatest attraction of theatre performances. In 2017, approximately 3,500 respondents chose "original imported musicals from abroad" as one of their preferred types of musical works (with about 1,000 opting for "Chinese-language versions of classic musicals" and over 500 for "domestically produced original musicals"). (Shanghai Culture Square) Taking the Shanghai Culture Square, which has been a major force in the city's musical theatre market in recent years, as an example: compared with the import scale of one production per year in 2012, 2013, and 2015, the number of classic musicals imported to Shanghai increased markedly from 2017 onward, with a total of seven original Broadway musicals staged at the Culture Square, and the momentum of original imports remained strong in the following two years of 2018 and 2019. According to statistics compiled from the *Shanghai Culture Guide* published by the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism, over the past three years (2017–2019), a total of 18 Broadway musicals were performed in Shanghai's major theatres, amounting to nearly 350 performances. As a quintessential representation of American popular culture, Broadway has been gradually permeating Shanghai's musical theatre market in recent years.

First, among the Broadway musicals imported to Shanghai from 2017 to 2019, quite a few are what might be termed "IPs" (intellectual properties). Just as film adaptations of novels have a natural advantage over original screenplays in attracting audiences, the same holds true for musicals adapted from films. Such source materials, "in the cultural production process of carrying images, telling stories, and conveying emotions, have [already] become emotionally resonant vehicles validated by the market" (Xiang & Bai), thereby providing a certain degree of critical and popular assurance for the musicals based on them. In this sense, importing musicals adapted from films seems to have become a foolproof strategy of selecting the "classics" from among the "classics."

The Titanic represents a significant cultural IP in China. In 2012, the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the RMS Titanic, the film *Titanic* was re-released in China in 3D, breaking the country's opening-week box-office record with over 500 million yuan in its first week, and ultimately grossing over one billion yuan in mainland China — the highest box-office total for the film worldwide (Huang). In 2018, the Beijing International Film Festival screened a re-release version to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the film's debut in China, with tickets selling out in just 12 seconds after going on sale. Even though audiences later realized that the "ship" in the musical version no longer carried Jack and Rose, the 2019 musical *Titanic* still concluded its Shanghai run with an 83% occupancy rate — a success that owes much to the enduring legacy of the film *Titanic* in China over the years. The musical *West Side Story*, staged in Shanghai in 2017, draws on Shakespeare's classic tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* — a story well known to Chinese audiences. Its adaptation from a literary classic greatly enhanced the musical's public recognition and played a significant role in its promotion and outreach (Fei 15) — a principle that holds true for Broadway in the 1950s no less than for the Shanghai musical theatre market in the 21st century.

Admittedly, beyond the IP factor, these musicals have other more valuable and

commendable aspects. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that for a domestic musical theatre market that has not yet reached full maturity, even in a first-tier city like Shanghai, IP remains an important consideration prior to the landing of original musicals. As noted above, the reason importing adapted musicals appears to be a foolproof strategy is that, with films and classic stories as their source material, their canonical status and audience reach have long been tested and validated by the domestic market over the years. The very reason they have become IPs in China — content that the public "repeatedly recalls and pays tribute to" (Xiang & Bai) — is that they embody values resonating with the general audience. In the process of gaining such recognition, they have undoubtedly "steered clear of content that might not be readily understood or accepted by the public" (Xiang & Bai). When art enters the public eye, it needs to be validated by the market (Li); IP-based productions, having already secured a certain degree of validation before even entering the market, are undoubtedly advantageous for the growth of the musical theatre market.

However, "IP" is only one of the market strategies. Music is the "soul" of a musical — it is the fundamental element that distinguishes musical theatre from other dramatic forms. For a still-maturing domestic musical theatre market, leveraging "music" itself as a selling point to popularize musicals and attract audiences is likewise a viable strategy. In the autumn of 2011, the Shanghai Culture Square staged *Ultimate Broadway* — a concert featuring a medley of classic musical numbers, in which a Chinese-foreign production team organically wove together 38 classic Western musical theatre songs, offering audiences a panoramic view of the evolution and transformation of Western musical theatre. The following year, an upgraded version of the show was revived at the Culture Square, achieving a 73% occupancy rate that surpassed that of the Broadway musical *Shrek* staged that same year ("Shanghai Culture Square Makes a Resolute Pivot to Production") — a testament to audience enthusiasm for such "greatest hits" medleys. In fact, this format was not entirely new in China. Andrew Lloyd Webber once regarded his 2001 concert in China as a "testing of the waters" for the domestic cultural performance market ("Lloyd Webber Takes 'Cats' to China") — that is, before musicals such as *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *Evita* were staged in their full theatrical form, their classic songs were first introduced and circulated domestically, which undoubtedly played a significant role in attracting and expanding the musical audience base. After all, for non-aficionados, the singing of classic numbers often serves as the first step into the theatre.

Apart from the relatively straightforward approach of medley concerts, Shanghai has also imported a number of productions with "music" as their primary selling point. In July 2010, *Thriller Live* received an enthusiastic response after its premiere in Beijing, drawing nearly 2,000 audience members to this musical tribute to Michael Jackson. Audience members felt that "although the late MJ can never be replicated, through these songs and dances, and through the collective celebration and interaction that filled the venue, this was an excellent way to pay tribute to and remember MJ" ("Beijing Fans Go Wacko for Jacko Show"). Closely similar to *Thriller Live* was the musical *The Bodyguard*, staged in Shanghai in 2017. In 2012, the sudden death of Whitney Houston added considerable commercial buzz to the musical adaptation of her

1992 film of the same name. *The Guardian* noted in its review that the musical *The Bodyguard* further "elevates the status of music," with audiences at times feeling they were watching a "rock concert" and at other times a "live cinema" (Billington). Compared with the film's mere five songs, the musical version of *The Bodyguard* included a total of 34 songs, among them the renowned theme song "I Will Always Love You" and the well-known hit "I Have Nothing," thereby recreating for audiences the charisma of a diva and the golden age of American pop music. That year, a Shanghai-based media *The Paper* explicitly used the phrase "Whitney Houston 'resurrected'" (Liao) in its headline to introduce the musical and attract public attention. Although *The Guardian* pointed out that the musical still failed to resolve certain paradoxes in the plot (Billington), Whitney Houston's fame and her numerous hits were reason enough for audiences to flock to the theatre.

In recent years, the "jukebox musical" has gradually entered the public eye as another type of production that foregrounds music as its selling point. The jukebox — a coin-operated record-playing machine that gained popularity in the West from the 1940s onward — gives its name to this genre by extension, referring to musicals that place a string of popular songs within a dramatic framework (Lunden). These generally take two forms: one is the autobiographical style, which uses the rise-to-fame story of a singer or band as the dramatic script, allowing their repertoire to be woven naturally throughout the musical; the other creates a new dramatic text to accommodate existing songs (Green, Jesse, et al) — *Mamma Mia!*, for instance, builds its storyline around multiple singles by ABBA. *Jersey Boys*, staged in Shanghai in 2017, and *Dreamgirls* in 2019, both belong to the former category, centering on the rise of a band or group. *Dreamgirls*, based on the 1960s American Black girl group "The Supremes", tells the story of three young Black women's ups and downs in the pop music industry — a process that essentially unfolds as a "play within a play," with the trio performing on stage throughout, so that singing and dancing naturally take up the vast majority of the show. Similarly, *Jersey Boys* chronicles the rise and fall of the 1960s American rock band "The Four Seasons". Although the band's name recognition and fan base in China today are far less than in the United States, their songs — such as "Can't Take My Eyes off You" — have long become well-known hits in China, with numerous cover versions and widespread popularity.

Entertainment and Comedy: The Appeal of Light-Hearted Musicals to Chinese Audiences

Compared with other dramatic forms, another major feature of musical theatre, beyond its musical element, is its emphasis on entertainment (Sun). In its early days, this performance form was directly termed "musical comedy." Statistics show that over the past century, tragedies on Broadway have been far fewer in number and much less influential than comedies (Greenspan). This very characteristic happens to be another factor that attracts audiences to musicals: popular aesthetics are predominantly centered on comedy, which is both accessible and appealing to the masses (Fu). And "comedy" today also commands a considerable market in China. According to statistics, in 2014, domestic television stations planned to launch over 20 comedy variety shows ("20 Comedy Shows Face Talent Shortage; Several Programs Aborted"), and this was followed

by a veritable explosion of comedy programs on television. In 2016, experts at a comedy forum during the Beijing International Film Festival pointed out that comedy films had been rising in output since 2006, becoming the most popular film genre and even a "must-have" for young audiences in modern times (Zu)... All of this demonstrates the strong affinity Chinese audiences have for the comedy genre.

Musical theatre as a performance form inherently carries an element of entertainment, and amplifying this very element can undoubtedly serve as a major means of attracting more audiences into the theatre. The original productions of *Sister Act* and *The Producers*, staged in Shanghai in 2017, were precisely such musicals that played up their comedic appeal. The ticketing page on an online platform directly described *Sister Act* as a "classic Broadway comedy musical in its original version"; meanwhile, a report from *Shanghai Observer* ran a headline asking "How to make the audience laugh 220 times within two hours" (Wu)... Clearly, for this musical, both official and unofficial coverage went out of its way to highlight its "laughter-inducing" effect — a selling point that not only aligns with the nature of musical theatre as a form of mass cultural communication, but also caters to the preferences of domestic audiences to a great extent.

Yet it is not difficult to notice that most imported musicals are "not young" — they have undergone years of testing on Broadway and the Western theatre scene, classic enough but somewhat lacking in "contemporaneity." In contrast, among the original productions staged in Shanghai over the past three years, there have been some "zero-time-lag" imports: *Kinky Boots*, performed in Shanghai in 2018, arrived on the domestic stage just five years after its Broadway premiere; the following year, *School of Rock* staged at the Grand Theatre had only premiered on Broadway in 2015, telling the story of a group of children who, under the guidance of their "fake teacher" Dewey, break free from traditional dogma and race toward rock music and freedom. Such a theme undoubtedly resonates deeply and sparks reflection among audiences of all ages in China's educational context. While *Kinky Boots*, like *School of Rock*, centers on a theme close to "rebellion against mainstream values" and follows the traditional "hero's journey" narrative structure, it brings a new demographic onto the musical theatre stage. *Kinky Boots* takes aim at "transvestites," telling the story of drag queen Lola, who searches everywhere for a pair of high-heeled boots for her runway performance. This new line of business saves Charlie's family shoe factory from deep operational distress, and the red boots meticulously designed and customized by the factory ultimately make Lola shine on the runway. That same year, the original production *Rent*, made its Shanghai premiere. *Rent* portrays a group portrait of struggling artists in New York's lower classes at the end of the 1990s — among them homosexuals, transvestites, and HIV carriers — who nevertheless remain full of dreams, loyal to their bonds, and passionate about life. The 20th-anniversary tour of *Rent* allowed domestic audiences to have a "zero-distance" encounter with American social history and cultural values, and perhaps the "Bohemian spirit" at the heart of the musical, in some measure, delivered an even greater impact on domestic audiences than the "zero-time-lag" factor itself.

Shanghai's Cultural DNA: From Treaty Port to Musical Theatre Capital

According to a 2018 report by the China Association of Performing Arts, the number of musical performances in Shanghai alone accounted for one-third of the national total ("Shanghai Leads Nation in Original Chinese-Language Music Stage Plays"). Correspondingly, surveys conducted by the Shanghai Culture Square show that "musical theatre" has consistently ranked among the "favorite performance forms" of audiences. In 2012, 20.5% of respondents named "musical theatre" as one of their most preferred performance forms, placing it at the top among all stage performance genres; in subsequent years, the proportion of audiences selecting "musical theatre" remained considerable — 57.77% (2013), 40.6% (2014), approximately one-third (2016), over 70% (among audiences under 50, 2017), and 84% (2018). Qian Shijin, former Artistic Director of the Shanghai Grand Theatre, once remarked on the subject of importing musicals: "Historically, Shanghai has been one of the earliest cities in China to come into contact with new things — advanced Western science, technology, and culture — and it has also long been one of the country's cultural centers. We should be going further in introducing and importing musical theatre as a performing arts product." (Qian) The popularity of musicals among the general public benefits from its innate appeal to both refined and popular tastes, which aligns well with the tradition of "Shanghai-style culture" (Haipai wenhua). Beyond this, the dissemination of original musicals in Shanghai is also inseparable from the city's cultural openness and receptivity.

Benefiting from its coastal location, Shanghai has historically been a city with a developed industrial and commercial economy and a relatively high degree of population heterogeneity, earning it the reputation of being "a thoroughfare between river and sea, and a metropolis of the Southeast." The formation of modern Shanghai culture was largely influenced by the Western concessions established in the city during the 19th and 20th centuries. Among the five treaty ports opened after the Opium War, Shanghai occupied the most culturally marginal position, and thus had the weakest resistance to the incursion of Western culture (Xiong). While the concessions deprived Shanghai of part of its municipal autonomy, they also made it a symbol of domestic social transformation, and the concession culture later "became an indispensable and important component of Shanghai culture, profoundly influencing the city's spiritual ethos for over a hundred years" (Yang). On the one hand, the continuous influx of Chinese and foreign refugees, scholars, and missionaries, together with the pattern of Chinese and foreigners living side by side in the concessions, turned Shanghai into a melting pot of populations; on the other hand, the relatively free discursive environment within the concessions also facilitated the emergence and proliferation of new cultural media such as newspapers, film, and broadcasting, which in turn attracted a convergence of various cultural trends, propelling Shanghai to become the national cultural center in the early 20th century and the birthplace of numerous modern cultural enterprises. It was in this way that Shanghai formed its uniquely open cultural disposition. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Shanghai's cultural development experienced a decline due to the withdrawal of Western influences and shifts in the country's development priorities; however, the trends of marketization and internationalization in

the 1990s once again revitalized the city's cultural industries. In this sense, the planning and preparation for the importation of original musicals by the Shanghai Grand Theatre in the 1990s represented an opportunity for Shanghai's cultural development. What overseas interests targeted was Shanghai's immense cultural inclusiveness, which in turn provided the city with a platform to reassert its unique inclusiveness and receptivity, enabling it to regain its status as the national cultural center by leading the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures. Undoubtedly, Shanghai has succeeded in this regard. Over the past two decades, Shanghai has become "the city with the largest operational scale and the strongest market vitality in China's musical theatre performance market" (Zhang).

Conclusion

For Chinese audiences, the significance of importing musicals lies in the opportunity to encounter Western culture and values — to understand the world and, in turn, to understand oneself. For the industry, the significance of importation extends beyond benefiting the general public; it also carries the responsibility of learning from Western models to create musicals that convey indigenous values. While original musicals have served as a powerful boost to Shanghai's cultural development, industry insiders have come to recognize that the Chinese musical theatre market will eventually need to step out of the cultural comfort zone of the "import" model. Entering the second decade of the 21st century, China's original musicals began to grow rapidly. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic — and especially the lockdown of Shanghai in 2022 — the city's theatre industry suffered a tremendous blow, and no new Broadway musicals were introduced during the three-year period from 2020 to 2022. Starting from 2023, as China began to emerge from the shadow of Covid-19, theatre has been recovering as well. *The Phantom of Opera* ended its show on Broadway in April 2023, but the Chinese-language production of *The Phantom of the Opera*, the 18th language version of the show, premiered at the Shanghai Grand Theatre on May 2, 2023. Its initial run of 40 performances in Shanghai grossed over 48.5 million yuan at the box office ("Chinese Version of 'The Phantom of the Opera' Set to Open in Shanghai"), after which it toured to multiple cities including Shenzhen, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Changsha.

Since 2019, the Chinese musical theatre market has shown a trend toward greater diversification in the sources of imported productions. Japanese and Korean musicals have been particularly active in the Chinese market, while French and German musicals have also gradually gained a foothold in cities such as Shanghai. Although original productions from Broadway and London's West End still occupy a significant position, the future of Broadway in China's musical theatre market remains to be seen, given the uncertainties in Sino-US relations in recent years. Yet Shanghai, having weathered both the pandemic and shifting geopolitical winds, has already secured its place as the undisputed musical theatre capital of China.

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Between Two Adaptations: Why Haider Succeeds Where Almereyda's Hamlet Fails
By Evelyn Gross

Abstract

This essay compares Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014) to Michael Almereyda′s Hamlet (2000) to analyze what makes a Shakespeare adaptation successful. Informed by the work of Linda Hutcheon and Oliver Spilsbury, I argue that success depends less on fidelity to the original text and more on whether an adaptation reshapes Shakespeare′s ideas to fit a new historical and cultural context. *Haider* is successful because it transforms Shakespeare's ghost, language, female characters, and ending to translate *Hamlet's* central dilemmas into the historical reality of Kashmir, while Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* ultimately falls short because its corporate and technological setting functions primarily as a backdrop opposed to a force that reshapes the narrative.

Introduction

Haider, released in 2014 and produced by UTV Motion Pictures, starring Shahid Kapoor, Tabu, Shraddha Kapoor, and Kay Kay Menon, is an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It tells the story of a young man coming back to insurgency-torn Kashmir, India to discover that his father had vanished into a military interrogation camp, his mother has remarried his uncle, and he is caught up in a spiral of anguish and vendetta that mirrors the political conflict raging around him in the valley. Instead of a royal court, the movie's setting is a militarized area of the world, with checkpoints, mass graves, and informers (*Haider)*. Like *Haider*, *Hamlet*, released in 2000 and produced by Miramax Films, starring Ethan Hawke, Kyle MacLachlan, Diane Venora, and Julia Stiles, is also an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It tells the story of an aspiring filmmaker (Hamlet) whose father, the CEO of the Denmark Corporation, has died mysteriously. In the weeks following his father's death, Hamlet's mother remarries his uncle Claudius, who assumes control of the Denmark Corporation. As Hamlet investigates his father's murder, the story unfolds against the backdrop of surveillance technology and the corporate skyscrapers of modern Manhattan (*Hamlet*).

In this essay, I argue that a successful adaptation is not defined by its fidelity to the original text, but by its ability to reinterpret Shakespeare's ideas in a way that is meaningful for a new audience and context. In proposing this argument, I argue that moving Shakespeare's story to a new setting is not enough. A successful adaptation must reshape the story so that its conflicts feel authentic and meaningful in its new cultural and political context and time period. This claim raises the central question that guides this essay: What makes a successful adaptation? To answer this question, I first establish a framework for evaluating adaptation by drawing on the theories of literary scholar Linda Hutcheon and Oliver Spilsbury. I then examine how *Haider* successfully reinterprets *Hamlet* through its setting, characters, language, and ending before contrasting these choices with Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000), which modernizes the play's

setting but fails to reshape its central conflicts in ways that resonate with the social and cultural realities of New York City in 2000.

Defining a Successful Adaptation

To effectively evaluate these two adaptations, I must first define what I think makes an adaptation successful. I agree with adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon, who argues that just as a translator cannot reproduce every word of a text exactly, an adaptor cannot recreate every element of the original work (Hutcheon 10). Instead, every adaptor must decide which aspects of the story are essential and which can be changed or omitted. Building on this idea, Oliver Spilsbury describes adaptation as a "rhetorical act" that seeks to persuade audiences to see a familiar story in a new light (Spilsbury 1). By this definition, success is not measured by how faithfully an adaptation reproduces the original plot or dialogue, but by whether it preserves the work's central ideas while making them meaningful within a new historical and cultural context (Spilsbury 1).

This definition also explains why fidelity alone is an inadequate way to judge adaptations. Traditional fidelity criticism treats departures from the original text as flaws that must be justified (Hardesty). However, if Hutcheon is correct that no adaptation can be completely faithful to its source, then judging a film simply by how much it changes misses the more important question: whether those changes make the story more meaningful in its new context (Hutcheon 11). For my analysis, I argue that successful adaptations, like *Haider*, reshape Shakespeare's work in ways that make the play meaningful within a different cultural, historical, and political context.

Reimagining Haider in Kashmir

Whether *Hamlet* is set in Kashmir or New York City, the setting only becomes meaningful when it shapes the story's central conflicts, influencing the characters' motivations, relationships, and the events that drive the plot. What distinguishes *Haider* is that the Kashmir conflict creates the conditions that drive the plot, shaping Haider's search for his father and his desire for revenge (*Haider)*. Sangita Gopal's analysis of post-liberalization Hindi cinema provides important context for understanding why the Kashmir conflict drives *Haider*'s narrative. She argues that Hindi cinema increasingly engaged with real social and political crises, creating a tradition of films that explore national trauma (Gopal 11). *Haider* builds on this tradition by making the Kashmir conflict central to the story, so that the political realities of the region drive the plot itself. By contrast, Almereyda's *Hamlet* places Shakespeare's story in corporate New York, but the setting functions largely as a backdrop rather than a force that reshapes the narrative.

Kashmir's history is what makes moving *Hamlet* to Kashmir feel meaningful and coherent. The film takes place during the counterinsurgency of the 1990s, when thousands of Kashmiri men were abducted for supporting, sheltering, or belonging to separatist militant groups by Indian security forces. These men were taken to interrogation centers, most likely

never to return (Hussain and Das 880). This history is woven directly into the plot through the disappearance of Haider's father, Hilaal, who is reported to the authorities by his brother after sheltering and treating a wounded separatist militant, and is subsequently taken from his home and killed (*Haider)*. Hilaal's disappearance and subsequent murder are a stand-in for King Hamlet's murder, but it carries a broader significance by linking the crime to a system of state violence rather than the action of a single villain. According to Nosheen Jaffar, Lubna Ali Mohammed and Muhammad Saleem, the film juxtaposes the motives for vengeance by seeing Haider's loss as representative of the suffering of Kashmiri people as a whole rather than an isolated family tragedy (Jaffar et al. 375).

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet learns that his uncle was responsible for his father's murder through the appearance of King Hamlet's ghost. However, in *Haider*, Bhardwaj replaces this supernatural means of revelation with a living witness, grounding the story in the historical realities of Kashmir. Instead of a ghost, Haider is met by Roohdar, a prisoner and witness who survived being shot and thrown into the Jhelum River with Hilaal (*Haider)*. Roohdar's testimony substitutes the ghostly authority with a more disturbing authority of a survivor. His account of torture, interrogation camps and the Ikhwan counter-insurgency militia reveals the truth about Hilaal's disappearance and implicates Haider's uncle Khurram, an army informer whose betrayal led to his brother's death (*Haider)*. This transformation exemplifies what I argue makes an adaptation successful: rather than keeping Shakespeare's supernatural ghost, Bhardwaj reinterprets it as a living witness whose testimony reflects the historical experiences of Kashmir. In doing so, he preserves the ghost's role in motivating Haider to take revenge on his uncle while making that role meaningful within a new cultural and political context.

Language further helps to heighten the film's political stakes. *Haider's* version of "To be, or not to be" becomes "hum hain ke hum nahin, agar hum hain to kahan hain?", or "do we exist, and if we do, where are we?" (Hussain and Das 883). This line questions whether Kashmiris are recognized at all as individuals and as people because the conflict has left many feeling politically marginalized and uncertain of where they belong. The line is not just explaining Hamlet's private dilemma regarding death in Urdu, but it is also making it a collective one about Kashmiri identity for a people who are trapped between Indian, Pakistani, and independence claims (Hussain and Das 883). This is perhaps the clearest indication that Bhardwaj is not simply relocating Shakespeare's story, but reinterpreting one of its central questions–what it means to exist–in a way that resonates with the historical realities of Kashmir.

Even *Hamlet's* theatrical play-within-a-play is restructured through Kashmiri cultural traditions without sacrificing its original purpose. Unlike in *Hamlet*, where the play-within-a-play is performed before the royal court, *Haider* adapts this moment into the *Bismil* sequence, in which Haider stages a traditional folk song and dance that publicly reenacts his uncle's betrayal (*Haider)*. The performance culminates as Haider confronts Khurram directly, pointing at him while declaring what translates to, "the criminal now cannot hide" (*Haider).* In this scene, Bhardwaj preserves the function of Shakespeare's original scene (Hamlet's trap for Claudius) in a traditional performance style which has a history in Kashmiri culture. This pattern

extends throughout the film: nearly every major turning point from Shakespeare's play is reimagined through Kashmiri cultural practices and political realities. As a result, the adaptation never feels as though Shakespeare has simply been inserted into a new setting; instead, the film feels authentically grounded in Kashmir's realities.

Bhardwaj also expands the roles of the film's female characters, giving them greater agency and significance within the narrative. Ghazala, who takes on the character of Gertrude, has a documented past with Khurram even before Hilaal disappears. She also unknowingly contributes to Hilaal's death by revealing to Khurram that Hilaal is sheltering and operating on a militant, information that ultimately leads to his capture (*Haider)*. Ghazala also plays a very important role in the story's conclusion, walking towards Khurram while wearing a suicide vest and detonating it to end the cycle of violence, a scene that is completely unparalleled when compared to other adaptations of *Hamlet* (Jaffar et al. 381). Moreover, unlike Ophelia, whose role is largely defined by her descent into madness, Arshia, Haider's love interest, is also endowed with a journalist's freedom and a clear reason for her fatal choice. At the beginning of the play, Arshia saves Haider by rescuing him from a military checkpoint when he first returns to Kashmir from university, using her press credentials to pull Haider away from suspicious security forces. At the end of the film, after her father is killed by Haider and she realizes she has lost both the man she loves and the family that defined her life, Arshia chooses to take her own life (*Haider)*. Her death is therefore clearly a tragic response to the unbearable consequences of the conflict that has destroyed her life. These changes take the women out of the political tragedy as props for the crisis of the male protagonist and make them active participants in the tragedy. By expanding their roles, Bhardwaj also successfully adapts Shakespeare's characters to a more modern historical context where women possess greater agency and autonomy.

The final part of the film is the one section where *Haider* differs most from its source and, paradoxically, it also happens to be where *Haider's* success as an adaptation can be most easily justified. In contrast to the cycle of revenge that would have finished with the death of Khurram in a final battle, Haider lowers his gun after Ghazala's suicide bombing and Khurram's request to be killed and walks away (*Haider)*. Jaffar, Mohammed, and Saleem write that Bhardwaj offers a resolution that is "hopeful" as opposed to *Hamlet's* "perpetuation of violence" (Jaffar et al. 381). The change can easily be interpreted as a betrayal of the original concept of *Hamlet*, but it actually has the exact opposite effect. By rejecting revenge instead of perpetuating it, *Haider* offers a conclusion that speaks directly to the realities of Kashmir in which retaliatory violence has repeatedly produced suffering. In this context, breaking the cycle of violence becomes a more compelling and persuasive message for the film's intended audience than Shakespeare's original revenge ending would have been.

The Limits of Almereyda's Hamlet

The difference in method is evident from the start in Almereyda's *Hamlet*. While Bhardwaj reshapes Shakespeare's text to fit the political realities of Kashmir, Almereyda completely retains Shakespeare's original language and places it within the corporate world of

“Denmark Corporation” based in New York City, where Claudius becomes CEO after his brother’s death (*Hamlet*). Essam Fattouh describes this Claudius as “a calmly self-possessed, impeccably well-mannered, and utterly ruthless mixture of legitimate corporate CEO and mafia don,” a characterization that is compelling in itself (Namin 71). However, the film never demonstrates that Claudius's corporate position fundamentally changes the nature of his power or the story’s central conflicts, such as power or betrayal. The corporate setting provides modern imagery and atmosphere, but it rarely shapes the narrative in the way Kashmir shapes *Haider*. As a result, the corporate setting serves mainly as a backdrop instead of fundamentally reinterpreting Shakespeare’s tragedy for a modern context.

The technology used in almost every scene is similarly disjointed, lacking substance and purpose. Almereyda saturates the film with media and technology so that much of the story is told through screens, recordings, and other forms of media. Some moments, such as Hamlet delivering “get thee to a nunnery” through Ophelia's answering machine are undeniably inventive. However, these technological elements are used to create a contemporary aesthetic rather than influence the plot in a meaningful way. Unlike Roohdar’s testimony or Ghazala's suicide vest in *Haider*, which emerge from Kashmir's political realities and drive the plot forward, Almereyda’s gadgets could easily be removed without fundamentally changing the narrative. To show that these gadgets were just props, Claudius’s crimes could have unfolded without surveillance technology and Hamlet could have delivered “get thee to a nunnery” directly to Ophelia instead of through an answering machine (*Hamlet*). As a result, the technology modernizes the play's appearance but does little to reinterpret its central conflicts or justify its new setting.

A successful adaptation must also reinterpret its characters in ways that reflect the realities of the new setting. Ophelia’s death, reimagined as a drowning in a shallow apartment pool, and her encounter with Gertrude at the Guggenheim, where she scatters Polaroids instead of flowers, are creative modern reinterpretations of *Hamlet* (*Hamlet*). Yet these changes do little to reinterpret Ophelia’s character or demonstrate how her tragedy is shaped by the social and cultural realities of millennial New York. Although the film updates the details of her story, it never explores how life in contemporary New York (a setting in which women enjoy considerably greater social independence and opportunities than Ophelia would have in Shakespeare’s time) might transform her relationships, choices, or the forces that ultimately lead to her death. By contrast, Arshia works as a journalist and exercises a degree of independence that more accurately reflects the realities of the late twentieth-century. Her profession and close relationship with her father, a police officer, tie her fate directly to Kashmir's surveillance state, while also allowing her to act independently of Haider throughout the narrative.

Almereyda's extensive cuts to Shakespeare's text further demonstrate the film's failure to reinterpret the play for its modern setting. Almereyda removes nearly half of the original play, restructuring scenes and eliminating entire characters and major passages, including much of Act 3, Scene 2, where Hamlet plans his execution of the *The Mousetrap* (Namin 71). Namin argues that these omissions reflect his difficulty in reinterpreting Shakespeare within a postmodern

context (Namin 72). As a result, many of Hamlet's soliloquies are reduced to only a few lines and relocated to settings such as a laundromat or an airplane aisle, locations that seem chosen more for visual novelty than thematic significance. Yet cutting Shakespeare's text is not, in itself, a sign of an unsuccessful adaptation. Bhardwaj also omits substantial portions of the play. The crucial difference is that Bhardwaj replaces what he removes with new scenes, dialogue, and characters that strengthen the film's engagement with the political realities of Kashmir. By contrast, Almereyda's cuts often create narrative and thematic gaps that his modern setting fails to fill.

Comparing the Success of the Two Adaptations

The limitations of Almereyda's adaptation are reflected in its lack of commercial reception. The modest return of $2,419,669 from the Film's worldwide box office, against a production budget of $2,000,000, was a poor result for an artsy Shakespeare adaptation by any standards ("Hamlet (2000)"). *Haider*, in contrast, was greeted in India as a landmark, with critics such as Mukul Kesavan describing it as a "great achievement" that brought Kashmir "out of the closet" for Indian readers (Talukder 2). This, in itself, is not necessarily a measure of artistic quality, since box-office sales depend on many factors beyond a film's merits, such as franchise familiarity and ticket pricing. However, the contrasting reception of the two films suggests that *Haider* persuaded audiences it had something original and meaningful to say about Kashmir, whereas Almereyda's *Hamlet* was just perceived as a modernization of a familiar play rather than a substantive reinterpretation.

Successful adaptations justify their departures from the source material by making each change necessary to the new cultural and historical context. An adaptation is a success if the changes made to the story are explained and justified, and if the audience can see why the story needed to change in these specific ways in order to work in its new setting. Each major deviation of *Haider*– the ghost that becomes a witness, the "to be or not to be" soliloquy that turns into a question about collective identity, the end that substitutes revenge with exhaustion is readable as answers to the historical events of the 1990s period in Kashmir (Hussain and Das 884). By contrast, Almereyda's departures are primarily aesthetic rather than structural. His adaptation updates Shakespeare through a contemporary setting while leaving the underlying plot completely unchanged.

As this essay has shown, the success of an adaptation depends on how convincingly it reimagines Shakespeare's ideas for a different historical and cultural context. Through its transformation of the ghost, language, female characters, and conclusion, *Haider* demonstrates that an adaptation succeeds when every departure from the source is justified by the realities of its new setting, whereas *Hamlet* (2000) shows the limits of simply modernizing Shakespeare's story without changing the conflicts that drive it. This comparison suggests that, instead of judging an adaptation by how closely it follows the original, we should judge it by whether it convinces its audience that its changes were necessary. This essay also raises questions that it cannot fully answer. For example, how is this standard applied when the medium is changed or

completely mixed, as in the case of a stage-to-videogame adaptation, or a novel-to-limited-series conversion, where the way the audience interacts with the narrative shifts? It also raises the question of whether an adaptation's commercial success reflects how successful it is as an adaptation, or whether other factors are responsible. These questions could form the basis of future research building on the framework proposed here.

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From the Bench to the Field: How Football Substitutes Interpret Immediate Coach Communication and How It Shapes Attention and Early Decision-Making

By Yinuo Bian

Abstract

This exploratory qualitative study looked at how soccer substitutes understand the coach's real-time communication when coming off the bench and how this communication relates to their attention and early decision-making on the field. This study focuses on three questions: how participants describe the transition process when coming on as substitutes; how perceived stress and evaluation affect players' attention and initial decisions once they're on the field; and in different situations, what types of instant communication are considered effective. Four semi-structured interviews were conducted in Mandarin with participants who provided first-person player accounts or observational and practice-based accounts. The interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three findings were identified. First, coming off the bench is experienced as a highly compressed readjustment process, involving adjustments in the body, tactics, attention, and evaluation pressure. Second, pressure doesn't trigger a consistent reaction: it can either push players to take action or make them hesitate and hold back. Third, effective information should help players understand the game situation, know a primary role, and identify one or two controllable actions, while still leaving room for them to observe the field and adjust flexibly. Interpretation also depended on position, the reason for substitution, scoreline, readiness, experience, and trust in the coach. The study suggests that the last chat a player has on the sidelines before going on should be seen as a tool to help the player get clear on what to do, rather than just a generic pep talk or a guaranteed way to impact performance. Since this study had a small and diverse sample and relied on retrospective accounts, it didn't make any causal claims. But it does offer a preliminary 'Situation–Role–Cue–Adapt' framework for future research and coaching practice.

Introduction and Literature Review

The Substitute Role as a Compressed Transition

A substitution seems so easy on a match sheet; one player has been taken off, and another has come in. To the bench player, though, the transition can squeeze several demands into a very short time frame. A substitute needs to complete the process of warming up, understand why the change is being made, read a match that has already developed, and be ready to make an immediate first action. The substitute is not acclimatized to the pace of the game, as a starter would be. The player may only have a short discussion with the coach before heading onto the field.

Existing studies have pointed out that substitute players might face uncertainty, frustration, and the pressure of always being ready to play; however, players also say that coming on as a sub late in the game can bring positive experiences and has some tactical value (Woods

and Thatcher). Research on substitutes' physical preparation before entering the pitch has examined patterns of movement by substitutes, showing that these may vary at different stages of a match (Hills et al., “Match-Day Analysis”). Another insight of practitioner research is that coaches and support staff do not necessarily have a single model of maintaining substitutes in a physically and mentally ready state (Hills et al., “Practitioner Perceptions”). Evidence of more recent reviews indicates that substitution research has focused primarily on physical and performance outcomes, whereas psychological and communicative processes are less developed (Martinho et al.).

These results indicate that the initial minutes of entry should not be understood as a strictly tactical or strictly psychological issue. Substitute players need to coordinate their physical readiness, focus, tactical information, and social awareness all at the same time. It's precisely this kind of multitasking that makes those brief moments before taking the field an important entry point for studying coach communication.

Pressure, Evaluation, and Attention

The transition from the bench to the field also has an evaluative factor. A substitute can have a sense that the playing time is scarce and that it provides a short opportunity to demonstrate value to the coach or team. Research on self-presentation in sport has linked concerns about how athletes are perceived by others to performance pressure (Mesagno et al.). Young athletes' competitive anxiety has also been associated with how controlling they perceive a coach's style to be (Ramis et al.). These research findings don't mean that stress will always lead to poor performance. They do suggest, though, that the meaning of the messages coaches convey might depend on the existing relationship between the athlete and coach, as well as how the athlete interprets the act of being substituted.

Attentional control theory provides one explanation for why this moment may be difficult. Anxiety can increase the influence of threat-related or stimulus-driven attention, making it harder to direct mental resources toward the most relevant information (Eysenck et al.). In sport settings, pressure has been associated with changes in visual attention and processing efficiency (Broadbent et al.; Vater et al.; Wilson et al.). A player may still complete an action successfully while using more mental effort to do so. Therefore, a successful first pass does not necessarily mean that the player felt calm, just as hesitation does not necessarily indicate that anxiety was the cause.

Football provides an additional complication since helpful attention is focused both externally and internally. Players must constantly scour the environment to obtain information about their teammates, opponents, space, and ball motion. Scanning behavior is linked to context and performance in research about visual exploration in football (Jordet et al.). A coach message sent immediately can thus be useful, provided it focuses on the information that the substitute may not have been able to obtain from the bench. Meanwhile, a message trying to control all the possible actions might even interfere with the need for the player to read the field.

Role Clarity and Immediate Coach Communication

Role clarity provides a useful perspective for understanding the connection between communication and the psychological experiences of substitute players. In team sports, uncertainty about one's duties is linked to competitive state anxiety (Beauchamp et al.).

Substitute players might understand the team's overall formation but still be unclear about the purpose of a specific substitution. The coach might want to protect a lead, increase pressing intensity, widen attacking options, replace an injured player without changing the tactical plan, or give young players some game experience. If they don't know the specific intention behind the substitution, substitutes might have to guess on their own: in the first few minutes after coming on, what kind of performance counts as a success.

Research on coach feedback also suggests that the value of communication depends on timing, purpose, and context. A systematic review of augmented verbal feedback in team sports found wide variation in the way coaches deliver feedback and emphasized that feedback should be interpreted in relation to the situation in which it is given (Corbett et al.). Research on pre-game speeches similarly found no simple overall improvement in athlete self-efficacy from motivational communication alone (Vargas-Tonsing). In football training, players have also been shown to retain only part of the information contained in coaches' verbal feedback, particularly as message complexity increases (Januário et al.).

Overall, these studies point to a more specific research question. The key isn’t just whether coaches should communicate with substitute players, but what information substitute players find useful in the brief seconds before they go on; how this information interacts with stress and attention; and why different players might respond differently to similar information.

Research Gaps, Study Aim, and Research Questions

Existing research has explored the experiences of substitute players from multiple angles, including physical preparation, role uncertainty, game anxiety, visual attention, and coach feedback. However, the last communication between coaches and substitute players on the sidelines right before they go on the field has rarely been studied as a separate event. This study aims to fill this gap through the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do participants describe the short transition period from the bench to the field before and after they enter as substitutes?

RQ2: How do perceived pressure and evaluation affect substitute players' attention and decision-making in the early stages of entering the game? Why do different players respond differently in different situations?

RQ3. What types of coach feedback do participants find useful? What situational factors affect how they understand this feedback?

The study is exploratory. This study doesn't test whether a specific type of expression can reduce anxiety or improve performance; instead, it uses qualitative interviews to identify patterns and provide a reference for future observational or experimental studies.

Methodology and Method

Research Design and Rationale

This study uses a small-scale qualitative research design, focusing on a specific event: the brief period before and after a substitute soccer player comes on. A qualitative research approach was chosen because the study aims to understand how participants make sense of this brief, highly context-dependent experience, rather than estimate the frequency of a particular response in a larger population.

Semi-structured interviews allow questions to be asked around common themes for each participant, while also exploring differences in their experiences and understandings.

The study's questions were also inspired by the researcher's own experiences. The researcher was once a youth goalkeeper, serving as both a substitute player and a team captain. This background made the researcher particularly attentive to uncertainty, others' evaluations, and tactical responsibilities, viewing these as possible areas of study. At the same time, it might also lead the researcher to assume that other participants would understand substitutions in the same way.

Therefore, participants were allowed to express different opinions during the interviews; in analysis, the researcher preserved differing narratives without forcing them into a single interpretation.

Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

From July 14 to 15, 2026, the researcher conducted four one-on-one semi-structured interviews in Mandarin. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 41 minutes, providing about 145 minutes of interview material in total.

Interview questions mainly revolved around the brief period before and after a substitute player enters the game. Questions covered participants' perceived emotional states, attention demands, coach wording, tactical responsibilities, initial decisions after entering the field, and specific contexts that might change the meaning of certain information. The researcher followed up to confirm details of specific events and invited participants to explain exceptions or express differing opinions.

Whisper large-v3 was used to generate working transcripts with timestamps, and these were checked against the recordings during analysis. Since the interviews were conducted in Mandarin and the paper was written in English, the interviews were translated during the writing process. The participants' accounts were therefore paraphrased where the correct wording in English could not be confirmed with the recording. This prevents the display of translated language as a word-for-word quotation where such accuracy is not as evidenced by the interview record.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

This study used purposive sampling and selected a total of four participants to represent different types of soccer experiences and related evidence. Two of the narratives included the players' first-person experiences, while the other two were mainly based on observation or practical experience. A-D are used to identify the participants in order to minimize unwarranted disclosure. These labels do not mean that the participants shared the same playing position, age group, or competitive level. Table 1 only provides the type of evidence that was utilized in the analysis and the primary contribution of each account.

Table 1. Evidence sources

Participant	**Type**	**Content**
A	First-person narrative of a substitute player	Adapting to the game's rhythm and immediately focusing on on-field tasks
B	Observational narrative	Viewing the adaptation process and physical readiness as other possible explanations
C	Narrative based on observation and practice	Low-complexity tasks and withdrawal response after criticism
D	First-person player account	Tactical mission, initiative, risk, and role clarity

Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis, guided by the methodology of Braun and Clarke in developing qualitative themes (Braun and Clarke), was used to analyze the interview content. Repeated reading and listening were the starting point of analysis to get acquainted with each account. During initial coding, five associated factors were separated, namely the match situation, how the participant interpreted that situation, emotional or attentional response, behavioral response, and reported outcome. Participants were then compared on a participant-by-theme basis with codes.

The analysis didn’t treat agreement as the only way to judge whether a certain pattern is important. Instead, it kept and showed conflicting viewpoints. For example, in one case, stress was linked to proactivity; in another, players showed a retreating reaction after being criticized.

The analysis also separated explanations based on observations from the players’ first-person experiences. The final choice of themes reflected common patterns while still keeping the important differences between viewpoints.

Ethical Considerations

Participants voluntarily consented to participate, be recorded, and allow their data to be used. Neutral participant labels are used throughout the paper to minimize unnecessary disclosure.

Findings

The thematic analysis generated three findings, each corresponding to one research question. First, participants described match entry as a compressed process of reorientation. Second, evaluative pressure could support initiative in one context but contribute to hesitation or withdrawal in another. Third, participants valued communication that clarified the current situation, one primary role, and one or two controllable actions while preserving room to read and adapt to the field. Across all three findings, interpretation depended on context, preparedness, and trust.

Finding 1 (RQ1): Match Entry as a Compressed Reorientation

Across the interviews, entering the pitch was described as a shift requiring several forms of adaptation at once. Participant A's first-person account emphasized the speed of this transition. The player had to register the flow of a match already in progress and identify an immediately workable action. The real challenge isn't understanding all the possible options before stepping in, it's about figuring out a practical starting point you can actually act on right away.

Participant B's observational account also highlights the adaptation process, but it reminds us that we shouldn't completely attribute the difficulties players face in the early moments of a game to communication issues or anxiety. The quality of the warm-up and physical readiness can affect the first few minutes just as much as verbal instructions. Hesitation shown by substitutes could be due to adjusting to the faster pace of the game or protecting a body that isn't fully ready yet. So early mistakes on the field might be misinterpreted as nerves, lack of focus, or not understanding the coach's directions.

Overall, these accounts see coming off the bench as a coordination issue. Players need to link three stages: preparing on the sidelines, gathering information from the ongoing game, and taking action once on the field. Communication from coaches can help with this coordination, but it has to work together with visual information, the player's existing tactical understanding, their physical readiness, and the player's own judgment of the game.

Finding 2 (RQ2): Pressure can either prompt players to act or make them hold back

Participants didn't describe a consistent reaction to evaluation pressure. Participant D's first-person account shows that limited playing time might spark a player's initiative and willingness to take risks. In this account, success means helping solve team-level tactical issues, not chasing personal highlights. Being able to keep making decisions even after mistakes helps players stay engaged in the game rather than becoming passive.

Participant C described an opposite pattern among younger players. After criticism, some seem to reduce their involvement, pass less, or choose safer options. Since this was an observational account, it's not possible to know what these players were really feeling. Still, it suggests that caution on the field may reflect how players interpret evaluation, not necessarily a lack of ability or effort.

This difference shows that how players understand the meaning of coming off the bench affects how they experience pressure. When a player is sent onto the field because the team

needs a specific tactical contribution, they might develop a clear sense of task; whereas when a player sees coming off the bench as a last chance to impress the coach, every action can be felt as a judgment of personal value. So, the same bold pass could either reflect appropriate initiative, be an attempt by the player to prove themselves, or just be a tactical choice. Interviews can't determine which interpretation is most common, but they show why pressure shouldn't be assumed to trigger a predictable response.

Finding 3 (RQ3): Effective communication can clarify game situations, player roles, and the first action

The most consistent view is that participants prefer communication methods that can reduce immediate role uncertainty. They value information that explains the reasons for substitutions and the focus of the current task. Participant D emphasized that specific tactical tasks should be made clear, rather than vaguely telling players to 'play well'; Participant C's account suggested that simpler tasks can give younger players a clear way into the game.

Participant A also distinguishes between "guiding" and "controlling." If a player on the bench might miss certain game situations, giving them relevant information is helpful, as it directs their attention to important cues. In contrast, trying to dictate every action a player takes once they're on the field is less effective, because the situation can change immediately. Substitute players still need to observe the game, make judgments, and adjust flexibly.

Based on the accounts from all participants, the last piece of information before going on the field can revolve around three immediate questions: What changes have happened in the game? What is my main responsibility? Which controllable action can I take to start fulfilling that responsibility? So, the value of this type of information mainly comes from clarifying the priority of tasks, rather than just the number of words. A short message can be effective without wiping away anxiety; it just needs to reduce players' uncertainty about where to focus their attention and actions.

Participants also pointed out that the same information might have different meanings in different situations. A player's position, the reason for substitution, game experience, the score, physical readiness, and trust in the coach all affect how a player interprets the information. When the team is behind, an attacking player coming off the bench might need permission to take risks; while a defending player coming on late in the game to help maintain a lead might need a different set of task priorities. If a player is subbed in because a teammate is injured, the focus might be on maintaining tactical continuity; if it's a tactical adjustment, the player might need to adapt and make changes. So, the findings don't support having one "one-size-fits-all" communication approach for every situation.

Discussion

In relation to RQ1, the findings suggest that the final touchline exchange is best understood as part of a compressed process of reorientation rather than as a stand-alone motivational intervention. Participants connected match entry with pace, physical readiness,

tactical responsibility, attention, and evaluation. This extends prior research on substitutes' distinctive experiences and uneven match-day preparation by showing how communication operates within a broader transition that is already physical, tactical, psychological, and social (Woods and Thatcher; Hills et al., Match-Day Analysis; Hills et al., Practitioner Perceptions).

Regarding research question 2 (RQ2), participants' narratives don't support a simple linear model where clear communication directly reduces anxiety and improves decision-making. Limited playing time was associated with initiative in one account, whereas criticism was followed by withdrawal in another. This contrast is consistent with work on self-presentation and controlling coaching styles, which indicates that evaluative pressure is filtered through how the athlete interprets the situation and the coach-athlete relationship (Mesagno et al.; Ramis et al.). The effect of an immediate message is therefore likely to depend on the player, reason for substitution, match status, readiness, and existing trust.

In relation to RQ3, the clearest practical contribution is role prioritization. Participants did not describe the most useful communication as a lengthy tactical explanation or a general motivational speech. Instead, they favored information that identified the current situation, one primary responsibility, and a manageable first action. This aligns with research associating role ambiguity with competitive anxiety (Beauchamp et al.), but the present study does not show that clarification directly reduces anxiety. The narrower claim is that it removes one potential source of ambiguity. Whether it also improves emotional state, information processing, or performance requires further study.

Attentional research helps explain why such prioritization may matter. Anxiety can compete for attentional control, pressure can alter visual search, and football decisions require continuous scanning (Eysenck et al.; Broadbent et al.; Vater et al.; Wilson et al.; Jordet et al.). Therefore, trying to predefine every single action a player should take can quickly become irrelevant as the game situation changes. Interviews show that the most effective communication is about keeping players aware of the current key issues while still allowing them to observe the game, make their own judgments, and adapt on the fly.

This interpretation also distinguishes learning feedback from competition orientation. Many coach-feedback studies examine corrections during repeated practice, when athletes have time to process information across several attempts (Corbett et al.). A substitute entering a match faces a different demand. Players might have already mastered the relevant technical skills or the team's tactical system; at this point, the main task is to figure out which part of this knowledge is most important for the current situation. So, the last information a coach gives a player before they go on the field should be about setting a temporary priority within what they’ve already learned, rather than trying to teach them a new skill.

This also helps explain why the length of information matters. Soccer players can’t remember all verbal feedback, especially as the number of key points increases (Januário et al.). For substitutes who need to use this information immediately, this limitation can be particularly important. Short information alone isn’t necessarily helpful, but unnecessary complexity can

interfere with a player's ability to pick up visual cues, adjust their physical state, and make tactical judgments.

Overall, research supports viewing coaches' real-time communication as a tool for guidance. Its value lies in helping substitute players connect the current game situation with their role priorities and an initial controllable action. Communication isn't an intervention that works on its own, nor does it guarantee that players will build confidence or make effective decisions. Its effectiveness depends on how relevant and clear the information is, as well as how well it fits with the players' traits, the coach-player relationship, and the game situation.

Conclusion

Coming onto the field from the bench isn't as simple as a substitution entry on the match sheet. The four interviews in this study describe an experience where a player's physical preparation, adjustment to the game pace, focus, tactical responsibilities, and social evaluation can all change at the same time. Coach communication during transition moments is really important because it helps substitute players understand what the team expects and where to start. The most obvious trend is that effective communication prioritizes clarifying the current game situation, a key role, and a few controllable actions, without limiting the players' ability to adapt on the spot. Interviews also revealed why there's no single phrase that can guarantee a better reaction from the players. Pressure can either spark initiative or cause low performance; early difficulties on the field can stem from psychological factors or simply the body adjusting. So, the most reasonable conclusion is that real-time communication can help substitutes get a sense of direction, but its actual impact depends on the player, the interaction between coach and player, the reason for the substitution, and the game situation.

Practical Implications

The results of this study have practical value for coaches guiding substitute players, especially in youth and school soccer, since young players may lack experience playing under pressure. Coaches can design the last exchange with players on the sideline before they come on as a communication that highlights key tasks, rather than a last-minute lecture. The goal should be to give players a tangible starting point for action, not to dictate every choice they make.

According to the patterns identified in the interview, this paper suggests a tentative Situation-Role-Cue-Adapt structure. It is not a proven intervention, and it should not be robotically recited. Instead, it provides a convenient means of organizing the final message.

Situation. Identify the most relevant change in the match, such as the score, time remaining, an opponent pattern, or the reason for the substitution.

Role. Clearly define a key responsibility that matches the team's current needs.

Cue. Give one or two controllable actions that can organize the player's first involvement.

Adapt. Make clear that the player should continue reading the field and adjust when the situation changes.

For example, a coach can explain to substitute players that the opponent has started using a higher pressing strategy, tell the players that their primary task is to provide a passing option behind the opponent's press, give an initial prompt like 'observe the field before moving the ball,' and remind them to adjust when the opponent changes tactics. This example is just meant to illustrate the communication structure and isn't based on research interviews, nor should it be seen as a one-size-fits-all script for every situation.

This structure also helps distinguish between giving information and giving evaluation. Reminders like 'don't make mistakes again' are threatening but don't tell players what to do. Clearly defining the game situation, the player's role, and giving precise prompts gives players a practical starting point for action. Coaches should also consider whether the player's body is ready and whether giving more guidance might be more of a burden than a help. Sometimes, simply clarifying one priority task in their role could be the most effective pre-game communication.

Limitations and Future Research

First, the sample size of this study was small and quite varied. The four interviews helped in forming some initial ideas, but they don't represent the substitute players as a whole group, nor do they show how common a specific type of response is. Also, the types of evidence weren't consistent: two accounts were from players' first-person experiences, while the other two were mainly based on observation or practical experience. These different perspectives can address the same research questions but shouldn't be treated as the same kind of evidence.

Second, this study used a retrospective method, which means it couldn't accurately record the exact information the coach delivered during the game, the players' feelings right before going on, or their first actions after entering the field through video documentation. Participants' memories might be influenced by game outcomes or after-the-fact reflection. Translating content from Mandarin into English also adds another layer of interpretation, which is why the study didn't use unverified English quotes directly.

Third, the study can't determine causality. How effective the coach's communication was might be affected by many factors, like how warmed up the player was, any injuries, game results, the urgency of tactics, player experience, or the coach-player relationship at the time. Future studies could combine on-field recordings, game footage, brief real-time status measures, and post-game interviews. Larger studies could compare different types of communication while controlling for player positions and reasons for substitution. Rather than just assuming that the proposed "Situation–Role–Cue–Adapt" structure improves outcomes, it would be better to further test its effects on information recall, perception of role clarity, focus, and players' initial actions on the field.

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What Were the Long-term Psychological Effects of the Jeju April 3 Incident on Survivors, and How did Survivors Cope with Trauma Through Silence, Labor, Family Responsibility, Testimony, and Resilience? By Seongwon Yoon

I. Introduction

The Jeju 4.3 Incident refers to a state-sponsored massacre on Jeju Island, during which roughly 30,000 Jeju civilians were killed and thousands were displaced (Kim). Records show that it took place between March 1, 1947, and September 21, 1954; the violence left scars and instilled a fear across local communities that lasted for a long time even after the mass killings had ceased (National Committee 536). Jeju 4.3 Incident History notes that, for decades, public discussions regarding this incident were controlled, forcing survivors into silence. As a result, the Jeju 4.3 incident was kept in the dark from the public eye for many years. This paper examines the Jeju 4.3 Incident as a historical event and as a source of lasting psychological trauma. Lasting psychological consequences consisted of PTSD, depression, suicidal risk, shame and social stigma. It will further explore how survivors managed to cope with the trauma through silence, labor, family, social support, testimony and resilience. Drawing on various sources of survivor testimonies, oral historical archives, and existing psychological research, this paper argues that these coping mechanisms shaped how survivors experienced and carried trauma over time.

II. Methodology and Sources: Studying Trauma through History, Testimony, and Psychiatry

This paper analyzes the long-term psychological effects of the Jeju 4.3 Incident and examines survivors' coping mechanisms by drawing on both historical sources and psychological analysis. The following types of sources will be referenced to support this analysis.

The first type of source draws on official historical reports. The 2003 Jeju 4.3 Incident Investigation Report by the National Committee for Investigation of the Truth about the Jeju 4.3 Incident, along with materials from the Jeju 4.3 Peace Foundation, will be used to establish the historical scale of the incident. These sources provide information on estimated death rates, number of civilian casualties, destroyed villages and the demographic profile of victims. These findings support the upcoming sections that examine the psychiatric consequences of mass violence.

The second source is the survivor interviews and oral histories. This paper draws on an interview personally conducted with a survivor of the Jeju 4.3 Incident, Kim Sun-im. For protection of privacy, all names for survivors interviewed in this study are pseudonyms. It will further adopt interviews and records of the women survivors, written by the journalist and director of the Jeju 4.3 Research Institute, Heo Yeong-sun, along with references made to other available sources published by the Jeju 4.3 Research Institute. These oral testimonies are crucial, as they give us insight into individual experiences of survivors, those of which are often absent in official records.

The third source is the psychiatric and psychological studies. Since the 2010s, researchers at Jeju National University (Jung and Kim) have conducted a number of quantitative studies on the mental health of Jeju 4.3 survivors. These studies measured the suicidal risk, PTSD symptoms, depression and life satisfaction using instruments such as the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview, the PTSD Checklist, the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale and the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, respectively. These studies confirm that the psychological impact of the Jeju 4.3 Incident can also be shown through measurable clinical outcomes.

Finally, the paper will utilize memory and cultural sources. It will refer to literary texts as an interpretative source that represent how the Jeju 4.3 incident was silenced, remembered and recorded. Due to the suppression, literature became one of the ways in which survivors preserved memory and expressed trauma. In addition to this, references will be made to UNESCO's Memory of the World, which identifies a large number of documents preserving memories with attempts to restore victims' dignity and honor.

As any public discussion of the Jeju 4.3 Incident was politically and socially silenced for decades, survivors' testimonies are some of the few remaining accurate records of individual experiences (Jeju April 3 Uprising Archive). Therefore, oral testimonies are considered as both historical and psychological evidence. Alongside survivors' testimonies, official reports and psychiatric studies will be referenced to strengthen these claims by connecting personal records with historical and clinical evidence.

III. Historical Background: Violence, Political Repression, and the Creation of Trauma

Before examining the psychological effects experienced by survivors, the following section outlines the historical background of the Jeju 4.3 Incident.

The Jeju 4.3 Incident emerged from the political and social instability that followed Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, as the peninsula became divided within the emerging Cold War. Korea was divided along the 38th parallel, the northern region was occupied by the Soviet forces, and the southern region, including Jeju Island, was occupied by the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK). Civilians within Jeju Island became fearful and suspicious that they were under surveillance and targeted by state violence (Kim).

During this post-liberation period, Jeju civilians became more dissatisfied with the USAMGIK policies. Tough economic conditions, such as forced grain collection policy that forced farmers to sell all their rice to USAMGIK at an unfavorable price, a poor barley harvest and a cholera epidemic left Jeju civilians in a state of great economic distress and sharp inflation (Hŏ). Tensions escalated when the USAMGIK appointed Japanese colonial officials to positions of authority, angering many Jeju residents who associated these figures with the colonial period violence (Hŏ). Even though the USAMGIK attempted to prevent protests arising, tensions intensified and led to mass demonstrations. On March 1, 1947, a child was struck by the horse of a mounted police officer during the 28th anniversary of the March 1, 1919, Independence Movement (Jeju 4.3 At a Glance). The enraged crowd pursued the police officer, provoking

retaliation from the police, which led to the killing of six civilians. This public anger led to a strike on March 10, involving more than 41,000 Jeju residents and the closure of 166 public institutions (Jeju 4.3 At a Glance). Rather than addressing the concerns of the protestors, authorities arrested the leaders, framed the Jeju residents' concerns as a movement of communist agitation, and labelled the island as 'red island'.

On April 3, 1948, roughly 350 armed members of the Jeju branch of the South Korean Labor Party marched down from Mount Halla and attacked 12 police stations and right-wing groups, expressing their opposition to the separate elections scheduled for May 10, 1948 (Jeju 4.3 At a Glance). In response, the USAMGIK deployed additional constabulary forces in order to strengthen security, including the Northwest Youth Association, a right-wing parliamentary group infamous for its brutality. As a result, Jeju became the only region in South Korea to not conduct elections on May 10, 1948 (A Guide to the History of the Jeju 4.3 Incident).

The violence hit its destructive phase after November 17, 1948, when President Rhee declared martial law on Jeju, ordering a scorched-earth suppression campaign, where villages near Mount Halla were burned, civilians were killed and residents were treated as participants of the armed resistance (A Guide to the History of the Jeju 4.3 Incident). Violence continued even after the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, where many people detained during the Jeju 4.3 incident were executed; bodies were thrown into the sea or secretly buried, this left families unable to identify or hold burial rites. The Jeju 4.3 incident officially ended on September 21, 1954, with an estimated death of approximately 30,000, including women, children and elderly civilians (Kim). S. N. Kim show that these incidents not only caused immediate terror but also, long-term traumatic grief among the survivors and bereaved families.

The trauma experienced by those who witnessed executions, lost family members, fled burning villages, hid in caves, experienced torture, was further deepened when survivors were forced to live under political silence and social stigma. The remainder of this paper examines the different forms of traumatic exposure survivors experienced, then their long-term psychological effects, and then will discuss the coping mechanisms survivors developed over time, including silence, family responsibility, and resilience.

IV. Forms of Traumatic Exposure during Jeju 4.3

This section discusses the different types of psychological trauma exposure experienced by Jeju civilians during the 4.3 Incident. To illustrate the different forms of exposure, this section assesses individual case studies and survivor testimonies that represent specific types of traumatic experience, including witnessing death and family separation, physical torture, sexual violence and displacement.

IV-A. Witnessing Death and Family Separation

The story of Kim Sun-im depicts how family separation during Jeju 4.3 can produce trauma, even without direct exposure to the violent act itself. Kim Sun-im, who was six years old during the Jeju 4.3 Incident, witnessed her parents being taken away. Although she did not witness her parents' deaths directly, she was informed of it after it had occurred without any

explanation or warning, leaving her unable to fully comprehend the loss. Without any given context, the loss of her parents remained unresolved. Her subsequent life shows that abrupt separation from family can reshape an individual's life, both psychologically and physically.

In contrast to Kim Sun-im, another survivor of Jeju 4.3, Lee Jin-hee, directly witnessed the deaths of her parents in the Bukchon massacre, which occurred on January 17, 1949 (Jeju 4.3 Research Institute 194). Soldiers herded villagers into a school field after burning their homes and killed groups of 30 to 50 people at a time, resulting in an estimated death rate of 300 people. Lee Jin-hee, who was a child at the time, witnessed firsthand the death of her parents and neighbors.

These cases show different forms of exposure to family death and separation that occurred during the Jeju 4.3 Incident. Kim Sun-im's exposure came through delayed, unexplained loss, while Lee Jin-hee's exposure was direct and immediate. Both cases illustrate the different circumstances in which Jeju civilians, particularly children, witnessed family death and separation.

IV-B. Torture and Physical Harm

Another form of psychological trauma exposure Jeju 4.3 survivors experienced was through physical violence, which involved torture and interrogation. Many women survivors recount being tortured, with accounts that recall that "the current wound around both [her] thumb and when it prickled, it felt like [she] was dying" (Park). In addition, women who refused to provide information about their husbands during interrogation were tortured and classified as "Pokdo Gaksi" (which roughly translates to 'rioter's bride') (Jeju 4.3 Incident Investigation Report 493). Kim Ok-soon, a Jeju 4.3 survivor, recalled the incident where her mother experienced similar forms of electric torture and interrogation, as recorded in her testimony (Heo et al. 85).

Some accounts present records of permanent injuries of Jeju women as a result of physical violence enacted during Jeju 4.3. A female survivor known as the 'Cotton Fabric Grandma' suffered from a severe jaw injury after being shot during a military raid, leaving her unable to speak or eat normally (Hong).

These accounts illustrate that Jeju survivors were exposed to physical violence in multiple forms, ranging from torture and interrogation to injuries that left permanent physical marks on the survivors.

IV-C. Sexual Violence

Women of Jeju 4.3 also suffered trauma stemming from sexual violence and public humiliation, a form of violence that was shaped by the era's structural gender inequality (Kim and Merose). Testimonies from women survivors reveal that sexual violence during 4.3 harmed both those who were directly assaulted and those who heard of the assaults and lived in fear. In Soubong Cliff of Hamdeok Village, for instance, counter-insurgency forces gathered 20 young women and threatened them into a public act of sexual humiliation. When news of this spread quickly throughout the village, one survivor recalled that they "trembled with fear… Terrified,

[they] tried not to leave home if possible and even pretended to be mentally handicapped when outside." (Gwon 238). This testimony shows that sexual violence did not only create actual victims of the sexual assault, but indirectly influenced the lives of those who lived under the threat of it occurring, which influenced their daily behaviour shaped out of fear.

IV-D. Displacement

Displacement, hiding and fear-based survival exposed Jeju people to continuous trauma. During the scorched-earth suppression campaign, in which villages near Mount Halla were burnt, residents fled to the surrounding mountains and hid in caves without adequate food or shelter (Southcott). During this time, survival in hiding required constant vigilance, as any form of ordinary behaviour, such as speaking or moving, could risk exposing one's location to the search parties.

For instance, one woman testified that she and her neighbors lived inside the Bengdwigul cave after their homes were burnt, blocking the entrance with a boulder out of fear of discovery (Jeju 4.3 Research Institute, "4.3 And Women, Records of Their Lives" 173–175). When the cave was eventually found, villagers were dragged outside and interrogated. The woman recalled that her experience in the cave was the one memory of Jeju 4.3 she was unable to forget.

V. Long-Term Psychological Consequences

This section explores the long-term psychological effects of the different forms of traumatic exposure endured by Jeju 4.3 survivors – including witnessing death, family separation, physical torture, sexual violence and displacement. These experiences led to a range of interconnected psychological outcomes, including PTSD, depression, suicidal risks, trauma, avoidance, memory triggers, shame, silence and family protection. Each of these effects will be discussed in turn, drawing on survivors' testimony and existing psychological research to demonstrate that the impact of the violence extended far beyond the immediate act itself.

V-A. PTSD, Depression, and Suicidal Risk

One of the most psychologically devastating forms of childhood trauma is witnessing the death of a parent or family member, as it can disrupt the child's basic sense of safety and attachment during the critical stages of early development (Christie and Sandoval). This claim is supported by the landmark ACE study by Felitti et al. (1998), who found that children exposed to violence or parental loss experience higher levels of depression, anxiety and long-term health problems later on in life. This aligns with Bowlby's attachment theory, which holds that forced parental separation early in life damages the secure attachment children need to develop, often resulting in lasting complications, such as depression and anxiety (Bowlby). Within the Jeju 4.3 Incident, entire families were executed or separated during the mass killings, leaving many survivors, of whom many were children at the time, with no stable care or safety. These early experiences of witnessing death and family separation, as seen in the case of Kim Sun-im, left lasting psychological consequences into adulthood.

These individual patterns are echoed in clinical findings, as further psychiatric research provides measurable evidence of these long-term psychological consequences. The Department of Psychiatry at Jeju National University studied the lifetime suicidal attempts and current suicidal risk among 602 elderly Jeju residents, of whom 110 were direct survivors of the 4.3 Jeju Incident. Using the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview (M.I.N.I.), the results suggested that the survivors faced a significantly higher risk of suicide than the comparison group. Within the past month, 42.7% of survivors reported suicidal ideation when compared with 15.4% in the comparison group; and 8.2% of the survivors reported suicide attempts over their lifetime, compared with 2.0% in the comparison group.

Furthermore, a 2020 study on the prevalence of comorbid PTSD and depression among individuals exposed to the Jeju 4.3 Incident examined 1,121 survivors and family members (Jung and Kim). The study found that 10.8% of the subjects met the criteria for comorbid PTSD and depression, while 24.3% had depression alone and 3.0% had PTSD alone. The study also revealed that subjects with both PTSD and depression were 2.04 times more likely to report suicidal risk than those with either condition alone (Jung and Kim). These findings suggest that the event left lasting psychological impacts on individuals exposed to Jeju 4.3, even 70 years after the incident.

The individual cases and psychological research show that there is a long-term psychological consequence for the survivors who experienced Jeju 4.3. The accounts and findings demonstrate that survivors exposed to witnessing death and family separation were significantly more likely to experience depression, PTSD and suicidal risk later in life than those who did not experience the incident.

V-B. Trauma, Avoidance, and Memory Triggers

The trauma of the Jeju 4.3 Incident was not limited to clinically diagnosable outcomes; for many survivors, it continued through the memory itself, reemerging through everyday triggers, such as food, places, family stories and body sensations. In the interview conducted for this research, Director Heo Young-sun mentioned that a woman witnessed her parents get killed and thrown into the sea. After witnessing such an event, she refused to eat fish, fearing that what she was eating may be the remains of her family. This case suggests that the survivor's experiences did not remain confined to the past but continued to influence their everyday behaviour, with simple, everyday practices, such as eating, capable of triggering traumatic memories.

For survivors of physical violence, trauma persisted not only in memory but also as a recurring physical sensation. Survivors who had experienced electric shock during interrogation – including women labelled as "Pokdo Gaksi" and Kim Mi-ja's mother – explained that they could still feel the physical sensation of electricity long after the event (Heo et al. 85). This suggests that physical torture extends beyond the act itself, embedding trauma into the body's own memory. Other survivors also conveyed similar dejection, as Director Heo recalled that a survivor would "rather die than go through that again", indicating that these experiences were

unbearable even decades later. A survivor who took refuge in the Bengdwigul cave during the incident stated that she was never able to forget her experience despite the years. Collectively, these testimonies show that trauma did not only exist in memory but also through the body – such as through sensation and taste.

Displacement and prolonged hiding led to a distinct form of persistent trauma: chronic hypervigilance, a state of heightened environmental threat-scanning and narrowed affective and behavioural responses in service of continuous threat assessment (Simply Psychology Editorial). This response has been found among those who lived under constant threat of death for sustained periods of time, such as those who hid in caves. Survival during Jeju 4.3 likely depended on specific sensory cues, such as the sound of footsteps outside the cave or smell of smoke; these cues, even decades later, remain capable of provoking a disproportionate fear response in the absence of actual danger. This pattern is aligned with Pavlovian fear-conditioning, in which a neutral stimulus becomes associated with a traumatic event and continues to provoke fear long after the threat has ceased (VanElzakker et al.). Herman's analysis of complex trauma suggests that repeated trauma occurring under captivity produces more severe psychological harm than a single traumatic event (Herman), a framework that may help understand the chronic entrapment experienced by those who hid for prolonged periods during the Jeju 4.3 Incident.

These patterns are consistent with features of post-traumatic memory. 'Intrusive memory' refers to the unwanted, involuntary recollection of a traumatic event which is often triggered by a stimulus such as a sensory image, smell, taste or physical sensation, as is with the case of the survivors' recollections of electric shock (Ehlers and Clark 319–345). This form of sensory memory can persist independently of, and even longer than, narrative memory of the event. Avoidance, as in the refusal to consume fish, functions as an unconscious strategy to prevent the triggering of the trauma, even when it imposes difficulties on a survivor's daily life. Together, these responses indicate that survivors' trauma of the Jeju 4.3 did not conclude with the incident itself, but persisted through the survivors' ordinary lives for years afterward.

V-C. Shame, Silence, and Family Protection

Silence following the Jeju 4.3 incident was not only a government regulation but also a psychological coping strategy and a means of protecting children from stigma. The case of Kim Sun-im demonstrates this, as during her interview she stated that she never told her children about what she experienced during the incident, fearing that revealing herself as the survivor of the Jeju 4.3 Incident would harm her son's career. This suggests that for some survivors, silence was a deliberate act of protection, shaped by fear, shame and the political danger of being associated with the incident – while also showing how the social stigma and prejudice at the time reinforced shame and subsequently discouraged survivors from speaking about their experiences.

This fear of stigma was intensified by the policy of 'collective punishment', in which families of individuals associated with communist organisations were themselves labelled as communists. A study by the Jeju 4.3 Incident Investigation Report, approximately 86% of 75 respondents reported having been accused of being leftist and unfairly disqualified from public

service jobs and the military as a result. Many families of victims dedicated years to proving that their family members were not communists. Ms Jeong Bong-suk, for instance, served in the military at age 19 in an attempt to prove her father's innocence, yet she was still singled out and investigated by the National Security Agency due to her father's stigma and was labeled as a 'daughter of red' (Heo et al. 34). These cases show that survivors feared discussing Jeju 4.3, not only for their own sake but also because of the collective punishment that extended the risk of stigma to their families as well. In this light, survivors' silence functioned as intergenerational protection and as a coping mechanism for managing shame surrounding wrongful accusations.

In particular, sexual violence produced a distinct and persistent form of shame-driven silence. The social atmosphere in Jeju at the time, shaped by prevailing gender norms and patriarchy, blamed women for any sexual assault even when they had been coerced. Director Heo Young-Sun, who interviewed women survivors, observed that they found it more difficult to discuss sexual violence than the massacre itself or the loss of their family. Therefore, many women did not disclose their experiences of sexual assault until decades later, once social taboos surrounding rape had begun to lessen. This suggests that survivors of sexual violence experienced trauma not only from the assault itself, but also from the fear of community judgement that followed.

Research on shame and guilt helps explain why Jeju women avoided testimony for such an extended period. Studies of sexual violence survivors have found that shame tends to trigger avoidance and withdrawal, with the need to hide oneself from further exposure (Saraiya and Lopez-Castro). Research findings show that shame intensified PTSD, particularly through chronic interpersonal violence involving social powerlessness, by causing survivors to feel responsible for the event or unworthy. This framework aligns with the experiences of the Jeju women, who were harmed during military occupation at a time when women's rights were restricted, offering an explanation for the long-term absence of testimony: shame compelled survivors toward silence and avoidance.

VI. Resilience and Coping after Mass Violence

Despite the severe nature of trauma experienced by the survivors of Jeju 4.3, they did not remain as passive victims of suffering. This section turns to how the survivors coped with and adapted to that trauma through daily survival, labor and family responsibility, while considering that resilience did not signify the absence or recovery of the psychological harm.

VI-A. Daily Survival as Psychological Resilience

In the aftermath of the incident, survivors of Jeju 4.3 rebuilt their lives through working, building families, or pursuing education. Yet this resilience did not suggest freedom from trauma. During her interview, Kim Sun-im referenced a phrase in the Jeju dialect shared by many survivors: "If you continue living, you will be able to live." This captures both the difficulty of enduring permanent traumatic memory and the achievement of simply pushing through each day. Her statement implies that continuing to live did not indicate that they had recovered from the

pain, but it allowed the survivors to carry the pain forward alongside them. Resilience, in this sense, meant learning to live with lasting psychological trauma, rather than overcoming it.

The hardship that the survivors faced after the violence makes the endurance more significant. Many Jeju women, including all those that were directly and indirectly affected by the violence, returned to their hometowns without husbands or fathers. An estimate of 10% of Jeju women became widows, and 70% were left in poverty, in part due to Korean property laws that denied women the inheritance of family assets (Kang). Due to the death of the men in their household, many Jeju women became their families' sole providers.

Within these circumstances, resilience took the form of a quiet return to daily life as Kim Sun-im explained how she kept herself busy after Jeju 4.3 – working, earning money and raising her family. She became a haenyeo, spending years diving for a living, before marrying and devoting herself entirely to her children's education. As she explained, "I didn't want to dishonor my parents who died. I didn't want anyone to criticize me because I grew up with no parents. I kept my head down, laid low, and worked hard. I wanted to be the best mother and provide my children with the education that I didn't get. Now my son works at a bank and my daughter married a professor." Her words reveal a resilience rooted in responsibility to the memory of her parents and to the future of her children – hard work and her children's success serving as a response to the stigma she once faced.

This pattern of labor, marriage and investment in the next generation reflects a form of behavioral coping, in which stress is managed through direct action, rather than verbal processing or emotional expression. For Kim Sun-im, and likely for many survivors living under the same social stigma, this form of behavioural coping may have been less a choice than a necessity. Openly discussing her parents' deaths risked experiencing the same shame and suspicion that once haunted families associated with Jeju 4.3, whereas working, marrying, and raising a successful family offered her the opportunity to continue living without speaking or reliving the past. In this sense, her labor functioned not only as a survival strategy but also as a form of silent testimony to a life worth respecting.

Yet, it would be inaccurate to conclude that Kim Sun-im and other survivors completely overcame their trauma through resilience. As the psychiatric evidence discussed earlier in this paper shows, medically significant symptoms of trauma persisted among Jeju 4.3 survivors long after the incident – high rates of PTSD, depression and suicidal risk indicate that the psychological toll of the violence remained. One possible explanation for this persistence could be that behavioral coping, unlike direct emotional processing, does not resolve the trauma but rather channels grief into action, allowing survivors to function without requiring them to confront or express the pain itself.

VI-B. Social Support, Life Satisfaction, and Resilience

A 2021 study in the Journal of Korean Medical Science examined resilience among 1,121 older individuals exposed to the Jeju 4.3 Incident. Using the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale, the study found that high resilience was associated with lower depression, higher life satisfaction, higher psychosocial support, younger age, higher education and current employment

(Kim and Jung). Notably, the study emphasized that perceived psychosocial support was independently associated with high resilience among older adults who had experienced early-life trauma.

This finding provides a population-level correlation to the pattern seen in Kim Sun-im's testimony. Although her narrative focuses on her own labor and resilience, it is also structured around relationships – her marriage, her role as a mother, and her children's later success – that provided her with a stable source of connection. When examined alongside the 2021 study, her account suggests that resilience did not stem from personal endurance alone, but it was also sustained by the relationships she built and maintained in the years after her parents' deaths.

Still, the findings of the study may not fully capture the experiences of Jeju women survivors, as its participant pool largely consisted of individuals with higher levels of education and stable employment. These conditions were likely not shared by many of Jeju's women survivors, including Kim Sun-im. Women who were stigmatised due to sexual assault or burdened with family responsibility likely had less access to these opportunities. Consequently, the results of the study may not be fully generalizable to the experiences of Jeju women survivors, even though they offer a useful clinical framework for understanding resilience.

VII. Testimony as Psychological Healing and Historical Justice

From the previous section, it can be seen that behavioral coping allowed survivors to live with their trauma without direct confrontation. However, testimony required survivors to do the opposite: to speak out about their experience after decades of silence. Testimony did not erase the pain of the Jeju 4.3 Incident, but it helped survivors reduce isolation and participate in a truth-finding movement. This section will discuss how and why survivors eventually broke their silence, as well as what testimony meant for both their psychological recovery and for the historical record.

VII-A. Testimony as Psychological Healing

After many years, women survivors of Jeju 4.3 began to manage their trauma through testimony. Director Heo Yeong-Sun stated that recounting their experiences helped victims cope with lingering feelings of indignation. Being broadcast, interviewed by reporters, and published in newspapers made the truth more public and allowed the survivors to feel more comfortable speaking aloud. Jeju women also used their voices to restore their own and their families' honor. Families of victims who were falsely accused of being leftists visited courts to testify and have their records expunged, using testimony as a means of restoring their families' dignity.

This pattern is consistent with the concept of narrative healing – the idea that sharing traumatic experiences can help a person make sense of it and move toward recovery ("Fiveable"). Testimony required survivors to revisit and narrate the very experiences that they spent decades avoiding. For many Jeju women, having their stories heard and trusted – by government investigators, courts, the United Nations, or UNESCO – offered a form of recognition and dignity restoration central to that healing process.

VII-B. Testimony as Historical Justice

Beyond the psychological function, testimony contributed directly to the historical record of the Jeju 4.3 Massacre. The Jeju Newspaper began recording survivors' voices in 1989 through a column titled "Testimony of 4.3". Soon after this first publication, media coverage gave rise to the Jeju 4.3 Incident Truth Revealing Movement, and in 1999, the Korean government passed a law to formally investigate the incident and provide compensation to survivors and their families. The committee published the April 3rd Investigation Report, gathering survivor testimony and documenting the incident in detail.

Jeju women also carried this history beyond domestic audiences to the international community. On June 20, 2019, survivor Ko Wan-sook spoke before a global audience of diplomats at a Jeju 4.3 Symposium held at the United Nations, recounting, "Discovered by the soldiers, I was dragged out into the street, and the sky was filled with smoke as the village burnt. Bang, bang, bang, I heard gunshots, and the heads I saw were gone." Her testimony allowed the Jeju 4.3 incident to be acknowledged publicly beyond Korea, on a global stage.

This truth-finding movement was further supported through institutional efforts. The Jeju April 3rd Incident Peace Foundation and Research Institute committed significant resources to thoroughly recording survivors' testimonies, and in April 2025, the Jeju 4.3 Archives were inscribed on UNESCO's Memory of the World International Register. The archives involved survivors' oral testimonies, as well as their ongoing efforts to combat social stigma and restore the honor of innocent victims.

Silent trauma became public memory as Jeju women began to share their testimonies that became a shared historical record. Although the psychological pain of the incident still remained, social recognition was crucial to the survivors' healing process that their experiences were finally heard and acknowledged. Recently, this growing public recognition extended further into literature and arts, where the Jeju 4.3 Incident continues to be remembered by a wider audience.

VIII. Conclusion: The Psychological Legacy of Jeju 4.3

The records of Jeju 4.3 show that the event caused more than historical loss but lasting psychological trauma on its survivors. Psychiatric research into the incident's impact documents elevated levels of PTSD, depression, and suicide risk among survivors which persisted for decades after the event. Testimony of survivors further reveals the shame, silence, and social stigma they carried, alongside the trauma which resurfaced through intrusive recollection, sensory triggers and avoidance.

At the same time, this paper has also shown that resilience and trauma coexisted for the survivors of Jeju 4.3. Survivors attempted to manage their trauma through various coping mechanisms such as silence, labor, family responsibility, social support, and testimony. Kim Sun-im, for example, aimed to reconstruct her life through labor, family and educating her children. However, this resilience did not signify full recovery, but it displays a desire to continue living alongside the trauma that many survivors still carried for decades afterwards.

The survivor testimonies, in particular, helped restore dignity, gain recognition and find partial healing. The truth-finding movement, the 1999 investigative legislation, legal trials and

international recognition through the United Nations and UNESCO all present how survivor testimony drove larger movements of historical and political recognition. This recognition extended further into literature and the arts, where the incident continues to reach new audiences. Yet public recognition did not help the survivors fully erase the trauma but offered them partial healing.

The psychological history of Jeju 4.3 demonstrates that mass violence results in more than material or historical loss but leads to psychological wounds that remain long after the violence itself has ceased. However, as discussed in this paper, survivors found ways to cope with their trauma, even if it did not fully heal them: through silence and labor, through family and testimony, and ultimately, by ensuring that their experiences were heard.

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Deontology and Surrogate Decision-Making in End-of-Life Care: A Comparative Ethical Analysis By Audrey Tia Limowa

1. Abstract

End-of-life decision making in contemporary medical practice is considered one of the most ethically difficult types of situations that an individual may encounter. When the patient is critically ill and unable to make decisions for themselves, the responsibility for deciding to withdraw life-sustaining treatment falls to another individual who can become their surrogate (Levi et al. 2024). Surrogate decision-makers are usually family members or close friends, who are assumed to have prior knowledge of the patient's expressed wishes, and therefore are expected to make a decision based on their judgment. In addition to their legal responsibility to provide a surrogate decision for the patient, surrogate decision makers may also have to experience the emotional burden of having to make a life-and-death decision for someone they care about. They may frequently have ongoing stress, guilt and depression as a result of their decision (Mehter, et al., 2017). Given these ethical and emotional challenges, this paper examines how utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics lead to different actions for a surrogate contemplating withdrawal of life support, and evaluates the practical limitations of each framework in the U.S. context. This paper argues that deontology provides the strongest default framework for surrogate decision-making when the patient's prior wishes or values are sufficiently known because it preserves the patient's moral agency through substituted judgment, protects against the projection of surrogate preferences, and aligns with the legal and ethical structure of informed consent. When those wishes remain unknown, deontology requires supplementation by best-interest reasoning, prudence, and clinical judgment.

2. Decision-Making in the United States

Surrogate decision-making in the U.S. occurs within state laws that govern when and how a surrogate may withdraw a patient's life support. Each state's different requirements create a system of laws that surrogates and healthcare providers must navigate. Currently, 44 states have enacted surrogate consent statutes, allowing advance directives to authorize surrogates to make healthcare decisions for patients who lack capacity (Wynn). Most states follow the "hierarchy law," where priority is based on an established order: spouse, adult children, parents, and then extended family. In Colorado and Hawaii, the "consensus law" requires all "interested parties" to agree on who will serve as surrogate. Seven states have no surrogate consent law (Wynn).

The legal distinction between substituted judgment and the best interest standard carries different ethical implications; substituted judgment aligns with deontological ethics. A surrogate using substituted judgment must determine what the patient would have wanted by applying past expressed wishes, asking, "What choice would the patient have made?" rather than "Which action will cause my family the most happiness?" When no previous wishes are known, the surrogate must determine the patient's "best interest" based on pain, suffering, dignity, and

quality of life (Parker and Goldberg). Parker and Goldberg also evaluate how “triggering conditions,” defined as predetermined clinical criteria such as terminal illness or irreversible unconsciousness, create ethical dilemmas in withdrawal-of-life-support cases. They present the case of a patient named Mary, who does not satisfy the state's triggering conditions for withdrawal, yet her family and medical team all agree that continuing life support is not in her best interest. The law blocks withdrawal, forcing Mary to continue suffering. Advocates argue that triggering conditions protect vulnerable patients from impulsive decisions, while opponents argue they prevent humane withdrawal even when all parties agree it is appropriate (Parker and Goldberg).

The second legal aspect relates to the conflicting relationship between ethics and legal liability. When a doctor considers the ethics of stopping life support and agrees that it is reasonable, they may still hesitate due to worries about being sued or facing legal consequences. Similarly, family members making end-of-life decisions may confuse their own wishes with the patient's, making it difficult to know what the patient would have wanted (Parker and Goldberg; Mehter et al.).

Substituted judgment has become the dominant legal standard because it reflects respect for patient autonomy. However, legal authority does not automatically imply ethical legitimacy; a surrogate may have the right to decide, but this does not guarantee that their decision accurately reflects the patient's wishes.

Despite these legal frameworks, research findings raise major issues regarding the accuracy of surrogate decision-making. A systematic review analyzed 16 studies involving over 2,500 surrogate-patient pairs, using hypothetical scenarios to assess how accurately surrogates predicted patient treatment preferences (Shalowitz et al., 2006). The review found that surrogates provide accurate predictions only 68% of the time. This means approximately one-third of surrogate decisions do not reflect the patient's true desires. Contrary to common assumptions, neither prior conversations about treatment preferences nor patient designation of a surrogate improved predictive accuracy (Shalowitz et al., 2006).

Surrogate decision-making in the United States occurs under legal standards that vary significantly across states and present ethical challenges. However, because the law allows for substituted judgment, it reflects the value of patient autonomy. This legal structure reflects the deeper moral principle that competent persons possess a right to govern their own medical decisions, a principle that deontology grounds in respect for persons rather than merely legal convention.

3. Utilitarianism

3.1 Core Principles of Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is based on the teleological principle that the only basis for making any moral judgment about an act is how that act affects other people (Miller). A main part of this teleological principle is the "greatest happiness" or "principle of utility." This means that any act that produces happiness is considered to be morally right, and any act that produces the opposite

of happiness (produces suffering or unhappiness) is considered to be morally wrong (Miller). Happiness, as defined by classical utilitarian philosophers is regarded as pleasure, with the absence of pain being a second positive definition for happiness; moreover, unhappiness is defined as pain and therefore represents the absence of pleasure (Miller). More recent utilitarians have broadened the good to include preference satisfaction, knowledge, and relationships (Miller).

There are two main branches of utilitarianism. Act utilitarianism evaluates each individual action by its consequences, requiring agents to choose the act that produces the highest overall utility in each situation (Miller). While flexible, this approach is criticized for being impractical, it would require constant calculations, and for justifying acts widely considered immoral, such as killing one innocent person to save five (Brook). Rule utilitarianism, by contrast, evaluates rules rather than individual acts. A rule utilitarian asks whether following a particular rule would produce the best overall outcomes if generally adopted, then follows that rule even when it does not yield the best outcome in a specific instance (Miller). This addresses some of utilitarianism's problems but still derives the "value" of rules from their consequences, meaning that the justification for the rules remains consequentialist (Miller).

3.2 How a Utilitarian Surrogate Would Approach Withdrawal of Life Support

A utilitarian surrogate might analyze the reasons for withdrawing support using an analysis based upon predicted outcomes only. A utilitarian surrogate would base the decision solely on the following question: “Which is the best solution from all of the below alternatives to provide the highest level of happiness to all of the people affected by this decision?”

In making this analysis, the following factors are generally taken into consideration when measuring the impact of each of the three categories of results:

First, the patient’s suffering: Are the patient’s immediate needs being met? Are they experiencing any pain or discomfort? Can these issues be treated by other means? Is this patient aware of their situation or is the patient in a Persistent Vegetative State (PVS) or not cognitively able to tell someone that they would like their life to end? If you determine that the patient is really suffering; has no hope for any future recovery; then continuing to provide life support would result in continuing harm to that patient. Life support would only provide the patient with pain and suffering for the remainder of his/her life. The removal of life support would provide relief from suffering and since the patient has no future opportunity for happiness, there could not be any offset of happiness that would be lost due to the decision to remove the life support.

Second, the surrogate might evaluate how much agony a family is suffering. Seeing someone you love remaining on life support is very upsetting. The family suffers from anticipatory grief, guilt, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, all of which cannot go away for months, if not years, after their loved one's passing. According to Mehter et al. (2017), doctors were very aware of this emotional burden and have strong feelings about the emotions families have while undergoing this agonizing decision. Doctors expressed concern

that the family would feel guilty for doing this, as well as taking upon themselves the emotional burden of making that decision for the family to relieve that burden. A utilitarian surrogate might understand that by allowing the family to withdraw from life support, they can begin the grieving and healing process without prolonging their trauma.

Another consideration for a surrogate decision maker is the effect on society. Intensive care beds, ventilators, intravenous medications, and physician attention are all limited. A patient receiving life sustaining treatment on a ventilator without any possibility of recovery is using resources that can be used to treat other patients who might recover and return to a meaningful quality of life. Society has a finite amount of resources with which it can provide medical care and those resources should be used in a manner that provides the most overall benefit to society. If a patient is unlikely ever to recover, providing life sustaining treatment is an inappropriate use of limited healthcare resources that could save other patients' lives. A utilitarian surrogate might take this into consideration as difficult as it may be emotionally. He or she might reason that taking away life sustaining treatment from a patient who is terminal would open an ICU bed for another patient who could recover and would therefore provide a net benefit for society.

3.3 Limitations of Utilitarianism in End-of-Life Care

Utilitarianism, while having an attractive appeal and being relatively simple to comprehend, presents many problems for end-of-life care. These problems are significant enough that they call into question whether or not utilitarianism can adequately respond to surrogate decision-makers needing to make surrogate decisions on behalf of patients.

First, Herzog (1985) claims that utilitarianism cannot form a coherent and complete theory regarding what should be done because there is no commonality amongst pleasures and pains, and thus it is impossible to properly quantify the different sources/types of pleasure or pain. How does one compare the physical suffering of a patient to the emotional suffering of family members? Herzog argues that there is no common standard and provides examples of this lack of comparison between pleasurable experiences such as: floating on a lake in the springtime; eating a tasty cake; and seeing an old friend again after a long time apart. These experiences cannot be combined, subtracted from or compared in any meaningful way. Utilitarianism assumes all experiences can be measured on a single scale, but Herzog argues this is impossible. Mill, a utilitarian philosopher, attempted to resolve this problem by making a distinction between higher and lower pleasures (Su). Higher pleasures, or pleasures of the mind, are said to have more value than lower pleasures, or physical pleasures. Herzog believes that this underlying assumption makes utilitarianism contradictory. Higher and lower pleasures cannot be added together; therefore, if we believe that higher and lower pleasures are qualitatively different, a utilitarian measure loses its meaning.

The second problem with utilitarian ethics is that they open up the possibility of the tyranny of the majority. Since utilitarianism is solely concerned with maximizing happiness (the sum of all happiness), it can be used to justify sacrificing one person to benefit many others. This is not just a theoretical concern; it can be a real threat in a case of end-of-life care. A utilitarian

surrogate might reason that the family is experiencing significant pain from the patient's condition, that the patient no longer has any future experiences to lose, and that there are other patients who need an ICU bed. The surrogate might, therefore, conclude that withdrawing life support is justified and in line with the family's or society's interests, regardless of the wishes of the patient. So, the patient is treated as a means to achieve family happiness or societal efficiency and not as an end in themselves.

Third, utilitarianism puts cognitive burden on surrogates, who must calculate all consequences, including indirect effects on society. Surrogates could take infinite time gathering information, but end-of-life decisions often must be made quickly. As Miller (2009) notes, act utilitarianism's vague calculations allow a person to rationalize decisions based on emotional needs rather than impartial consideration. In the highly emotional ICU environment, surrogates are likely to do exactly that.

Despite these disadvantages, utilitarianism remains influential in healthcare ethics. It focuses on the outcome which aligns with the view of clinicians to balance benefits and harms. Utilitarianism also provides a straightforward systematic method of making decisions about resource allocation. These theoretical strengths do not translate to the complex, emotional realities of surrogate decision-making. The difficulties with measuring suffering, the likelihood of putting the individual patient's needs below those of the group (utilitarian calculations), and the unreasonableness of requiring surrogates to have to carry this cognitive load outweigh the advantages of utilitarianism in healthcare.

4. Deontology

4.1 Core Principles of Deontology

Immanuel Kant is the most well-known moral philosopher for deontologists. According to Deontological Theory, which derives from the Greek word Deon or "duty", a person's act is good as long as that person consistently performs an act in accordance with their duty or a particular moral rule regardless of how well that act will turn out (Alexander et al., 2007). Unlike utilitarianism, which focuses on consequences, deontology focuses on following moral rules regardless of the outcomes (Kasher 1978). According to Johnson and Cureton, Kant believed the most significant ethical principle was the categorical imperative (2004). Kant defined his categorical imperative in three different forms. The first of these forms is known as the universal law form. The universal law form states, "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time that it should become a universal law" (Johnson and Cureton 2004). This principle directly applies to surrogates: if a surrogate cannot hope that all surrogates should override patients' wishes, then they should not do so themselves.

The second formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative is the formulation of humanity: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means but also as an end at the same time" (Johnson and Cureton 2004). This principle has a direct connection to end-of-life care. A patient who is incapacitated is a person with dignity and, consequently, cannot be treated merely as a way of reducing the

suffering of a family or a way of freeing up an ICU bed. Their autonomy must be respected, as well as their status as an end in themselves. This formulation shows that rational beings have intrinsic value simply because they are rational (Kasher 1978). This principle directly underlies the bioethical concept of respect for autonomy, which holds that competent patients have the right to make their own medical decisions and that this right extends to their prior expressed wishes even after they lose capacity.

The formulations of autonomy and the kingdom of ends emphasize that rational persons are both self-governing moral agents and members of a moral community. Consequently, every rational being is both the author and the subject of the moral law. External authorities such as God, society, or nature cannot impose moral duties on rational beings; only rational will can determine what constitutes moral duty. This formulation emphasizes that moral agents are self-governing and can only act on principles that would be acceptable to a community of rational beings, each legislating for one another (Johnson and Cureton 2004). This concept of self-governance is the philosophical foundation for patient self-determination, the idea that patients should direct their own medical care based on their values and beliefs. It also informs the legal doctrine of informed consent, which requires that patients receive adequate information to make voluntary decisions about their treatment.

Kasher (1978) makes a significant distinction regarding what deontology is and what it is not. He states that deontology looks at morality as a "game" with its own internal ends rather than an external end "institution." For example, a game like chess has checkmate as its goal, which has no meaning outside the rules of chess. In the same way, while deontology does not ignore ends, it does have "internal ends" that must be treated as ends in themselves, rather than being treated as external ends that independently justify the rules. What makes an action wrong does not reflect the consequence but is inherent to the act because it violates a moral rule. Unlike teleology, Kasher continues that deontology has its own distinct content: duty, autonomy, and respect for persons. This emphasis on respect for persons is the ethical basis for advance directives, which allow patients to document their treatment preferences while competent so that those preferences can guide care after they lose capacity. Advance directives are a practical application of Kant's principle that rational beings have the right to determine the course of their own lives.

Kant established two different kinds of imperatives: hypothetical and categorical (Kasher 1978). Hypothetical imperatives consist of conditions that describe specific actions that must be taken in order to accomplish a goal (Johnson and Cureton 2004). For example, "In order to pass the exam, you will have to study." On the other hand, categorical imperatives are defined in relation to the universal moral law and therefore apply universally to all people without regard to the specific circumstances or results of their actions (Kasher 1978). An example of a categorical imperative is, "You shall not lie." Whether you lie to gain happiness for yourself or to help a family member feel more comfortable, the obligation not to lie remains unconditional (Johnson and Cureton 2004). Therefore, a surrogate's duty to honor a patient's wishes is unconditional; the surrogate's responsibility is to honor that obligation because it is their moral duty to do so. This

unconditional duty is the foundation of informed consent in practice: patients must be given truthful information about their condition and treatment options, and surrogates must act on the patient's prior expressed wishes rather than their own preferences.

4.2 How a Deontological Surrogate Would Approach Withdrawal of Life Support

When a surrogate is faced with the choice of withdrawing life support through a deontological lens, they will ask one question: What is my duty? The surrogate's answer will be based upon what was previously expressed by the patient when they were competent. If the patient expresses that they do not wish to be kept alive on life support with no hope of recovery while competent, then the surrogate has a duty to withdraw treatment. This duty does not change based upon consequences. It does not matter if this causes great grief to the family, nor does it matter whether the surrogate feels guilty about this decision, nor does it matter if the ICU bed could have been used for another patient. This duty belongs to the patient, and it is binding. The surrogate must set aside all of their emotions, fears, and preferences, and act on behalf of the patient as their voice.

Conversely, when a patient has clearly requested continued life-sustaining treatment, the surrogate should treat that preference as morally binding unless the requested intervention falls outside accepted medical practice or offers no medically achievable benefit. The emotional suffering to the family is not relevant when looking to provide treatment. Costs associated with the treatment will not change the obligation of the surrogate to continue treatment in accordance with the individual's autonomous decision. When an individual makes an autonomous decision while competent, the surrogate has an obligation to honor that decision regardless of their personal beliefs.

The Mehter et al. (2017) study provides evidence that this deontological approach is already present in clinical practice. The physicians in the study stated that "autonomy is still our highest ethical principle." They deferred most readily to families who demonstrated sincere substituted judgment about what the patient would have wanted. They did not base their decisions on cost or resource calculations. They focused on the individual patient and on honoring the patient's voice. One physician said, "We push harder when we feel that the family is thinking more about what they'd want for themselves than what the patient would want." This is precisely the deontological concern: the surrogate's duty is to the patient's autonomy, not to the family's preferences. Another physician said, "If I think we're prolonging suffering, I push harder. I feel like my duty as a physician is to protect patients from things that cause them suffering." This statement reflects a duty-based concern for the patient, although it also draws upon beneficence and the clinical obligation to prevent avoidable suffering.

Respect for patient autonomy does not mean automatically obeying all past requests. Deontology does not require clinicians or surrogates to honor treatment choices that are medically inappropriate, clinically futile, or ethically impermissible. A patient's prior wishes remain important, but they must be interpreted within the context of the patient's best interests

and the limits of medical practice. This distinction preserves the moral weight of autonomy while acknowledging that deontology requires judgment, not mere rule-following.

4.3 Limitations of Deontology in End-of-Life Care

While deontology has many positive aspects, it has several weaknesses that must be acknowledged. First, conflict of duties. Deontological ethics does not provide a clear hierarchy for resolving conflicts between duties. There could be a situation where there is a conflict with regard to two separate duties that are both absolute. For example, deontology recognizes duties to respect persons and to preserve life under ordinary circumstances; this means under normal circumstances deontology assumes that life should not be destroyed. Meanwhile, deontology also sees a duty to relieve suffering. Therefore, in some end of life cases, the individual may not have clearly expressed any wishes regarding the use of life-sustaining treatment but the surrogate now has two separate obligations to continue treatment based on the duty to preserve life, or not providing treatment due to the surrogate's duty to relieve suffering. Deontological ethics does not provide any guidelines or means of resolving conflict between obligations; deontological ethics would simply state that in terms of ethics, both obligations are equal, and leave the surrogate in a bind between competing obligations.

Another challenge is that the family has 'unknown wishes' for their loved one. When wishes are unknown, deontology alone is insufficient. According to the study by Mehter et al. (2017), physicians indicated that when families make a genuine effort to practice substituted judgment, physicians were willing to accept the family's decision as the legitimate voice of the patient, however, if the patient did not discuss their end-of-life preferences with anyone prior to their death or did not provide an advance directive indicating their preferences, the surrogate is unable to practice true substituted judgment. Because the surrogate has no knowledge of the patient's wishes, they are required to rely on the best interest standard, which lacks a clear deontological basis. The surrogate must determine what is in the patient's best interest based on objective criteria, such as pain, dignity, and quality of life. Surrogates will use a different style of judgment, which lacks a clear respect for autonomy.

Third, difficulty in applying substituted judgment in practice is a major limitation. Parker and Goldberg (2015) state that it is difficult for families to differentiate their own desires from those of the patient. An anxious family member may want their loved one to continue receiving treatment; on the other hand, they may want the same family member to pass with dignity but cannot bear to see them suffer. The law and deontological ethics assume that family members automatically act as someone who acts as an advocate or voice for the ill individual, without interference due to personal feelings; however, empirical evidence has shown that implementing this standard is very difficult for family members to achieve. Mehter et al. (2017) also found that physicians often had difficulty separating their own emotions from their role as a substitute decision-maker and would be more inclined towards withdrawal if they believed the family was projecting their own desires onto the individual who was actually sick.

The deontological focus on autonomy emphasizes individualism as contrasted to other patterns seen in many different societies in which collectivism is the predominant pattern e.g., in many aspects of decision making in East Asian societies are done collectively/with family members; many studies show that East Asian collectivist cultures also prioritize maintaining group harmony instead of focusing individual preferences when it comes to decision making (Savani, et al 2008; Yates & de Oliveira, 2016). The degree of value placed on individual choice varies across cultures; both the middle-class American culture tends to place a high value on making independent decisions; while working-class American culture has a strong preference for including others in the decision-making process as do the majority of people from a collectivist culture (Snibbe & Markus, 2005). These differences between cultures indicate that the deontological perspective of an emphasis on autonomy of the individual may be at odds with the cultural norms of surrogates who come from collectivist cultures for how decisions are made. However, this does not mean that deontology should be dismissed; it does mean that when applying deontological philosophies or principles it is important to do so within a specific culture's context.

The theory of relational autonomy suggests that personal identity and the decisions related to it are determined by one's relationships, their social context, and the circles of care that surround them. However, according to Elsner & Rampton (2023), there is an assumption that Kantian autonomy is more rigid than is actually the case. Kantian autonomy can include emotional expression and empathy in relation to others, and he did not disregard our social, embodied nature. Autonomy can exist in the presence of interdependence between individuals and/or caring for others, provided one's choices arise from individual reflective self-awareness. So, when representative decision-makers are involved in making end-of-life decisions, they are not independent but embedded in a network of existing relationships with the person making the decision on behalf of the other, and the family members and healthcare providers who support their relationship to the person whose behalf they are acting as surrogates. Deontology therefore can and does provide an opportunity to integrate relational concerns without abandoning its fundamental principle of patient autonomy.

5. Virtue Ethics

5.1 Core Principles of Virtue Ethics

When assessing if an act is immoral or moral, virtue ethics focuses on the character traits of the person performing the act instead of the act itself. Virtue ethics also defines the virtues of courage, honesty, compassion, justice, and integrity as well as their corresponding vices of cowardice, dishonesty, cruelty, injustice, and corruption. When presented with an ethical dilemma, virtue ethics requires that an individual ask themselves how they want to behave instead of simply asking themselves what the right action to take would be (Dimmock and Fisher 2017).

Aristotle is one of the most prominent philosophers in Western philosophy when it comes to the concept of virtue ethics. In Aristotle's work "Nicomachean Ethics", he defines the ultimate

good that can be achieved by humans as "Eudaimonia", which can be translated into English as "Happiness", "Flourishing" or "Well-Being." Courage is a virtue that helps an individual to face danger; this helps an individual to flourish in life. Temperance allows an individual to manage their desires and pleasures appropriately, while justice allows for treating other individuals fairly. A virtuous individual is not born virtuous but acquires virtue through habit and practice by doing what is virtuous. Over time, these virtuous acts will become second nature and when the virtuous individual performs them they do so with ease (Dimmock and Fisher 2017).

Louden (1986) argues that Kant's ethics is associated with virtues, making it unlike utilitarianism (which focuses on outcomes) and unlike standard deontology (which focuses only on duty). This means that Kantian ethics provides individuals with rules to follow but also requires them to demonstrate good character. A person applying Kantian ethics must possess both moral guidelines for conduct and excellent moral character to apply those guidelines successfully. By combining deontological and virtue ethics, Kantian ethics offers clear guidance on both how to behave and why to act.

5.2 How a Virtuous Surrogate Would Approach Withdrawal of Life Support

A surrogate would approach the end of life and withdraw from life support by asking, "What would an ethical person do?" The response would depend upon the ethical principles which are most important to the surrogate and how they apply those principles to the patient's situation.

Consider a surrogate who has a strong belief in the virtue of faithfulness, they might reason, "I promised this person I would always take care of them, and I promised I would never give up on them. To fulfill the virtue of faithfulness means to keep them on life support even though they have a poor prognosis; I have a responsibility to keep this promise even though it is difficult for me." Therefore, this surrogate continues to the patient on life support because they believe faithfulness is the highest virtue. A surrogate who values compassion may reason, "This patient is suffering, the ventilator keeps them alive, but they are not living. In order to show true compassion, I must relieve their suffering rather than prolonging it." Therefore, this surrogate withdraws the patient from life support because they believe compassion is the highest virtue.

Both surrogates could be acting virtuously. But they reach opposite conclusions. Virtue ethics provides no way to determine which virtue should take priority when virtues conflict. It says that the virtuous person will know what to do, but as Simpson (1992) argues, this is circular. It simply assumes that the surrogate already agrees with the framework.

In virtue ethics, virtuous individuals react to situations with appropriate emotion; they feel compassionate, fearful, and angry properly, whereas deontological approaches require individuals to act according to duty without taking into account their feelings about the situation at all. According to Kupperman (2009), Kant viewed moral virtue as requiring the regulation of inclination by duty; actions possess moral worth when agents perform them from duty rather than inclination alone. In contrast to this view, virtue ethics claims that a truly virtuous individual will engage in acts based on their inclination because they possess a character shaped by virtue;

therefore, they will have the desire to perform the right action. Therefore, when a surrogate is faced with the decision of whether to disregard their own feelings and only act based upon their obligations as surrogates or to allow their feelings to guide their decision-making and actions, virtue ethics asks the surrogate to integrate appropriate emotion with practical wisdom, moral perception, and attention to the particulars of the patient's circumstances.

Prudence, or practical wisdom, helps turn virtuous character into good actions. A study on physician communication at the end of life found three behaviors linked to prudent care: directly telling the patient they are dying, clearly asking about treatment preferences, and asking about the patient's family and social support (Murphy et al., 2022). What makes these behaviors prudent rather than just competent is that they require judgment, knowing when, how, and with what tone to deliver difficult news, how to structure questions so the patient can answer honestly, and which family members matter most. This matters for surrogates because it shows that virtue is not about following a checklist.

5.3 Limitations of Virtue Ethics in End-of-Life Care

Virtue ethics suffers from serious deficiencies which make it an inappropriate framework for surrogate decision-making. A major limitation of virtue ethics is the absence of clear action oriented guidance (Simpson 1992). This is particularly problematic in the high-stress, high-stakes ICU environment where surrogates require very specific guidance on how to make decisions. "Show compassion" is not very informative because showing compassion may lead to two totally different outcomes. Kupperman (2009) also admits that virtue ethics is incapable of functioning as a decision making algorithm.

However, contemporary virtue ethicists have responded to this. Rosalind Hursthouse maintains that virtue ethics offers action guidance in the form of "v-rules," which consist of action rules derived from virtue/vices (Hursthouse 1999). More recently, Nevim Borcin (2023) contends that virtue ethics critics often make an important distinction between action guidance and action assessment. In the view of Borcin, the virtue theoretical criterion for right action as that which is performed by a virtuous agent serves primarily as an action assessment criterion (to determine the quality of an act) rather than as a guide for action. Borcin proposes that action guidance stems from v-rules and from the second premise that virtue is the character trait necessary for human flourishing. When faced with circumstances in which v-rules may be in conflict, the virtuous agent, guided by practical wisdom, will be able to find his or her way through these conflicts. Thus, while virtue ethics may lack a formalized way to produce decisions (unlike utilitarianism or deontology), it still provides useful but non-rigid guidance to agents. However, even this response concedes that virtue ethics lacks the clear, decisive guidance that deontology provides. For a surrogate facing a life-or-death decision, "useful but non-rigid guidance" is not enough.

Another limitation of virtue ethics is its vulnerability to circular reasoning. A virtuous person possesses practical wisdom, and practical wisdom is the ability to determine what virtue requires. However, the only way to determine who possesses practical wisdom is by determining

whether or not a person acts virtuously. The result of this circular reasoning is that virtue ethics cannot resolve disagreements. This means that when two surrogates disagree about what compassion entails, virtue ethics provides no means by which to determine which surrogate is acting correctly (Simpson 1992).

Moreover, Virtue ethics may legitimize bad behavior. A religious surrogate may think that it is virtuous to prolong life no matter how much suffering is caused. A surrogate with fear can confuse fear with courage. Virtue ethics has no external type of check on the surrogate's self-perception. Also, Virtue ethics does not protect the patients who are vulnerable. Deontology provides rules and respect for autonomy; utilitarianism looks at the consequence of the act. Virtue ethics only looks at the character of the surrogate. If the surrogate does not truly possess virtue, or misunderstands what virtue requires, there is no protection for the patient. The surrogate's interpretation of virtue will overrule the patient's autonomy.

6. Conclusion: Deontology as the Best Approach

This paper has argued that deontology provides the strongest default framework for surrogate decision-making when the patient's prior wishes or values are known. Utilitarianism is limited because pleasures and pains are incommensurable, and virtue ethics lacks sufficient action guidance. Deontology, by contrast, preserves the patient's moral agency through substituted judgment, protects against the projection of surrogate preferences, and aligns with U.S. law and the ethical structure of informed consent. When wishes are unknown, however, deontology requires supplementation by best-interest reasoning, prudence, and clinical judgment.

Deontology is reinforced by its alignment with US law, which reflects the moral principle that patient autonomy should be respected. Deontology offers a moral reason to respect prior autonomous wishes, and the law reflects that reason. Deontology also protects vulnerable patients by giving surrogates a clear, external standard: what the patient said.

To argue that deontology is the best default framework is not to dismiss utilitarianism and virtue ethics entirely. Utilitarianism reminds surrogates to consider consequences; virtue ethics emphasizes character. However, these considerations only inform how to fulfil the surrogate's primary obligation: supporting the patient's autonomous choice.

The most difficult challenge arises when the patient's wishes are entirely unknown. In these cases, substituted judgment is impossible. Critics might argue that deontology offers no guidance at all. This is a valid criticism. When wishes are unknown, deontology alone is insufficient. The surrogate must turn to the best interest standard, supplemented by practical wisdom and clinical judgment. Deontology provides the best starting point: a clear default rule to honor wishes when known, and a clear acknowledgment of the limits of substituted judgment when they are not.

The surrogate's role is not to become the patient's replacement moral agent but to preserve the patient's agency after decisional capacity has been lost. Deontology offers the clearest philosophical account of why this responsibility exists and how surrogates should fulfill it.

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The Effects of Sleep Deprivation on False Memory Formation
By Raahil Khan, Mentor By Dr. Nora Isacoff

Abstract

Memory is vulnerable to distortion because it is reconstructive. Since sleep plays a key role in memory consolidation, disruptions in sleep may contribute to false memory formation. This literature review examines how sleep and sleep deprivation interact with the mechanisms involved in false memory formation. First, it compares experimental paradigms used in false memory research, including the Deese-Roediger-McDermott (DRM) paradigm and narrative or script-based tasks. It then examines the role of retrieval format (free recall versus recognition) in false memory expression. Next, the review evaluates the primary ways sleep deprivation is operationalized in research including total sleep deprivation, partial sleep deprivation, and chronic sleep disturbance. Finally, the review explores how memory consolidation during sleep and semantic associations influence false memory formation. The findings suggest that the effects of sleep on false memory formation depend on encoding structure, retrieval format, and the specific mechanisms engaged during memory processing.

Keywords

Psychology; Cognitive Psychology; Episodic Memory; Sleep Deprivation; False Memory

Introduction

Human memory is reconstructive, meaning memories of past events are influenced by factors such as schema and post-event information and thus are not accurate recollections of the original, past events (Roediger, 2001). Episodic memory, which is a reconstructive process, is the ability to create, store and recall past events (Ghetti & Bunge, 2012). Since episodic memory is reconstructive, it is prone to the formation of false memories, which is a phenomenon where new memories are informed by both the original experience and false information (Gisquet-Verrier & Riccio, 2018). Episodic memory has both an encoding phase and a consolidation phase. The encoding phase, which occurs during wakefulness, involves rapidly encoding stimuli via the hippocampus, while the amygdala assigns emotional significance to these rapidly forming memories. The consolidation phase, on the other hand, which happens during slow-wave sleep, integrates the encoded information with existing knowledge networks, where memories are kept in long-term storage. Thus, particularly in the consolidation phase, sleep plays a critical role in episodic memory. Consequently, quality of sleep directly affects memory (Khan et al., 2025). Many factors can influence sleep quality, one of which is duration of sleep, which will be the primary focus of this literature review investigating the effects of sleep deprivation on false memory formation.

False memories can arise from identifiable cognitive and social influences. One example is memory conformity, which is when individuals incorporate information provided by others into their own recollection of an event (Gabbert et al., 2012). For example, when two individuals

speak to each other after witnessing a crime scene, they may unintentionally incorporate incorrect details in their accounts, which merge secondhand information with the original memory. This process is often studied through the broader framework known as the misinformation effect, where exposure to misleading post-event information alters episodic memory.

A second example is suggestibility, which refers to the degree to which an individual's memories are influenced by leading questions, expectations, or subtle verbal or physical cues (Dilevski et al., 2025). An example of this is when an investigator asks leading questions or exhibits verbal or physical cues indicating the answer they are looking for or biased toward, leading a witness to recall events that were not a part of their original memory.

A final example involves source monitoring errors, which is when individuals misattribute the origin of a memory, that is, whether it was experienced first-hand, inferred, or externally supplied (Johnson, 1997). An example of this is when a witness views a news report covering the crime they witnessed and they conflate the memory of the event and the memory of the news report.

In all of these examples, even though the added information may be factually accurate, the memory is still considered a false memory if the individual does not remember that the information is from an external source, and believes they personally experienced it. Also, although these examples are crime-related, the phenomenon underlying each example (i.e., post-event misinformation, suggestibility, and source-monitoring errors) can be applied to many other situations, such as educational and workplace environments.

This paper first reviews experimental paradigms used in false memory research, including the Deese-Roediger-McDermott (DRM) paradigm, recognition memory procedures, and narrative and script-based approaches. Second, it contrasts acute and chronic sleep deprivation as well as distinguishing between studies that assess memory during sleep loss with those that test memory following a sleep-wake interval.

Past research has examined the relationship between sleep and false memory, but the findings appear to be inconsistent. Some studies show that sleep increases false memories, while others show a reduction or no effect. Some even find that different forms of sleep deprivation produce distinct patterns of memory distortion. This review will demonstrate how these apparent inconsistencies in the research can be explained by methodological differences, particularly differences in experimental paradigms used to assess false memory and in how sleep deprivation is operationalized. By comparing these approaches, the goal of this review is to provide a coherent framework for understanding why and when sleep influences false memory formation. Overall, this review argues that the effects of sleep on false memory depend on the interaction between encoding structure, retrieval format, and the type and timing of sleep disruption.

Discussion

Experimental Paradigms Used to Study False Memory

False memories arise from the interaction between how information is encoded and, afterward, how it is retrieved. So, differences in false memory findings across studies often reflect methodological differences in the experimental paradigms used to encode information and the retrieval procedures used to assess memory. Understanding these differences is thus essential for interpreting the research on sleep and false memory. Several experimental paradigms are used to examine different mechanisms of memory distortion. Two of the most widely used paradigms are the DRM paradigm and narrative (i.e. script-based) paradigms. The primary difference between these paradigms is in how information is encoded. This section will first examine the DRM paradigm, which will then be compared to narrative/script-based paradigms. The section then examines how free recall and recognition affect false memory formation.

The DRM paradigm is one of the most widely used experimental procedures in false memory research. In this task, participants study lists of semantically related words (e.g., bed, dream, tired). These words are strongly associated with another word, known as the critical lure (i.e., sleep), which is not present in the list. Participants are asked either to recall or recognize the words on the lists. Participants frequently report the critical lure as having been presented, demonstrating the formation of a false memory (Pardilla-Delgado & Payne, 2017). According to fuzzy trace theory, false memories in the DRM paradigm are explained by reliance on gist memory. Rather than retaining precise details of each word, participants encode the overall theme of the list. This contrasts with verbatim memory, which involves retaining precise, item-level details. During retrieval, the gist representation produces a strong sense of familiarity for the critical lure, which increases the likelihood of false recall/recognition (Malloggi et al., 2021). Supporting this idea, Conte et al. found that studied words and critical lures were remembered at similar rates. Since critical lures rely exclusively on gist-based memory, the similar retention rates of lures and studied words after a delay suggests that gist representations were preserved over time and contributed to memory for both studied words and critical lures. In other words, it is likely that even for presented words, participants were using gist memory rather than verbatim memory (Conte et al., 2025). This finding suggests that false memories in DRM tasks arise because participants rely on generalized semantic representations rather than precise item-specific information. As a result, studies using the DRM paradigm primarily measure distortions driven by gist-based processing.

While much of the research on false memories uses the DRM paradigm, narrative and script-based tasks are also used in some research. Narrative and script-based tasks use stories, picture sequences, or depictions of everyday events for encoding information, unlike the DRM paradigm which uses words, resulting in generally greater ecological validity. A narrative refers to a specific scenario with particular details, while a script refers to sequences of events that follow a familiar schema. In narrative and script-based tasks, participants may fill in omitted actions, infer causal steps, and report details that could potentially align with the narrative but are not presented. For example, van Rijn et al. (2017) found that, after a narrative, misleading questions lead participants to endorse details that are consistent with the events of a story but that did not occur. Similarly, Calderan et al. (2025) used pictures of everyday activities and later

tested memory for seen actions, plausible but unseen actions, and causal inference events. An example of a causal inference event is remembering that someone locked their door after leaving the house, even if that action was never shown, but was rather implied by the sequence of events. They concluded that false memories in these tasks reflect schema-consistent reconstructive processing, as participants fill in missing steps or infer likely outcomes based on prior knowledge. Narrative and script-based paradigms generally produce lower false memory rates than DRM tasks as a result of sequential events with causal relationships constraining the range of possible errors. This difference suggests that narrative and script-based paradigms engage reconstructive processes that more closely resemble everyday memory, whereas DRM tasks primarily isolate semantic association. Consequently, findings from these paradigms should not be interpreted as measuring identical forms of false memory.

While the DRM paradigm and narrative/script-based paradigms differ in how information is encoded, free recall and recognition reflect differences in retrieval (i.e., how stored information is accessed during testing).

In free recall tasks, participants retrieve information without external cues, such as when listing studied words from a DRM task, or when recounting details from a narrative. This increases the likelihood that gist-based information is retrieved. In addition to gist, free recall is also reliant on source monitoring, which is the ability to determine whether a retrieved detail is derived from the original source, from external stimuli like leading questions, or from internal inferences and associations. To succeed on this task, participants must be able to correctly identify whether gist-based information, elicited by free recall, was actually presented in the task or internally generated. If this process fails, then internally generated information will be reported as the original experience, resulting in a false memory (Malloggi et al., 2021). Recognition tasks, in contrast to free recall, provide external retrieval cues, changing how stored memories are accessed at test. In DRM paradigms, critical lures are explicitly presented in the testing phase and often feel familiar because they strongly match the semantic gist of the studied list. As a result, recognition tasks often produce high false alarm rates in DRM paradigms. This finding illustrates that retrieval format can substantially influence false memory expression even when the encoded information is identical. Therefore, differences across studies may reflect retrieval procedures rather than differences in the underlying effects of sleep.

Overall, differences in false memory expression across studies can be explained by an interaction between encoding paradigms and retrieval formats. The DRM paradigm promotes gist-based encoding through semantic association, which makes its interaction with retrieval conditions, like recognition tasks, more likely to elicit false memories because critical lures generate strong familiarity. In contrast, narrative and script-based paradigms encode information in structured sequences, which constrain the range of plausible errors and reduce false memories. Free recall and recognition alter how stored information is accessed at test, as free recall depends on internally generated retrieval and source monitoring, whereas recognition relies on external cues. In sum, false memories arise from multiple mechanisms that are shaped by both encoding and retrieval processes.

Types of Sleep Deprivation

Before interpreting the research on sleep and false memory, it is important to understand how sleep deprivation is operationalized across studies. Differences in experimental findings often reflect differences in the type, duration, and timing of sleep loss rather than contradictory effects of sleep itself.

Total sleep deprivation (TSD), partial sleep deprivation (PSD), and chronic sleep disturbance differ in both severity and duration, and therefore affect memory through different cognitive mechanisms. These forms of sleep deprivation are expected to produce different patterns of false memory rather than a single, uniform effect.

TSD refers to the complete absence of sleep for a period of approximately 24 hours. Studies using TSD consistently report impairments in memory performance at retrieval. These impairments are reflected in reductions in correct recall and recognition of studied terms, rather than a selective increase in false memories. Chatburn et al. (2017) found that TSD reduced correct recall and recognition of studied items in a DRM task, while recall of critical lures remained normal. This pattern suggests that TSD weakens veridical (accurate) memory performance rather than increasing false memory formation.

PSD, on the other hand, refers to reduced sleep across multiple consecutive nights, operationalized as approximately 3-5 hours of sleep per night. Compared to TSD, PSD is considered more ecologically valid because the experimental manipulation more closely reflects how sleep loss typically occurs in everyday life (Lo et al., 2016). A misinformation paradigm involves a task where participants encode an event and are later exposed to misleading information before being tested on their memory. Unlike TSD, PSD does not impair veridical memory performance. Using a misinformation paradigm, Lo et al. (2016) found that participants under PSD recalled correct event details at rates comparable to well-rested controls. However, PSD increased susceptibility to misinformation, particularly following multiple nights of restricted sleep. This finding suggests that PSD does not necessarily impair the ability to remember original events, but reduces resistance to incorporating misleading post-event information. In other words, PSD appears to affect monitoring or evaluation processes during retrieval rather than causing a general decline in memory accuracy. In adolescents, PSD led to significantly higher incorporation of misleading post-event details despite intact recall of true information. This pattern indicates that PSD preserves memory retrieval while increasing vulnerability to memory distortion.

A third form of sleep deprivation is chronic sleep disturbance, which is operationalized by examining individuals who meet DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for insomnia. Unlike experimentally induced sleep deprivation, such as TSD and PSD, chronic sleep disturbance reflects long-term patterns of shortened sleep. Malloggi et al. (2021), using the DRM paradigm, found that individuals with insomnia produced higher rates of critical lure recall than the control group, despite comparable levels of correct memory, measured by their ability to recall studied items in a DRM task at normal rates. Since critical lures represent the general theme of a word list, this suggests that insomnia increases reliance on gist-based memory or reduces the ability to

distinguish between presented and internally generated information. This finding suggests that long-term sleep disturbance affects memory differently from experimentally induced sleep loss by altering the balance between gist-based and item-specific processing rather than simply reducing overall memory performance.

Altogether, findings on false memory differ depending on how sleep deprivation is operationalized. TSD provides overall reductions in memory retrieval, PSD preserves overall retrieval but increases susceptibility to post-event misinformation, and chronic sleep disturbance yields an increase in false memories.

Sleep and Memory Relationship

The relationship between sleep and false memory formation is best understood by examining how sleep and sleep deprivation interact with distinct memory mechanisms. Sleep primarily affects consolidation and later access, while sleep deprivation can disrupt encoding processes.

First, sleep influences the strength of semantic associations formed during consolidation. Second, the effect of these associations depends on how memories are retrieved. Finally, the impact of sleep also depends on whether sleep disruption occurs before or after encoding. Examining each of these factors separately helps explain why previous studies have reported different findings.

An important factor impacting the effect of sleep is list length. In the DRM paradigm, short lists typically consist of around 10 semantically related words, whereas longer lists contain approximately 15 words. Shorter lists generate fewer semantic associations at encoding, producing relatively sparse semantic associations in which fewer studied items are linked to one another and to related concepts. Longer lists create more associations, changing how activation spreads across related ideas during retrieval. Therefore, list length matters because of how it changes the network of semantic associations formed among the words. The effect is not simply due to presenting more words, but rather to the different associative structure created during encoding.

Sleep is thought to influence memory in part by increasing spreading activation within semantic memory (Newbury and Monaghan, 2018). Spreading activation refers to the process by which activation of one concept in memory increases the activation of other, semantically related concepts through associative links. In the DRM paradigm, activation originating from studied words can spread to the critical lure. Although the critical lure was never presented, it strongly matches the overall theme of the list and therefore receives activation through these semantic associations.

Longer lists produce more semantic associations during encoding because additional studied words create more associative links. As a result, activation is distributed across a larger semantic network. Even if sleep increases spreading activation, that activation is shared among multiple studied items, reducing the likelihood that the critical lure becomes uniquely activated. This explains why Newbury and Monaghan (2018) found that sleep increased false recall for

short lists but reduced false recall for longer lists. These findings demonstrate that sleep does not uniformly strengthen false memories. Instead, its effects depend on how semantic information is organized during encoding.

Although semantic spreading activation influences what information becomes available in memory, retrieval format determines how that information is accessed during testing. The influence of sleep on false memory is also shaped by retrieval format. Newbury and Monaghan (2018) observed that sleep increased false recall during free recall tasks, which rely on internally generated activation and provide fewer external cues for monitoring. Since participants must generate responses without any cues, they may report words that fit the overall theme of the list, but are not actually presented. In recognition tasks, studied words are presented alongside new words, allowing participants to compare each presented word with their memory of the studied words. Sleep can strengthen the activation of associated items without necessarily increasing false memories, depending on how retrieval is structured. Therefore, even if sleep enhances associative links between studied words and related concepts, recognition testing may reduce the likelihood that the increased activation results in endorsement of a critical lure. This finding helps explain why studies using different retrieval procedures often reach different conclusions regarding the effects of sleep on false memory.

In addition to semantic activation and retrieval format, the timing of sleep disruption is another important factor influencing false memory. The effects of sleep on false memory formation also depend on when sleep disruption occurs relative to encoding. Sleep deprivation and chronic sleep disturbance affect memory during encoding by weakening the encoding of item-specific information and contextual details, resulting in weaker memory representations.

When encoding occurs under sleep deprivation, memories are formed under conditions of reduced attention and impaired cognitive control. Lo et al (2016) found that TSD prior to learning increased false recognition in the DRM paradigm. This increase was not limited to critical lures but also included unrelated new words, indicating a general reduction in retrieval accuracy. Chatburn et al. (2017) found that both PSD and TSD increased false memories, with stronger effects following more severe deprivation, suggesting that sleep deprivation negatively affects encoding processes. This suggests that some inconsistencies in the literature may reflect differences in when sleep deprivation occurs rather than in whether it affects memory.

However, when sleep deprivation occurs after encoding, that is, after the initial memory representations have already been established, sleep influences how these representations are later accessed. Newbury and Monaghan (2018) showed that increases in false memories only occur under specific conditions, specifically when short lists were presented, and retrieval relied on free recall rather than recognition. Under these conditions, retrieval depends on internally generated associations that are strengthened during sleep-dependent consolidation.

Overall, the relationship between sleep and false memory cannot be explained by a single mechanism. Instead, false memory reflects the interaction among semantic spreading activation during consolidation, retrieval format, and the timing and type of sleep disruption. Considering

these factors together provides a coherent explanation for why previous studies have reported seemingly inconsistent effects of sleep on false memory formation.

Conclusion

Overall, this review argues that the effects of sleep on false memory depend on the interaction among encoding structure, retrieval format, and the type of sleep disruption. Rather than reflecting contradictory findings, much of the existing research can be reconciled by considering these methodological and cognitive differences. The DRM task reliably elicits gist-based distortions through semantic association, while narrative and script-based tasks produce schema-consistent errors. Retrieval format also interacts with these effects, with free recall increasing reliance on internally generated activation and source monitoring, and recognition providing external cues that can reduce certain types of false endorsement.

Sleep deprivation does not produce a linear increase in false memory. TSD primarily weakens veridical memory performance, while PSD increases susceptibility to misinformation despite preserved recall of accurate details. Insomnia appears to increase reliance on gist-based processing on DRM tasks. These findings indicate that sleep loss affects encoding and monitoring processes differently depending on duration and severity.

Sleep itself may also strengthen semantic associations by spreading activation during consolidation, which, under conditions of sparse associative networks and free recall, may increase activation of critical lures. However, when associative networks are dense or if retrieval is externally cued, the same consolidation processes can reduce false recall. Thus, sleep-dependent consolidation doesn't inherently cause false memories; rather, it depends on how memory is encoded and later retrieved.

Understanding these mechanisms has important practical implications. Since false memories can influence eyewitness testimony, clinical assessments and other real-world situations that rely on accurate recollection, identifying the conditions under which sleep improves or distorts memory may help improve research and applied practice.

Overall, the literature suggests that the relationship between sleep and false memory formation is dependent on task structure, retrieval format, and type of sleep manipulation. It is not clear how these variables interact within the same experimental design. Thus, future research should aim to integrate multiple paradigms and sleep manipulations in single studies to allow direct comparisons between encoding, consolidation, and retrieval processes. Clarifying these interactions would greatly help determine when sleep strengthens memory accuracy and when it increases vulnerability to distortion.

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Moscowcentrism: The Historical and Economic Roots of the Heart of Russia
By Anastasiia Sharkova

Introduction

The letter that Napoleon sent to Alexander I a couple of weeks after the Battle of Borodino reads: "My dear Lord and Brother, there is no longer a beautiful, proud city of Moscow. I began the war against Your Majesty without malice. One note from you would have halted my advance. I truly wish to cede to you the advantage of entering Moscow."

Conquering Moscow was supposed to be the crowning victory of Napoleon's career, but the occupation lasted just over a month. A hundred years later, Moscow would reclaim its status as the capital, and a century after that, it would become the most populous metropolis in Europe.

In this essay, I will follow the development of Moscow from a small principality to Russia's leading city that managed to overcome its rivals through stable dynasties, alliance with the Horde, and backing of the church. The major milestones of this development include Ivan the III's strengthening of power, Peter the Great's elevation of St. Petersburg, 1812 fire that established Moscow's symbolical identity, Soviet showcase constructions, and modern re-centralization. The conclusion will be made in the discussion of Moscow's modern domination because of vast budget revenues through personal and corporate taxes, while most regions remain trapped in dependency, deepening the gap between the capital and the rest of the country.

Early Rivals

Moscow did not claim the top spot among Russian cities right away. It had very strong rivals. In the first half of the 13th century, Khan Batu burned Old Rus'. The Mongol invasion froze cultural, economic, and even everyday human life in Rus' for several generations. The principalities would only reach pre-Mongol economic levels after a century and a half.

But the crisis, as always, became a time of opportunity for those lucky enough to survive. After the terror of the Horde, the initiative passed to the outsider principalities, about which few had previously known. The struggle for the grand principality, that is, the status of chief among princes, began on the periphery.

The first to make a loud statement was Tver. The first stone cathedral after the invasion was built there, and the first all-Russian chronicle was compiled there. At the beginning of the 14th century, Prince Mikhail Yaroslavich even took on the title of Grand Prince of All Rus'. A small town on the Volga, only 12 years older than Moscow, rapidly grew into a new political center of the Northeast.

The development model chosen by the Tver princes was not the most far-sighted. Tver simply plundered everyone it could reach. These were mainly Torzhok, Dmitrov, and the Novgorod lands. In the second half of the 14th century, the principality experienced a Tver Renaissance. German merchants called the Tver prince no less than a king, and the Horde designated Tver as a separate grand principality. Imagine: a delegation from Tver participated in the Council of Florence, where the fate of Byzantium was being decided. But the bet on quick

money let the Tverians down, as the city had almost no direct vassals. This became its weak point in the struggle against Moscow.

Now let's turn to Tver's northern neighbor, Novgorod. At that time, it was a feudal boyar oligarchy. There was a form of popular will, but in a very strange way. The famous Novgorod veche, for example, worked only for the townspeople. No one listened to the rural people there. Votes were not counted when making decisions either. Everything was decided by shouting and force, and it often came to fights and murders. And most importantly: key positions were always held by people from the most influential clans.

Luck helped Novgorod survive the Mongol invasion. They simply did not reach it. The best defense against nomads was 58 degrees north latitude and dense forests. The city, of course, regularly paid tribute, but the distance from the Horde center, Sarai, was felt both in money and in the degree of freedom. Until Novgorod was annexed to Moscow, the city was the largest Russian land. Novgorod's possessions stretched from the Baltic to the Urals, and its trade ties extended throughout Europe, all the way to Gdańsk and Hamburg.

Novgorod had two main problems: fewer people lived there than in other principalities, and the city's trading power did not convert into military might. Novgorod suffered first from the Vladimir princes, then from the Tver princes, and perished at the hands of the Moscow princes.

Nearby was also the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the largest state in Europe. Influential, wealthy, with a large territory, but at a convenient distance from the Horde. By the end of the 14th century, the Lithuanian princes had taken control of almost everything left of Kyivan Rus' after the Tatar-Mongol invasion, including Kyiv itself. More Orthodox Slavs lived under Lithuanian rule at that time than in the lands controlled by Moscow, which is why it was called the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Rus'. But Lithuania also failed to become the center around which Russian lands would unite, as the Lithuanian princes did not think about the project of an all-Russian state. Expansion was important to them, not integration.

Moscow's Unique Advantages and Consolidation of Power

In those times, the main priority was to obtain the yarlyk (patent) for rule from the Horde, which gave them power over their neighbors. Moscow succeeded in this more than the others. In principle, Moscow's success is largely a series of incredible historical coincidences that did not initially seem so coherent and logical, because almost all objective explanations for why exactly Moscow became the capital of Russia work rather poorly.

The most popular version is Moscow's geography. The city supposedly rose because it stood at the crossroads of trade routes. In reality, all trade went along the Volga, and the Moscow River was shallow. Tver, Yaroslavl, Kostroma, Nizhny Novgorod – in short, cities on the Volga – were the real winners from trade, but not Moscow.The argument that people sought protection from Tatar raids in Moscow also does not hold up. It was much safer to flee to Tver, to the Northern lands, or to Galich – they were even farther away. Or, even more so, to Novgorod.

Resources are often mentioned. Moscow supposedly had fertile lands, salt, fish, and furs, but this is simply not true. The soils around Moscow are rather poor, there is no salt, you can't

live off small fish, and the forests around the city were quickly cut down. Fur-bearing animals were killed off, and there were never any mines nearby. Compared to Galich or Vologda, the Moscow lands looked weak.

And strong institutions, like the same legal code, appeared in Moscow a hundred years later than in Pskov or Novgorod. However, Moscow had other advantages. First and foremost, the family monolith. The descendants of Ivan Kalita stuck together, and this set them apart from their neighbors, who constantly quarreled among themselves; the throne simply passed from father to son. Each time, the heirs turned out to be the eldest in the family, so no disputes arose.

The second point was that the Moscow princes pursued a flexible policy towards the Horde. Moscow came to an agreement with the senior khans in time and received the patent for rule, while other principalities found themselves in a much less advantageous position. The others, seeing Moscow's position, were afraid and ceded more and more rights to it. And so, here, almost five hundred years ago, a tilt towards Moscow began.

In modern political geography, this tilt is described by the "center-periphery" concept. The center accumulates advantages at the expense of those around it. Asymmetry appears. But if the center gathers all resources to itself and takes everything from the rest, the imbalance will be so huge that this entire structure, even an asymmetric one, will collapse. Therefore, the center cannot ignore the regions, otherwise it will have to bear all the burden alone.

In the conditions of Mongol Rus', Moscow, which was gaining strength, was ultimately able to protect not only itself but also other cities from Mongol raids. In the end, the Horde itself helped Moscow. The more actively the Golden Horde disintegrated, the more Moscow rose above the other principalities. The princes from Moscow became increasingly independent and powerful. And the culmination of this city's ambitions was the defeat of Mamai at the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380.

By the end of Dmitry Donskoy's reign, Moscow's superiority over its neighbors became obvious. Its main rivals, Tver and Ryazan, recognized its seniority. The Horde Khan Tokhtamysh, however, burned Moscow after the Battle of Kulikovo, but was still forced to recognize the grand principality for Moscow.

Even the long and brutal struggle between the descendants of Donskoy in the 15th century did not change much. Moscow remained the capital, and the direct descendants of Ivan Kalita ruled there. The Moscow principality grew many times over. In the 14th century, Moscow turned into a powerful center of northeastern Rus'. Lands from Tula to Rostov and Nizhny Novgorod came under its control, but it was too early to speak of a full-fledged state. Supreme power still belonged to the Horde. The Moscow state in the 15th century consisted of the prince's lands, apparitions of his brothers, and estates of the serving nobility. In short, the situation was not much better than in Germany before Bismarck.

Ivan III and the Birth of Russia

Although it is important to emphasize: even then, nothing was predetermined. In Pskov and Novgorod, the beginnings of bureaucracy were already in place, and laws were being

systematized. The republics conducted their own foreign policy. Everything pointed to the possibility of independent states emerging on these lands. But history took a different path thanks to Ivan III, the grandfather of Ivan the Terrible.

Ivan III, the first of the Moscow princes, stopped traveling to the Horde and began to pursue a policy without regard to the Southeast. It was under him that the centuries-old dependence on the Horde ended. Rus' was for the first time called Russia, and its ruler – the sovereign. Moscow began to speak of itself as an independent state. Official relations began with the Holy Roman Empire and with Poland. Ivan himself married Sophia Paleologus, the niece of the last emperors of Byzantium.

By the end of his reign, Ivan III became convinced that autocracy was the simplest and most understandable path for governing Russia. The princes and even his own brothers were all under his thumb. Ivan III arrested one of his brothers for disobedience, along with his sons, and had them rot in prison. And Ivan directly told the Novgorodians that his power was unlimited. Within a year, Novgorod became part of the Russian state. After this, Moscow's territory at least doubled. Pskov, unlike Novgorod, did not resist and retained its autonomy for only half a century. And a couple of decades before that, independent Tver came to an end. There were simply no more competitors left for Moscow in northeastern Rus'. The era of fragmentation had finally ended.

Moscow's Identity and Symbolism

By the end of the 15th century, Moscow was becoming more and more monolithic. The Monomakh's Cap, the double-headed eagle, the brick Kremlin, the Faceted Chamber – all these symbols of power appeared under Ivan III. It was then that Moscow first felt itself a capital of continental European scale.

Scribes and church authors began to call Moscow the New Constantinople. Later, the well-known formula appeared – Moscow – the Third Rome, but even that was not the end. The lineage of Moscow sovereigns began to be traced almost back to the Roman Octavian Augustus. And Vladimir Monomakh, without knowing it himself, turned out to be a descendant of the Byzantine emperors.

For centuries, Moscow yielded in prestige to the ancient cities of Rus'. The same Vladimir was a century and a half older than Moscow and was founded by Saint Vladimir himself. Tver's prestige rested on the fact that its princes often received the title of Vladimir, but remained to rule at home. Moscow had nothing of the sort. Moscow desperately needed an identity, a symbolic meaning. It was necessary to explain to others – to its own elite and to foreign elites – why exactly Moscow had the right to power and why exactly Moscow was the center of the Russian lands. And above all, the religious center, and therefore the political one.

The Church and Moscow's Rise

It is important not to forget: the rise of Moscow was connected with the church from the very beginning. Even Ivan Kalita persuaded the metropolitan to move to Moscow, making the

city the spiritual center. As a result, the rivals in Rus' weakened so much that the difference between Moscow and Russia proper began to gradually fade away. Abroad, it disappeared completely. In Europe, any inhabitants of the Russian state were simply called Muscovites. Moscow received the exclusive right to expand its possessions. Moscow also had another important feature: the power of the Grand Prince, and later the Tsar, was not limited by either laws or institutions. The only force that could restrain the princes remained the church. The metropolitan retained the right of intercession, and could stand up for those who had fallen into disgrace, but this worked poorly.

The Evolution of Moscow as Capital

It is also important that in the 16th century, Moscow was anything but a capital; such a concept did not really exist before. Capitals of the modern type began to take shape in Europe only in the 17th century. And since then, the meaning of the term has not changed much. A capital is a city where the government is located. Although even this rule does not always work.

In 16th-century Russia, Moscow was called the "stolny" city. That is, the city where the "stol" (throne) is located. The difference is that the throne can move from place to place. Even during the time of Kyivan Rus', Prince Svyatoslav Igorevich thought about moving from Kiev to the city of Pereyaslavets. He explained it this way: "I do not like to sit in Kiev, I want to live in Pereyaslavets on the Danube, for it is the center of my land. All good things flow there." That is, the princes understood: if you want to control all of Rus' – go to the richest city.

Only when Ivan Kalita and his descendants made Moscow the center of Rus' did they decide that one could simply make Moscow itself the richest. The Horde gave Moscow the right to collect tribute from other principalities; most of it had to be given to the khans, but a small stash remained. This regular percentage later helped to create an army precisely to get rid of the Horde. And when the fragmented Rus' was replaced by a young tsardom, Moscow did not change anything. After all, everything was working well already.

Ivan the Terrible: Challenging Moscow's Primacy

In the 16th century, the principalities sent taxes to Moscow and received nothing in return. The first to weaken the position of the "stolny" city was Ivan the Terrible. The Tsar divided the country into the Oprichnina and the Zemshchina. The center of the Oprichnina became Alexandrovskaya Sloboda, where the Tsar moved. The center of the second territory was Moscow. Taxes now went to two different centers, and Moscow's revenues plummeted. Ivan also planned another capital – Vologda, farther away from the Moscow he disliked. A fortress, an oprichnina residence, and a stronghold for controlling Novgorod were even built there, but the project was never completed. Under the Terrible, Moscow barely stayed afloat. However, the state apparatus laid down by Ivan III was absolutely Moscow-centric, and it could not be quickly destroyed.

Peter the Great and the Founding of St. Petersburg

After Ivan Vasilyevich, Moscow went through a lot: a change of dynasty, famine, plague, the Polish invasion, riots and uprisings. But there was one ruler that the "stolny" city could not survive. Historians still argue about Peter the Great's attitude towards Moscow. Peter was so irritated by Moscow that he decided to found a capital in a very strange, at first glance, place. In those years, the banks of the Neva were much lower and often, especially in spring, this river flooded everything around. During the flood of 1824, the elements washed away hundreds of buildings and killed thousands of livestock.

Construction of St. Petersburg began in 1703, and within 9 years the capital was officially moved. And unlike Ivan the Terrible, who deprived Moscow of status only formally, Peter understood perfectly well what made Moscow the "stolny" city. Peter's first move was to pull the elite to St. Petersburg. For example, the right to land now depended not on the nobility of the family, but on service, and all government bodies were located in St. Petersburg.

Then Peter redrew the tax system. He ordered taxes to be collected locally, but a good portion still went to St. Petersburg. Every adult male paid, and all the money flowed into the new capital. To ensure sufficient resources, stone construction was prohibited everywhere except St. Petersburg. Partly because of this, in 1737, wooden Moscow experienced the largest fire in its history up to that point.

Peter found resources for construction; now he needed people. Everyone was brought to St. Petersburg: peasants, carpenters, artisans – voluntarily, forcibly. As a result, during the first half of the 18th century, the population of the new capital grew 2.5 times, while Moscow emptied during this time. Over 40 years, it lost nearly 30 thousand inhabitants, that is, almost a quarter of its population by those standards. And finally, the main thing: Peter moved the imperial court to St. Petersburg. Thousands of servants, artisans, and merchants followed. Meanwhile, in Moscow, boyar houses were emptying, and the residents who had suffered from the fire rebuilt the city with their own efforts, mainly from wood.

Moscow vs. St. Petersburg: The Two Capitals

The conflict between Moscow and St. Petersburg, as Alexander Sergeevich aptly put it, consisted in the fact that two capitals cannot prosper equally in one state. Moscow began to fade, and after such blows, many cities were never able to recover.

In this situation, Moscow managed to survive only thanks to Nikolai Alexandrovich Vtorov; he would become the face of Moscow as a city-corporation. Vtorov was considered almost the richest man in the history of the empire, not counting the Yusupovs and the Romanovs. By the end of his life, he amassed a fortune of 60 million gold rubles. The Vtorovs' business was a family affair and very simple: buy cheap, sell dear. With railways and wagons being scarce at the end of the 19th century, success often came to those who could quickly and safely arrange the supply of goods to distant cities. And thanks to the centralization that Ivan the Terrible and his grandfather and father had built, a significant part of the goods immediately went to Moscow, because there were the most buyers and more money circulating.

Even after Peter the Great, Moscow's economic ties survived. The city turned into a large warehouse, becoming a distribution center. Merchants came here with goods, sold them, bought something exotic, and carried that goods far and wide. Even during Peter's lifetime, this arrangement did not suit him at all. As soon as the harbor in St. Petersburg was completed, the Tsar closed the ports in Arkhangelsk and ordered all trade to be routed through the new capital. The harsh administrative measures worked. A year after the Tsar's death, 90% of trade went through Petersburg.

Moscow, of course, suffered from such policies, but not critically. Peter especially miscalculated on the issue of the Old Believers. These were the richest people in Russia in terms of money and connections. But in the city on the Neva, they were without rights: live with a double tax, without a church, and without your rituals; and the Old Believers hated Peter for subordinating the church to the state. Moscow, unlike the capital, was much more tolerant. This was one reason the Vtorov family headed to Moscow.

Moscow's 19th Century Transformation

At that time, Moscow was critically short of space. Under the Tsar, old trading buildings were constantly declared unsafe, causing traders to crowd into tiny squares.

Nikolai Vtorov opened the first business center in Moscow for local merchants. There, in addition to shops and warehouses, offices, hotels, and a telegraph were located. All the premises in the building were snapped up by tenants even during the construction phase. Moreover, the building is still in demand today. It is called the Business Courtyard.

At the end of the 19th century, Moscow became the center of imperial business. For this reason, with the onset of the industrial revolution, railways began to lead specifically to Moscow. The city was quickly connected to key industrial centers. By the beginning of the 20th century, 10 railway lines converged on Moscow, and only 7 on Petersburg. And the industrial revolution gave Moscow a new growth point. Previously, Moscow was the largest industrial center with endless factories. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Moscow industrial district was first in terms of the number of workers. The city's main enterprises were usually located near the water in the areas of modern Aviamotornaya, Elektrozavodskaya, Kurskaya, and Baumanskaya streets.

Nikolai Vtorov also found his place in this atmosphere. During the First World War, he invested in a very profitable military business. He bought a bank to finance construction, opened chemical and cement plants, and the first automobile plant of the empire was also Vtorov's work in alliance with Ryabushinsky.

Moreover, in Moscow, Vtorov built not only an industrial but also a family empire. His sisters married all the Moscow businessmen – textile, chintz, and engineering magnates. Then, as now, people from the regions who achieved success in Moscow immediately tried to put down roots here, including through their children, whom they sent to study at Moscow universities.

If you start recalling famous residents of Moscow – Chekhov, Tolstoy, even Mayakovsky – you will find that almost half of them are not natives. For centuries, Moscow has remained a city where people break out of villages, settlements, small towns, and medium-sized cities. With

one caveat: until the abolition of serfdom, such luxury was mainly affordable only to the nobility. But still, the trend was obvious.

The Elite and Moscow's Character

The aristocracy initially disliked Petersburg altogether. Ship engineer John Perry wrote that the nobles hated the new capital. They were annoyed by the prices, the weather, and the fact that they had to build a new life in a completely unknown place. When Peter II, the grandson of Peter I, moved the capital back to Moscow for a couple of years, Petersburg simply emptied.

Of course, it was impossible to build a career in Moscow – salaries in the old capital were too tiny. Gilyarovsky, for example, wrote that the salaries were so meager that officials survived only on bribes, which they took openly. Villagers paid with flour and meat, and city dwellers – with cash. Therefore, the nobility fled to Moscow not for a career, but for a peaceful retirement. From the cold, cramped, and secular Petersburg, they arrived in a much calmer and more stable city.

Mostly nobles and merchants lived in Moscow. Interestingly, over time, these archetypes began to converge. After the abolition of serfdom, the nobles had to start working, and the merchants, closer to the 20th century, became more educated. But in all other respects, the Moscow elite was conservative. No "Moscow never sleeps" for you. This especially displeased the youth, who adored the vibrant social life of the capital but were forced to hang around in Moscow.

Moscow looked like a huge capital, but in reality everyone knew each other, and if they didn't know you, they would push you with their elbow and be rude on your way to success. But strictly speaking, in the 18th, 19th, and even the early 20th centuries, this phrase could work not figuratively but literally. Even just before the revolution, chickens, goats, cows, and pigs grazed on the city streets.

The Dark Side of 19th Century Moscow

Where there was no cobblestone, grass grew and puddles accumulated. They were so deep that there was even a person in the city who, for a small price, would carry you on his back, literally on his shoulders, from one side to the other, and it was even profitable. Things were so bad that the writer Andrei Bely recounted how, at the end of the 19th century, near Dorogomilovo, one conductor literally drowned while trying to swim across a Moscow puddle.

Khitrovka was considered the scariest district in Moscow. In this tiny area, there were hundreds of flophouses, and it was the very bottom: beggars, fugitives, prostitutes, addicts. In addition, Khitrovka was a real exchange for criminals. Robbery, gold smelting, contract killings – crime grew, flourished, and stank here.

Interestingly, on the corner of Maly Tryokhsvyatsky Lane and Khitrovka was a police station. And it didn't even try to disperse all this. And all because the owners of these lodging houses generously thanked their patrons, all the way up to the highest city authorities. Constant robberies, murders, rampant prostitution, especially child prostitution – all this could not please

the neighbors in the city. Five minutes to Solyanka and Pokrovka, where there are solid mansions of merchants. But this very contrast was the whole of 19th-century Moscow.

Meanwhile, the city was growing in all directions at once. Moscow began with the Kremlin and Kitay-gorod. Then the capital was considered to be within the bounds of the White City, i.e., the Boulevard Ring. In the mid-17th century, it was already within the Garden Ring. Later, the boundary was marked by the Kamer-Kollezhsky Rampart. And when big industry came to Moscow by rail, the city became cramped again. Stations began to appear on the outskirts: Kursky, Belorussky, Ryazansky. Over the years, Moscow grew so much that the former outskirts began to be considered the center. And with each new expansion, Moscow absorbed both poor and rich neighborhoods.

Moscow as Anti-Petersburg

At the beginning of the 19th century, this contrast became part of the city's self-awareness. Moscow began to perceive itself as the anti-Petersburg. Petersburg is the capital of fashion and dandies, while Moscow is chaotic: people from villages, shops and vegetable gardens alternating with towers, boulevards, and lions on gates. Moscow was simultaneously traditional and patriarchal, yet rapidly growing.

The fact that Moscow built its identity in opposition to Petersburg is not surprising. People realize who "we" are only by looking at the different "others." And the stronger the difference, the easier it is to define one's own along that fault line.

The Fire of 1812 and the Symbolic Capital of it

But there came a year that changed everything. For Moscow, that was 1812. The September fire destroyed six and a half thousand houses, that is, more than 70% of all buildings. Eight thousand shops burned down, every third temple. The historical center turned to ashes. According to various sources, between eight and fifteen thousand people died in the fire. Russian General Benckendorff recalled that when he and his regiment returned to the still-smoking city, there were traffic jams on the streets because of the bodies of people and animals. The horrors of that fire during the war with Napoleon can be described at length, but two moments are important. First: the war almost completely destroyed Moscow. And second: after the destruction of Moscow, Russia won the most significant war in European history up to that point. And these two facts became ingrained in Moscow's DNA.

The version of the formation of the Russian state – that it began with the calling of the Varangians and ended with unification around Moscow – was presented to the public in 1816, immediately after the fire. It was then, thanks to Karamzin, that this concept became official. Or the fact that Moscow was founded in 1147 by Yuri Dolgoruky. It is known that the first settlements on the site of Moscow appeared much earlier, but 1147 was also established after the fire, although much time had passed before that.

The fire and all the suffering the city endured gave rise to a host of stories, myths, and just rumors. Moscow suddenly opened up as a large city with a rich past, which few had thought

about before, except for the highest nobility. And now Muscovites began to know and talk about it. In Moscow, they also recalled previous fires. Before Napoleon, it burned down at least once every seven years, not counting hundreds of smaller fires. But every time, Moscow rose from the ashes, becoming even larger and stronger.

A clear narrative was built in the culture: if it weren't for the sacrifice of burning Moscow, we wouldn't be here. This myth of Moscow was firmly established by Ivan Aksakov, one of the leaders of the Slavophiles. He wrote that Moscow withstood both the Polish interventionists and the French invaders, and therefore finally became the mother of Russian cities. The unprecedented happened: bypassing the then-capital Petersburg, Moscow became the universally recognized heart of the country.

And then, as if on a roll. From 1864 to 1914, Moscow's population tripled, and more than 80% of this growth came from migrants from all over Russia. When the Bolsheviks moved the capital back to Moscow, it surprised no one. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called this symbolic capital – a resource that a person receives due to prestige and status. It was the war of 1812 that provided Moscow with symbolic capital for at least two centuries to come.

The only problem was that over time, this symbolic capital began to hinder Moscow. Vladimir Lenin, 1920: "First of all, we have the task of clearing Moscow of the filth and neglect into which it has fallen. We must do this to set an example for the whole country." The following quote is from a later period, from Stalin's plan for the reconstruction of Moscow: "The transformation of Moscow into the healthiest and most beautiful city in the world is the business of the entire Soviet country."

Soviet Moscow: The Showcase City

As you might have guessed, the leaders of the Union, at the very dawn of the Soviet project, decided to make Moscow not just a capital, but a model city.

The focal point in Soviet Moscow became commodity and consumer abundance. The Soviet project was theoretically supposed to fan the flames of world revolution, but by that time the world was already seriously hooked on consumption. Therefore, Moscow had to compete not only with ideas but also with a way of life. And in order for socialist Moscow to look advantageous against the capitals of capitalist countries, they tried to make it flawless.

Under conditions of centralized planning, cities and other settlements were divided into categories. The first category included capitals of republics and large regional centers. There, goods were more or less decent. The second and third categories covered most of the country, and there abundance occurred only on holidays. There was also a fourth special category of supply – Leningrad, Kiev, closed cities, and, of course, Moscow. It stood apart. At the beginning of the 80s, an average Muscovite ate almost twice as much meat as the average in the country. This gap looks frightening, but this statistic does not take into account the famous "sausage trains." It is a very common story for cities around Moscow, all the way to Tver, when people traveled in whole trains to the capital to bring home that coveted piece of meat. Sometimes the flow of people was so great that it was necessary to attach five, seven, even ten extra carriages so

that the sausage tourists could get to Moscow. Moreover, this did not start in the 80s. According to NKVD data, at the end of the 30s, residents of Moscow made up no more than a third of those in Moscow queues.

Moscow remained the exemplary trading center it had always been. And the authorities did not forget to talk about it, take at least the GUM advertising: fruits, sausage, respectable gentlemen. The window-dressing image was built primarily for the foreign audience. If a foreigner got to the capital, he could easily be convinced: abundance in the country of Soviets indeed existed. At least in the "Beryozka" network, where only foreign currency was accepted, and later special checks that were only available to those who worked abroad. The shelves in Beryozka were overflowing with souvenirs, chocolate desserts, imported cigarettes, and other symbols of prosperity.

Because the questions of "what to eat" and "what to wear" were at the center of the Soviet citizen's thinking, other meanings – about centuries-old history, glorious battles, spiritual strength – all faded away, and there was no time for that.

In general, such a state of affairs may seem strange. In the country, all production was maximally dispersed. According to the first Soviet constitution, the Union was a state of equal peoples and republics. The document was adopted 101 years ago, but the practice was very different from what was enshrined on paper. In reality, it turned out to be a super-unitary system. All key decisions were made in Moscow.

Soviet history knows only a couple of cases when this Moscow-centrism was attempted to be broken. The first was Khrushchev's reforms. The country's leader closed almost all sectoral ministries – the very ones that sat in Moscow and told the republics what to do with products and other goods. Instead, Khrushchev cut the country into dozens of regions and created local ministries in each, responsible for the economy on their territory. However, then the sovnarkhozes began to consolidate, and when Khrushchev left, the reform was curtailed. The second attempt at decentralization happened already under Gorbachev.

But it would be a lie to say that Moscow held on only through the products it took from the regions and other republics. The capital's showcase had a second key element – technology. It was Moscow that first received the best infrastructure and housing projects, so that distinguished guests from socialist countries could see how Moscow was growing and developing, how under socialism there could also be majestic architecture, landscaping, and joyful faces.

But Moscow also had core showcase projects. The first was the Moscow Metro. Lazar Kaganovich, who led the reconstruction of Moscow, built a complex of underground palaces for an entire people. Initially, the main goal was not functionality, but grandeur, pomp, and richness. It was physically impossible not to believe in the life-giving power of the ideology of Marx-Lenin-Engels-Stalin. Since all this underground splendor existed, and every Soviet citizen could descend there and ride in a subway car for pennies, then what objections could there possibly be.

And the second element of Moscow's showcase was the famous Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy (VDNKh). The exhibition was opened in 1939, just a

few years after the completion of collectivization. The process of creating collective farms had dealt a terrible blow to the country, and it was at VDNKh that the Soviet republics were supposed to show and see that all their suffering had not been in vain. And there they were met by a festival of abundance: mountains of exotic fruits, sculptures by the best authors, and the most complex agricultural machinery. After the war, the exhibition was supplemented with achievements in space and the atom. Soviet people were shown that they lived in a country where everything already existed. The bright socialist future was within reach.

Undoubtedly, similar exhibitions existed in other countries, for example, in Paris, London, or Chicago. But the ideological component was stronger in ours; there they were more like technological events, and the advantages of capitalism were not talked about on every corner. And VDNKh was a product primarily for domestic consumption: the exhibition was socialist in content, but very national in form, ethnically designed.

There remained a third most important reason – Moscow's culture. By the end of the 50s, the authorities realized that it was no longer possible to close themselves off from the world as in the 30s. The world had to be opened up, otherwise no one would appreciate the advantages of socialism. Hence the youth festivals with thousands of participants, the American exhibition in Sokolniki, after which the famous photograph of Khrushchev with Pepsi appeared.

The Soviet showcase attracted more and more people. During the Soviet years, Moscow gained 7 million people. 4.5 million – solely through migration. People came to Moscow for food, for the atmosphere of the capital, for a career. Films like "Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears" or "Office Romance" fueled the fire. Your own apartment on Bolshaya Nikitskaya, life in a Stalinist high-rise – all this was supposedly the norm for Muscovites. In the late Soviet period, such capitalist dreams were increasingly associated with Moscow.

The "Limita" and Tensions with Regions

People from all over the Union flocked to the coveted Moscow. Yes, there was a system for distributing university graduates, when, according to enterprise requests and various assignments, young people were sent to work in different corners of the Soviet Union, but such graduates with relocations were a minority, especially during the Brezhnev years and the 80s.

Even earlier, during the years of industrialization, factories in Moscow grew faster than the local population increased, so the capital began to accept workers from the regions. But as soon as supply and demand for jobs equalized, competition for vacancies began. Muscovites, even if they had been Muscovites for only a couple of months, were already dissatisfied with those who arrived yesterday. This is how the contemptuous word "limita" appeared – that is, people with temporary registration. Such people were quickly labeled as drunkards, criminals, uneducated, and also that they only married for the sake of a Moscow residence permit. It was then that the famous division into native and non-native Muscovites finally took shape.

Tension between Moscow and the regions grows. Just as Pierre Bourdieu described symbolic capital as a resource that a person receives by virtue of prestige. When this capital

becomes too large, it can lead a person to isolation from the community. And already in the 80s, Moscow felt this to the fullest.

The Collapse of the Soviet System

1990. Moscow, once the center of Soviet abundance, itself found itself in crisis: shop windows were empty, people stood in endless queues, and goods disappeared within minutes. Thousands of queues quickly lost patience and turned into spontaneous rallies.

Moscow, with its resources and influence, found itself at such a low point due to the decentralization of the USSR. Khrushchev's attempt to break Moscow-centrism failed. After a 20-year break for Brezhnev's stagnation, it was Gorbachev's turn. Against the backdrop of endless economic problems, he decided to weaken the vertical power structure, which the leaders of the republics complained about, but all this coincided with the collapse of the consumer system. State orders shrank to a minimum. It was more profitable for enterprises to hold back products until better days. As a result, overall output and trade between the republics fell. The center distributed fuel, wagons, and products worse and worse. The tax system was also decentralized. Gorbachev introduced prohibition and thereby deprived the country of one of its largest sources of income – profits from alcohol sales. As a result, state revenues fell, and all that remained was to print new rubles. The economy was completely disorganized. And when you have both the decentralization of the country and economic disorganization happening at the same time – the crisis is terrible. And then Boris Yeltsin takes the post of head of Moscow.

Russia's Forgotten Identity

All the republics that were part of the Soviet Union had their own mandatory attributes: their own party, their own security forces, and even an Academy of Sciences. But the RSFSR, that is, the republic from which independent Russia later emerged, had none of this. In the RSFSR, and therefore in Moscow, all-Union bodies mainly ruled. And there were no Russian Communist parties or Russian trade unions, and there was no own Ministry of Internal Affairs in the Russian part of the Union for many years. Moreover, the Ukrainian SSR and the Byelorussian SSR even joined the UN in '45 alongside the Soviet Union, but the RSFSR did not as a separate entity.

All because the Soviet Union grew on the foundation of the Russian Empire. And in order to distance itself from this past, Moscow had to become the center not of the Russian, but of the common Soviet project. And in order to gain the support of all the other republics, the Moscow leadership pretended that the Russian was not so important. What was Russian became Soviet.

Yeltsin and the New Russia

When, years later, Boris Yeltsin became the Secretary of the Moscow City Committee, it became clear that what had been hushed up and relegated to the background for years easily worked in the new conditions. Everything independent, Russian and ethnic Russian quickly began to rise in the ratings. And everything unifying, Soviet, began to fall. But it's one thing

when nationalism began to grow somewhere on the outskirts of the Union, but here it grows right in its heart, right in Moscow, which is both the Union center and the Russian center, both in one city, in one capital.

And when Yeltsin enters into open conflict with Gorbachev, the concept of Russia with its center in Moscow begins to gain more and more popularity. Everything good is Russia, everything bad is the Union with its leadership. And the fact that the center is geographically the same is a secondary matter. People begin to understand: although Moscow remains the capital of the USSR, it already feels like the center of a completely different country. Nationalists and republican elites began to blame Moscow for everything, while in Moscow slogans appeared demanding that Moscow stop feeding the others. In 1990, Yeltsin cuts the Russian Republic's contributions to the Union budget by 85%. The Union government finds itself on the brink of bankruptcy.

Who Fed Whom?

Disputes about who fed whom continue to this day. Figures show that in the late USSR, Russia was the main donor to the Union budget. According to Yegor Gaidar's calculations, in 1989, Russia produced goods and resources almost 31 billion rubles more than it consumed itself. This surplus went to exports and support for other republics. On the other hand, Moscow's success was possible only thanks to the super-centralized system that had developed half a century earlier under Stalin. But because things were bad for all republics in the early 90s, the grievances were mutual.

Luzhkov's Moscow: The New Capitalism

When the Union ceased to exist, overpopulation was added to the supply crisis. With a forecast of 7.6 million people, the city had a whole million more inhabitants, and there was no longer work for everyone, but everyone wanted to eat. In his autobiography, Yuri Luzhkov, who became the second mayor of Moscow after Gavriil Popov, wrote: "From a bird's-eye view, the capital looked like a seriously ill person. On that helicopter flight, I saw a wounded, suffering city. Not dead, but a very ruined city that needed long, heavy treatment."

Luzhkov, taking advantage of temporary decentralization, negotiated with other regions on commodity exchange, and products began to flow into local stores. By 1993, there was no trace of ration cards not only in Moscow but also in nearby cities. Hyperinflation took their place. And Moscow also adapted to capitalism faster than others and began to dominate even more under these conditions. At the beginning of Luzhkov's rule, the capital accounted for 12% of the country's entire retail trade, and by the end of the 90s – already 29%. The same with services: in 1992 – 13%, by 2000 – almost 30%.

Luzhkov had so much power alone due to the Soviet system of governance. The logic of power in Moscow was the same as in the whole country. There are formal leaders, and there are real ones. Nominally, all issues in Moscow were managed by the Mossovet, but in reality, the life of the city was managed by the city and district party committees, that is, the CPSU committees.

No key decision was made without the consent of the party. Actually, Yeltsin – the face of Moscow – was from the city party committee.

With the collapse of the USSR and the CPSU, city and district committees ceased to exist. A new political agent quickly emerged in the capital – the mayor's office, or rather, the mayor and the Moscow government. According to the plan, they were supposed to compensate for the inefficiency of the Mossovet, but then, under Luzhkov, instead of district councils, prefectures and councils appeared, which were personally accountable to the mayor. And the centralization of management – and already in the first half of the nineties – became even greater than before.

The Post-Industrial Magnet

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow ceased to be a showcase in the struggle against the capitalist West. The capital had a new goal – to turn into a post-industrial city with fundamentally different management and an insane amount of money. In short, into what we see now.

Of course, the larger the city, the easier it is to get access to resources, the right people, and investors willing to take risks and earn money. A high concentration of wealthy and successful people is a stimulus for the development of infrastructure that allows them to live comfortably. Not to mention that the capital concentrates the real levers of influence, connections, and money.

Moscow is becoming a springboard for talented people; out of the top 10 universities in Russia, 6 are in Moscow, one more in the Moscow region, and the remaining 3 in St. Petersburg. Moreover, thanks to replacing university entrance exams with the Unified State Exam (EGE), Moscow universities got the opportunity to select the best students from all over the country, not just those who managed to get to Moscow and take the exams. Because of this, Moscow today hunts for the brightest minds in Russia.

Moscow's Budget: The Economics of Centralization

Regarding the financial component, the revenue of the entire Moscow budget for 2025 amounts to just over 5 trillion rubles.

The most significant part – 45%, or 2 trillion 330 billion rubles of budget revenue – is the Personal Income Tax (NDFL). That is, from any income you can receive as an individual, you pay tax. NDFL is a progressive tax, and depending on your income, it can range from 13 to 22%.

According to the Tax Code, 85% of NDFL remains in the region, and 15% goes to the local budget. But in Moscow, the usual NDFL ratio does not apply: instead of 15% going to local budgets, as in other regions, Moscow's districts receive only about 1% – essentially, for the basic functioning of the local administration. And since Moscow is a city of federal significance, all 100% of the NDFL paid in the capital remains within the city. This means that a Muscovite who pays taxes often clearly sees where their money goes – whether it's the construction of a new metro station, snow removal, or neighborhood improvement. At the same time, a resident of

Anapa in the Krasnodar Krai also pays NDFL, but the main part of these funds goes to the regional budget, which is distributed by the authorities sitting in Krasnodar, while the municipality of Anapa receives only 15% of the collected NDFL and, accordingly, has much less opportunity to influence its infrastructure and the quality of city services.

Keep in mind that Moscow is home to 9% of the country's total population, and the more individuals work in Moscow, the more money from NDFL. Therefore, for Moscow, it is precisely people's incomes that are the main source of revenue for the capital.

In addition to companies paying NDFL for their employees, they also pay corporate income tax. This is the second largest source of Moscow's budget revenue – accounting for 31% of all revenues, or 1.5 trillion rubles. In other words, a fifth of the country's revenue from this tax is collected in the capital, because the absolute majority of leading Russian companies are registered there. Among them are Rosneft, Lukoil, Aeroflot, Russian Railways, and Yandex.

The corporate income tax rate in Russia from January 1, 2025, is 25%; of this amount, 8% goes to the federal budget, and the remaining 17% goes to the budget of the region where the company is registered. However, to become a Moscow company, a company does not need to move its factories to the capital; it is enough to simply register its head office in the city. From Moscow, it is more convenient to manage your business, as well as to be closer to all regulators, investors, and important contacts, while the actual production remains in the regions, where wages are lower, rent is cheaper, and dealing with trade unions is simpler.

There are also taxes under special tax regimes – the government's official name for conditions for individual entrepreneurs and the self-employed. For these professions, Moscow has many more clients, higher average bills, and developed infrastructure. And some even work remotely, enjoying all the benefits of the capital. Therefore, Moscow also has the largest number of self-employed people in the country: as of 2022, there were as many as 375 thousand of them in the capital – that's 10% of the total. As a result, about 90% of Moscow's budget revenues depend on the incomes of Muscovites and companies registered in Moscow.

Moscow's Expenditures: Investment and Social

The planned expenditures of the capital for 2025 amount to 5.5 trillion rubles. The Moscow government divides them into two roughly equal parts – social and investment. Let's start with the latter. Investment expenditures are aimed at ensuring Moscow's economic growth, and for this, more workers are needed. Most of these workers come to the capital from Central Asian countries. Migrants work in housing and communal services, construction, cleaning, delivery, and taxis – that is, in those areas where most Muscovites would hardly want to work themselves. However, it is their labor that allows the city's infrastructure to be maintained in working order and, most importantly, to maintain high rates of housing construction, because more housing means more residents, more Muscovites, and more revenues for the capital's budget.

Primarily, investment expenditures on housing refer to the housing renovation program. New housing means new Muscovites, which means further tax growth and enrichment of the

city. In addition, the construction industry has a very high investment multiplier: to build a house, you need not only to hire workers but also to produce building materials, deliver them to the site, and bring in special equipment. And investment is ultimately someone's income, from which taxes can then be collected, returning to the Moscow budget.

Another significant part of investment expenditures is transport: spending on this area accounts for about 20% of all city budget expenditures. Moscow spends on the construction of new metro stations, as well as repairing existing roads and building new ones – the capital is expanding. However, Moscow is a city with very high housing prices that not everyone can afford. People settle in the Moscow region, where rent is cheaper and utility costs are lower, but continue to work in Moscow. This phenomenon is called pendulum migration: a person lives in one region and works in another, commuting back and forth every day. 60–80% of workers living in Mytishchi, Khimki, Odintsovo, and other nearby areas go to the capital every morning to their workplaces. And the more people come to work in Moscow, the more economic activity there is, and the more the city benefits – which is why Moscow spends billions on developing its transport system.

This migration is beneficial for another reason: social expenditures, which Moscow has at 2.8 trillion rubles in 2025, could be much higher. The maintenance of hospitals, schools, public places, utilities, repairs, purchasing new equipment – all this is covered by the regions out of their own pockets. Thus, the budget of the Moscow region spends money on a resident of the Moscow region who works in Moscow. In the end, if you compare all the expenditures and revenues of the Moscow budget, it turns out that the capital reinvests in anticipation of future revenues.

The Vicious Circle of Regional Inequality

As for the other regions: in order to attract investors and their money, the regions have only two tools left – tax incentives and the development of transport infrastructure to compensate for poor infrastructure. But even if a region wins this investment war, it will earn less from it than it could have, because it voluntarily gave up some of the taxes itself. It turns out that in order to attract money, a less developed region has to pay extra for its lag.

As a result, a vicious circle emerges: rich regions use their advantages, attract investment, and become richer, while poor regions remain poor. This is partly justified by the regional competitiveness index – an indicator that shows how well regions are developing, creating conditions for people's lives and doing business compared to others. In the capital, it is simply easier to do business: there are more personnel, they are more educated, and there is direct access to investors. Because of this, the regions lose the competition – they often have low population density, poor infrastructure, and less active local authorities.

Thus, almost two-thirds of the regions are left only to ask for subsidies. However, there is a problem with this. Mainly because the higher budget can give money with some unpleasant conditions, that is, send an external financial manager who begins to cut spending. This is exactly what Khakassia faced in 2010 when it was refused loans on market terms and was placed

under external management. In essence, transitioning to such management means that the region has lost the remnants of its independence. That is why for many regions, applying for subsidies is a last resort.

Of course, individual regions that are rich in oil, gold, and minerals hold on because they are the backbone of Russia's exports; without these resources, the economy would simply stall. Therefore, the government finds it profitable to invest very large sums in the infrastructure of these regions and to develop living conditions there in order to attract new workers to where these resources must be extracted for the whole country.

Other regions have to rely on the interest of the federal center in them, which decides to implement some project for them. For example, the same Krasnodar Krai received a stimulus for development due to the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014.

What we see now

It is hard to deny that all this only deepens the gap between Moscow and the rest of Russia. Of course, one can talk about moving some companies to other regions, about remote workers moving to warmer and cheaper regions, about restructuring the tax system, and about moving the capital, but so far there are no prerequisites for this, allowing Moscow to maintain its Moscow-centrism.

Zygmunt Bauman did not call the time we live in "liquid modernity" for nothing. This modernity is so fast, rapid, and incomprehensible that you do not know what to fear, who to look up to, with whom to compare yourself, what to count on, and what to distance yourself from.

That is why there is so much uncertainty; one has to turn to history to have at least some kind of support in this fluidity. Modern big cities, including Moscow, which strive to resemble each other under the pressure of globalization, are afraid of missing out on something new. They have become the best illustration of Bauman's fluid postmodern concept, where everything is very fast, very contrasting, and not very clear.

So, in Moscow, the highest average salaries in Russia, the best medicine and education in the country, the largest budget among all Russian cities, so much so that other regions cannot even boast 10% of that amount. The population density exceeds 5,000 people per square kilometer, while throughout Russia it is only 8.5 people per square kilometer, real estate is astronomically expensive, traffic is hellish during rush hour, and the situation when you cannot get into a train car because an overcrowded train arrived at your station is called the Vykhino effect – named after the corresponding station of the Moscow metro. Moscow has as many as 20 million square meters of office space, meaning every third Russian office is located there. It is in Moscow that the most legal entities are registered, and if you take the list of the 20 largest Russian companies, 14 of them will have Moscow registration, including Rosneft, Sberbank, Lukoil, VTB, Transneft, and Norilsk Nickel.

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Making Room for Every Mathematical Mind By Beatrix Doeringer

Introduction

In almost every math classroom, one student finishes the worksheet in five minutes while another is still trying to understand the first problem. One student eagerly raises their hand for every question, while another avoids making eye contact, hoping they won't be called on. At first glance, these differences can seem like obstacles to effective teaching. However, students will inevitably see mathematics in different ways, and that is precisely what makes a classroom richer. (McDonald) The challenge is not diversity itself, but creating a classroom where those differences are valued rather than diminished. A strong mathematics classroom makes space for original ideas and unconventional strategies rather than pushing them aside.

In a diverse classroom, every student has a distinct relationship with math. Teachers often attribute mathematical struggles primarily to ability, when factors such as confidence, prior experiences, classroom culture, and learning preferences can be just as influential. Teachers must make an effort to find what interests their students (even if it is something outside of math) to design a classroom environment with multiple ways for students to engage with math, collaborate, and demonstrate their thinking. This can be very challenging, but there are many changes that can help create spaces for *all* students to successfully learn math. Teachers need to redefine what it means to be successful at mathematics.

Understand the Learner

It's critical that teachers understand why performance is not always a direct reflection of a student's knowledge. (Ironside) Confidence, anxiety, previous experiences, and classroom dynamics can all influence how a student performs. When students have repeatedly experienced negative feedback, comparison to classmates, or frustration in class, they might believe they are "bad at math." This belief can lead students to stop trying, avoid participating, or fear making mistakes. (Blankman) Teachers should therefore make an effort to understand each student's past experiences with math and establish a non-judgemental, uplifting, and growth-centered setting.

Beyond Right and Wrong

One challenge is that mathematics is often presented as binary. Students either have the correct answer or don't, and many teachers don't allow for in-between. Many students learn more effectively when the teacher focuses on mathematical thinking rather than the mere answer. The best way to implement this is through a shift in questions. Instead of asking "What is the answer?" Teachers should use questions such as "How did you think about this?" "What patterns do you notice?" and "Can someone solve this another way?" This will help decrease fear around being wrong, offer more opportunities to participate, emphasize understanding and exploration over memorization, and create a closer connection between the teacher and students. Prioritizing explanation, open-ended questions, verbalizing thoughts, and metacognition creates a safer classroom environment for more students. (Ironside)

Embracing Differences

One critical part of any math classroom, often neglected, is collaboration. Especially with a diverse range of students, collaboration is a great way for students to both contribute and learn through different strengths. (Blankman) Collaboration also forces students to use verbal explanations, which can both reveal and strengthen mathematical understanding. Not only does explaining a concept to a peer reveal gaps in understanding that may otherwise remain unnoticed, but it can also help solidify and deepen a student's grasp of the topic. (Blankman) Fostering intentional and thoughtful collaboration starts by creating groups that include a diverse set of students. Then, assigning challenging and thought-provoking math problems, rather than routine, one-step problems, will be much more beneficial for the group and allow more opportunities for everyone to contribute. (Ironside) Routine or one-step problems often result in students memorizing the process rather than truly understanding the core concepts.

Conclusion

There will never be a perfect method to teach mathematics because there will never be one type of learner. Successful teaching hinges on individual needs and takes constant adaptation, listening carefully to students, recognizing different strengths, and creating multiple ways for them to engage with challenging ideas. (Education Northwest) A diverse classroom may be more difficult to teach than one where every student learns in the same way, but that diversity can also make it more meaningful. But what if being "good at math" meant more than getting the right answer quickly? Being good at math can mean reasoning. It can mean asking questions. It can mean seeing something differently. It can mean helping someone else understand. It can mean persevering through a problem you don't immediately know how to solve. When teachers give room for every student to think differently, explain their ideas, learn from one another, and see their own contributions as valuable, diversity stops being an obstacle to overcome and becomes one of the classroom’s greatest assets.

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The Illusion of Improvisation: Nikolai Kapustin's Jazz-Classical Synthesis
By Timothy Yang

Abstract

This paper examines how Soviet cultural repression shaped the emergence of a new musical style through the career of Nikolai Kapustin (1937-2020). Although jazz was widely condemned by Soviet authorities as a symbol of western decadence and improvisation was viewed with suspicion, Kapustin developed a distinctive compositional style that fused the harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary of jazz with the formal idioms of classical music. This study situates Kapustin in the broader context of Soviet censorship, Socialist Realism, and the Khruschev Thaw. It also examines other Soviet era composers to illustrate the practical constraints confronting Soviet musicians. Rather than arguing that political repression merely limits artistic expression, this paper contends that Soviet restrictions unintentionally fostered conditions for Kapustin's innovation.

Introduction

On April 9, 2018, an audience at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. encountered the music of Nikolai Kapustin. At the conclusion of the recital, Korean pianist Dasol Kim performed two selections from *Kapustin's Eight Concert Études, Opus 40,* presenting the seventh and eighth pieces of the set. As one critic described, "although the previous movement was energetic, the final étude took the energy to another level. Kim tackled the technical challenge with careful attention to timing, dynamics, and accents. The momentum never eased, and an abrupt ending brought the audience to its feet" (Ewing). Immediately after in the lobby and elevator, excited conversations reflected a shared curiosity. Several patrons asked, "Do you know who that composer is?" Each time the answer was a variation of, "No, but I want to hear more." It was a fitting introduction to a composer who, for much of his life, remained largely unknown to Western audiences despite creating one of the most original bodies of work in twentieth-century music (Bose).

Few composers have transformed jazz, a musical tradition born in freedom, while working under an oppressive regime as profoundly as Nikolai Kapustin. In the Soviet Union, where jazz was condemned as a decadent Western influence and true improvisation was viewed with political suspicion, Kapustin created a new form of jazz composition. His work captured the spontaneity of jazz within the strict structures of classical music. His career stands as a striking example of how political repression can force not only adaptation but also radical innovation.

Although trained as a classical pianist, Kapustin's musical ambitions extended beyond the boundaries of Soviet conservatory life. His fascination with jazz, particularly its rhythmic complexity and harmonic language, was developed in tension with a cultural environment that discouraged improvisation and Western influence. In response, Kapustin invented an entirely new compositional approach that fused the discipline of classical form with the expressive language of jazz. Every note was carefully written, yet his music gives the impression of

real-time invention. Through this synthesis, Kapustin created a distinctive musical voice that challenged the ideological constraints of his time and expanded the possibilities of both classical and jazz traditions.

This essay examines the historical and political conditions that shaped Kapustin's career, analyzes his compositional innovations, and argues that his work constitutes a singular achievement in twentieth-century music, the creation of a fully composed jazz idiom forged under conditions of political repression.

Jazz in the Soviet Union: Paradoxical Times

To understand how Kapustin developed his unique style of composed improvisation, it is necessary to examine the cultural environment he inherited. In the 1920s, jazz was initially welcomed in the Soviet Union as a symbol of modernity and progress. During the New Economic Policy period, Soviet cities were open to selected Western influences, and jazz quickly became a popular import. It filled dance halls and cabarets, carried by recordings, touring bands, and Soviet musicians eager to imitate its rhythmic vitality. "The rapid penetration of jazz dances into Soviet cities goes far toward explaining the qualified success of Sam Wooding's jazz band in the spring of 1926" (Starr 62). The genre was seen by some cultural leaders as compatible with the industrial optimism of the early Soviet era. Even famous composers such as Dmitri Shostakovich experimented with jazz idioms, incorporating popular dance rhythms into orchestral suites in "Vincent Youman's 'Tea for Two' as a fox-trot for a symphonic orchestra called 'Tahiti Trot' " (Starr 59).

This brief period of openness ended in the early 1930s when Stalin restructured Soviet cultural life under centralized control. All artistic expression was expected to reflect and reinforce Party ideology. Jazz was recast as politically dangerous, "officially denounced as a supreme expression of capitalist decadence" (Bose). Improvisation came under suspicion, since it represented personal expression and creative autonomy. Cultural authorities attempted to create state-approved versions of jazz that eliminated its spontaneity and expressive freedom. By the mid-1930s, performances of real jazz had largely disappeared from public life, and musicians with ties to foreign influences were at risk of surveillance or arrest. The suppression of jazz during these years did not eliminate its influence entirely, but it forced the genre into secrecy and shaped the way later Soviet musicians approached questions of form, style, and originality.

Around the time of Kapustin's birth in Nikitovka, Ukraine in 1937, the space for musical experimentation had already narrowed significantly. Stalinist policies increasingly sought to suppress Western influences. Soviet ideology was not constrained to politics or economics, but it was meant to encompass all aspects of Soviet life. "Culture was to be a key weapon in Stalin's new revolution, and jazz was an obvious target for attack. All foreign influences were to be exiled, smashed aside by the imposition of Russian peasant culture" (Woodhead 41). Jazz, with its associations with capitalist culture, was deemed the "sonic idiocy of the bourgeois capitalist world" (Woodhead 41-42). Stalinist propaganda reinforced the idea that jazz was a corrupting force, undermining Soviet ideological purity. The application of the Soviet ideology in the areas

of music and culture were complete and severe. “The powerful appeal of jazz provoked Soviet officials to periodic and cruel acts of suppression” (Feigin 5). In fact in the summer of 1936, a year before Kapustin was born, Stalin’s Great Terror began to consume the USSR. Anyone suspected of dissent was killed, resulting in as many as a million people dying over the next two years. Jazz music was a high profile target. “Hundreds of musicians were rounded up and vanished into labor camp. … Musicians with foreign contacts were especially vulnerable, and alien foreign elements in music were banned” (Woodhead 47). And in the years following, the assault on jazz continued. “Bands were broken up or changed beyond recognition. Leaders were harassed, and arrangers were told to spurn the alien and licentious music in favor of wholesome Soviet songs” (Starr 157).

Broadly, the Soviets attacked music labeled as “formalism,” a politically charged term used to criticize composers whose works were considered too abstract, overly complex, or influenced by Western modernism. The music was deemed formalistic because it emphasized “form over communist ideals” (Krielaars 37). In practice, the term was applied so loosely that Sergei Prokofiev, a prominent Soviet composer, complained, “Formalism is music that people don’t understand at first hearing” (Schwarz 115). The Soviet authorities, especially under Stalin, promoted Socialist Realism, the official artistic doctrine that demanded that music be purposeful, optimistic, and promote the ideals of the Soviet state (Schwarz 110). What this translates to is that the Soviets approved of music that consisted of simple melodies that were accessible to the masses (Starr 143), contained optimistic themes that could inspire, and had clear narratives that supported the Soviet ideology. Russian and Soviet folk melodies were clearly preferred. It also necessarily follows that jazz and improvisation, rooted in spontaneity, complexity, and personal expression, would be targets of formalism under the standards of Soviet Realism. Compositions were evaluated by state-controlled bodies such as the Union of Soviet Composers (Schwarz 112), which judged works based on their accessibility, optimism, and adherence to Soviet themes.

“In 1946, Party Secretary Andrei Zhdanov, after Stalin the most powerful man in the Soviet Union, decreed a new path for the nation’s spiritual life” (Krielaars 37). “In four separate resolutions, the Central Committee laid out a new set of guidelines for literature, cinema, music and the stage, adding one for music in 1948” (Krielaars 37). After the 1948 Zhdanov Decree, compositions deemed "formalist" were banned from performance, composers were stripped of their positions in conservatories and institutions, and their works were removed from concert programs. Many were required to issue public apologies, rewrite their compositions to align with Socialist Realism, or produce new, state-approved pieces that glorified the regime (Starr 220). Those who resisted faced professional exile, loss of state commissions, and in extreme cases, political persecution (Woodhead 56-57). The result was a climate of artistic repression where composers either conformed to state demands or risked career and personal ruin (Schwarz 206).

By the late 1940s, Soviet cultural policy imposed strict ideological constraints on all forms of artistic expression. Music had to adhere to the principles of Socialist Realism, prioritizing accessibility, the needs of the working class, and patriotism while rejecting anything deemed too abstract or intellectual. Jazz, which had briefly flourished in the Soviet Union, was now

condemned as a corrupting influence of the West. Its emphasis on individual expression and improvisation made it incompatible with the collective ideals of Soviet Art (Starr 143). For musicians who embraced jazz, the risks were severe. Careers could be destroyed as the state sought to eliminate foreign influences and reinforce a strictly controlled cultural identity (Schwarz 223).

In 1948, Kapustin was 11, and the Central Committee's resolution that year against formalism in music marked a turning point in the Soviet Union's relationship with jazz. From this point forward, jazz had to go underground. Despite Soviet efforts, jazz persisted in secrecy. "Jazz barely limped along. Bands continued to rehearse and perform, but they had to be extremely wary. It only took one musician to be picked up on the street after a rehearsal and then disappear without a trace (as actually happened with the Moscow saxophonist Alexander Lerner) for a stage of constant fear to reign" (Starr 171-172). Beyond professional ruin, many jazz musicians faced active persecution, including surveillance, harassment, and even imprisonment (Roberts 14). State-controlled ensembles attempted to produce sanitized, ideologically acceptable versions of jazz, but these efforts stripped the music of its defining spontaneity. Many jazz musicians, especially those with foreign contacts, were arrested or sent to labor camps (Starr 157) (Schwarz 223). Public performances of jazz dwindled, and many bands were disbanded. The few that remained were forced to conform to Soviet ideals, often reworking jazz pieces into rigid, state-approved arrangements that bore little resemblance to their Western counterparts (Starr 220).

Following Stalin's death, Soviet censorship eased during the 1950s and 1960s because of Nikita Khrushchev's policies of de-Stalinization and peaceful coexistence with other nations. This period, often referred to as the Khrushchev Thaw, marked a temporary relaxation of cultural restrictions, which permitted the controlled reemergence of jazz within state-sanctioned frameworks. During this time, Kapustin was studying at the Moscow Musical College and Moscow Conservatory. Stalin's regime, which effectively dominated in the 30's, 40's, and 50s, had banned jazz. "By the end of the 1950s, the ban had been lifted although most officials who had supported it remained in office" (Starr 259). The thawing was marked by the appearance of new educational and cultural contacts, festivals, art shows, new fashions, foreign movies, and many other modern trends. In the world of jazz, this was evidenced by the tours in the USSR of some significant musicians that deeply influenced the development of jazz traditions in Russia. In 1962, even the great Benny Goodman visited the Soviet Union (Starr 206). It would be incorrect to interpret this as a sign of leniency as the Soviet government remained antagonistic. In fact, "Nikita Khrushchev launched an all-out attack on jazz and modern art. 'When I hear Jazz, it's as if I had gas on the stomach' the Party leader declared on December 1, 196." (Starr 270). Numerous Stalinist officials retained their government positions and persisted in upholding these views, publicly denouncing jazz. "At the Congress of Soviet Composers early in 1957, a former Pravda editor railed against the 'degrading music of the capitalist world'" (Starr 248). Radio and recordings of jazz were hard to find, and "those wishing access to Western jazz had to make an effort to hear it" (Starr 260). It was not until the Perestroika era of the 1980s, when

Kapustin was 48, that jazz began to slowly rehabilitate itself within Soviet culture. Even that crawled along as musicians in the mid 1990s were still hampered by the lack of basic musical necessities, like reeds (Minor 40).

Models of Adaptation: Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Tsfasman

The Soviet campaign against jazz extended well beyond formal prohibitions, producing widespread and enduring consequences for musicians. Artists adopted various strategies in response to these pressures, and it is instructive to examine several notable figures whom Kapustin likely observed with interest. Figures such as Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev managed varying degrees of negotiation between artistic ambition and political conformity, offering models of survival that Kapustin would have known well. Alongside them, Alexander Tsfasman represented a different path. As a prominent Soviet jazz composer and bandleader, Tsfasman succeeded in integrating jazz elements into Soviet musical life, initially within the limits of state approval. Together, these figures embodied different strategies for reconciling personal creativity with ideological constraint. Their examples shaped the landscape in which Kapustin developed, providing him with both classical and jazz-inflected models for navigating the artistic demands of the Soviet system.

Dmitri Shostakovich, born in St. Petersburg on September 5, 1906, emerged as one of the most prominent Soviet composers of the twentieth century. His early success was rapid and far-reaching. The First Symphony, completed at the age of nineteen, received international acclaim and marked the beginning of a distinguished and complex career. During the 1920s and early 1930s, Shostakovich developed a style that combined rhythmic vitality, sharp wit, and bold orchestration. His opera Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk demonstrated his embrace of modernist techniques, dissonance, and emotional extremity. The work was widely praised for its dramatic power and originality, and it placed Shostakovich among the leading composers of the Soviet avant-garde (Krebs 194). But this ascent came to a halt in 1936 when Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk was denounced in Pravda, the official newspaper of the Communist Party (Schwarz 131). Shostakovich, once hailed as a national treasure, was now under political suspicion. In response, he withdrew his unperformed Fourth Symphony and turned to composing the Fifth Symphony, which he publicly described as “a Soviet artist’s response to just criticism” (Schwarz 130). This new work appeared to align with socialist realist expectations by emphasizing traditional structure, accessible melodies, and a heroic conclusion. It was celebrated by both the state and the public as evidence of Shostakovich’s rehabilitation (Krebs 194). Over time, the Fifth Symphony became a key example of the layered meanings that characterize Shostakovich’s mature style. On the surface, the work fulfills official demands for clarity and optimism. His compositions outwardly conformed to ideological expectations while communicating a more complex and often tragic inner reality to attentive audiences (Krebs 195). This sophisticated dualistic technique was not enough.

In 1948, Shostakovich was condemned by the state again, where “his influence was found to be pernicious, and he was relieved of his professorial duties in that year and has not taught

since" (Schwarz 199). Although he was later vindicated, the episode revealed how fragile artistic status remained under authoritarian rule. One researcher noted that "he is easily the most honoured [sic] and lionized composer of his time, if not all time, within his country and without" (Schwarz 203). Those honors, however, offered no real protection from political retribution. For Kapustin, who came of age in the decades that followed, Shostakovich's career revealed the limits of artistic negotiation under authoritarianism. Even the most refined techniques of ambiguity and ideological concession had failed to guarantee safety or independence, and Kapustin would have understood that success in such a system remained precarious at best.

Born in 1891 in Sontsovka, Ukraine, Sergei Prokfiev, one of Kapustin's favorite composers, emerged as one of the most distinctive and versatile composers of the twentieth century. A prodigy in both composition and piano, he studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and quickly developed a reputation for his bold harmonic language, rhythmic innovation, and often acerbic wit. Prokofiev's decision to leave Russia in 1918 aligned with a broader tradition of Russian musicians seeking artistic and professional opportunities abroad (Krebs 141). The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found Russian composers, conductors, and instrumentalists situated in many Western musical posts. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Prokofiev displayed little concern for Russian politics, remaining largely self-centered and inclined to ignore prevailing ideological currents (Krebs 142). Between 1918 and 1936, he lived and worked in the United States and Western Europe, centering his career in Paris. Despite a success in the west, he surprisingly decided to return to the Soviet Union in 1936, during one of the most repressive phases of Stalinist control. That he avoided censure in 1936, even as figures like Shostakovich were publicly condemned, suggests that he reached an agreement with Soviet authorities. As Professor Krebs of the University of California, Santa Barbara notes, "A good guess would be that the agreement included, for Prokofiev, protection from RAPM-like [Russian Associate of Proletarian Musicians, which sought to regulate musical life according to Marxist ideology] attacks and interference, relief from certain USC [Union of Soviet Composers] obligations (such as submission of work in progress to adjudicating committees of peers), possibly financial security, and clearly, the freedom to travel abroad" (Krebs 152-153). However, this immunity eroded over time. By 1948, Prokofiev had become a target of Andrei Zhdanov's cultural purges. He had been marked "as a traitor and pariah, putting an end to the prestige that since 1939 he had enjoyed among his fellow composers" (Krielaars 98). He was compelled to issue humiliating apologies and express gratitude to Stalin and the Communist Party (Krebs 161). Increasingly marginalized and falling heavier into debt, he devoted a growing share of his time to reworking earlier compositions as performances were canceled and cultural organs subjected him to relentless abuse (Krebs 163). He died in poverty in 1953 (Krielaars 98). Kapustin would have naturally concluded that even international fame and seemingly iron clad guarantees could be insufficient to insulate a composer from repression.

Alexander Tsfasman was born in December 14, 1906 in Zaporizha, Ukraine. He was one of the leading figures in Soviet jazz and likely a significant early influence on Kapustin. The two musicians shared important commonalities. Both were Ukrainian by birth, classically trained at

the Moscow Conservatory, and later turned their attention to jazz, forging paths within a genre often marginalized by Soviet authorities. They even shared an apartment during one summer, a period that likely deepened their personal and musical connection (Tyulkova *Conversations* 212). Tsfasman was a pioneer of Soviet jazz. He was the first major soloist in the genre and the first Russian musician to build a professional career around jazz. His Association of Moscow Artists (AMA) Jazz Band was the first to make recordings, the first to perform live on radio, the first to appear in a sound film, and the first to replace rigid, pre-programmed performances with informal jam sessions (Starr 134). Tsfasman called upon Soviet jazz musicians to aspire to the standards of the best foreign bands, a meticulous concern for style that parallels Kapustin's later artistic ideals. He was easily one of the Soviet Union's most durable musicians. He steadfastly and successfully dedicated himself to promoting jazz through political purges and wartime devastation (Woodhead 46). However, by 1937, official booking agents had received orders to deny Tsfasman professional opportunities, and in 1947 he was stripped of his orchestra (Starr 144). Although he was cleared of charges and reinstated to good standing following Stalin's death in 1953, the years of official hostility left him embittered and disillusioned. This was the state in which Kapustin encountered him, a figure whose early achievements and later disillusionment offered a complex model of both possibility and caution within the Soviet musical landscape. Kapustin, observing both the brilliance and eventual marginalization of Tsfasman, would have recognized that jazz remained ideologically vulnerable in the Soviet Union, regardless of its artistic sophistication or public appeal. The disenchantment Tsfasman suffered despite his early achievements likely impressed upon Kapustin the risks a traditional jazz career could bring.

Although there is no definitive evidence that Kapustin made artistic decisions based on the treatment of any specific composer, he was well aware of the challenges that his predecessors faced. He was connected to these composers and their circles, and he witnessed firsthand how the Party's expectations shaped their careers. The approaches adopted by Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Tsfasman in response to Soviet cultural pressures provide an essential backdrop for understanding the environment Kapustin navigated. Their careers revealed to Kapustin that talent, ideological compromise, and even international prestige offered no lasting protection under Soviet rule.

Kapustin's Journey to Musical Mastery

Nikolai Girschevich Kapustin was born in 1937 in Nikitovka, Ukraine, amid the height of Stalin's cultural purges, a time when artistic expression was tightly controlled and individuality was often suppressed. Growing up during the turmoil of World War II, his first encounters with the piano were largely self-directed, setting the stage for a lifelong pattern of disciplined, independent learning. Even as a child, Kapustin displayed an extraordinary ability to structure his own education. By the age of six, he had taught himself all six of Clementi's sonatinas, which was a remarkable achievement for someone so young. While his perfect pitch might suggest he learned these pieces by ear, Kapustin himself emphasized, "I learned to read the

notes. My mother and Fira [his sister] taught me where the notes are situated on the staff. Somehow gradually I learned it. I've always sought to be self-educated" (Tyulkova *Conversations* 26). This early display of discipline, precision, and a preference for structure would later help him apply his classical training to jazz. When Kapustin was 12 or 13, he started composition and without any training, he composed his first piece, a Piano Sonata. As was characteristic of him, when asked in an interview how he learned sonata form, he simply replied, "I taught myself. I read about it" (Tyulkova *Conversations* 40). His two early teachers, who recognized his talent, encouraged him to audition at the Moscow Music College at the age of 14. Moscow Music College is a selective pre-conservatory school, much like Juilliard's Pre-College Program. Attending high school there was a big step for Kapustin, especially since he grew up in Eastern Ukraine with protective parents. He once said they were afraid to let him go to the creek alone (Tyulkova *Conversations* 43). Why they allowed him to move so far away is unclear, even to him. However, one can speculate about the possible motives. His talent must have been undeniable. For Kapustin, leaving home at such a young age took confidence and a strong sense of direction. This willingness to take risks would define his life and career.

Kapustin travels to Moscow and delivers an exemplary performance. He does so well in fact that the entrance committee tells him midway through the assessment that he could skip the rest of the exam (Tyulkova *Conversations* 46). He enrolled in 1952. Avrelian Rubbakh was Kapustin's first teacher at the college. He was an inquisitive and open-minded educator who encouraged Kapustin's interest in jazz. Unlike many in the Soviet classical establishment, Rubbakh maintained a "positive attitude toward jazz", allowing Kapustin the freedom to explore its influence within his formal studies (Tyulkova *Conversations* 59). However, Rubbakh also focused on teaching Kapustin the fundamentals, diligently refining his technique. As Kapustin himself described it, they worked on "…every small detail of the piece." He "worked on us like a potter works with a clan" (Tyulkova *Conversations* 108). Kapustin's years at the Musical College were a time of intense exploration and deep engagement with jazz. He actively listened to and transcribed jazz recordings, studying the style through careful analysis. Although he was officially enrolled in piano performance, he remained dedicated to composing solo piano works. Recognizing his exceptional talent, Rubbakh, one of Kapustin's strongest advocates as a composer, took the initiative to publish Kapustin's Sonatina in 1954 (Tyulkova *Conversations* 77).

Self-education drove the part of his musical studies that were dedicated to jazz. This was during the Khruschev thaw when the government was willing to crack open a small window on the West to permit the popular American culture to enter. However, "those wishing access to Western jazz had to make an effort to hear it" (Starr 260). So Kapustin would go weekly to the Muzgiz (Moscow Publishing House) to buy music scores (Starr 74). During this time, he moved into the house of a conservatory friend, Andrei Mikhalov. It was here he also spent long nights listening to the radio programs of Voice of America. Andrei would listen to the radio every night for the whole night, preventing Kapustin from sleeping (Tyulkova *Conversations* 89). Even though the mid 1950s were the period of the Khruschev thaw, "jazz was prohibited and not

accepted by the official musical directives of USSR culture. At that time, the predominance in music was given to the [tastes of the] nationalistic regime of the Soviet Union" (Tyulkova *Conversation*s 89). Kapustin fell in love with jazz from the first moment he encountered it (Tyulkova *Conversations* 89). So beyond listening to jazz programs, Kapustin went to great lengths to acquire jazz vinyl records by any means available. Armed with these resources, he applied his natural aptitude and classical music training to self-directed learning, meticulously transcribing and practicing jazz. Kapustin states, "as a jazz pianist I didn't perform a lot. I learned how to play jazz deliberately for myself" (Tyulkova *Conversation*s 90). Through countless hours of listening to jazz, Kapustin began to cultivate his distinctive jazz style in both composition and performance.

In 1956, Nikolai Kapustin auditioned for and was admitted to the Moscow Conservatory, one of the world's most prestigious and historically significant music institutions. Kapustin remembers his audition. "Upon hearing Kapustin's performance of Liszt's *Reminiscences of Don Juan,* one of the most technically difficult works by Liszt, Goldenweiser [Kapustin's future instructor at the Conservatory] asked Rubbakh: 'Where did you find such a pianist?' Of course, this question was rhetorical, but anyone could see that Goldenweiser was impressed by the level of Rubbakh's student's performance" (Tyulkova *Classical and Jazz Influences* 90). Founded in 1866, the conservatory had produced legendary composers, pianists, and conductors, including Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Shostakovich. By the 1950s, it had reached the peak of its prestige, serving as a global center for classical music excellence. "The supremacy of the Moscow Conservatory is officially recognized by its being designated as the single conservatory with responsibility for supplying musical cadre for the entire Soviet Union" (Krebs 27). Despite the Soviet Union's political isolation, the conservatory remained a beacon of musical mastery, upholding the highest standards of technical and artistic achievement.

At the conservatory, Kapustin studied under the highly influential pianist and pedagogue Alexander Goldenweiser, a key figure in shaping the Russian Soviet School of piano performance. Goldenweiser was not only a distinguished teacher but also a close friend of Leo Tolstoy and a classmate of renowned pianists such as Rachmaninoff and Scriabin (Tyulkova *Conversations* 104-105). Over his career, he also taught prominent composers including Prokofiev and Kabalevsky (Tyulkova *Conversations* 115-116). Nikolai Kapustin's admission to the prestigious Moscow Conservatory and his assignment to study under Alexander Goldenweiser, a towering figure in Russian piano pedagogy, speaks volumes about his exceptional skill and seriousness as a classical music performer. Although Kapustin's placement under Goldenweiser was regarded as prestigious, it had minimal impact on his technical advancement. In Kapustin's words, "He [Goldenweiser] was a very interesting person – he remembered Rachmaninov and Medtner, so it was very interesting to speak with him. But as a teacher he gave me nothing, because he was old – he was already 81" (Bayley 394). Despite his limited pedagogical influence, Goldenweiser did leave a meaningful mark in one regard. Unlike Rubbakh, Goldenweiser emphasized the "big picture" in musical interpretation, focusing on overarching artistic vision rather than just technical precision (Bayley 108).

In 1956, the year Kapustin matriculated to the Moscow Conservatory, Kapustin published his first jazz piece, *Czech Rhapsody for 2 Pianos*. Kapustin states in an interview, " Yes, it was the first piece where I started to use a jazz approach to composition. Just remember – that transition from classical to jazz language happened gradually and this piece stands right in that period of change" (Bayley 80). This is the first time the jazz from his self studies and his classical training have combined together to create what would become his signature style.

At the time, like many Russian institutions, the Moscow Conservatory regarded jazz with disdain, considering it an inferior discipline. Jazz musicians were often seen as lacking the technical proficiency of their classical counterparts (Bayley 143). As a result, Kapustin continued to rely on self-education to develop his jazz musicianship. There are three composers who Kapustin considers to be his favorites. They are Sergei Prokofiev, Béla Bartók, and Maurice Ravel (Bayley 152). During this time, he played and listened to a lot of Ravel.

Maurice Ravel, a French Impressionist composer, drew inspiration from jazz in the 1920s and integrated many of its techniques into his own work (Burns and Ward 140). His innovative approach, in turn, influenced prominent jazz musicians such as Miles Davis, Oscar Peterson, and Bill Evans (Tyulkova *Conversations* 152) (Gioia *How to Listen* 126). Ravel was a trailblazer in the use of non-Western harmonies, particularly in his chord progressions. While his methods were considered controversial at the time, Ravel played a pivotal role in fostering the cultural acceptance of these harmonies (Tyulkova *Conversations* 152), which ultimately helped shape the evolution of jazz composition. Similarly, it shaped Kapustin's trajectory. In 1957, after a car accident that injured his right hand forced him to learn Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand* (Tyulkova *Conversations* 139), Kapustin composed *Piano Sonata for the Left Hand,* his last piece in traditional classical style (Tyulkova *Conversations* 153). From this point forward, Kapustin would start adding jazz and blues idioms and numbering his work.

A watershed moment in Kapustin's life came when he started composing for live jazz bands. In 1957, Moscow hosted the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students, an event meant to show the world that the Soviet Union was open to cultural exchange (Starr 248). As part of the festival, Kapustin composed *Concertino for the Piano and Orchestra* for Yuri Saulsky's Russian big band jazz ensemble. It was Opus 1. Saulsky was a central figure in Soviet jazz. He led big bands, composed film scores and popular songs, and helped keep jazz alive despite government restrictions. He understood how to blend jazz with Soviet-approved styles, allowing the genre to exist within the limits of state censorship. Kapustin had first met Saulsky in the mid-1950s while attending rehearsals for a friend's jazz band. That friendship led to the commission to compose the orchestral jazz piece for the festival, which Kapustin later described as "a very significant performance" (Tyulkova *Conversations* 158). The festival also introduced him to the Lundstrem Big Band, the ensemble he would later join. More importantly, it marked his entry into the world of professional compositions for live jazz performances.

However, jazz was not welcomed within the Moscow Conservatory's rigid classical environment. Kapustin had to keep his involvement in jazz performances and festival activities hidden from Alexander Goldenweiser and the conservatory faculty. Reflecting on this period, he

later admitted, "He [Goldenweiser] did not know about either. That would create a big problem for my existence at the conservatory. Jazz was not appreciated at the Moscow Conservatory, especially at that time" (Tyulkova *Conversations* 161). “In fact, all the while that Kapustin was immersing himself in the classical masters in the conservatoire [sic] he was leading a double life as a jazz pianist, not only with his own quintet but also as a member of Yuri Saulsky's Central Artist's Club Big Band” (Smith).

By 1961, as Kapustin finished his studies, he faced a problem and a choice to make. His classical career was promising, but jazz pulled him in a different direction. He was expected to teach, and the conservatory had assigned him to a job in Alma-Ata. His diploma was tied to the position, as was common practice in the Soviet Union at the time. Refusing the position meant forfeiting his diploma, but he had other plans (Tyulkova *Conversations* 165). The Oleg Lundstrem Big Band had made him an offer, and he was eager to accept it. He turned to the band’s managing director, Mikhail Tsin, for help. Tsin tried to negotiate with the conservatory, but they refused to release Kapustin from his assignment. The only option left was an appeal to Alexander Goldenweiser to intervene. Goldenweiser stepped in, and the conservatory relented. Kapustin received his diploma, avoided the job in Alma-Ata, and joined the band (Tyulkova *Conversations* 165). It was another moment that showed his determination and self-belief. Faced with a system designed to dictate his future, he found a way to shape it himself.

Upon graduation, Kapustin fully embraced jazz and joined the Oleg Lundstrem Big Band, one of the most respected jazz ensembles in the Soviet Union. The band had a long and unusual history. It was formed in 1934 when Oleg Lundstrem was only 18. Unlike most Soviet musicians, Lundstrem was not born in the USSR, but he was born in Chita, China and later moved with his family to Harbin, China. When Stalin’s purges began, the band relocated again, this time to Shanghai. This cosmopolitan city was a center for jazz and dance music, often compared to New York for its thriving nightlife. In Shanghai, the band reached the height of its popularity. Everything changed in 1947 when the group decided to return to the Soviet Union. They brought back American instruments and a vast collection of big band scores, but their timing could not have been worse. Months later, the Soviet government issued the 1948 decree against Western music. They were not allowed to settle in Moscow or St. Petersburg and were forced to relocate to Kazan, a town 450 miles east of Moscow noted for its rich blend of Russian and Tatar cultures. Despite all of this, Lundstrem was determined to keep the band together. In 1956, after recording music by Tartar composers and playing several successful concerts, the group caught the attention of Mikhail Tsin, an administrator for the Moscow State Concert Association. Tsin became their managing director and helped them gain official recognition. That same year, they became the Russian State Concert Orchestra, just as the Khrushchev Thaw was beginning. This cemented Lundstrem’s reputation as the father of Russian jazz and established his band as the first official big band in the USSR (Tyulkova *Conversations* 170-173) (Starr 226-228). Into this illustrious band, Kapustin was hired as a pianist, arranger of existing melodies, transcriber of songs into music, and composer of original scores (Tyulkova *Conversations* 177). It was a role he was eminently qualified for. “By the beginning of his work

with Lundstrem, Kapustin already had his style of playing." (Tyulkova *Conversations* 178). He put his composition skills to good use. As an arranger, he wrote jazz arrangements of famous Russian songs, songs written by Soviet composers, and Classical music themes. He transcribed orchestral parts of the music of the Count Basie Orchestra, the Duke Ellington Orchestra, and other big bands of the 1930s-1950s (Tyulkova *Conversations* 183-184). He traveled with the band on tour across hundreds of cities in Russia and abroad to places in Eastern Europe like Czechoslovakia. More expanded travel abroad was often prohibited. Composing, arranging, and transcribing gave him a new experience that shaped his style. He received immediate feedback from the audience, experimented with a wider variety of instruments than just the piano, and could adjust his work based on live reactions. Kapustin would describe the experience with the Lundstrem band in an interview as follows, "Eleven years of work with Lundstrem became my second Conservatory…" (Tyulkova *Classical and Jazz Influences* 17). During his tenure with the Lundstrem band from 1961 to 1972, Kapustin composed twelve works (Opus 2–13), eleven of which were written specifically for the ensemble. This period can be considered his first prolific phase of composition (Tyulkova *Conversations* 215). Working for a touring band was tiring. By 1972, Kapustin was married and had a child. The hours on the road became untenable, so he quit the Lundstrem band. He still loved working for bands so he worked as a pianist, composer, and arranger for the Blue Screen Orchestra, a group that mainly performed for radio and television. Here he stayed for five years and wrote Opus 14 to 28. He put his talents to use modernizing arrangements of traditional and classical songs and adding jazz elements to it (Tyulkova *Conversations* 182, 203). His next position was as a pianist for the State Symphonic Orchestra of Cinematography, where he stayed until 1984.

The 1980s marked a pivotal shift in Kapustin's composing career. In 1984, he made the bold decision to become a full-time composer, transitioning from writing for ensembles to focusing solely on piano. With a family to support, this choice was difficult. As he recalled, "Do you think it was easy for me? Everybody kept saying to me that I have two teenage boys, that I shouldn't do such a foolish thing" (Tyulkova *Conversations* 311). Yet, the same unshakable confidence that had driven him to teach himself jazz propelled him forward. It was also his lifelong ambition. He was a great pianist but did not like to perform all that much. Kapustin states, "Composition became my main direction in life; something that I was dreaming about finally came true" (Tyulkova *Conversations* 311). This step embodies the dogmatic self-belief that defined him, not just in his career but in every challenge he faced. A striking example came in the summer of 1979, when another car accident severely damaged his hand. Doctors warned he might never play again without surgery, but Kapustin refused to accept that fate. He did not get the surgery, and trusted his intuition. He chose rehabilitation through practice, rebuilding his strength until, just a year later, he returned to the stage and performed (Tyulkova *Conversations* 292).

Kapustin's decision to embrace life as an independent composer in 1984 marked the beginning of a period of exceptional creative output. This phase reflected not only increased focus and freedom from institutional obligations but also the full maturity of his compositional

voice. “By this point, he had finally figured out how best to compose classically structured works that retained the swing and spontaneous feeling of real jazz. Sometimes when you pioneer, the initial idea, bright though it may be, does not always lead to proliferation. There are times you need to step back, reflect, and consider where you are going and what is that you’re really trying to accomplish” (Bayley 396). With more time to dedicate to his craft, his productivity rose steadily over the following decades. He composed 12 works in the 1960s, 17 in the 1970s, 25 in the 1980s, 44 in the 1990s, and an extraordinary 62 works between 2000 and 2017. Upon his death in 2020, he left the world with a vast library, including 161 published works (Opus 161 was his last published work). What is clear is that the style he perfected kept him safe from the government censure, and in his own words, “I was entirely free; no problems … my music wasn’t avant-garde” (Bayley 394).

Kapustin’s Unique Synthesis of Jazz and Classical

Most composers who fuse elements of another genre into their work adapt its surface features, borrowing rhythms, melodies, or harmonies to fit traditional forms. Nikolai Kapustin approached the problem differently. Rather than decorating classical structures with jazz elements, he wove jazz principles into the structural, harmonic, and rhythmic layers of his compositions. By the time Kapustin left the Lundstrem Band in 1972, he had perfected a unique synthesis of classical music and jazz, one that seamlessly incorporated the structured rigor of classical composition with the harmonic and rhythmic language of jazz while paradoxically eliminating the key feature of jazz itself, improvisation. Kapustin’s works are carefully notated and through-composed, yet they sound as if they are being improvised in real time. This was not merely a stylistic choice but a necessity under Soviet suppression. His formal training in classical music, combined with his natural inclinations, fostered a strong emphasis on precision, structure, and complete notation. At the same time, his exposure to jazz came primarily through underground radio broadcasts and banned Western records. As he later arranged pieces for jazz bands, he refined his ability to transcribe music by ear. His musical development followed two parallel paths. He was trained to perform music exactly as written but was simultaneously drawn to a genre that extensively employed improvisation. Because true spontaneity was unattainable under Soviet constraints, Kapustin developed a method of composing jazz pieces that preserved the feeling of improvisation within a fully notated classical framework. Through this synthesis, he created a distinctive compositional style that united the discipline of classical music with the spirit of jazz. As Kapustin explains, “I am not interested in improvisation – and what is a jazz musician without improvisation? But I am not interested in it because it is not perfect” (Roberts 23-24). To help understand this, we must first give a brief overview of jazz’s structure.

For those unfamiliar with jazz, its structure can often seem elusive. Unlike classical compositions, where musical direction is thoroughly planned, jazz performances can appear unpredictable. Melodic lines shift unexpectedly, leadership within an ensemble can transfer without warning, and rhythms emerge in ways that defy conventional expectations. Most strikingly, no two renditions of the same piece are ever identical. "In improvised music more

than any other, the personality of the performer (the creator of the music) is a natural and organic part of the musical content" (Feigin 30). This unpredictability is largely the result of improvisation, which forms the foundation of jazz as a genre. Though it may seem unstructured to an untrained listener, jazz adheres to its own set of guiding principles, albeit ones that differ from the rigid conventions of classical music. As *How to Listen to Jazz* describes, "The vast majority of jazz performances follow a familiar pattern. You might call it a theme and variation. First, the musicians play the melody or theme. Second, they improvise over the harmonies of the song with some or all of the performers taking solos (these are variations). Third, the musicians return to the melody for a final restatement of the theme" (Gioia *How to Listen* 52-53). Improvisation is not merely a feature of jazz. It is its defining characteristic. Even as jazz musicians have fused their art with other genres, including rock, improvisation has remained the essential thread that distinguishes jazz from other forms of music (Gioia *How to Listen* 63). Its presence ensures that jazz remains a fluid, ever-evolving art form, one in which performers continuously reshape the musical landscape through their own interpretative choices.

Kapustin's distinctive style emerges from a deliberate synthesis of classical form and jazz elements, which can be categorized into three fundamental components: classical frameworks, jazz-influenced harmonies and rhythms, and the incorporation of jazz chord structures. By seamlessly integrating these components, Kapustin crafted compositions that maintained the formal rigor of classical music while evoking the spontaneity and harmonic complexity of jazz.

Kapustin's compositions are deeply rooted in classical structures, incorporating forms such as fugues, concertos, and etudes. These frameworks provide a familiar structure for listeners, following established patterns like exposition, development, and recapitulation, which are fundamental to classical music. His works are firmly grounded in traditional classical genres. One researcher describes, "Virtually all are composed in the codified Baroque, Classical, and Romantic genres such as Bagatelles, Concertos, Etudes, Fantasias, Fugues, Impromptus, Inventions, Nocturnes, Preludes, Sonatas, Suites, Toccatas, and Variations" (Mann 19). Counterpoint, a hallmark of Western classic structure, also plays a significant role in Kapustin's compositions, allowing multiple independent melodic lines to interact harmoniously while retaining their distinct identities. His contrapuntal writing is particularly evident in his *Twenty-Four Preludes and Fugues, Op. 82*, reflecting his deep influence from Bach, which provided a structural model for his later jazz-infused compositions. "Kapustin's compositions have a formal design consisting of twenty-four major and minor keys, which is similar to that of Bach and Chopin (c.f., Bach's Well Tempered Clavier (BWV 846-893) and Chopin's Preludes Op. 28). There is no doubt about the influences of Bach's contrapuntal textures of Prelude and Fugue on Kapustin" (Seong 43). His ability to blend such classical forms with contemporary harmonic language creates a distinctive and sophisticated musical style, and as a music scholar observes, "Kapustin's music exhibits a unique way of integrating the expression of classical music with the specifics of jazz styles" (Daugulis 138). This solid foundation in classical form allowed Kapustin to experiment freely with jazz harmonies and rhythms without ever departing from a rigorous structural framework.

In addition, his scores feature rhythmic complexity, achieved through irregular accents, cross-rhythms, and syncopation, which evokes a sense of movement that resembles jazz improvisation. “Kapustin displaced accents irregularly and inserted syncopation in a regular metrical structure. Most of the detailed elements were taken from jazz categories, such as ragtime, swing, and bebop” (Seong 50). This deliberate manipulation of rhythm, combined with his classical approach to form, enhances the perception of spontaneity in his music.

Kapustin’s harmonic language also incorporates advanced jazz techniques, including quartal voicings, extended harmonies, and modal structures reminiscent of bebop and modern jazz pianism. His compositions employ reharmonization techniques such as tritone substitutions and chromatic passing chords, which heighten harmonic tension and provide a sense of forward motion. By embedding jazz vocabulary within a classical framework, Kapustin creates a sound world that is both structurally rigorous and expressively free. In his 100 bagatelles, “Kapustin included various jazz-oriented stylistic elements throughout this piece, including, boogie woogie, swing, stride, bebop, improvisation, and quartal harmony” (Seong 100). These three techniques weave together to form the tapestry of Kapustin’s singular style. Unlike traditional jazz musicians, for whom improvisation was an essential and spontaneous part of live performance, Kapustin composed every note and masterfully replicated the spontaneity and rhythmic freedom of jazz. While composers like Gershwin and Ravel incorporated jazz elements, syncopation, blues harmonies, into classical frameworks, Kapustin inverted the relationship, embedding jazz’s structural DNA within classical forms. As critic Sudip Bose observes in The American Scholar, this approach defies conventional categorization. “…Kapustin’s scores contain an inherent tension. They aren’t really jazz and they aren’t exactly classical. They aren’t examples of fusion either, at least not in the way that Ravel’s bluesy *Violin Sonata No. 2* fuses disparate idioms. Perhaps this music defies categorization” (Bose).

This tension extends beyond the page. Though fully notated, Kapustin’s works demand a performer’s intuitive grasp of jazz idioms, what pianist Lelie De’Ath describes as “a ‘feel’ to many passages that is unable to be notated, [requiring] an aural acquaintance with the jazz styles of Art Tatum, Errol Garner, Oscar Peterson, and others” (De’ Ath). In other words, even though the pieces are not improvised, a performer must use an approach to arm weight, fingering, rhythmic independence of hands that are distinct from learning classical repertoire.

Reception, Legacy, and Impact

Nikolai Kapustin’s music, though a product of paradoxical innovation under Soviet repression, remained largely unknown outside the USSR for much of his life. His synthesis of classical formalism and jazz energy, achieved without improvisation, was a direct response to the ideological constraints imposed by Socialist Realism. The Soviet Union sought to suppress jazz, viewing it as a symbol of Western decadence, yet in doing so, it inadvertently fostered a radical transformation of jazz composition. Kapustin’s "composed improvisation" was not merely a stylistic experiment but a new way of thinking about jazz itself.

Kapustin's approach challenged long-standing assumptions about the nature of jazz performance. Throughout the twentieth century, improvisation was considered the defining characteristic of jazz, distinguishing it from the rigid structures of classical music. Ted Gioia, Jazz scholar, explains that improvisation is the "deepest" and most "enchanting" aspect of jazz because of "the intensely personal quality to improvisation and its tendency to mirror the psyche…" (Gioia *How to Listen* 42-43). Kapustin, however, rejected improvisation entirely and instead composed comprehensively annotated jazz-infused works that captured both the spontaneity and emotional depth of the genre. His music could shift seamlessly from playful energy to quiet introspection, all within the structure of a thoroughly crafted score. This approach set him apart from earlier composers who had experimented with jazz elements in classical music. Whereas George Gershwin, Maurice Ravel, and Igor Stravinsky had incorporated jazz harmonies into orchestral or piano works, their compositions remained fundamentally classical. Kapustin's music, by contrast, did not merely borrow from jazz. It was structurally and rhythmically jazz, yet entirely written out.

Despite the originality and technical brilliance of his compositions, Kapustin's work remained largely unknown outside the Soviet Union for most of his life. Several factors contributed to this obscurity. Soviet censorship imposed strict controls on artistic production, particularly limiting music that incorporated Western influences such as jazz. Thus, audiences and performers within the Soviet Union often failed to fully appreciate the distinctive nature of Kapustin's music. As one scholar notes, Kapustin's "music does not require the performer to improvise, but it does require a knowledge of how to play jazz, how to swing, how to phrase the breaks, and turnarounds that he writes into his score, and many Russian pianists simply didn't want to bother" (Bayley 395). Even among musicians with strong classical training, there was often a lack of interest in the technical and stylistic demands of jazz performance. Recalling a concert featuring jazz pianist Dwike Mitchell and bassist and French horn player Willie Ruff, Vladimir Ashkenazy, a conservatory friend of Kapustin, remarked, "I am pretty sure that if they were asked to play any of Chopin's etudes, they would not be able to do so with their technique" (Tyulkova *Conversations* 143). Kapustin was also a shy and private figure, "who was interested in composing and recording, but not in public performance, travel or fame" (De' Ath). Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, his music remained largely inaccessible due to a lack of published editions and international recordings. As Canadian virtuoso, Marc-André Hamelin, stated, "Getting scores was practically impossible. You had to know the right people" (Walls).

This changed in the early 2000s when Kapustin's works began attracting the attention of Western pianists. In 2000, Scottish pianist Steven Osborne recorded an album featuring Kapustin's *Piano Sonatas Nos. 1 & 2 and Preludes* (Abramova 3) in Jazz Style, marking one of the first significant Western recordings of his music. In Osborne's words, "I was bowled over. I've always loved jazz, and have never heard of such great fusion of jazz and classical styles… normally the jazz bits feel 'grafted on' with classical composers; or else if it is a jazz musician attempting fusion, the structure is pretty weak" (Roberts 3). Around the same time, Hamelin, known for championing overlooked twentieth-century composers, performed and recorded

several of Kapustin's works, further increasing international awareness. Upon hearing Kapustin's music initially, Hamelin exclaimed, "My jaw dropped to the floor… This is really rather incredible" (Walls). These recordings shattered the prevailing belief that jazz could not exist without improvisation, demonstrating that Kapustin had successfully captured jazz's harmonic complexity and rhythmic vitality within the framework of classical notation.

As interest in his music grew, a new generation of pianists embraced Kapustin's compositions. Yuja Wang, known for her technical brilliance and dynamic interpretations, played Kapustin's *Eight Concert Études, Op. 40* for mainstream classical audiences, performing them at concerts. Hayato Sumino, a pianist blending classical training with jazz influences, showcased Kapustin's rhythmic ingenuity through concerts in Asia. South Korean pianist, Yeol Eum Son, devoted a significant portion of her repertoire to Kapustin, recording an extensive album of his works in 2021. Additionally, Russian pianist Nikolai Lugansky recorded several of Kapustin's pieces, helping to reintroduce his music to post-Soviet audiences.

Beyond individual performances, institutional recognition of Kapustin's work has grown in recent years. There is now a Kapustin Society in England, devoted to the authorized dissemination of his scores…" (De' Ath). The Kapustin Festival, established in Japan by pianist Masahiro Kawakami, provides a platform for musicians to explore and perform his works, ensuring that his contributions to music are preserved and celebrated (Tyulkova *Conversations* 410). His music has also been featured at major festivals, such as the XII International Music Festival in Toledo, Spain, where the renowned Bulgarian pianist Ludmil Angelov premiered Kapustin's *Piano Sonata No. 14, Op. 120* (Tyulkova *Conversations* 408). These developments indicate that Kapustin's music is not merely an obscure curiosity but an emerging part of the global piano repertoire. As American music critic Lynne René Bayley writes, "To say that his work hit America and Great Britain like a bombshell would be putting it midly… listeners were stunned by the utter brilliance of his construction and the wonderful swing that he injected into his scores" (Bayley 395).

Kapustin's belated emergence onto the international stage, contrasted with the obscurity that marked much of his career, invites a deeper consideration of the conditions under which his artistry developed. His classical training and clandestine exposure to jazz, shaped by the strictures of Soviet cultural policy, chart a complex creative journey. Understanding the forces that shaped Kapustin's path provides essential context for assessing the nature and significance of his achievement.

Conclusion

Nikolai Kapustin's legacy is often framed as a story of missed opportunities, with some speculating that he might have achieved greater fame had he lived in the United States. The *History of Jazz* reflects this sentiment, stating, "A similar story can be told of Nikolai Kapustin, born in Ukraine in 1937, who developed an unconventional virtuosic piano style that might have brought him renown in the United States, but under the Soviet regime, jazz careers were sharply curtailed. Instead, Kapustin focused his energies on composing some of the most rhythmically

exciting (and alas all-too-seldom-performed) classical music of the century. One can only imagine what he might have achieved in Los Angeles or New York" (Gioia *History of Jazz* 499). While this perspective highlights the restrictions that shaped his career, it overlooks the fact that Kapustin's distinctive style was a product of his specific environment. His music did not emerge despite Soviet constraints but because of them, blending classical discipline with jazz energy in a way that could not have developed elsewhere.

Unlike traditional jazz musicians, who rely on improvisation to bring their performances to life, Kapustin assiduously notated every note of his compositions. This approach, rather than limiting his expression, allowed him to create works that fully captured the harmonic complexity, rhythmic vitality, and spontaneity of jazz while preserving their structure for future generations. His music stands apart from other classical composers who incorporated jazz elements, as it does not merely borrow from jazz but recreates it, even the improvisation, within a classical framework. This synthesis is a defining characteristic of his work and a major contribution to the global musical tradition.

If Kapustin had been born anywhere else, his music might have taken a different path. The restrictions of the Soviet Union shaped his approach, but they were not the only force at work. His discipline, curiosity, and belief in himself were just as important. Again and again, he followed his own instincts. He did not wait for approval. He did not let obstacles define him. He mastered what others might have thought impossible, not because he was given the opportunity, but because he created it for himself. Throughout his life, he worked tirelessly to master classical techniques while exploring the rhythms and harmonies of jazz. His deep focus and structured approach allowed him to capture the energy of jazz in fully written compositions without losing its spontaneity.

Kapustin's legacy is not merely the result of history but a testament to his own determination and vision. The limits imposed by the Soviet Union may have prevented him from pursuing a traditional jazz career, but they did not extinguish his creativity. Instead, he forged a new musical language, combining classical precision with the rhythmic vitality of jazz. Throughout his life, he refused to be defined by external constraints. His music stands as a lasting testament to the power of discipline, curiosity, and innovation. In blending structure and freedom so seamlessly, Kapustin did more than survive within a repressive system. He transformed it into the unlikely soil for one of the twentieth century's most original musical achievements, which is only now starting to come into view.

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Helicopter Parents, Stunted Wings: The Impacts of Helicopter Parenting on a Child's Social, Cognitive, and Emotional Developments By Aleksandr Yang

Abstract

Helicopter parenting, the extensive involvement and control of children's lives is characterised by the perceived violation of children's basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence. This literature review investigates germane literature that assesses the effects of helicopter parenting on children's psychological developments in social skills, cognitive performance and emotional capacity. The methodology involves a systematic review of empirical studies and psychological literature on helicopter parenting, specifically impacts on social, cognitive and emotional developments. Socially, children of helicopter parenting often exhibit lower levels of social competence, struggling with peer interactions due to a lack of autonomy in decision making. Cognitively, lower cognitive development in problem solving abilities and reduced intrinsic motivation in academic settings are also directly linked to excessive parental control. Emotionally, a child raised under helicopter parent will experience higher levels of anxiety, stress, and depression symptoms due to low self-efficacy and resilience, they report low satisfaction with family life and present indications of deprivation in self-worth. Preponderance of previous research suggests that the costs of helicopter parenting is dependent not on quantity of involvement but the developmental experiences displaced. This literature review thus seeks to offer an extensive understanding of the developmental consequences of helicopter parenting and provide insights for parents, psychologists, educators to consider these effects in their own practices.

Introduction

The metaphoric term "helicopter parenting" first appeared in Dr. Haim Ginott's Between Parent & Teenager, where a teenager described, "Mother hovers over me like a helicopter" (Ginott). The term is used to denote over-controlling and excessively involved parenting behaviors negatively impacting children's development (Bronson; Hofer; Levine; Marano; Nelson; Schiffrin). Notably, some reviews explicitly treat "overparenting" as overprotective and controlling behaviours as dimensions within helicopter parenting (Vigdal and Brønnick), while other research groups use "overparenting" as their preferred term of the construct (Segrin et al.,). This review acknowledges that there is no "umbrella" term for the construct of parental pattern and for clarity and consistency will use "helicopter parenting" as its standard form.

Despite findings of children reporting higher perceived safety and emotional closeness during early childhood (Segrin), the term "helicopter parenting" is pejoratively used as scholars believe the long-term harm overshadows the positive outcomes in early stages of development. Many argue that the positive outcome of helicopter parenting are attributed by a mixture of parenting styles, highlighting the distinction of helicopter parenting from broader categories of parental behaviour: its combination of emotional overinvestment and behavioral micromanagement (LeMoyne and Buchanan; Padilla-Walker and Nelson). Most accepted

parenting theories classify parenting styles along two sets of axes: responsiveness and demandingness (Baumrind). This framework yields the four dominant styles of parenting: authoritative (high warmth, high control), authoritarian (low warmth, high control), permissive (high warmth, low control), and neglectful (low warmth, low control) (Maccoby and Martin). Helicopter parenting does not particularly fall into any of these categories, instead, it can occur in any, or a combination of these styles where a child's fundamental psychological needs are not met. When autonomy and competence is limited by parental involvement (Deci and Ryan).

While parental involvement is generally beneficial, represented by the consistently optimal child outcomes linked to authoritarian parenting (Baumrind), existing literature refers to helicopter parenting as the disruption aspect of autonomy development, leading to reduced intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy (Segrin et al.; Grolnick and Ryan). It is characterised by behaviors like constant monitoring, interference in decision making, and inability for children to fail safely. Children raised under helicopter parenting are shielded from frustration and challenge, limiting their ability to build resilience, self-regulation, and problem solving skills. Despite growing in prevalence, research on the long-term consequences of helicopter parenting are limited from early and middle childhood. This review traces the mechanisms of displaced experience, the self-directed opportunities a child is not permitted to undertake independently due to parental interference, of peer interaction in social development, intrinsic motivation in cognitive development, and distress management in emotional development. Deducing from existing literature, helicopter parenting harms development through displacing experience in which capabilities are built and hinders children' s ability to shape meaning.

Social Development

Social development refers to how children learn to interact with others, build trust, and partake in group settings on their own (Bandura). Within the helicopter parenting literature, social development is most often measured through self-efficacy, a person's belief in their own ability to act effectively, and through the quality of peer relationships. Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy identifies mastery experience, the success at something difficult through one's own effort, as the strongest source of self-efficacy (Bandura). When a parent consistently manages a child's social challenges the child may be denied the opportunity to build this confidence independently.

A study of 190 undergraduate students aged 16 to 28 measured perceived maternal and paternal helicopter parenting alongside general self-efficacy and peer attachment. Using the Self-Efficacy Scale, developed by Sherer and colleagues, assessed across subscales across trust, communication and alienation found helicopter parenting, particularly maternal behaviour, was significantly correlated with general lower general self-efficacy, greater peer alienation, and reduced peer trust (van Ingen et al.). Notably, an overlooked detail is that the developmental deficit was applied to general self-efficacy rather than social self-efficacy specifically, suggesting a broader diminished competence rather than narrow social skill gaps. Moreover, skills-deficit accounts would predict lower confidence, but not active mistrust of peers. The correlation with

peer alienation thus suggests constant parental management may teach a child to regard peer relationships as a source of risk rather than an area of social skill, which can lead to further withdrawal from peer interactions (van Ingen et al.). In a larger study that surveyed 538 parent-young adult child dyads predominantly biological parents (mean age 50.81) and young adult children (mean age 20.28), using newly developed helicopter parenting measure that exploratory factor analysis resolved into four dimensions (anticipatory problem-solving, advice and affect management, child self-direction, and tangible assistance), found that overhelicopter parenting predicted significantly lower quality in parent-child communication, an indirect reduction in family satisfaction, and significantly higher psychological entitlement in young adult children (Segrin et al.,). Because both parents and children reported comparable patterns, the findings are more reliable than research relying on a single source of report. However, this particular study reported an explicit null result for association between helicopter parenting and the adaptive traits it measured, including self-efficacy and emotional intelligence (Segrin et al.,). The self-efficacy relationship is instead documented in a separate study that surveyed 339 parent–young adult child dyads using a family communication model. Finding that parenting behaviour emphasising control over the child, rather than parental warmth as such, was associated with diminished self-efficacy and exaggerated psychological entitlement in young adult children. This correlation between helicopter parenting and self-efficacy was amplified when parent–child communication was more open (Givertz and Segrin). One plausible explanation for this inconsistency is that the self-efficacy cost attaches to the autonomy-restricting component of specific helicopter parenting rather than to general parental involvement in general in Segrin et al.,, where the impact is emphasised on displacement of autonomy (Hu et al.). Similarly, a survey of 268 Millennials using the 15-item Helicopter Parenting Instrument, a 7-point self-report scale with a reported reliability coefficient of .78, found moderate, positive correlations between helicopter parenting and neuroticism, interpersonal dependency (depending on others for support and validation), and ineffective coping, alongside associations with an authoritarian parenting style and a family communication pattern oriented toward conformity (Odenweller et al.). Impacts of social development extend to adulthood and workplace settings, where among 482 college students surveyed, those experienced helicopter parenting was associated with lower self-efficacy and with maladaptive responses to hypothetical workplace scenarios, such as an inability to meet deadlines and excessive reliance on others to solve problems; self-efficacy itself was identified as the statistical mediator explaining why helicopter parenting predicted these workplace difficulties (Bradley-Geist and Olson-Buchanan).

Further, maternal and paternal helicopter parenting was found to predict fewer prosocial and empathic outcomes in emerging adults (McGinley). Though this relationship is dependent on the security of the young adult's attachment to their parent, parental gender, and the specific outcome assessed, thus a uniform effect cannot be drawn (McGinley). Weaker adjustment (capacity to adapt) through inadequate boundaries (incapacity of rejection) between parent and child has also been documented in a study of 89 Israeli families, where paternal overparenting

predicted lower adjustment, an effect partially explained by young adults' attachment anxiety and their perception of parental psychological control (Rousseau and Scharf).

The meaning children assign to parental involvement appears to shape social development outcomes considerably, a confirmatory factor analysis on data from 412 Korean university students found that the helicopter parenting construct produces the same single-factor structure, meaning helicopter parenting behaviours cluster together as an unified construct, documented in American samples, establishing that the underlying behaviour is recognisable across cultures (Kwon et al.,). However, in a follow-up qualitative study using in-depth interviews, the same research team found that many Korean American students interpreted their parents' close monitoring as an expression of care, investment, and culturally normative familial sacrifice rather than intrusive control (Kwon et al.,). A related study of 562 Koreans aged 19 to 34 using structural equation modelling, identified that parental pressure around career expectations predicted greater depressive symptoms, while parental affection independently predicted better psychological adjustment (Lee and Kang). Thus cross-cultural findings suggest that whether a child appraises close parental involvement as controlling or as caring may determine whether the same underlying behaviour produces psychological harm.

It should be noted that most of the evidence regarding comparing parental behaviour relies on cross-sectional, self-reported data which can establish statistical association but cannot establish which variable precedes the other (Vigdal and Brønnick). A child who is naturally more withdrawn from peers may also draw more parental involvement, a possibility considered further in the discussion of emotional development.

Overall, helicopter parents' social cost may be interpreted as a displacement of social interaction with defensiveness, yet, the cost is largely dependent on the child's reaction to parental involvement.

Cognitive Development

Cognitive development in helicopter parenting literature is typically assessed not through intelligence but a child's capacity for self-directed learning, including academic motivation, self-regulation, and decision-making (Ryan and Deci). The Self-Determination Theory distinguishes between autonomous motivation, where effort is driven by personal interest, and controlled motivation, where effort is driven by external reward or the wish to avoid disapproval (Ryan and Deci). Researchers have proposed that helicopter parenting may shift a child's motivation from the former to the latter.

A survey of 192 students and 121 of their mothers examining associations between helicopter parenting and motivation found children's reports of maternal helicopter parenting was associated with greater extrinsic motivation to learn, greater perfectionistic discrepancy, and stronger avoidance goals for learning (Schiffrin and Liss). While mothers' own reports of helicopter parenting were separately associated with their children's sense of entitlement. (Schiffrin and Liss). Because the motivation findings rely on different informants these correlations were relatively weak and are treated as suggestive evidence of an association

between helicopter parenting and maladaptive motivation. A stronger methodology tested self-control using structural equation modelling as a specific mediating mechanism between helicopter parenting and psychological maladjustment, defined as depression, anxiety, and low life satisfaction, in a sample of college students (Hong and Cui). Results confirmed that self-control statistically mediated this relationship, and that the association between helicopter parenting and maladjustment was significantly stronger among students still living with their parents than among those living independently (Hong and Cui). It was explicitly noted that the mediating effect of self-control, while statistically significant, was relatively small in size (Hong and Cui). It is plausible to infer that self-regulation, like any skill, develops through practice, and constant parental direction may reduce the occasions on which a child is required to regulate their own behaviour. Moreover, specific dimensions of helicopter parenting have been linked to weaker decision-making and academic functioning (Luebbe et al.), and in a multi-group structural equation modelling of 446 college students, it was found that reduced that satisfaction of psychological need for competence specifically predicted lower academic functioning (Schiffrin et al.,).

Excessive parental expectation may also contribute to socially prescribed perfectionism, defined as the belief that others demand flawlessness (Hayes and Turner). Hayes and Turner found that helicopter parenting predicted this form of perfectionism even after accounting for parental warmth, suggesting the effect may be linked more to expectation-setting than to a lack of care (Hayes and Turner). This pattern may not be limited to individual families. Curran and Hill's analysis of data across several decades found that young people's perceptions of parental expectations and criticism have risen over time, alongside a corresponding rise in socially prescribed perfectionism (Curran and Hill).

Nevertheless, different aspects of children are interdependent and effects of helicopter parenting on cognitive development can be non-linear. A study categorizing students into different parenting profiles found that helicopter parenting was largely unrelated to student success and wellbeing during the transition to university (Howard et al.). One possible explanation is that the costs of helicopter parenting may be concentrated among parents who combine high control with low warmth, while children of warm involved parents show comparatively few negative outcomes (Padilla-Walker et al.; Nelson et al.). Another possibility is that measuring outcomes at the point of university entry may capture students who are still supported by parental scaffolding, with costs becoming more visible only once that support is withdrawn, mostly seen in the transition to college (Darlow et al.).

A meta-analysis pooling 111 effect sizes drawn from 53 individual studies (sample sizes median 355), found that helicopter parenting was consistently associated with reduced academic adjustment, lower self-efficacy, and weaker regulatory skills (McCoy et al.). Notably, it was found that parent gender did not significantly moderate associations in cognitive development, as mothers tend to engage in more helicopter parenting overall than fathers, meaning individual studies reporting stronger maternal effects may be detecting a difference in exposure rather than in the potency of the behaviour itself (McCoy et al.). Moreover, in a gender-congruent analysis,

daughters' autonomy was more strongly affected by maternal helicopter parenting, while sons' relatedness was more strongly affected by paternal helicopter parenting, suggesting that parent gender shapes which psychological need is compromised rather than how much harm or displaced experiences occurs overall (Schiffrin et al.,).

Overall, helicopter parenting's cost is suggested to be a conditional erosion of self-regulatory capacity rather than a direct uniform reduction in ability. This cost is concentrated among high control low warmth parenting and is frequently masked while parental involvement is still intact, only becoming visible once support is withdrawn in the transition to independence. Having traced how helicopter parenting shapes a child's capacity for self-directed effort, the next section on emotional development offers more nuanced and specific impacts on developmental behaviour.

Emotional Development

In the context of helicopter parenting, emotional development refers to a child's capacity to regulate their own feelings, including tolerance for distress and recovery from setbacks (Gross; Thompson and Meyer). Psychology research on emotion regulation, the processes by which people monitor, evaluate, and modify their emotional reactions, suggests that this capacity is built through repeated exposure to manageable difficulty, allowing development through direct experience in discomfort tolerance and recovery (Gross; Thompson and Meyer). Clinicians use "parental accommodation" to describe situations in which a parent modifies a child's environment to prevent distress, for example by resolving a conflict with a teacher on the child's behalf. While this may relieve the child's distress in the moment, it may also remove the opportunity for the child to practise managing that distress independently and thus develop emotional regulation (Gross; Thompson and Meyer).

In a cross-sectional study of 382 undergraduates who completed self-report measures of perceived parental overprotection, anxiety symptom severity, and experiential avoidance (tendency to avoid uncomfortable internal thoughts or feelings), researchers found using mediation analysis that experiential avoidance significantly mediated the relationship between helicopter parenting and anxiety symptom severity (Fulton et al.). This was a specific, clinically relevant regulatory pathway where early caregiving experiences may relate to anxiety in young adulthood (Fulton et al.). Another related study that surveyed 297 college students, measuring perceived helicopter parenting alongside satisfaction of the three psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci), together with depression and life satisfaction (Schiffrin et al.,). They found that helicopter parenting predicted significantly higher depression and lower life satisfaction. This is explained primarily by reduced satisfaction of the autonomy and competence needs, with relatedness playing a smaller and less consistent role across analyses (Schiffrin et al.,). Similar patterns emerge in other studies including one with a sample of 278 Swiss adolescents, using structural equation modelling to test emotion-regulation strategies of dysregulation, suppression, and integration as intervening mechanisms (Mathijs et al.). It was found that emotional dysregulation specifically was the significant pathway linking

overparenting to adolescent social anxiety symptoms (Mathijs et al.), while a more detailed analysis decomposing helicopter parenting into its constituent behaviours found that autonomy-limiting actions were consistently associated with harm across every dimension of emotion dysregulation and every mental health outcome measured, whereas parental information-seeking (parent's efforts to stay informed about a child's life without directly intervening), was not associated with the same negative outcomes (Nguyen et al.). Reduced self-efficacy has also been proposed to have connection to helicopter parenting constituting poorer mental and physical health more broadly; in a study of 461 emerging adults using structural equation modelling (Reed et al.), reduced independence was linked to rising social anxiety symptoms across a single university semester, alongside a more external locus of control (a heightened belief that outcomes are determined by forces outside oneself) in earlier research using older parental overprotection instrument (Spokas and Heimberg). Moreover, a relevant study surveying 477 parent–emerging adult children found that overparenting was associated with a more critical family environment (a family climate of conditional approval and evaluative pressure) and separately with greater difficulty in the child's relationships with other people and less effective coping (Segrin et al.,). This suggests that the cost of overpartnering can be amplified through family dynamics and recurring environments.

A literature review screening the literature down to 38 eligible studies, of which 33 used cross-sectional designs and only 5 were longitudinal, found a consistent association between helicopter parenting and both anxiety and depression (Vigdal and Brønnick). However, it was explicitly concluded that none of the five longitudinal studies were of sufficient methodological quality to establish that helicopter parenting precedes the development of these symptoms, rather than following from them or reflecting some third factor entirely (Vigdal and Brønnick). Within a study in this review it was suggested that the relationship between parenting and child anxiety results in multiple directions. A study of 653 parent–child dyads found that parental anxiety significantly predicted subsequent engagement in overparenting ($\beta = .14$), and that overparenting was in turn significantly associated with higher narcissism ($\beta = .11$) and less effective coping ($\beta = .10$) in adult children (Segrin et al.,). Similarly, a four-wave study following 349 university students and their mothers over one year, using a random-intercept cross-lagged panel design capable of separating within-person change from stable between-person differences, found a student's growing uncertainty about their educational path significantly predicted a subsequent increase in maternal helicopter parenting, but only among mothers who reported higher perceptions of environmental threat (Wang et al.,). Another three-wave study of 1,328 adolescents using latent growth modelling, a statistical technique that tracks each individual's trajectory of change over time, earlier adolescent anxiety predicted a significantly slower decline in maternal overparenting, while a steeper decline in maternal overparenting was independently associated with improving adolescent wellbeing (Leung and Shek). A more methodologically rigorous study followed 350 adolescents across an academic year using *Dynamic Structural Equation Modeling* (Wang et al.,), a statistical technique explicitly designed to separate patterns occurring within individual families over time from stable differences between families found

that, increases in helicopter parenting significantly predicted decreases in autonomy and relatedness need-satisfaction, though notably not competence need-satisfaction, which in turn significantly predicted poorer emotional wellbeing approximately two weeks later (Wang et al.,). Another two recent meta-analyses estimate the overall size of these associations: pooling data from 52 articles, found small but statistically significant correlations between overparenting and offspring depression ($k = 133$ effect sizes, $r = .15$), anxiety ($k = 101$, $r = .14$), and broader internalizing symptoms ($k = 58$, $r = .19$), all $p < .001$ (Zhang and Ji). A separate meta-analysis of 44 studies and 21,607 participants similarly found small positive correlations for anxiety ($r = .16$) and depression ($r = .20$), alongside a weaker correlation with life satisfaction ($r = .09$) (Hu et al.). The two analyses contradict, however, on whether moderators such as culture and parental gender explain differences between individual studies, an inconsistency that remains unresolved in the current literature (Zhang and Ji; Hu et al.).

Overall, the emotional cost of helicopter parenting is seen through experiential avoidance and thwarted psychological needs. The emotional mechanism better specifies impacts of helicopter parenting than other aspects, yet this field has no available longitudinal study insufficient quality to establish that helicopter parenting precedes these outcomes rather than other factors such as pre-existing distress or temperament.

Conclusion

This review synthesized the developmental impacts of helicopter parenting and concluded that the cost of development depends not on the extent of parental involvement but the extent of the specific experiences that involvement displaces. Socially, helicopter parenting is associated with a defensive orientation toward others, including dependency, entitlement, and peer mistrust (Segrin et al.; Odenweller et al.; van Ingen et al.), an association that is conditional on whether the parenting emphasises control specifically (Givertz and Segrin) and on whether the child appraises that involvement as controlling or as caring (Kwon et al.,). Cognitively, the erosion of self-regulatory capacity is rather concentrated in high control and low warmth parenting than a uniform effect (Hong and Cui; Padilla-Walker et al.). Emotionally, helicopter parenting frustrates autonomy and relatedness needs, less consistently the need for competence, with a parent's own anxiety and a child's own distress each shaping the other (Wang et al.; Segrin et al.,).

Meta-analytic effect sizes across the literature are modest, typically within the range of $r = .14$ to $.20$, meaning associations are directionally consistent but relatively small in size (Zhang and Ji; Hu et al.). Much of the evidence is drawn from cross-sectional or self-reported data collected from adolescents and university students rather than from children in early or middle childhood, limiting observational effects during development that persist over time. No longitudinal study has yet been of sufficient quality to establish that helicopter parenting precedes the outcomes attributed to it, as external factors such as child's pre-existing distress or temperament are not precluded (Vigdal and Brønnick).

Despite these limitations, existing literature suggests that parental behaviours that limit autonomy within helicopter parenting predict the poorest outcomes across social, cognitive and emotional spectrums; while parental behaviours that involve seeking information and offering emotional availability without direct intervention carries less of the same cost (Nguyen et al.). Future research should prioritise longitudinal designs within the family, capable of separating the direction of influence between parenting and child outcomes. Genetically informed designs, such as twin or adoption studies, would help establish whether shared temperament accounts for part of the association currently attributed to parenting. Cross-cultural replication is also needed to test whether the appraisal-dependent findings observed in Korean samples generalise to other collectivist contexts, to test whether parental involvement carries different normative meaning across cultures. For parents, psychologists, and educators, the results suggest the concern of helicopter parenting lies not in how involved a parent should be, but in what kinds of involvement deprives a child's own effort.

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Human Agency and Natural Autonomy: Lessons from Japanese Tree Practices
By Jeeahn Hong

Abstract

Within many Western frameworks of environmentalism, the relationship between humans and nature is often framed as a singular choice between two extremes–total domination through human intervention or preservation through a complete absence of human activity. Japanese relationships with nature are often romanticized by Western scholars as an ideal model of environmental preservation. However, by comparing two contrasting Japanese tree practices, bonsai and *chinju no mori*, this paper reveals the complexity of human-nature relationships. Drawing on the works of Chris Reed and Nina-Marie Lister, Neil Evernden, William Cronon, and Aike P. Rots, this paper explores how each practice represents a different expression of human agency. Bonsai relies on continuous human control to cultivate a miniature abstraction of the natural landscape into an urban environment, yet its survival remains constrained by the biological limits of the tree. Similarly, *chinju no mori*, or sacred Shinto forests, appear to preserve nature by completely removing human activity. However, their existence is dependent on human-created boundaries, and in some cases, deliberate ecological planning. Together, these practices show that sustainable human-nature relationships depend on negotiating boundaries and adjusting the fluidity of human agency to different ecological contexts. By reframing human agency as fluid and context-dependent, this paper argues that environmentalism is not a choice between domination and preservation, but rather an ongoing negotiation of the boundaries between human agency and natural autonomy.

Introduction

Within many Western frameworks of environmentalism, humanity's relationship with nature is treated as a choice between two extremes. Humans can completely transform the environment through urbanization and industrial development, or they can withdraw and preserve certain areas as untouched wilderness. Under this framework, intervention is often associated with destruction, while the absence of humans is often associated with preservation. However, neither extreme fully explains how humans actually interact with nature. Even environments that appear untouched are often protected through human laws, cultural beliefs, physical boundaries, and management systems.

Japan is often presented as embodying an ideal approach to environmental preservation, particularly through its perceived harmony between humans and nature. Japanese culture, especially Shinto, is frequently romanticized as having an inherent "love of nature" (Mesner 33–34). Trees, mountains, rivers, and other natural features may be understood as places where *kami*, or spiritual presences, reside. However, describing Japanese culture as inherently harmonious or environmentally friendly creates another oversimplification. It ignores the fact that Japanese relationships with nature are often contradictory. Nature may be carefully protected in one situation and intensely manipulated in another.

Two Japanese tree practices demonstrate this contradiction particularly clearly: bonsai and *chinju no mori*, or sacred shrine forests. Bonsai involves the detailed shaping, containment, and miniaturization of a living tree. It seems to represent maximum human control. In contrast, *chinju no mori* consist of forests that have historically been protected from logging, construction, and other forms of disturbance because of their religious symbolism and integration into Shinto shrines. They seem to represent the surrender of human control. However, neither practice fits completely into the categories of domination or preservation. Bonsai can only thrive when its biological limits are respected, while sacred forests only remain protected because humans actively create and enforce boundaries around them. Japanese ecological harmony is therefore not based on a complete absence of human intervention. Instead, it is produced through a fluid spectrum of agency. From the micro-managed manipulation of bonsai to the large-scale preservation of *chinju no mori*, these practices show that coexistence depends on adjusting the boundaries between human action and natural autonomy.

Theoretical Framework: Paradox in the Definition of Nature

The difficulty of describing a relationship between humans and nature begins with the word "nature" itself. Nature is often understood as existing outside of human society, as though it were independent of human influence. However, the way people define, organize, and value the natural world is shaped by human culture. Landscape architects Chris Reed and Nina-Marie Lister explain that a major Western perspective originates from a Judeo-Christian belief that humans are the dominant species and therefore have a moral responsibility to manage other species and natural resources (26). Under this perspective, nature becomes something that humans can classify, organize, control, or use.

Reed and Lister also discuss the work of literary scholar Robert Pogue Harrison, who argues that humans can only understand nature through models that are themselves human creations. The contrast between humanity and nature is therefore not completely objective; rather, it is constructed through the categories and systems people use to describe the physical world. Similarly, environmental philosopher Neil Evernden argues that simply naming something "nature" separates it from human life. According to Evernden, naming the natural world becomes "an act of domestication" that allows humans to both separate and control it (Reed and Lister 30).

William Cronon develops a similar argument in "The Trouble with Wilderness." He explains that wilderness is commonly imagined as the purest form of nature because humans appear to be absent from it. However, the idea of wilderness is itself a human cultural creation. Places described as untouched may have been inhabited, managed, or shaped by people long before they were classified as wilderness. In some cases, Indigenous communities were removed from their land so that national parks could appear empty and natural. Therefore, preservation does not always mean that human influence has disappeared. It may simply mean that certain types of human activity are hidden while others, such as tourism, law enforcement, or conservation management, remain. This criticism is important because environmental sustainability cannot be achieved by imagining humans as completely separate from nature.

Human societies already depend on and alter ecosystems. The more useful question is not whether humans should interact with nature, but how they should interact with it and under what conditions. Cronon argues for a "middle ground" between human use and total withdrawal, where people recognize their place within nature while developing more thoughtful relationships with nonhuman life (21).

Japanese environmental traditions provide one way to examine this middle ground, but they should not be treated as the complete opposite of Western environmentalism. In "Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation," religious studies scholar Aike P. Rots explains that the famous Japanese "love of nature" is partly a modern national myth (215). Some scholars have presented Shinto as an ancient ecological solution to environmental problems that they attribute to Christianity and Western industrialization. However, this comparison reduces both traditions into overly simple categories. It portrays Western cultures as destructive and Asian cultures as naturally holistic, even though both contain many conflicting environmental practices (Rots 215–16).

Therefore, this paper does not argue that Shinto is automatically environmentalist or that Japanese society has achieved a perfect relationship with nature. Instead, Japanese tree practices are useful because they reveal how a single culture can hold dramatically different attitudes toward nature at the same time. The contrast between bonsai and *chinju no mori* shows that environmental agency is contextual. Human control may be appropriate in one space, while restraint is necessary in another.

Total Control: Human Agency in Bonsai

At first glance, bonsai seems like one of the clearest examples of humans controlling nature. Although the practice developed from the Chinese tradition of *penjing*, bonsai became especially influential in Japan during the Edo period. A bonsai artist takes a living tree and confines it to a small container, pruning and wiring its branches, trimming its roots, and carefully controlling its access to water, soil, nutrients, and space. Over many years, the tree is gradually shaped into a miniature version of a much larger natural landscape.

Nearly every part of a bonsai carries meaning. The species of tree, the shape of its trunk and branches, its exposed roots, the empty spaces around it, and even the container all contribute to the overall composition. Bonsai is therefore more than just a small tree in a pot. It is an abstraction of nature that can suggest age, movement, balance, weather, and the passage of time. As recorded in the tenth-century tale Utsubo Monogatari, "A tree that is left growing in its natural state is a crude thing. It is only when it is kept close to human beings who fashion it with loving care that its shape and style acquire the ability to move one" (qtd. in Rustad). Even in these early depictions of bonsai, nature is portrayed as becoming more beautiful and meaningful through human cultivation.

From this perspective, bonsai may seem representative of an anthropocentric relationship with nature, valuing a living tree as an object of human design. The human artist decides how the tree should look, limits its growth, and brings it into a domestic setting. Bonsai became particularly significant as Japanese cities developed because it allowed people to cultivate a

controlled representation of nature within urban homes. The trees were often displayed in spaces such as the *engawa* and *tokonoma*, where they could be observed and appreciated as carefully arranged objects. In this process, the tree was removed from the scale of the forest, miniaturized, and placed within human architecture. The container in which the bonsai is grown is itself a miniature representation of the larger landscape, compressing an expansive natural environment into a confined space. These tray landscapes, as French Japanese historian Nicolas Fieve characterizes them, are recreations of a miniature world that allows humans to exist in constant symbiosis with the surrounding landscape (21-22). In other words, the physical boundary created by the container does not simply confine the tree, it deliberately frames how it is meant to be experienced.

However, bonsai does not attempt to erase every irregularity found in nature. Its aesthetics are strongly influenced by *wabi-sabi*, which values aging, asymmetry, imperfection, and incompleteness. A bonsai may be shaped to look as though it has endured strong winds, drought, erosion, or centuries of growth. Twisted trunks, uneven branches, deadwood, and empty spaces are not always treated as flaws. Instead, they are deliberately used to make the tree appear more natural, weathered, and unfinished. Rather than eliminating the unpredictability of nature, bonsai aesthetics preserve these signs of natural processes. This creates an interesting paradox. Bonsai requires an intense pursuit of perfection, yet the finished tree is meant to look imperfect. The idea of *kodawari*, or a disciplined commitment to detail and quality, helps explain this contradiction. Perfection in bonsai does not mean complete symmetry or flawlessness. Instead, it means creating a convincing *wabi-sabi* appearance—one that seems aged, irregular, and naturally formed (Pietraszko and Sobota 602-03). In other words, the artist uses highly artificial methods to produce the illusion of natural spontaneity.

However, even with this level of control, the artist can never completely determine how the tree will respond. A bonsai remains a living organism. Each species has its own needs, growth patterns, tolerances, and biological limitations. A branch may not bend in the intended direction, or the tree may react poorly to pruning, temperature changes, insufficient light, or damage to its roots. Without consistent care, it will die, but too much intervention can be just as harmful. The survival of a bonsai therefore depends on an ongoing negotiation between the artist's vision and the tree's biology. Humans may control much of its visible form, but they cannot override its genetic and ecological foundations. The tree must be closely observed over time, and the artist must respond to its changing condition. This means knowing when to prune, when to wire, when to water, and, perhaps most importantly, when to leave the tree alone.

Bonsai represents an extreme form of human agency, but it also reveals the limits of that agency. Human control can only be sustained when it operates within the biological boundaries set by the living organism. Rather than proving that humans can fully dominate nature, bonsai shows that even the most carefully manipulated environment depends on attentiveness, restraint, and respect. Control is possible, but only through cooperation with natural processes, demonstrating that human agency is most effective when it works with the rules of nature.

Total Surrender: Human Restraint in *Chinju no Mori*

At the opposite end of the spectrum from bonsai are *shinboku* and *chinju no mori*. In Shinto traditions, natural features such as trees, mountains, rivers, and rocks are believed to be places where *kami,* or divine presences, reside. Some trees, known as *shinboku*, are regarded as sacred because they are associated with or believed to contain a *kami* and are often specifically marked with a *shimenawa* rope to signify their sacred status. These sacred trees frequently serve as the focal point of Shinto shrines, around which *chinju no mori,* or sacred shrine forests, have historically developed. Because these spaces are considered sacred, activities such as logging, construction, and resource extraction have historically been restricted within them. Unlike bonsai, where humans directly shape nature, sacred forests appear to require humans to limit their own actions, allowing nature to remain separate from the surrounding landscape.

However, it would be misleading to describe *chinju no mori* as completely untouched nature. These forests did not survive simply because humans refrained from intervening. Their preservation depended on people recognizing them as sacred, establishing boundaries around them, and enforcing cultural taboos against disturbing them. As described in *Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation*, shrine forests can range from a small group of old sacred trees to large areas of woodland. What connects them is their relationship to a shrine and their separation from the "ordinary" rural or urban landscape. Their sacred status historically protected them from exploitation because violating the forest, such as by stealing its timber, could be seen as an offense against the shrine's deities (Rots 219). In this way, preservation is also a form of human agency. Humans may not control the shape of each tree as directly as they do in bonsai, but they still control how the surrounding society interacts with the forest. The boundaries around the sacred space determine which actions are allowed and which are prohibited. As a result, the forest appears to be left alone only because people have actively created the conditions that allow it to remain protected. The absence of visible intervention is not the absence of human agency, but rather, a different expression of it.

The histories of these forests also complicate the belief that they are always ancient or completely natural. Some *chinju no mori* may contain ancient trees and remnants of earlier vegetation, but others have been replanted or deliberately established. The forest surrounding Meiji Jingu, for example, was planted in the 1920s rather than preserved from an ancient woodland. Its planners envisioned an "eternal forest" that would gradually become dominated by long-lived species such as *Zelkova serrata* and *Ginkgo biloba*. To achieve this, the planners developed a 150-year planting plan in which faster-growing trees were planted to establish an initial forest structure while slower-growing broadleaf species were expected to gradually take over (Moore and Atherton 25). Meiji Jingu shows that intervention and preservation are not necessarily opposites. The forest was carefully designed and planted by humans, but the goal was not to permanently control every part of the landscape. Instead, human intervention created the starting conditions for an ecological process that could continue beyond the direct control of its planners. Carefully engineered intervention acted as a catalyst, allowing the forest to become more self-sustaining over time.

This is different from the form of control seen in bonsai. In bonsai, human involvement must remain constant. The tree has to be repeatedly pruned, wired, watered, and reshaped in order to maintain its intended form. Every aspect of human intervention, from the selection of the container to the pruning and careful regulation of growth, is directed toward shaping the tree itself. In *chinju no mori*, by contrast, human control is more often directed toward the boundaries around the forest rather than the individual trees within it. Humans decide where development must stop, which resources cannot be removed, and what kinds of behavior are inappropriate within the sacred space. Rather than regulating natural growth, these boundaries regulate human behavior, allowing ecological processes to proceed with minimal interference.

The protection of these forests has also changed over time. Modernization, westernization, logging, and urban development contributed to the destruction or erosion of many sacred forest traditions. Later efforts to associate Shinto with environmentalism brought *chinju no mori* back into public discussion, though some scholars note these narratives were also shaped by religious, political, and national interests rather than by purely ecological concerns. As a result, scholars caution against presenting Shinto as an ancient religion that has always been inherently environmental, arguing that such portrayals oversimplify both its history and its beliefs.

Still, the presence of political, cultural, or religious motivations does not make the preservation of these forests meaningless. As *Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation* argues, "conservatism and conservationism are not mutually exclusive," meaning that nationalist motivations can exist alongside a genuine desire to protect forests and cultural landscapes (Rots 226). The important point is that sacred forests do not survive because humans are absent. They survive because humans have created rules, meanings, and boundaries that restrict their own behavior. In this case, human agency is not used to shape nature directly, but to limit the actions that might destroy it.

Fluid Agency: Rethinking Human-Nature Relationships

On the surface, bonsai and *chinju no mori* seem to represent completely opposite relationships between humans and nature. Bonsai places a tree inside a small pot and requires constant human intervention. *Chinju no mori*, on the other hand, restricts human activity to allow ecological processes to evolve. One seems to maximize human control, while the other tries to minimize it. Yet both practices ultimately depend on boundaries. A bonsai artist must work within the biological limits of the tree. The tree cannot simply be forced into any shape without being damaged or killed. In a sacred forest, humans create social and physical boundaries that protect the ecosystem from logging, construction, and urban expansion. Even though these boundaries are created by people, they are what allow the forest to continue growing.

The main difference is not whether humans have control, but where that control is directed. In bonsai, humans control the form of the tree while still being limited by its biology. By contrast, *chinju no mori*, humans control their own behavior around the forest, allowing ecological processes to continue more independently. Human agency does not disappear in either

practice. Instead, it shifts in its scale, location, and purpose. This challenges the idea that sustainability requires choosing between complete human domination and complete preservation. Bonsai is not entirely destructive because the tree's survival depends on careful observation, patience, and responsiveness. At the same time, sacred forests are not completely untouched. Their survival often depends on religious traditions, historical management, legal protection, and the deliberate creation of boundaries. Both practices exist within what Cronon describes as a middle ground between total human use and total human absence.

This middle ground is especially important when considering environmental design within the context of urban design. Urbanization does not have to be a matter of developing high-density infrastructure while completely separating nature from human activity. Different environments require different levels of intervention. A street tree may need regular pruning and irrigation to survive, while a restored wetland may be dependent on intensive human intervention during its early stages before becoming self-sustaining. An old urban forest, by contrast, may benefit most when construction and development are restricted around it. Sustainability comes from recognizing these differences rather than applying the same approach to every environment.

Human intervention is therefore not automatically harmful to nature. It becomes harmful when it ignores ecological limits and treats living systems as passive materials that can be controlled without consequences. At the same time, leaving nature alone is not always the most sustainable option. A forest may still need protection from development, invasive species management, or restoration after past damage. The harmony often associated with Japanese landscapes may therefore be less of an inherent spiritual quality than the result of carefully maintained cultural and spatial boundaries. In one case, humans bring nature into the home and care for it closely. In another, they recognize a space as sacred and limit their own access to its resources. Together, these practices demonstrate that the sustainable human-nature relationship is defined by its fluidity and the continual negotiations of the boundaries between them.

Conclusion

Japanese relationships with nature are often romanticized as evidence that Japanese culture naturally values and protects the environment. However, the contrast between bonsai and *chinju no mori* reveals a much more complicated relationship between humans and nature. Bonsai transforms a living tree through years of pruning, wiring, containment, and care, while sacred shrine forests restrict human activity in order to protect larger ecosystems. Even so, bonsai depends on respecting the biological limits of the tree, while sacred forests rely on human involvement through rituals, boundaries, restoration, and legal protection.

Together, these practices show that human agency exists on a spectrum. Sustainability does not require people to constantly control nature, but it also does not require humans to completely remove themselves from it. Instead, it requires people to recognize when intervention is necessary, when restraint is more appropriate, and when their role may need to change over time.

The larger lesson is not that Japanese culture has solved environmental problems or that Shinto automatically functions as an environmental philosophy. Rather, these practices demonstrate that fluid agency depends on context and adaptability in shaping human-nature relationships. Humans are already part of ecological systems, and every attempt to define, design, manage, or preserve nature reflects human values. Sustainable coexistence therefore depends not on eliminating human intervention, but on creating respectful boundaries while also remaining willing to negotiate and redefine them.

Environmental sustainability cannot be reduced to a choice between complete domination and complete surrender. It requires an ongoing negotiation between human needs and nature's capacity to grow and function on its own.

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To What Extent Does Consumer Culture Contribute to the Rise of Anti-Intellectualism in Modern Society? By Lulu Hsueh

Introduction

Throughout history, intellectual exchange has been shaped by both ideas and the environments in which they are shared. In eighteenth-century Europe, coffeehouses were not simply places to drink coffee; they functioned as informal centers of debate, learning, and civic participation. As Cowan explains, these spaces were often referred to as "penny universities," where individuals from different social classes could engage in discussions about politics, science, and philosophy, contributing to the formation of public opinion and democratic culture (Cowan, 2005). In contrast, many contemporary spaces prioritize consumption and individual experience over sustained dialogue. This shift raises a key question: how has the move toward convenience and individual use affected the rigor of public discourse?

Unlike earlier societies, where daily life was largely organized around production and survival, modern society has transitioned into one structured by consumption, convenience, and market-driven behavior. Within this context, consumer culture has expanded rapidly, shaping both economic activity and patterns of interaction. This expansion has coincided with growing concerns about anti-intellectualism, which Hofstadter defines as a recurring cultural tendency characterized by distrust of expertise and skepticism toward abstract thinking (Hofstadter, 1963). While Hofstadter demonstrates that anti-intellectualism is not a new phenomenon, contemporary scholars such as Jacoby and Nichols argue that modern conditions have intensified its visibility. The decline of serious reading, the rise of entertainment-focused media, and the widespread availability of information without corresponding expertise have all contributed to a cultural environment where intellectual engagement is increasingly devalued.

Given these overlapping developments, the relationship between consumer culture and anti-intellectualism requires careful examination. Consumer culture, interacting with historical patterns, technological change, and social fragmentation, exerts significant influence in shaping both the spaces in which people interact and the incentives that guide their behavior. By examining the transformation of public spaces, the emphasis on instant gratification, and the restructuring of social and educational environments, it becomes clear that consumer culture plays a substantial role in amplifying anti-intellectual tendencies. At the same time, this influence is not absolute, and understanding its limits is essential for evaluating possible responses.

Consumer Culture and the Transformation of Public Spaces

The contrast between historical coffeehouses and modern cafés illustrates how consumer culture reshapes intellectual life at a structural level (Oldenburg, 2013). In early modern Europe, coffeehouses enabled what Cowan describes as a democratization of knowledge, where intellectual exchange was not confined to universities or elite institutions (Cowan, 2005). Individuals participated in discussions that crossed class boundaries, allowing ideas to circulate

in ways that contributed to Enlightenment thinking and the development of civic discourse. Though not formally educational, they cultivated inquiry, debate, and critical reasoning that supported intellectual engagement in everyday life.

In contemporary society, however, similar spaces often operate within a different framework. While modern coffee shops allow social interaction, their primary function is commercial. The expectation to purchase, the design of the space, and even the social norms surrounding behavior are shaped by consumer logic. Rather than encouraging open-ended discussion, these environments frequently prioritize individual activities such as working on laptops or browsing social media. Although this shift does not eliminate the possibility of intellectual exchange, it reduces the likelihood that such engagement becomes a consistent feature of everyday interaction.

This shift becomes more significant when considered alongside broader cultural patterns: Jacoby (2008) argues that public discourse has increasingly moved away from sustained, evidence-based discussion toward opinion-driven and entertainment-oriented formats. As intellectual engagement declines in social spaces, they become more susceptible to such trends; in this sense, consumer culture does not directly suppress intellectualism but rather alters the environments that once made intellectual engagement accessible and routine.

American culture has historically valued practical success over abstract thought, Hofstadter notes (Hofstader 1963). Consumer culture intensifies this correlation by linking social value to economic activity and visible consumption. As public spaces are defined by consumption, the purpose of gathering changes, and with it, the role of intellectual exchange—therefore, this outcome does not eliminate intellectualism but displaces it into specialized or isolated contexts. This displacement suggests that addressing anti-intellectualism may require more than increasing access to information; it may involve deliberately reconstructing environments that encourage sustained discussion, even through small external incentives that reintroduce such habits into everyday life.

Immediacy and Intellectual Engagement

Given the established gap between intellectual interaction and modern interactive spaces is already established, a second supporting contention is that the influence of consumer culture extends beyond physical spaces into patterns of attention and cognition. Modern consumer economies prioritize immediate satisfaction, offering products and experiences that deliver quick rewards with minimal effort. This emphasis aligns with what Nichols identifies as a key feature of contemporary anti-intellectualism: the tendency to equate access to information with understanding, while avoiding the sustained effort required for expertise (Nichols, 2007).

Intellectual engagement, by contrast, requires time, patience, and the willingness to engage with complexity. Reading complex texts, evaluating evidence, and engaging in debate require forms of attention that are not easily compatible with a culture centered on speed and convenience. Jacoby connects this shift to the decline of serious reading, arguing that media environments prioritize short, emotionally engaging content over in-depth analysis;

consequently, individuals may become less accustomed to engaging with complex ideas due to surrounding culture not rewarding such engagement (Jacoby, 2008).

A major factor is technological platforms operating within consumer-driven models. Social media algorithms prioritize content that maximizes engagement which often favors simplicity, emotional intensity, and immediacy. Nichols notes that this environment can create the illusion that all perspectives are equally valid, which undermines the authority of expertise (Nichols, 2017). Since many individuals rely on these platforms as primary information sources, they may believe fake or generated information is true—thereby prioritizing accessibility over accuracy.

However, it is important to recognize that this process is not purely imposed from above. Merkley asserts that anti-intellectual attitudes are also shaped by social identity and community dynamics, as individuals may reject expert knowledge not only due to its complexity but also because it contradicts their social group's beliefs (Merkley, 2020). In this context, consumer culture interacts with such social factors, reinforcing patterns of thinking that prioritize personal experience over abstract reasoning.

Extending the argument that modern spaces suppress public intellectual discussion, an add-on factor contributing to anti-intellectualism is the way individuals engage with information through the influence of consumer culture. While neither directly eliminates intellectual capacity, both still change the incentives and habits that support intellectual engagement, thus making it less central to everyday life. If sustained engagement is no longer routinely practiced, then rebuilding intellectual discourse may require environments that first attract participation through external motivation before gradually encouraging deeper, more intrinsic forms of inquiry.

Social Fragmentation and Declining Intellectual Communities

Beyond shaping individual habits, consumer culture also influences the social frameworks that support intellectual exchange, altering how, and whether, people engage with ideas in shared settings. Historically, communities, civic organizations, and educational institutions provided opportunities for sustained dialogue and collective learning by creating conditions that supported sustained intellectual engagement. In contemporary society, however, these structures have become increasingly fragmented. Nichols points to a growing distrust of institutions, including universities and research organizations, which weakens the authority of expertise (Nichols 2017). He argues that skepticism toward universities and research bodies has expanded beyond healthy critique into a broader dismissal of expertise itself, a claim supported by Merkley, whose research demonstrates that individuals embedded in ideologically homogeneous social networks are more likely to reject expert consensus, particularly when such expertise conflicts with personal beliefs or group identity. When expertise is viewed as unreliable and fragmented, its "authority" depends less on institutional credibility and more on whether it aligns with existing beliefs. This inevitably affects the notion of intellectualism itself, as rejection of institutional credibility makes sustained, evidence-based conversations more difficult to maintain and validate with sources. Again, extending to the whole anti-intellectual agenda,

without consistent exposure to rigorous discourse or mechanisms that encourage evaluation of evidence, discussions and disagreements shift from critical engagement to reflexive rebuttals, providing a new, otiose type of "discussion" in the name of "intellectual conversations".

Aside from using credible sources to model one's argument, a change in how society perceives education also neglects the value of learning critical thinking and personal growth in favor of only gaining vocational skills; when education is framed primarily as a pathway to economic success, rather than intellectual exploration, the intrinsic worth of knowledge is overlooked. Nichols argues that this instrumental view of education contributes to the erosion of expertise, as education is treated primarily as preparation for employment and students are encouraged to focus on outcomes such as grades or credentials rather than depth of understanding. This substantially correlates with Hofstadter's observation that cultures emphasizing practical success may struggle to sustain respect for intellectual inquiry. Over time, this emphasis can weaken the perceived importance of engaging critically with complex ideas; the result is a cycle in which social structures that once supported intellectual engagement are weakened, making it more difficult for individuals to participate in meaningful discourse. Therefore, consumer culture does not create this cycle alone, but it reinforces the conditions that allow it to persist, even in education.

Counterargument: Consumer Culture as an Expanding Intellectual Resource

At the same time, it is reductive to frame consumer culture solely as decline, particularly when many of the same market-driven forces have also contributed to a significant expansion in access to information and educational materials, making lectures, articles, and discussions widely available to those traditionally rejected entry into institutional spaces. Digital platforms now host recorded university courses, open-access journals, and forums where ideas circulate far beyond the boundaries of formal education, and in this sense, there are surface-level similarities to the environments described by Cowan, where access to printed materials and conversation once broadened participation in intellectual life. This expansion allows individuals to pursue knowledge independently, often guided by personal interest rather than institutional requirements, supporting the argument that contemporary society offers broader entry points into intellectual exploration than in previous periods. At the same time, this form of access operates under different conditions, as information is frequently encountered in isolation, separated from the sustained, face-to-face exchanges that historically shaped how ideas were passed around.

These differences become more apparent when considering the limits of access alone, particularly in relation to how individuals process and evaluate what they encounter. Tom Nichols argues that the availability of information does not inherently lead to understanding, especially in cases where individuals have not developed the skills necessary to assess credibility or engage with complex arguments, a concern that is reinforced by Jacoby, who suggests that the sheer volume of accessible content can encourage forms of engagement that remain brief and surface-level, as readers move quickly between sources without sustained analysis (Nichols, 2017)(Jacoby, 2008). This blurs the distinction between familiarity and comprehension, which

complicates the assumption that increased access naturally leads to deeper intellectual involvement. In contrast, the coffeehouses examined by Cowan were structured around ongoing interaction, where ideas were not only shared but actively debated, and where participation required a degree of attentiveness that extended beyond initial exposure. Digital environments, though expansive, enable access on an unprecedented scale but do not consistently reinforce prolonged discussion or collective reasoning, limiting how far access alone supports meaningful intellectual engagement.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the connection between consumer culture's influence on anti-intellectualism is too extensive to be summarized fully within a single argument, and its broader impact on intellectual life depends less on the sheer availability of information than on whether contemporary society can reestablish the conditions that make sustained engagement possible, particularly in shared environments where ideas are examined through discussion rather than encountered in passing. While access to knowledge has expanded in ways that would have been unimaginable in the contexts described by Cowan, the persistence of fragmented interaction and declining institutional trust, as noted by Nichols, indicates that exposure alone does not ensure participation, nor does it recreate the forms of accountability and attentiveness that historically accompanied intellectual exchange. This raises a more immediate concern that extends beyond identifying causes: the absence of environments that sustain engagement long enough for evaluation and refinement. In this context, any effort to address anti-intellectualism cannot begin with the assumption that individuals will naturally seek out depth or complexity, particularly when existing social and economic structures continue to reward speed, convenience, and individual preference. Instead, the more pressing task is to reconsider how public spaces—whether physical or digital—might be organized in ways that first provide external incentives for participation, even if such incentives initially operate at a superficial level, before gradually fostering the conditions under which intrinsic motivation can develop through repeated exposure to meaningful discourse. This is not a resolution to the problem so much as a recognition of its scale, because even the presence of incentives does not guarantee engagement, and in many cases may remain a low priority within the broader patterns of everyday life; however, without some form of deliberate effort to restore the expectation of discussion within shared environments, the gap between access to information and active intellectual involvement is unlikely to narrow, leaving the broader cultural position of intellectual inquiry uncertain.

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Intergenerational Comparison of Code-Switching Norms between English and Cantonese in Emotional Instagram Posts By Sze Nga Nicole Tang

Abstract

This paper focuses on the differences between generations in terms of Cantonese–English code-switching in emotional posts on Instagram by Gen Z and Millennials in Hong Kong. Despite the fact that earlier studies have been dedicated to code-switching related to identity, education, bilingualism, and other issues, only a few attempts have been made regarding the investigation of generational differences in terms of code-switching in an informal online environment. Using the qualitative thematic analysis method suggested by Braun and Clarke, 30 Instagram posts of Hong Kong fencers (15 Gen Z and 15 Millennials) were examined. The coding was performed according to the linguistic patterns used, and the posts were divided into categories of social identity, linguistic norms, emotional expression, linguistic creativity, and complex vocabulary. However, generation-related differences were observed. The participants from Generation Z displayed more linguistic creativity and more pronounced local Hong Kong identity, whereas the Millennials had a more equal bilingual emotional expression and a tendency to use more linguistic norms. The gender-related observations also showed that the male participants performed more code-switching, probably due to the presence of more public athlete accounts in this sample. In general, the results of the study show that the process of code-switching on Instagram is not only communicative but is also used as a tool for building one's identity, expressing emotions, and creating something new linguistically. It is worth noting that the present research adds to sociolinguistics by observing intergenerational code-switching between Cantonese and English languages in social media.

Keywords

Code-switching; Generation; Gender; Linguistic creativity; Cantonese-English; Comparative Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

Hong Kong was a British colony for 156 years until its return to China in 1997. During its colonial era, English was established as the sole official language, while Cantonese was recognized as a national language in 1974. As a result of British colonization, "Chinglish" (the blending of Chinese and English terms in different contexts) developed as a contact language and is now integrated into the colloquial dialect in Hong Kong, Macau, Guangdong, and Guangxi through institutional education and daily conversation (Zheng, 2018).

The integration of these two languages in Hong Kong reflects the common sociolinguistic practice of code-switching in its community. Code-switching is defined as the common practice of switching between two or more languages among bilingual speakers, indicating language adaptability to various social situations. Code-switching often "serves as a useful tool for expressing identity and fostering group solidarity", which is a behavior seen among teens

wanting to fit in with their peers (Azlan & Narasuman, 2013; De Fina, 2007; Sophocleous, 2012). This is supported by Bucholtz and Hall's Emergence principle, which states how people often use language to position themselves within social groups, therefore creating a sense of belonging and social identification (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). Like all bilingual cities, code-switching is frequently utilized by the urban youth generation in Hong Kong, among Millennials and Gen Z. The rise of social media presence among urban youth in recent years has encouraged code-switching among this age group because social media serves as a convenient and non-restrictive platform for self-expression, unlike formal educational environments.

It is crucial to understand the reasons and motivations behind code-switching among Gen Z and Millennials because it helps illustrate social and cultural changes across generations, therefore enhancing communication in a constantly evolving world. Existing research primarily examines code-switching and its connection to identity and cultural belonging in society, including through pop culture, music, and entertainment (Nazri and Kassim, 2023). In particular, sociolinguistic research has primarily focused on youth in academic settings, such as in the classroom, or on general social media presence with a wide range of methods and through multiple platforms, such as Lin (1996).

The literature on code-switching has also focused on intergenerational comparison and on the phenomenon's effects on bilingual and bicultural societies, e.g., Alfonzetti, G. (2013). However, current research includes only very limited discussions of code-switching in intergenerational Cantonese contexts. Indeed, although code-switching between Cantonese and English in Hong Kong has been studied, these studies generally lack generational comparisons (e.g., Yim, 2020). Moreover, as seen in Wong (2006), while comparative intergenerational studies on Hong Kong and Cantonese do exist, they focus on slang and youth language rather than code-switching. This research paper addresses these gaps by exploring the intersection of code-switching in Hong Kong and generational differences.

Firstly, the research paper will be a comparison between Gen Z and Millennial code-switching in Cantonese and English in Hong Kong only. By concentrating on a single location, I can identify clearer patterns in linguistic norms of code-switching. Secondly, all the data collection will be done on Instagram because different social media platforms can display different linguistic norms. All the Instagram accounts in my data collection belong to professional or non-professional fencing accounts. Focusing on accounts outside a typical academic setting is valuable because this topic has not been previously investigated, and was chosen as an easily accessible data set. Thirdly, by comparing two generations, my study examines how "no language is static" (Haugen, 1966), as shown by evolving linguistic norms between generations. Fourthly, by controlling the research platform variable, I can reduce this source of variation. This can be seen in Sattar (2025), which shows that urban youth use code-switching across multiple social media platforms for different purposes. Fifthly, the emergence of linguistic creativity will be explored in this study, a theme that has emerged in code-switching practices between logographic languages and English, and a topic that contains limited exploration in code-switching contexts.

2. Methodology

2.1 Aims

This study aims to analyze the linguistic patterns of code-switching on Instagram between Gen Z and Millennials in Cantonese and English in Hong Kong. This study mainly focuses on participants aged 14 to 45. By comparing these two generations, conclusions can be drawn about the generational evolution in communication patterns, particularly how different generations use code-switching for social identification and emotional expression purposes on social media.

The objectives of the research are as follows

1. Acquire data through Instagram from Gen Z and Millennials in Hong Kong and organize it through Google Sheets for further analysis
2. Perform qualitative analysis of the data and identify recurring themes through linguistic patterns of Cantonese-English code-switching among each generation
3. Perform a qualitative comparison of the identified patterns using charts and graphs
4. Interpret how the identified code-switching patterns link to identity and self-expression of teens on social media platforms

2.2 Research Design

The research method employed is qualitative, which is a "methodology for scientific inquiry that emphasizes the depth and richness of context and voice in understanding social phenomena" (Lim, 2025). Utilizing a consistent qualitative data research method throughout the research paper led to trustworthy results and reliable findings.

A purposeful criterion was set to collect data for my paper:

1. Professional or non-professional fencer from Hong Kong
2. Gen Z or Millennial Generation (Ages 14 to 29 or ages 30 to 45)
3. Instagram user
4. Posts should contain at least one code-switching pattern (e.g., linguistic creativity, Chinese characters, pinyin)

Fifteen posts were selected for each generation group following the criteria above. The final data set is unstructured and naturally occurring, therefore making the data more authentic and inclusive.

2.3 Data Analysis

This study employed insightful thematic analysis to identify Cantonese- English code-switching linguistic patterns across generations by following Braun and Clarke's qualitative

analysis framework. This can be seen through the Google Sheets analysis, which begins with the familiarisation of Instagram captions, generation of initial codes for each line of the caption, sorting the codes into overarching themes, reviewing if similar themes occur throughout the dataset, defining and naming identified themes such as “emotional expression (positive)”, and preparing bar charts and graphs to summarize findings.

After the data collection stage, the data was analyzed in Google Sheets through the following steps:

1. Copy and paste the post from the user’s Instagram caption in its original form under the “Post” column.
2. Separate the fifteen posts into the two different generation groups.
3. Google Translate the post caption to English when the majority of the caption is in Cantonese. Then, modify the contents based on linguistic skills under the “Translation” column.
4. Add and fill in the “Gender”, “Age Group”, “Post”, “Translation”, “Codes”, “Themes”, “Analysis (Code-Switching)”, “Majority of Text” (English or Cantonese), “Public or Private Account”, and “Tone” (of post) columns in the Google Sheet.
5. Analyze every line of the post captions and prescribe a keyword that best describes the content of the line under the “Codes” column. The codes in this study are specific to the content of each line. An example of this is: “-celebration” if the user expresses their joy after receiving an award.
6. After assigning different codes to each post, identify common themes based on the code words under the “Themes” column. An example of this is: the theme “emotional expression (positive)” if quite a few lines of the post include positive feelings.
7. Analyze the purpose of the code-switching depending on the length, location, and timing in the post caption under the “Analysis (Code-switching)” column. The purpose of the code-switching should be related to the identified “Themes” and “Analysis (Code-switching)”. An example of this is: The author switches to English for the words "moment" and "feel" for social identification (age).
8. After all the data is analyzed and processed in the Google Sheet, generate charts and bar graphs on the trends of code-switching between gender, generation, and within each generation group.

2.4 Participants

Data were anonymously collected from a total of 30 participants for analysis. There is a mix of professional and non-professional fencers, public and private accounts, different educational backgrounds, and different genders.

2.5 Ethics

The data used in this study were anonymously collected from participants. To protect privacy and confidentiality, no personal information was revealed in the study.

3. Results

After analyzing the data, the following codes emerged as predominant. The codes were grouped into different themes, and several predominant themes were analyzed

3.1 Code Identification

The codes identified from the data collection include:

- Celebration
- Emotional
- Gratitude
- Encouragement
- Memory
- Reflection
- Humour
- Inquiry
- Formal/informal
- Typical/ atypical winning post
- Simple/complex vocab
- Birthday
- Descriptive
- Podium
- Happiness
- Gen Z slang: “aura”
- Regret
- Hope
- Sadness
- Love
- Result

The themes identified from the data collection include:

- Technical precision
- Emotional expression (positive)
- Emotional expression (negative)
- Linguistic norms
- Social identification (age)
- Reflection (positive)
- Reflection (gratitude)
- Reflection (celebratory)
- Linguistic creativity
- Humour
- Celebration

- Encouragement
- Social identification (age- mental health)

The discussion groups these codes under the themes identified above, e.g., “emotional expression (positive)” can be associated with the codes “gratitude”, “emotion”, “happiness”, “celebration”, and “reflection.” This aligns with Gottlieb (2021)'s paper on how gratitude is “related to positive emotions and wellbeing”, including feelings such as happiness. Another example would be the theme of “technical precision,” which can be associated with the codes “complex vocab”, “podium”, and “result”.

Currently, there hasn’t been much focus on the emotive aspect of code-switching. Instead, it investigates more about identification and interaction between communities using code-switching. However, in this dataset, clear linguistic patterns surrounding emotional content have been identified, especially between Gen Z and Millennials in Cantonese-English code-switching contexts. Based on these newly identified patterns, themes such as “linguistic creativity”, “emotional expression (positive)”, and “emotional expression (negative)” were added after undergoing thorough thematic analysis.

3.2 Common Themes and Definitions

After conducting extensive thematic analysis, these themes were identified as the most prevalent reasons for code-switching, and graphs were made based on how often they appeared throughout the data set:

- Linguistic Norms
    - Definition: The user code-switches a specific word/phrase because it is how it is commonly said in a community
- Social Identification
    - Definition: The user code-switches this way as it is how they linguistically gain a sense of belonging with their social group
- Ease of Expression
    - Definition: The user code-switches this way as it is how they usually express themselves emotionally
- Complex Vocabulary
    - Definition: The user employs advanced and formal vocabulary into their posts through code-switching (e.g., idioms, formal or academic vocabulary)
- Positive Feelings in English
    - Definition: The user code-switches specific words/phrases to emphasize positivity

4. Discussion

4.1 Themes vs Generation

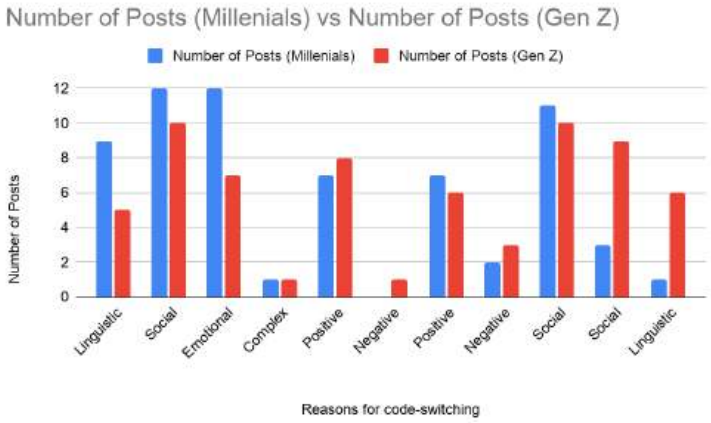

Figure 1: Number of Posts (Millennials) vs Number of Posts (Gen Z)

Code-switching emerged in all identified themes for both generations throughout the dataset.

Among both generations, the theme of "social identification" most frequently appeared with 10 posts among Gen Z users and 12 posts among Millennial users. This indicates their tendency to code-switch between Cantonese and English on Instagram as a means of identifying with their age group and Hong Kong athlete identity. This is supported by Khalilli (2025), who states that code-switching "speakers use language to signal belonging" and to act as a "marker of ethnic identity in multilingual communities". Similarly, the theme of "linguistic norms", namely, code-switching due to norms in the linguistic community, is a common reason for code-switching, which results in the frequent appearance of this theme in the dataset with 5 Gen Z users and 9 Millennial users code-switching due to linguistic norms. An example of this would be technical language, which is frequently used by athletes.

Other frequently appearing themes among both generations include "emotional expression", with 7 Gen Z users and 12 Millennial users, signifying their comfort in emotionally expressing their thoughts through code-switching in different languages on Instagram (Williams et al. 2019). More specifically, when discussing positive feelings, the number of posts expressing "positive feelings in English" and "positive feelings in Cantonese" among Millennial users was equivalent, with 7 posts identified in each theme. This suggests that Millennial users are equally flexible when expressing positive emotions in both languages, potentially due to increased bilingual exposure through education and online communication in Hong Kong, as reflected in their comfort in switching between the two languages. Li (2022) acknowledges that Hong Kong's 'trilingual and biliterate' language policy expects students to be equally comfortable in English, Cantonese, and Putonghua since 1997, which might be a cause for the results found from the dataset. However, 6 Gen Z users expressed "positive feelings in English" and 8 Gen Z users conveyed "positive feelings in Cantonese", which shows a slight imbalance in language preference between the two generations.

Gen Z and Millennials have similar linguistic patterns for negative feelings in this dataset. Both Gen Z and Millennial users had more posts about “negative feelings in Cantonese”. This aligns with Lestari (2026), who indicates that when people target emotional expression, local languages are utilized to express “emotional authenticity” and “relational closeness”. Cantonese is the preferred language for negative emotional expression as it is the local language of Hong Kong, and therefore feels more natural for local athletes to emotionally express themselves through this language.

Another theme with unexpected results would be “linguistic creativity”. According to the dataset, 6 Gen Z users used linguistic creativity, while only 1 Millennial user did so. This suggests that Gen Z users treat Instagram as a more creative outlet for informal self-expression through code-switching, possibly due to their private accounts. Millennials have to keep their posts more comprehensive, as most have public accounts with sponsorships. It also indicates the evolution of language between generations as Gen Z users defied typical language norms on online platforms and created their own way of communication for convenience and easier self-expression. Gonzales and Tsang (2023) support this claim because code-switching was found to help participants "engage in socialization and construct bilingual and Hongkonger identities”. Similarly, another example would be the theme of “social identification (HK)” which appeared among 9 Gen Z users, while only 3 Millennials employed it. This indicates a stronger desire for cultural belonging, specifically connecting their language expressions to the Hong Kong Cantonese dialect.

Overall, as seen in the bar graph above, Gen Z and Millennial users code-switch in similar amounts across all themes.

4.2 Themes vs Gender

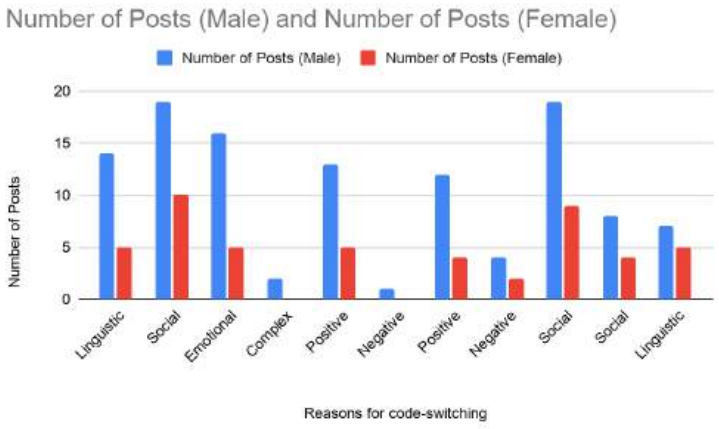

Figure 2: Number of Posts (Male) and Number of Posts (Female)

Males code-switched more frequently compared to females across all themes. The biggest gap between the genders appears in “social identification (age)”, where male Instagram users produced 19 posts and female Instagram users produced 9 posts. This suggests that male users in this dataset often use code-switching to express a sense of belonging with their age group through linguistic patterns such as nicknames, humour, and encouragements like “Let’s go!”.

Figure 3: Number of Sponsorship Accounts across both Genders

Another example would be the theme of “emotional expression”, with 16 male users and 5 female users, and “social identification (age)” with 19 male users versus 9 female users. All these examples suggest that gender does influence code-switching. Overall, the results generated from the dataset yield unexpected results. The fact that male users appeared to code-switch more often than female users is contrary to previous studies about stronger female emotional expression, as seen in Chaplin (2015). This also suggests that code-switching in this dataset might be due to the content factor of the posts and the nature of these user accounts - 11 male versus 2 female users have public accounts with sponsorships in this dataset (as seen on the bar graph above).

This claim can be supported by the exceptions where male and female users had similar amounts of posts in the “linguistic creativity” and “complex vocabulary” theme, with slight differences between 7 male users versus 5 female users, and 2 male users versus 0 female users, respectively. This implies that users are willing to experiment with different ways of code-switching instead of sticking to conventional methods. Furthermore, as mentioned above, account nature is influential and contributes to the post captions because public sponsorship accounts often have to contain content that appeals to their audience. In the case of users being

athletes from Hong Kong, their post captions have to appeal to the Hong Kong community and maintain their reputations.

4.3 Comparison: Genders Within Each Generation

By comparing genders within each generation, one can observe that themes shift with age.

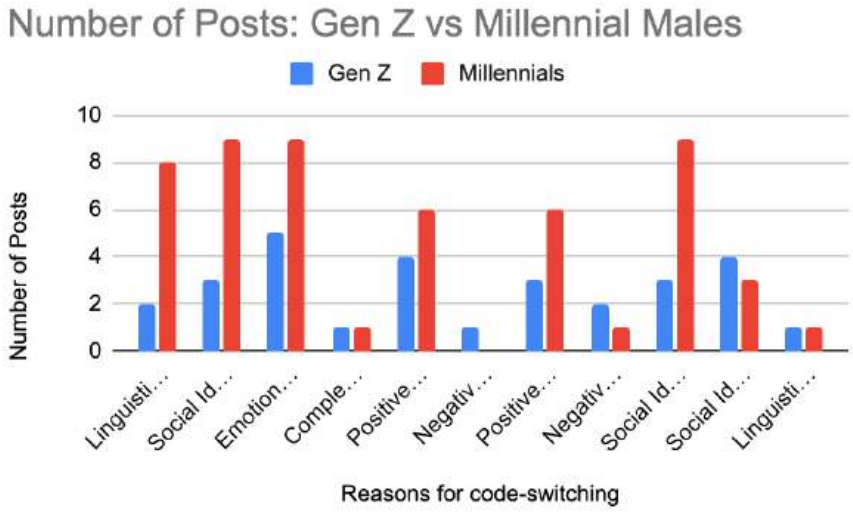

Figure 4: Number of Posts: Gen Z vs Millennial Males

It is observed that more Millennial male users are willing to freely express themselves on Instagram. This is supported by "social identification" and "emotional expression" themes, where Millennial males have exceeded Gen Z users (9 users versus 3 users and 9 users versus 5 users, respectively) and suggests that Millennial males are more frequently represented in self-expression themes. This aligns with Gallegos (2018), which suggests that Instagram functions as a self-expression platform for males, allowing them to reveal parts of their identity online. The only time when Gen Z males slightly exceeded Millennial males was when 4 Gen Z male users and 3 Millennial males code-switched according to the theme of "social identification (HK)". This might be due to common linguistic norms practiced among Gen Z males since code-switching in Hong Kong establishes a sense of belonging and "mutual identification" between local communities (Chui, Liu, & Mak, 2016).

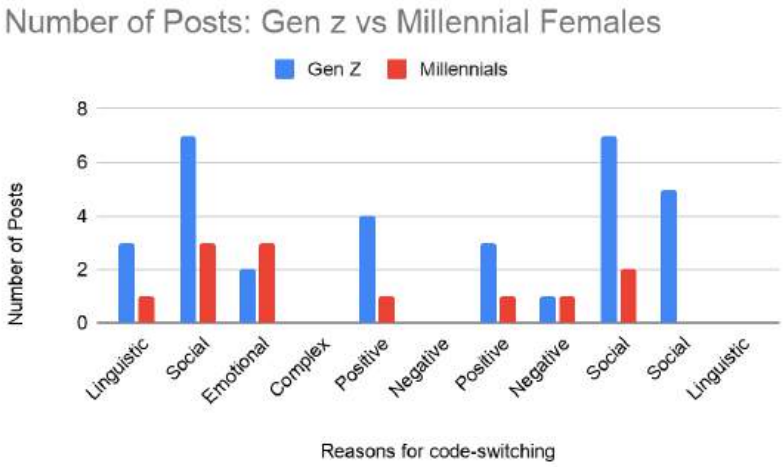

Figure 5: Number of Posts: Gen Z vs Millennial Females

On the contrary, Gen Z females demonstrate more "social identification" in general and locally. This can be seen in 7 Gen Z female users expressing "social identification" compared to 3 Millennial female users; 7 Gen Z female users expressing "social identification (age)" compared to 2 Millennial female users; 5 Gen Z female users expressing "social identification (HK)" compared to 0 Millennial female users (see bar graph above). This shows that Gen Z females are more likely to utilize Instagram to develop a sense of belonging within a social group, especially within their athlete identity and age groups (Chui, Liu, & Mak, 2016).

Overall, the thematic analysis between genders within each generation proves that female and male code-switching serves the same purpose of social identification in this dataset.

4.4 Limitations

This study includes several limitations. The dataset is a relatively small sample size, which limits the generalisation of its findings. In addition, there is also an unequal distribution of gender in the accounts collected, which may have influenced comparison results between gender groups. Despite this, the study still provides reliability based on justified findings which align with existing literature and a structured thematic analysis approach, while introducing a newly identified linguistic pattern of linguistic creativity after generational comparison.

5. Conclusion

In this study, the use of code-switching between Cantonese and English by Gen Z and Millennials on Instagram in Hong Kong is investigated through its use in emotional social media content. Based on qualitative thematic analysis of 30 Instagram posts, some of the major themes emerging from this study include social identification, linguistic norms, emotional

communication, linguistic creativity, and sophisticated vocabulary. In summary, the study shows that code-switching not only works as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a means of self-expression.

While both generations had common tendencies to use code-switching to establish social identity and to convey emotions, significant differences between them were observed. Gen Z members revealed greater creativity in their linguistic behavior and a higher level of local identity expressed in the context of code-switching, implying that younger people are changing bilingual interaction on social media through this mechanism. Millennials, in turn, had a better balance in conveying their emotions using both languages and made use of more linguistic conventions. The comparison of gender roles demonstrated that males had more cases of code-switching compared to females.

The overall findings from this study can be linked to the research question in showing how the code-switching behavior varies across different generations while serving the same function socially and emotionally. The findings contribute to the existing literature in the area of studying code-switching in Instagram posts, as opposed to the classroom context and, secondly, through the concept of linguistic creativity. Nonetheless, the small sample size and unequal gender ratio used in the study reduce its generalizability.

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Positional Sovereignty in an Age of Technological Interdependence: BRICS+ Supply Chains, Chokepoints, and European Vulnerability By Amogh Deshpande

Abstract

This study seeks to investigate how much the technological sovereignty of the European Union can be curtailed by its asymmetric interdependence with the BRICS+ countries in global technology supply chains, especially for rare earth minerals, semiconductors, and telecommunication infrastructure. Even though BRICS+ countries don't negate the EU's sovereignty in a traditional sense, they redefine it since interdependencies in critical global value chains move the concept of sovereignty from being territorial to becoming one of strategic positioning in asymmetric interdependence relations.

In the paper, Farrell and Newman's framework of weaponized interdependence will be applied to the global technology supply chains in order to expand it beyond the scope of its initial use in financial and information networks. For this purpose, a four-step causal process will be developed to understand how structural dominance leads to political leverage, including gaining structural dominance in a critical component of a global value chain; creating asymmetric dependence among the importing countries; forming a politically useful chokepoint due to concentrated dependence and selective ability to restrict the access to it; and constraining dependent countries' policies through anticipatory compliance, regardless of any coercion.

A key aspect of the paper's contribution to literature is its innovation of the concept of sovereignty to "positional sovereignty," where sovereignty cannot be understood as territorial sovereignty and independence from foreign influences but rather as a state's leverage-to-vulnerability ratio within multiple interconnected global networks. In the context of the EU, this approach makes it possible to see that the Union is vulnerable in production and logistics networks controlled by BRICS+, but enjoys significant counter-leverage in terms of regulatory frameworks and the creation of global standards, exemplified by the Brussels Effect.
Keywords: Sovereignty, Weaponized Interdependence; Positional Sovereignty; BRICS+; Global Value Chains; Structural Power

Introduction

In December 2021, devastating floods hit the region of Shah Alam in Malaysia, the home of BE Semiconductors' chip-packaging and semiconductor production hub (Reuters). This incident, confined to a single region in Malaysia, compounded the effects of an ongoing global semiconductor shortage, prompting Honda to shut down assembly lines worldwide and reduce its FY2022 automobile sales forecast by 800,000 units, with effects lingering into FY2023 ("Honda Maximizes"). An event like this perfectly illustrates just how interconnected and interdependent the global economy is today: a local storm in Southeast Asia hampering the sales of automobiles in Europe and the United States of America. However, even in a world deeply interdependent on one another, states seek to continue to exercise their sovereignty, even in the presence of leverage, deficits, and vulnerabilities with trading partners of more 'powerful' blocs. Thus, in

this paper, I explore the question “To what extent is the sovereignty of the European Union constrained by asymmetric technological interdependence with BRICS+ states within the existing tech supply chains?”

This investigation’s relevance centres around a 21st-century world which is seeing extensive deployment of economic statecraft as geopolitical weapons, a new era of technological wars, and the development of artificial intelligence (AI) technology with the ability to redefine the way the global economy operates. Hence, the intersection of sovereignty and the ability for autonomous action by a rightful government within a state, trade, technology, supply chains, and strategic positioning presents a new system of functioning and use of power. It is within this new system that trade asymmetries can be observed in the interactions and dealings between the EU and BRICS+ nations, particularly pertaining to the development of AI technology, the export of rare-earth minerals, positioning within global value chains, and forms of geo-economic leverage. The asymmetries observed differ from those seen between the EU-USA relationship, being condensed in production systems rather than financial or regulatory systems, having the ability to effect disproportionate impact on the European economy. However, rather than theorising these asymmetries work towards eliminating European sovereignty altogether, the paper argues that it fundamentally shifts the manner in which that sovereignty is preserved and enacted due to the foreseeably perpetual nature of the interdependence observed, redefining sovereignty.

In order to do this, this paper first explores the conceptual foundations of sovereignty, geo-economic statecraft, and power to develop a unified framework through which current global events and geopolitical movements could be dissected and understood. The exploration of these concepts culminates in the development of ‘Positional Sovereignty’ in the context of economic production and control. In the second part of the paper, the development and mobilization of asymmetries within the EU-BRICS+ trading relationship is explored through a four-part model to understand whether and/or how these asymmetries constrain European sovereignty before examining the policy response to such constriction by the EU.

Conceptual Frameworks

Sovereignty

The concept of sovereignty has gone through many changes and iterations across history, finding its roots in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Westphalian sovereignty is defined as absolute control over the events within a state’s border, underpinning the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of a state by foreign powers (Santos). Over time, the concept of sovereignty has changed to reflect the nature of international relations in the present day. Thus, sovereignty in the modern era must be viewed in light of changing times, technologies, and typologies of power.

In the 20th century, with the rise of globalization, the erosion of absolute control by state institutions, and the rise of capitalism, a new concept of Complex Interdependence was developed. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's "complex interdependence" (Keohane and Nye)

emphasizes the reduction in state autonomy through the development of non-hierarchical multifaceted global relationships. They further theorize the reduction in importance of military power relative to economic power due to overflows of economic goods, capital and ecosystems from state borders (Keohane and Nye). Political scientist Stephen D. Krasner built on this theory to introduce interdependence sovereignty in Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy, essentially defining it as “the ability of public authorities to regulate the flow of information, ideas, goods, people, pollutants, or capital across the borders of their state" (Krasner 4). Krasner argues that a state’s control over domestic outcomes diminishes as complex, interconnected and variable global relationships are formed, notably by interdependence, forcing states to cede control over policy in hopes of greater mutual benefit (Krasner). In this case, Krasner theorizes states will be faced with two decision streams: to maximize autonomy and sovereignty, or benefit from globalization and cooperation. The two concepts of sovereignty - Westphalian and Interdependence Sovereignty - arguably clash with each other, as one defines sovereignty as being absolute, and the other as being a management of vulnerabilities and leverage, respectively. Moreover, the focus of the two concepts is also fundamentally different; to serve as a legal foundation and definition as opposed to a concept rooted in practicality and governance, respectively.

In this setting, the concept of digital sovereignty is relevant. This new form of sovereignty builds on the ideas of Interdependence Sovereignty and Westphalian Sovereignty through exploring the importance of technology to the maintenance of authority within state territory, the hubs of control present for technological systems, and the possibility for external parties (other states or even non-state actors) in control of technological systems and infrastructure to influence state events if they so choose. Bauer & Van Eijk (2020) frame the concept of sovereignty in the context of states’ ability to control digital infrastructure, technologies, data flows, and services linked to regional, national, and/or international security at large. Power is the foremost and by far most important element of establishing and maintaining sovereignty. This power can come in multiple forms, from popular public mandates to hard military backed power, but in the context of tech supply chains and digital infrastructure, this power comes from a state’s position within the global network. The position of a state in these networks determines the types of structural power it possesses, the ability for the state to weaponize power to protect interest, and employ economic statecraft in response to affronts. This may not seem to fit into the concept of sovereignty directly, but holds significant power in the maintenance of that sovereignty.

In the 21st century, economic statecraft has been increasingly applied to facilitate supply chain manipulation and capability limitation. To this end, the United States has heavily used economic statecraft to limit the capabilities of its perceived adversaries, namely China, through export controls on semiconductors, graphics processors, design equipment and related software (United States, Bureau of Industry and Security 62186). These export controls ensure Chinese firms are unable to access cutting-edge equipment to support the development of Chinese artificial intelligence agents rivalling those in the United States, thereby maintaining dominance

over the sector. The United States has excessively used sanctions and trade barriers as the primary means of power projection, in a few cases, completely shutting out certain nations from the world economic system, aimed at ensuring favourable geopolitical and economic outcomes for the US in various markets around the world. In parallel, emerging powers like India have also employed a host of tariffs to incentivize and protect domestic industries (automotive, technology) from outside competition while pursuing internal policy to prioritize research and development. The EU, as well, has issued a slew of tariffs to protect local industries and ensure certain capabilities remain within the member nations to safeguard their economy and security in many respects, most noticeably in the duties levied on Chinese battery electric vehicle imports, ranging from 7.8 % to 35% (European Union, Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2024/2754). China, a nation that has found itself at the receiving end of economic statecraft, also holds significant power in this regard. Most recently, aiming to create a chokepoint effect in REMs to ensure purchasing nations do so on their terms, limiting the potential application of REMs supplied by them, or denying access to them altogether in an effort to create more ideal geopolitical situations across the Asia-Pacific (International Energy Agency, "With New Export Controls").

Crucially, the European Union holds great economic leverage, namely access to 452 million consumers, spending $8.9 trillion annually - representing both opportunities and risks (Council of the European Union, "The EU Single Market"). The EU has in the past used sanctions, tariffs and other trade barriers to influence geopolitical outcomes, and continues to do so, underscoring their mature use of economic statecraft, namely against Russia (post-2014, post Ukraine invasion) (Council of the European Union, "EU Sanctions against Russia Explained"). However, unlike the United States or China, the EU does not possess control over a particular hub or dominance over a structure to wield power comparable to China or the USA. More importantly, their dependence on China for manufacturing materials, REMs, finished goods and industrial equipment leaves them vulnerable to potential Chinese economic assaults.

Structural Power and Global Value Chains

Susan Strange (1988) developed a framework for the structures of power in her book States and Markets, with power itself at the core of this framework. Strange argues that through control over these structures of power, an entity can influence outcomes and maintain dominance, or hegemony in the case of nation-states, without the use of direct force. These elements break down structural power, the ability to create the rules of the game itself. Strange also distances these structures from relational power, defined as more coercive and direct.

Security Structure	**Production Structure**
Control over the protection of the state and other states through military alliances and global military chains to determine which states can thrive in safety and which are left to struggle in perpetually dangerous situations.	Control over all forms of the goods and services economy except financial capital. This includes everything from sourcing, manufacturing, development of technology, trade, and supply chains. In essence, the power to decide which state and firm produces what goods and services.

Financial Structure Control over the global financial architecture through dominance in the financial domains of currency, credit creation, exchange rates and capital flows. In essence, the ability to influence the entire market system through tweaks is fundamental to the creation of capital and economic output itself. Surprisingly, Strange highlighted this structure as being the most crucial yet underappreciated.	**Knowledge Structure** Authority over the standards society holds itself to, gained through control over ideas, information, expertise and the media in general. This includes societal norms, academic norms, and technological norms, which combine to provide a state with control over the morality of society.

These four structures are interdependent and interconnected in nature, with none being more important than the other. It is also true that if one structure begins to falter, the others will soon grapple with the consequences, highlighting their interdependent nature. Given this, contemporary tech supply chains sit at the convergence of production and knowledge structures, although they are also interlinked to the remaining two structures in more indirect ways. These supply chains rely on the production of knowledge through continued research and development for advancement and the maintenance of technological superiority against competitors within a set of outlined norms to move into production. Additionally, they require materials, the ability to manufacture, and the freedom to trade to function as an end-to-end process. In order to facilitate this process, financial structures play a pivotal role in the funding of procurement, research, and upgradation of said supply chains. The most tertiary of the structures to tech supply chains, the Security Structure, remains important to safeguard production facilities, transit routes, and other important stages in the product life cycle (Strange, 1988). In totality, every structure maintains a distinct and nuanced relevance to tech supply chains, making control over all of them lucrative.

China sits at the epicentre of these tech supply chains by dominating control over the Production Structure, being the largest manufacturer of high-tech goods in the world, and accounting for 28% of the global manufacturing of value-added goods (ChinaPower). The natural presence of extensive rare-earth mineral deposits in the nation also ensures an enhanced ability to manufacture goods important to building future technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and renewables. India has also been consistently ramping up its production capabilities, particularly in medium and low-technology goods. These two nations make up the bulk of BRICS+ production capacity, cementing the grouping's dominating control over the Production Structure (ChinaPower). These two nations have also, in recent times, developed a robust domestic and international security architecture through enhanced military spending, increasing nuclear arsenals, and policies of extensive modernization across military branches. This has further cemented BRICS+ domination in the Security Structure, particularly pertaining to regional issues which have the potential to impact their production capabilities. The EU, on the other hand, has maintained some dominance over the Knowledge Structure through the development of globally adhered to standards and dominating machinery design. Examples of this include the EU's Global Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which has become the global standard, serving as the model for many countries' privacy laws that have been mirrored,

including India's DPDP (Digital Personal Data Protection) Act, Brazil's LGPD, China's PIPL, and many other laws enacted by Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Japan (Bradford, The Brussels Effect). Moreover, the EU's common charger regulation mandating the USB-C port on all personal electronic devices, has been widely recognised as the instigator pushing Apple, the biggest company in the world at the time, permanently shifting to the USB-C port globally (European Union, Directive (EU) 2022/2380). At the same time, companies like ASML maintain dominance over critical manufacturing equipment. (ASML Holding N.V., Annual Report 2024)

However, the EU falls short of maintaining complete dominance in the Knowledge Structure. Chinese investment in Research and Development in 2024 reached 2.68% of GDP, CNY 3.61 trillion (approximately $497 billion), while the EU invested 2.24% of GDP or €403 billion. Both figures are at applicable exchange rates. Crucially, China leads in published AI literature, granted patents, and citations: China holds roughly 70% of global AI patents compared to the United States' 12%. However, it must be noted that the United States holds a substantial lead in the aspect of patent impact, shown through forward citations (Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence).

Such dominance in structures can, and often is, weaponized for geopolitical purposes. Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman's theory for Weaponized Interdependence (Farrell & Newman, 2019) provides the most direct theoretical framework application to the question this paper seeks to address. Farrell and Newman build on Strange's theories to illustrate the new forms of power states have gained through a more globalized world. They do so through two main mechanisms: the panopticon effect and the chokepoint effect. The panopticon effect comes into being when a network is developed to channel information and resources through a series of hubs, which branch out into spokes to the end user or buyer. Thus, a state with control over one or more hubs can gain access to information and resources, enabling it to gain leverage over the end users, granting these states massive power relative to others. The chokepoint effect occurs when a state gains influence over a critical hub, commonly the entry point or source, allowing these states to dictate the terms of participation within the network and the ability to deny access or gain privileged information (Farrell and Newman). These two mechanisms perfectly illustrate the ability of states with control over such networks, which have developed as a result of an increasingly globalized and interdependent world, to influence outcomes far and wide.
Farrell and Newman developed this theory to explain the true nature of US Sanctions and their resounding efficacy. However, such a network model can be easily applied to tech supply chains, which often have a similar structure. China, a state which controls 90% of global REM processing, creates a chokepoint effect for all advanced technological hardware manufacturing, from semiconductors to telescopes, granting it the ability to impose terms for participation and deny its strategic adversaries or competitors participation in the network (International Energy Agency, Rare Earth Elements). At the same time, the United States, which controls a hub for financial movement through the SWIFT Banking System, is able to gain privileged access to information on the activities of other states, influence outcomes through the imposition of

blockages (sanctions) or conditional relief mechanisms - creating a panopticon effect (Farrell and Newman).

More interestingly, however, weaponized interdependence does not require direct action to constrain behaviour and influence outcomes - the mere knowledge of the leverage a state holds against another is a deterrent enough. This reality forces less influential states and firms to behave in accordance with expectations by global hegemons to ensure safety and continued access to such networks. For this reason, many European firms avoid transactions, partnerships or investments with entities that are unfriendly to hegemons even if they are in the best interest of the firm. Likewise, EU states might choose to moderate their tone and international positions on contentious issues to safeguard access to financial and supply chain networks. This system creates a sense of anticipatory behaviour, where lesser powers take decisions in line with the agenda of a hub/access controller, even in the absence of threat or direct action against them. Occurrences such as this in interdependent networks highlight the nature of leverage, as a tool that does not need even to be directly deployed in order to yield outcomes in favour of a dominant state's interest.

Positional Sovereignty

The concept of Positional Sovereignty can be introduced to reconfigure existing forms of sovereignty to represent the realities of this new globalized world with deeply interdependent networks by building on the conceptual frameworks above. It can be defined as the management of a state's positioning within global value chains and networks of interdependence – leverage-to-vulnerability ratios – to effectively maintain autonomy and safeguard national interest. The maintenance of these ratios is inherently overlapping at the national scale, which may be maintained independently of each other, or as a unified policy, across the fields of production, digital infrastructure, finance, standards and regulations, and many others. Within this framework, a state can be considered more 'sovereign' if it can effectively act to mitigate vulnerabilities in one domain by weaponising leverage in another domain, resulting in the maintenance of an interdependent trading relationship whilst acting to further national interest. Thus, it is not necessary that a state must remove all forms of interdependence to be considered sovereign and capable of acting autonomously. Conversely, it is necessary for a state to be able to re-calibrate asymmetries over the long-term by building counter-balancing nodes of power in the network in order to ensure that dominance by another state in one node does not translate to dominance over the entire network.

BRICS+ and the Politics of Dependence

BRICS+, an informal coalition of nations seeking greater global influence, comprises Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Indonesia, Ethiopia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (BRICS Brazil). Together, they represent approximately 45% of the global population (as of 2026), 37% of global GDP (PPP), 43.6% of global oil production, and 24% of international trade, and exceed $30 trillion in nominal GDP (BRICS Brazil). It is important to

note that this group of nations often do not act as a cohesive bloc but rather as a coalition of nations which band together in times of opportunity. Within this framework, China stands out as the most dominant economic and military power. Its dramatic transformation from a nation once known for its low-wage manufacturing capabilities to one driven by innovation, ingenuity, and high-technology manufacturing capabilities has secured its position at the helm of the coalition. Today, China accounts for almost a third of global wafer fabrication capacity, at 10.1 million out of 33.7 million wafers per month in 2025 (SEMI) and approximately 80% of global electric vehicle production (Ezell; Wang). At the same time, as of the end of 2021, China accounted for 79% of polysilicon, 97% of wafer, and 85% of solar cell manufacturing, with China's share of wafers and polysilicon expected to continue to grow to exceed 95% (International Energy Agency; Solar PV Global Supply Chains). With regards to rare earth minerals, it controls approximately 69% of mine production and 91% of refined output for magnet REMs in 2024 (China's Rare Earth Elements"; International Energy Agency, Rare Earth Elements) Simultaneously, other nations within the group have also continued increasing output and maintained steady rates of economic and technological development, allowing the group as a whole to emerge as integral to Global Value Chains.

The concept of Global Value Chains (GVCs) proposes that the production of goods in technology-intensive industries is more often than not highly fragmented and geographically dispersed in the 20th and 21st centuries (Gereffi et al., 2005). These chains include distinct stages such as research and development (R&D), design, component manufacturing, assembly, and marketing, being distributed around the world based on various states' competencies and abilities. In these value chains, a disproportionate amount of value is concentrated in intermediate goods rather than final goods, with control over advanced components and technological standards proving to be more consequential than nominal trade balances. In the case of tech supply chains, the ability to generate and distribute knowledge becomes crucial to long-term competitiveness and thus is a key determinant in technological sovereignty (Gereffi et al.).

The creation of such GVCs results in the development of dependencies and interdependencies, directly translating to political power and leverage. The translation of GVCs to political leverage can be described through a four-step model. A state must first acquire a dominant position of control over a particular structure within a GVC, potentially but not necessarily, combining a centrality to a particular step within the GVC (processing, packaging, or other) and state capacity to direct or influence firms at that particular step within the chain (e.g. export controls). This dominance gives rise to a structural asymmetry as many other states are reliant on the continued participation of the dominant state in the GVC while the dominant state is not as reliant on the continued participation of any other single state. As this dominance cannot arise suddenly, often the result of a concerted effort over decades, other states adapt to integrate this node into their economic and security calculus within this GVC. This further compounds the asymmetric dependence, creating a situation wherein switching away from a dominant state comes with high costs and long operational periods for diversification, disturbance to overall

policy as decoupling comes with repercussions on end -products and -goals, and creates a vacuum in which there are no short-term substitute states possessing the same capabilities.

Effectively, this creates a condition in which a dependent state might be able to decouple, but doing so would risk large self-inflicted harm, making the decision politically and economically challenging. This dominant power, through maintaining this dominant position and creating asymmetric dependencies, could create a chokepoint if the node is concentrated to the point where substitutes are virtually non-existent, legal tools can be directed at states or firms attempting to do business using that particular step, and there is a credible legal ability to impose restrictions. If the combination of these criteria holds, the node ceases to simply be a 'bottleneck' and transforms into a usable chokepoint wherein the dominant state may selectively restrict access to the particular step it dominates. With a chokepoint in place, the dominant state may choose to leverage its dependent states through either actual implementation of restrictions (export controls, regulation, licensing, etc.) or through credible threats of application. Moreover, this situation of weaponized interdependence manifests as anticipatory restraint: moderating policies to not jeopardize the national interest of a dominant state and provoke disruption to trade, dilute measures, or even provide quiet exemptions (Farrell and Newman).

The structural dominance of BRICS+ in GVCs, particularly Global Tech Supply Chains, becomes evident. This structural dominance is twofold, encompassing Rare-Earth Minerals (REMs) and Semiconductors. Rare-Earth Minerals are possibly the most critical components of all high-technology goods and green-transition technologies, with applications in everything from windmills, electric vehicles, and phones to precision-guided munitions and artificial intelligence. The production of these minerals is often highly localized and geographically concentrated owing to long lead times for mine development, duration for extraction, and environmental restrictions placed on the mining, processing, and production of them (International Energy Agency, Global Critical Minerals Outlook 2024). Due to this, the production of such minerals is always slow, and their supply is scarce, resulting in import-dependent economies like the EU harbouring significant supply security concerns. BRICS+ contributes the majority of the world's reserves and processing capacity of such minerals, particularly in the separation process, converting ores to usable oxides. China controls 69% of rare-earth production and 90% of rare-earth processing, creating an asymmetric dependence imposed upon each of its trading partners in the GVC (International Energy Agency, Rare Earth Elements; "China's Rare Earth Elements"). Moreover, the placement of restrictions on the export and use of REMs in India and the United States illustrates the ability of the Chinese government to impose restrictions, cementing its position as a choke point within the chain (International Energy Agency, "With New Export Controls"). Due to this, the EU has shown immense anticipatory constraint in their policy towards China. For example, after China introduced export controls on critical REMs to the EU, Brussels chose to pursue bilateral negotiations and a toned-down rhetoric combined with de-escalation efforts rather than a formal World Trade Organisation (WTO) complaint, the standard course of action, representing the need to appease and not escalate ("EU, China Set for 'Urgent' Brussels Talks"; Gavin 254–61).

Semiconductors occupy a rather similar critical position to REEs in the tech supply chain. Semiconductor technology is foundational and critical to the development, production, and even transportation of various goods and services, particularly in the industries of telecommunications, computing, automation, artificial intelligence, and modern defence systems. Semiconductor supply chains reside within tech supply chains and are similarly long, geographically concentrated, yet fragmented and highly capital-intensive.

Semiconductor technology relies heavily on REEs, extending the vulnerability of the EU highlighted in the above paragraph. The production of such semiconductors, often fragmented across Southeast Asia, Japan, and Taiwan, relies on oil from the Middle East, flowing through the Strait of Hormuz, a chokepoint Iran continues to leverage. Iran's blockade of the Strait of Hormuz in early 2026 showed an ability to create and maintain a chokepoint (United States, Congress, Congressional Research Service). Thus, the strategic placement of the BRICS+ nations grants them control over the movement of primary and intermediate goods in the semiconductor supply chain, compounding the vulnerability experienced by the European Union. However, the design and development of semiconductor technology is concentrated in the USA, EU, and Japan, reducing the vulnerability experienced.

Taken together, the vulnerabilities of the European Union are greatly evident. The BRICS+ nations, through a combination of geographical positioning, investment in medium to high-technology production capability, control over strategic waterways, chokehold on critical nodes of the tech supply chain, and ability to act to influence global outcomes, have the ability to systemically control and dominate global tech supply chains. This creates a configuration of asymmetric interdependence with all its trading partners, namely the EU. While the EU holds leverage in the form of a consumer market which promotes the production of technology in BRICS+ nations and drives their economies, they also face permanent vulnerability due to the lack of raw materials and spare production capacity present within the EU-27. At the same time, the BRICS+ nations are vulnerable to import controls and tariffs on their goods, but remain capable of influencing the supply of crucial materials, technologies, and resources - their greatest leverage. In terms of interdependence and sovereignty, this means that the EU's ability to regulate and/or restrict transboundary flows of critical tech components without incurring detrimental economic and political consequences from BRICS+ nations is severely restricted, although their legal (Westphalian) sovereignty is completely intact.

The EU and the Politics of Influence

The European Union's large integrated market, combining 27 nations, allows the bloc to shape global standards by unilaterally imposing stringent internal technological standards that all foreign firms operating within the market must adhere to. In doing so, multinational companies have often found it more feasible to apply these standards to their operations across the world rather than just Europe, leading to Anu Bradford coining the term "Brussels Effect" (Bradford, "The Brussels Effect"). EU standards for data protection, competition, and product safety have become the de facto global standard, with companies attempting to meet the most stringent of

standards, and other countries moving to emulate the same in their jurisdictions. More recently, however, a difference has become evident between the Brussels Effect and a de jure effect, where the EU deliberately designs regulation with specific extraterritorial objectives in mind, affecting foreign firms, governments, and entire economies (Bradford, The Brussels Effect). This positions Europe as a global commission on standards which every entity must strive to meet, creating global influence without the use of natural resources or favourable geography. This particular positioning is something the Von Der Leyen Commission has made a cornerstone of European foreign policy, signalling a desire to embed the advantage Europe possesses within its security framework as well (Christakis). This suggests a desire to use the need for clear international standards for trade, competition, production, marketing, and consumption for geopolitical ends, namely, defending economic security, countering possible coercion, and creating a set of rules every economic player must abide by. This gives the EU a unique ability to manipulate the rulebook to favour its own economy, geopolitical objectives, and defend its sovereignty. This defense is done through the strategic minimization of interdependence asymmetries by converting real-time advantages to strategic capabilities and leverage. Sovereignty in the age of networks, then, should not be viewed as independence from reliance, but as the ability to re-calibrate asymmetries in multiple interconnected networks through turning an advantage in one domain (regulatory power or standards setting power, for example) into leverage in another domain where a state might be vulnerable. In the position-based concept of sovereignty, what counts is not disentangling oneself from interdependence, but rather managing risk and creating counterbalancing nodes of power in the context of interdependency, as exemplified by the activist approach of the EU known as the "Brussels Effect."

This regulatory approach, however, is not one dimensional. The European Union splits the concept of digital sovereignty into two distinct dimensions: an economic dimension and a social dimension (Roberts et al.). The economic dimension hinges upon the reduction of dependence on non-European digital infrastructure, maximum utilization of European resources, minimization of economic vulnerabilities within GVCs, and promotion of European cloud services and tech platforms. The social dimension hinges upon the ability of the EU to project its own social values into the digital sphere, namely the rule of law, privacy, and human rights. In aiming to promote these values and secure European economic prowess, the EU does not seek to isolate itself from global tech supply chains, but rather implement a greater degree of control over the deployment, usage, and appropriation of digital technology across Europe, in line with the concept of complex interdependence and interdependence sovereignty. This can be seen as an attempt to interpret and implement the concepts of interdependence sovereignty to digital dimensions, such as controlling the cross-border flows of data, standards, and digital products.

Within this broader concept of European digital sovereignty lies the importance of data sovereignty. Control over the collection, storage, processing, transfer, and sale of data provides an entity with disproportionate power to dominate the economic landscape in a multitude of ways. The EU aims to retain control to a great degree over all data originating within its territory through the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Union, Regulation (EU)

2016/679, arts. 3, 44–50). The implementation of the GDPR protects individual rights and ensures European data is used in accordance with European values, even when processed and stored in foreign digital infrastructure. However, this digital infrastructure is dominated heavily by the United States and China, creating a heavy concentration of data between the two, and thus a vulnerability in that regard. In short, the EU has attempted to greatly minimize asymmetries discussed previously in the paper by reducing dependence on non-European digital infrastructure and by embedding European norms into the global standards framework.

Industrial policy and new legal frameworks have become a means of concretizing the ambition to boost the strategic and technological sovereignty of the EU in the last few years. In the case of the European Chips Act, for example, it is considered a policy that aims at strengthening the European position in semiconductors' value chains by making use of huge financial backing from the government to develop their production capacity and securing their supply chain risk management and response strategies (European Union, Regulation (EU) 2023/1781). In the case of semiconductors, digital sovereignty is explained as a legitimating frame of trade, industry, and research policies designed to decrease exposure to foreign bottlenecks, even as the EU continues to be involved in global semiconductor supply chains. Hereby, it becomes evident that industrial policies are no longer purely economic but represent an instrument that the Union uses to change its place in strategic GVCs and recover some interdependence sovereignty towards technology powers like the US and China.

The same can be said about the increasing number of regulatory tools with extraterritorial application, such as the Digital Markets Act (European Union, Regulation (EU) 2022/1925), the Digital Services Act (European Union, Regulation (EU) 2022/2065), the Artificial Intelligence Act (European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1689), the Foreign Subsidies Regulation (European Union, Regulation (EU) 2022/2560) and the regulation on forced labour (European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/3015). Legal academics have explained that these regulations constitute an activist version of the Brussels Effect, not only as an unintended consequence of the internal regulation, but rather as a tool intended to influence the conduct of foreign businesses, and by extension, the policy-making of third countries (Christakis). In its new trade policy based on “open strategic autonomy”, the EU combines the above regulatory tools with the identification of critical assets, supply chains and technologies to be defended and diversified by trade defence, investment screening, anti-coercion (European Union, Regulation (EU) 2023/2675) and conditionality related to sustainability (European Commission). All these industrial and legal tools constitute a geoeconomic conception of sovereignty, aimed at mitigating Europe’s vulnerability to external coercion, while preserving the gains from interdependence.

Thus, an increasing gap can be seen to be developing between the European Union’s ambitions of autonomy and the realities of governance, which forces interdependence. EU trade policy seeks to balance the benefits of economic interdependence with the growing demand for Europe to manage the risks it entails by defending against coercion, linking trade to values and sustainability, and securing critical assets and supply chains. However, the reality is that the EU is heavily reliant on foreign powers, namely China, on a host of fronts through deep integration

in GVCs. As a result, the EU's ability to act unilaterally remains heavily constrained, especially in situations of conflict with structural rivals possessing the capability to disrupt essential supplies. Thus, the autonomy the EU desperately seeks must be pursued as a reconfiguration of interdependence rather than a removal of its existence. The EU has increasingly leveraged its status as a normative power, projecting rights and values-based rules for the digital sphere to deploy regulations as measures, or rather, counter-measures as geopolitical tools to defend its security and competitiveness in strategic sectors. The European Chips Act, created to preserve autonomy and, by extension, sovereignty in the semiconductor domain, serves as the foundation of European digital sovereignty alongside the GDPR. It is unfortunate that, regardless of the measures Europe takes, it will be reliant on foreign powers for fabrication, equipment, and broader design ecosystems. This paradox, between the language and intent of the EU and the persistence of asymmetric interdependence, is at the core of governance challenges in Brussels today.

Conclusion

The BRICS+ dominated tech supply chains do not eliminate European sovereignty; instead, they translocate the principle and redefine it within a network of asymmetric interdependence. From the synthesized perspectives of Westphalian and interdependence sovereignty, digital sovereignty, and structural power, sovereignty in the modern European environment takes on a different meaning and looks less like a capability for absolute unilateral control and more like the capability to control exposure to leverage, which is highly concentrated in a few centers of the world. Countries that are part of BRICS+, particularly China, but also India, Russia, Iran, and several other nations, have firmly established themselves as important nodes in the global value chain due to their monopoly on rare earth minerals and their capacity for manufacturing semiconductors and mid-to-high technology.

Two innovative theoretical arguments are proposed in this paper. Firstly, a conceptualization of positional sovereignty is presented. According to this approach, sovereignty in the digital, globalized era cannot be associated with territorial sovereignty and/or independence. In contrast, sovereignty becomes the ratio of leverage to vulnerability on the part of the state in relation to global networks that are overlapping. Thus, sovereignty is created through the construction of offsets rather than independence from interdependence.

The second theoretical argument is the four-level causal process by which structural dominance becomes a political instrument for creating a leverage advantage. Firstly, the state acquires dominance over some structure in global value chains. Secondly, the state acquires an asymmetric dependence from other countries as importers. Thirdly, in combination with selective restriction of access to structures by the dominant country, dependence becomes politically usable. Fourthly, through the threat or actual activation of such a chokepoint, political constraint is imposed on the policies of the dependent country. A case study is used to explore and provide a means to understand this system.

From an economic perspective, the EU's position vis-à-vis BRICS+ puts it at a structural disadvantage within the production and resource structure of Susan Strange in that the EU's industrial structure and decarbonization policy depend on continuous access to BRICS+–produced rare earth metals, specific intermediate inputs, and energy that could be disrupted via BRICS+'s use of geo-economic power. From the perspective of interdependence sovereignty, this translates to a situation where, although the EU still has the legal authority to control economic flows into and out of its jurisdiction, its ability to actually limit, redirect, or weaponize such flows is limited by the danger that it poses to the BRICS+ states, who would react by limiting or disrupting those flows.

Digitally, however, the European Union has tried to offset such vulnerabilities by adopting a position of normative and regulatory dominance in the spheres of data, platforms, and digital services. Instruments such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Digital Markets Act, the Digital Services Act, the Artificial Intelligence Act, and the European Chips Act constitute what is referred to as the "activist" Brussels Effect, where internal norms are purposefully crafted to influence the actions of foreign companies, and, thus, indirectly, the policies adopted by third countries (Christakis). Using these tools, the EU is trying to limit its reliance on external digital infrastructure, favouring European players within the cloud and platform ecosystem and attempting to export its values of privacy, rule of law, and human rights into the digital domain. However, it should be noted that the infrastructure supporting digital activities continues to depend largely on non-European entities, particularly the U.S. and Chinese hyperscale providers, along with BRICS+–centric hardware and components production.

In terms of political influence, both economic and technological dependencies result in what Farrell and Newman call weaponized interdependence – a situation where the owners of the key hubs and chokepoints have the ability to impose conditions for participation or threaten with exclusion should the other side behave improperly (Farrell and Newman). European businesses and states accordingly anticipate such developments and align their geopolitical stances on issues like China policy, sanctions regime, and technology diversification so as not to be affected in terms of market access, input supplies, and technological cooperation. The concept of sovereignty now becomes irrelevant not in terms of border integrity but rather in terms of dealing with a complicated interplay between autonomy and interdependence, namely between the EU's desire to become "open strategic autonomous" and the reality of technological dependence on BRICS+ economies.

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Generative AI and Cognitive Offloading in Secondary Education: Implications for Student Learning and AI Literacy By Caroline Dove

Abstract

The rapid adoption of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in secondary education has raised questions about how reliance on large language models may affect students' cognitive engagement with academic work. This paper examines the relationship between generative AI use, cognitive offloading, and critical thinking, with particular attention to students in grades 9–12. Using a comparative analysis of recent research from the Pew Research Center, RAND Corporation, and MIT Media Lab, the study considers three related dimensions of AI use in education: patterns of adolescent AI adoption, the development of school policies and AI-literacy practices, and emerging evidence concerning cognitive engagement during AI-assisted writing. The findings indicate that AI use is increasingly common among adolescents, while formal guidance and instruction have not developed at the same pace. Experimental research involving adult participants further suggests that reliance on large language models during writing may be associated with reduced cognitive engagement, weaker recall, and greater cognitive offloading, although these findings cannot yet be generalized to high-school students. Taken together, the evidence does not establish that generative AI causes a cognitive deficit among adolescents. It does, however, identify cognitive offloading as an important area for further research and suggests that the educational consequences of AI depend partly on how students engage with these technologies. The paper argues for AI-literacy approaches that preserve independent reasoning and cognitive engagement while recognizing the growing role of generative AI in secondary education.

Introduction

Generative artificial intelligence has entered education at a remarkable speed. Since the public release of ChatGPT in late 2022, students have gained access to tools capable of generating essays, summarizing readings, explaining difficult concepts, brainstorming ideas, revising writing, and answering questions within seconds. For students in grades 9–12, these technologies are becoming part of an educational environment in which the boundaries between assistance and substitution are still being defined.

The rapid adoption of AI presents educators with a difficult question. A tool that helps a student understand a difficult concept may support learning, yet the same technology can also complete intellectual tasks that students traditionally perform themselves. If a student asks an AI system to generate an argument, organize evidence, or compose an essay, the immediate result may appear successful. The student has produced an answer. The more important educational question, however, is what cognitive work the student performed in producing it.

This distinction leads to the concept of cognitive offloading, the transfer of mental tasks to an external tool. Cognitive offloading is not unique to artificial intelligence. People have long relied on calculators, search engines, notebooks, and other technologies to reduce cognitive

demands. Generative AI differs in an important way because it can perform complex language-based tasks that traditionally required interpretation, reasoning, synthesis, and writing (Kashani, Ethical Considerations). The concern is therefore not simply whether students use AI, but how they use it and which parts of the thinking process they transfer to the technology (Kashani, Ethical Considerations).

This paper examines whether current research provides evidence that generative AI may contribute to cognitive offloading among students and what this possibility means for secondary education. It analyzes three recent sources: Pew Research Center data on adolescent AI use, RAND Corporation research on AI use and policy in American schools, and an MIT Media Lab study examining cognitive engagement during AI-assisted essay writing. These studies address different populations and questions, so they cannot independently answer whether AI causes cognitive deficits among high-school students. Examined together, however, they reveal an important pattern: adolescent AI use is widespread, educational policies and training remain inconsistent, and emerging experimental evidence suggests that extensive reliance on large language models during writing may reduce some forms of cognitive engagement. (Doss et al.) (Faverio and Sidoti) (Kosmyna et al.).

The evidence therefore supports a more cautious argument than the claim that AI is creating a permanent cognitive deficit among high-school students. Current research does not establish such a causal relationship. Instead, it suggests that cognitive offloading is a significant educational risk when generative AI replaces intellectual work that students would otherwise perform themselves. The challenge for schools is to develop forms of AI literacy that allow students to benefit from these technologies while preserving the independent reasoning, memory, writing, and critical-thinking processes education is intended to develop.

Adolescent AI Use: Evidence from Pew Research

Understanding the possible cognitive effects of AI begins with understanding how widely adolescents are using it. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center provides evidence that AI chatbots have already become familiar technologies for a large proportion of American teenagers.

Pew (Faverio and Sidoti) surveyed 1,458 teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 between September 28 and October 9, 2025. Participants were drawn from the Ipsos KnowledgePanel, a nationally representative online survey panel. The researchers weighted the results according to demographic factors including age, gender, race and ethnicity, and household income. Because the participants were minors, parental consent was required.

The results demonstrate how quickly AI has entered adolescent life. Approximately 64 percent of teenagers surveyed reported having used an AI chatbot. Usage patterns also differed among demographic groups. Older teenagers were more likely to use AI than younger teenagers, and household income was associated with ChatGPT use. Pew reported that 62 percent of teenagers in households earning at least $75,000 used ChatGPT, compared with 52 percent of teenagers in households earning below that amount.

These findings are significant for this inquiry because they establish the scale of adolescent exposure to generative AI. They do not, however, demonstrate that AI use causes cognitive harm. This distinction is important. A survey showing that teenagers use AI can tell us about prevalence and demographic patterns, but it cannot determine what happens cognitively when students rely on AI for academic tasks.

The Pew findings (Faverio and Sidoti) instead raise the next question: if AI has become common among adolescents, are schools providing students with adequate guidance about how to use it?

AI in Schools: Adoption Is Moving Faster Than Guidance

Research from the RAND Corporation (Doss et al.) suggests that educational institutions have struggled to keep pace with the rapid adoption of generative AI. RAND examined AI use through nationally representative survey panels involving students, parents, teachers, principals, and district leaders. The study included 1,261 middle- and high-school students surveyed in early 2025 and an additional sample of 852 students surveyed shortly afterward.

The results reveal a gap between technological adoption and educational preparation. Fifty-four percent of students reported using AI for schoolwork. RAND also found that more than 80 percent of students said their teachers had not explicitly taught them how to use AI for schoolwork. Only 35 percent of district leaders reported providing students with AI training.

The study also identified disagreement about the possible consequences of AI use. Sixty-one percent of parents and 55 percent of high-school students believed greater AI use could harm critical-thinking skills, compared with only 22 percent of district leaders. These numbers represent perceptions rather than proof of cognitive harm, but the difference is revealing. Students and parents appear more concerned about possible cognitive consequences than the administrators responsible for developing institutional policies.

RAND's findings (Doss et al.) strengthen the educational dimension of the problem. Students are adopting AI rapidly, yet many are doing so without systematic instruction about when AI supports learning and when it may replace the thinking students are expected to develop.

The question therefore becomes more specific. What might happen cognitively when a student allows a large language model to perform substantial portions of an academic writing task?

Cognitive Offloading and the MIT Study

The MIT Media Lab study “Your Brain on ChatGPT: Accumulation of Cognitive Debt” explains that when an AI Assistant for Essay Writing Task provides emerging experimental evidence relevant to the question of cognitive offloading. The study compared participants writing essays under three conditions: using a large language model, using a search engine, or relying only on their own thinking. Researchers used electroencephalography (EEG) to measure

patterns of brain activity and also examined participants' writing, recall, and sense of ownership over their essays.

The study found notable differences among the three groups. Participants in the brain-only condition demonstrated the strongest neural connectivity. Search-engine users generally occupied an intermediate position, and participants using the LLM showed the weakest connectivity. LLM users also demonstrated weaker recall of their own writing, and in the first session, 83 percent had difficulty accurately quoting from essays they had produced.

These findings provide evidence consistent with cognitive offloading. When the external system performs more of the intellectual work involved in composing an essay, the writer may engage less deeply with some of the cognitive processes involved in producing that work. The result is especially relevant to education because writing is more than a method for recording completed thoughts. Writing itself can be a process through which students develop, organize, question, and refine their thinking.

The MIT findings (2025), however, must be interpreted carefully. The study did not examine high-school students. Its 54 participants ranged in age from 18 to 39 and were recruited from five institutions in the Boston area: MIT, Harvard, Tufts, Wellesley, and Northeastern. The findings therefore cannot establish that the same neurological patterns occur among students in grades 9–12.

The researchers also acknowledged other limitations. The sample was relatively small and geographically limited, only one large language model was tested, and EEG measures neural connectivity without providing the spatial precision that methods such as fMRI can offer. The experiment also focused specifically on essay writing, meaning its findings may not apply equally to other forms of AI-assisted learning.

These limitations change the conclusion that can reasonably be drawn from the study. The research does not prove that generative AI creates a permanent cognitive deficit, nor does it prove that AI has damaged the cognitive abilities of high-school students. It provides evidence that certain forms of LLM-assisted writing may involve reduced cognitive engagement and greater cognitive offloading among the adults studied. Whether similar effects occur among adolescents requires direct research with adolescent populations.

From Cognitive Offloading to Cognitive Deficit

This distinction between cognitive offloading and cognitive deficit is central to understanding the evidence.

A cognitive deficit implies an impairment or reduction in cognitive ability. Cognitive offloading describes something different: allowing an external system to perform a cognitive task that a person might otherwise perform internally. Offloading does not automatically produce a deficit. In many circumstances, it can be useful. A calculator, for example, allows a person to perform complex calculations efficiently without necessarily reducing the person's ability to reason mathematically.

Generative AI creates a more complicated situation because the tasks being transferred can include interpretation, argumentation, synthesis, and written expression. These abilities are themselves important educational outcomes. If students repeatedly delegate these processes before developing them independently, the educational concern is not simply that they have used technology. The concern is that they may have avoided practicing the very cognitive skills their assignments were designed to strengthen.

The three studies examined in this paper become more meaningful when considered together. Pew establishes that AI use has become common among adolescents. RAND demonstrates that school guidance and AI education have not kept pace with that adoption. MIT provides preliminary experimental evidence suggesting that substantial LLM assistance during writing can be associated with lower cognitive engagement and weaker recall among adult participants.

None of these studies alone establishes cognitive harm among high-school students. Together, however, they identify a credible educational concern worthy of further investigation.
Implications for AI Literacy in Secondary Education

The evidence also suggests that the educational response to AI cannot be limited to a choice between prohibition and unrestricted use.

Students need to understand the difference between using AI to support thinking and using AI to replace thinking. A student might use an AI system to generate questions about a reading, challenge an argument, identify weaknesses in a draft, compare interpretations, or receive feedback on ideas the student has already developed. These uses still require the student to evaluate, question, and make decisions about the information produced.

A different cognitive relationship develops when a student asks an AI system to formulate the argument, produce the analysis, and write the final response. In that situation, the student may receive a completed academic product without engaging deeply in the process that the assignment was designed to teach.

RAND's findings suggest that many schools have not yet provided students with sufficient guidance for making these distinctions. Effective AI literacy should therefore extend beyond rules about cheating. Students should learn how large language models work, why their outputs require verification, when AI assistance is academically appropriate, and how dependence on automated responses may affect their own engagement with a task.

Schools also need clearer and more consistent policies. Students should not have to determine independently whether one teacher permits AI, another prohibits it, and another expects it. From a student's perspective, different expectations across classrooms can create uncertainty about acceptable academic practice. That student perspective is worth preserving because it demonstrates that AI policy is not an abstract institutional issue. Inconsistent rules affect how students actually approach their academic work.

Discussion

I began this research with the assumption that generative AI was creating a cognitive deficit among students in grades 9–12. Examining the research changed that position.

The available evidence supports concern about cognitive offloading, but it does not yet justify the conclusion that AI has produced a lasting cognitive deficit among high-school students. This distinction is important because research should be allowed to complicate an original hypothesis instead of simply confirming it.

The more significant question may therefore be how students interact with AI. If a student uses an AI system to avoid reading, reasoning, developing an argument, or writing, the technology can replace cognitive processes that education is intended to strengthen. If the student instead questions AI-generated responses, evaluates their accuracy, compares competing explanations, and uses the system to develop ideas further, AI may serve a different educational function.

This makes the quality of AI education increasingly important. Students are already using these technologies. Pew's research demonstrates the scale of adolescent adoption, and RAND shows that formal educational guidance has not kept pace. The question facing schools is therefore becoming less about whether students will encounter AI and more about what intellectual habits students will develop when they use it (Kashani, Meditations).

Future research should directly examine high-school populations. Longitudinal studies would be especially valuable because they could investigate whether repeated AI-assisted academic work affects writing development, memory, critical thinking, creativity, or students' ability to work independently over time. Researchers should also distinguish among different types of AI use. Asking an AI system to critique an argument is cognitively different from asking it to write the argument. Treating all AI use as one category may obscure the most important educational differences.

Generative artificial intelligence has become part of the educational environment faster than schools have developed consistent methods for teaching students how to use it. Current evidence shows widespread adolescent adoption, substantial uncertainty about appropriate academic use, and emerging concerns about cognitive offloading during AI-assisted writing.

The research examined in this paper does not establish that generative AI causes a permanent cognitive deficit among students in grades 9–12 (Doss et al) (Faverio and Sidoti) (Kosmyna et al).

The strongest experimental evidence considered here comes from adults, and its findings should not be generalized beyond the population studied. It does, however, provide a reason to investigate cognitive offloading among younger students and to consider carefully which intellectual processes are being transferred to AI systems.

The educational challenge is therefore not simply to determine whether AI is good or bad for students. A more productive question is whether a particular use of AI increases or decreases the student's own cognitive participation in learning.

Secondary schools should respond by developing AI-literacy practices that emphasize intellectual agency. Students need opportunities to think independently, struggle with difficult

ideas, construct arguments, write, revise, and make mistakes. AI can become part of that process, but it should not subtly replace it.

The long-term educational value of generative AI may ultimately depend less on what these technologies are capable of doing and more on what students continue to learn to do for themselves.

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War as Domestic Political Strategy: Reinterpreting France's Declaration of War in 1792
By King Liu

Abstract

In the field of history, the French declaration of war against Austria in April 1792 has often been interpreted as the product of revolutionary ideology, foreign threats, or the broader international crisis created by the French Revolution. This paper argues that the decision to enter war must also be understood as a consequence of domestic political competition. Drawing on scholarship on the origins of the Revolutionary Wars, Feuillant politics, Girondin foreign policy, and revolutionary political culture, the paper examines why political factions with fundamentally different visions for France nevertheless converged in support of war. The Girondins viewed war as an opportunity to defend and consolidate the Revolution, expose counterrevolutionary forces, and strengthen their political position. Constitutional monarchists and Feuillants, by contrast, saw war as a potential means of restoring royal authority and containing the Revolution's radical trajectory. Their shared support for war therefore reflected not ideological agreement but competing calculations about how military conflict might resolve France's internal political crisis. By comparing these factions and examining the political context surrounding the declaration, this study challenges interpretations that treat the war primarily as a straightforward response to foreign danger. It demonstrates that the Revolutionary Wars emerged partly from the intersection of international tensions and domestic struggles over the future of the French state.

Keywords: French Revolution; French Revolutionary Wars; declaration of war; Girondins; Feuillants; constitutional monarchy; domestic politics; revolutionary ideology; Austria; political factions

Introduction

On 20 April 1792, the French Legislative Assembly declared war on Austria, initiating what would become the French Revolutionary Wars and eventually two decades of nearly continuous conflict across Europe.

Historians have often portrayed this series of events as the inevitable consequence of revolutionary ideology: a confrontation between a France committed to the principles of liberty and constitutional government and the monarchies determined to suppress revolutionary change. Such interpretations emphasize ideological conflict, portraying war as the natural extension of the Revolution's universal aspirations and Europe's determination to preserve the traditional monarchical order.

Yet this explanation leaves an important historical puzzle unresolved. If ideological confrontation alone drove France toward war, why did political factions with fundamentally different visions for the future of France—including both the republican Girondins and the constitutional monarchist Feuillants—simultaneously advocate military conflict? (Blanning 1996; Doyle 2008; Esdaile 2019)

This persistent paradox suggests that the origins of the French Revolutionary Wars cannot be understood solely through the lens of ideology or international diplomacy.

This phenomenon of the exporting crisis finds a contemporary parallel in the actions of the U.S. President Donald Trump, whose decision to launch military operations against Iran mimics this precise playbook of internal containment. Faced with severe domestic political liabilities and economic turbulence at home, the Trump administration has routinely weaponized shifting war rationales—from nuclear containment to asserting total control over the vital Strait of Hormuz—to reshape the domestic media cycle and manufacture a nationalist umbrella. Between the adoption of the Constitution of 1791 and the declaration of war in April 1792, France remained deeply divided over the future of its political system. The monarchy had survived but with greatly reduced authority, the Legislative Assembly struggled to establish legitimacy, and revolutionary leaders competed to determine whether the Revolution should end with constitutional monarchy or continue toward a republic. Under these circumstances, foreign policy became inseparable from domestic political calculations (Doyle 2013; Vovelle 1984; McPhee 2016).

In the expansive historiography of the French Revolution, the outbreak of war has long occupied a central place. Earlier historians (Rothenberg 1988; Blanning 2016) frequently interpreted the conflict as an ideological struggle between revolutionary France and conservative Europe, arguing that revolutionary leaders believed military victory would spread the principles of liberty beyond France's borders. Scholars such as T. C. W. Blanning has demonstrated that European diplomacy before 1792 remained remarkably consistent with eighteenth-century patterns of interstate rivalry rather than an unprecedented ideological confrontation. Likewise, William Doyle and Patricia Chastain Howe have highlighted the importance of internal political divisions, ministerial politics, and factional rivalries in shaping revolutionary foreign policy. More recent scholarship (Howe 2009; Dendena 2012; Esdaile 2019) has complicated this interpretation by emphasizing diplomatic tensions, strategic considerations, and the instability of France's domestic political environment. While this series of scholarship has broadened understanding of the Revolution's international dimensions, historians have generally examined the motivations of individual political actors or diplomatic developments separately rather than asking why rival political factions converged in their support for war (Blanning 2016; Lefebvre 1962; Furet 1981; Rothenberg 1988).

This article argues that France's declaration of war in April 1792 resulted primarily from domestic political competition rather than from an inevitable ideological conflict between revolutionary France and monarchical Europe. Although revolutionary rhetoric undoubtedly influenced political discourse, leading advocates of war employed military conflict as a strategic instrument to reshape political authority within France. For the Girondins, war promised an opportunity to consolidate republican leadership, expose the monarchy's suspected disloyalty, and strengthen the legitimacy of the Revolution through patriotic mobilization. For the Feuillants and many constitutional monarchists, however, war offered an entirely different political opportunity: the restoration of executive authority to Louis XVI through his constitutional role in

directing foreign policy or, should military defeat occur, the possibility that revolutionary instability would revive support for the monarchy. Their simultaneous endorsement of war therefore reflected not ideological consensus but competing domestic strategies pursued through a common instrument (Doyle 2013; Dendena 2012; Howe 2009).

To demonstrate this argument, this article analyzes debates within the Legislative Assembly alongside speeches delivered by Jacques-Pierre Brissot and Maximilien Robespierre, the Declaration of Pillnitz, contemporary revolutionary pamphlets, and correspondence involving Louis XVI and leading political figures. Rather than treating these documents merely as descriptions of political events, the analysis examines how revolutionary leaders framed war as a solution to France's internal political crisis. Comparing arguments advanced by competing factions reveals that support for military conflict transcended ideological divisions and instead reflected attempts to manipulate the Revolution's domestic balance of power (Tackett 1996; Doyle 2008; Howe 2009).

Reinterpreting the declaration of war through the lens of domestic political competition contributes to the historiography of the French Revolution in two important ways. First, it challenges narratives that portray the outbreak of war primarily as an ideological confrontation between revolutionary and monarchical Europe by demonstrating that internal political calculations were equally—if not more—important in shaping French decision-making. Second, it illustrates how foreign policy can function as an extension of domestic political struggle during periods of revolutionary instability. The French declaration of war in 1792 was not simply the beginning of an international ideological crusade; it was also the product of rival political factions attempting to determine the future of the Revolution itself. Understanding this convergence provides a more nuanced explanation for one of the defining turning points in modern European history and offers broader insight into the relationship between domestic political competition and international conflict (Furet 1981; Furet and Ozouf 1989; Tackett 2015).

Literature Review

The origins of the French Revolutionary Wars have generated extensive scholarly debate, with historians offering competing explanations that emphasize ideology, diplomacy, and domestic politics. While earlier scholarship frequently interpreted France's declaration of war in April 1792 as the natural consequence of revolutionary ideology, more recent studies have highlighted the complexity of political decision-making within revolutionary France. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature examines these explanations independently, leaving insufficient attention to the question of why rival political factions simultaneously embraced war despite pursuing fundamentally different constitutional objectives (Blanning 2016; Rothenberg 1988; Esdaile 2019; Lefebvre 1962).

One influential interpretation portrays the Revolutionary Wars as an ideological conflict between revolutionary France and monarchical Europe. Historians emphasizing this perspective argue that revolutionary leaders believed France had a mission to defend and disseminate the

principles of liberty, equality, and popular sovereignty beyond its borders. Revolutionary rhetoric, particularly that of Jacques-Pierre Brissot and the Girondins, frequently invoked the liberation of oppressed peoples and the universal significance of the Revolution. From this perspective, military conflict represented the logical extension of revolutionary political philosophy rather than merely a response to immediate political circumstances. (Blanning 2016; Rothenberg 1988; Schneid 2011; Schama 1989; Furet 1981).

More recent scholarship has challenged this interpretation by demonstrating that eighteenth-century European diplomacy remained largely governed by traditional concerns of power politics rather than ideological confrontation. T. C. W. Blanning argues that the diplomatic environment preceding 1792 closely resembled earlier interstate rivalries, in which shifting alliances, territorial interests, and dynastic calculations continued to shape foreign policy despite the Revolution. Rather than seeking an immediate crusade against revolutionary France, Austria under Leopold II attempted to preserve stability through cautious diplomacy, including the carefully qualified Declaration of Pillnitz. Similarly, Charles Esdaile and Gunther Rothenberg emphasize the continuity between the Revolutionary Wars and earlier eighteenth-century conflicts, suggesting that the expansion of ideological warfare occurred only after military hostilities had already begun (Blanning 2016; Esdaile 2019; Rothenberg 1988; Doyle 2008).
A separate body of scholarship (Doyle 2013; Howe 2009; Dendena 2012; Vovelle 1984) shifts attention from international diplomacy toward France's internal political divisions. William Doyle demonstrates that the Revolution after 1791 remained deeply unstable, with constitutional uncertainty, economic distress, and factional competition shaping political decision-making within the Legislative Assembly. Patricia Chastain Howe likewise argues that foreign policy became increasingly intertwined with domestic political struggles as revolutionary ministers attempted to strengthen their political positions. Federico Dendena's study of the Feuillants further complicates conventional interpretations by demonstrating that constitutional monarchists actively supported war, not because they shared republican ambitions, but because they believed military success could restore confidence in the constitutional monarchy and reinforce executive authority.

These studies have significantly broadened historians' understanding of the Revolution, yet they generally analyze revolutionary factions individually or emphasize a single explanatory framework. Scholarship focusing on the Girondins often interprets their support for war through revolutionary ideology, while studies of the Feuillants examine constitutional politics without fully considering why both groups ultimately converged on the same foreign policy. Likewise, diplomatic histories frequently explain Austria's actions independently of political developments inside France. Consequently, the interaction between competing domestic political strategies and foreign policy remains insufficiently explored. (McPhee 2016; Andress 2004; Rudé 1959)
This article builds upon these historiographical contributions by comparing the political calculations of multiple revolutionary factions rather than examining them in isolation. Through a close analysis of speeches, legislative debates, diplomatic declarations, and contemporary political writings, it argues that war functioned primarily as a contested instrument of domestic

political competition. Although the Girondins, the Feuillants, and the monarchy envisioned radically different political futures for France, each regarded military conflict as a means of reshaping the domestic balance of power. By emphasizing this convergence, the article reinterprets the declaration of war not simply as an ideological confrontation between France and Europe but as an extension of the Revolution's internal struggle over political legitimacy and authority (Furet 1981; Tackett 1996; Dendena 2012).

Methodology and Primary Sources

This study employs qualitative historical analysis to examine why competing political factions within revolutionary France simultaneously advocated war in 1792 despite pursuing fundamentally different political objectives. Rather than treating the declaration of war as the inevitable outcome of revolutionary ideology or international diplomacy alone, this research compares how leading political actors used the language of war to advance competing domestic agendas. The analysis focuses not on whether individual statements were objectively true, but on how political leaders framed military conflict as a solution to France's internal political crisis. The principal methodology is comparative textual analysis of contemporary primary sources. Political speeches delivered before the Legislative Assembly provide the most direct evidence of how revolutionary leaders justified war to fellow deputies and the French public. Particular attention is given to speeches by Jacques-Pierre Brissot, whose arguments became central to the Girondin campaign for war, and Maximilien Robespierre, whose opposition provides an important contemporary counterargument. Rather than reading these speeches in isolation, they are compared to identify recurring themes, political objectives, and differing assumptions regarding the relationship between foreign policy and domestic stability.

Legislative debates are examined alongside diplomatic documents, including the Declaration of Pillnitz (1791), Austrian ultimatums, and correspondence involving Louis XVI and revolutionary ministers. These sources allow the study to compare political rhetoric within France with the intentions expressed by European governments. This comparison is particularly important because revolutionary leaders frequently portrayed Austria as an immediate military threat, while Austrian diplomatic correspondence suggests that Emperor Leopold II initially sought to deter further revolutionary radicalization without provoking a general European war. Examining both French and Austrian sources therefore helps distinguish between political perception and diplomatic reality.

The study also incorporates revolutionary pamphlets, patriotic songs such as La Marseillaise, and contemporary political writings to reconstruct the broader political environment in which support for war developed. These materials are not treated as objective descriptions of events but as evidence of political persuasion and public mobilization. Revolutionary pamphlets illustrate how different factions appealed to popular opinion, while patriotic literature demonstrates how concepts such as liberty, national honor, and foreign conspiracy became intertwined with domestic political competition (Rudé 1959; Andress 2004; McPhee 2016).

Rather than organizing the analysis chronologically, the evidence is examined comparatively across three political groups: the Girondins, the Feuillants, and their contemporary critics led by Robespierre. This thematic approach makes it possible to compare how rival factions interpreted the same diplomatic events—including the Flight to Varennes, the Declaration of Pillnitz, and Austria's military preparations—to support markedly different political strategies. By comparing competing interpretations instead of simply recounting events, the study identifies both areas of agreement and significant points of divergence among revolutionary leaders.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This article focuses primarily on elite political discourse recorded in speeches, legislative debates, and official correspondence. These sources provide valuable insight into the decision-making of political leaders but reveal less about the attitudes of ordinary French citizens, soldiers, or provincial communities. Likewise, surviving political speeches often served persuasive purposes and therefore cannot be interpreted as transparent expressions of private motives. To address this limitation, the study compares multiple categories of primary evidence—including diplomatic correspondence, legislative records, and political writings—rather than relying upon a single source. Although this approach cannot reconstruct every motivation behind France's declaration of war, it allows for a more balanced assessment of how domestic political competition shaped revolutionary foreign policy. By combining comparative textual analysis with contextual examination of diplomatic and political documents, this study seeks to explain not simply why France declared war in 1792, but why rival political factions believed that war offered the most effective means of securing their competing visions for the future of the Revolution (Doyle 2013; Dendena 2012; Howe 2009).

Comparative Historical Analysis

1. **War as a Strategy for Republican Consolidation**

Among the political factions that advocated war in early 1792, the Girondins have most frequently been portrayed as ideological revolutionaries determined to spread the principles of liberty across Europe. Jacques-Pierre Brissot, the faction's most influential spokesman, repeatedly described revolutionary France as possessing both the right and the responsibility to confront despotic monarchies abroad. Such rhetoric has encouraged historians to interpret Girondin's support for war primarily as an effort to export the ideals of the French Revolution. Yet a closer reading of Brissot's speeches before the Legislative Assembly suggests that ideological language often served a more immediate political purpose.

Rather than advocating war solely to liberate Europe, Brissot consistently framed military conflict as a means of resolving France's domestic political crisis and strengthening the position of the revolutionary government. Brissot's speeches reveal that his principal concern was not Austria itself but the unresolved constitutional struggle within France. Following Louis XVI's attempted Flight to Varennes in June 1791, public confidence in the monarchy had deteriorated dramatically. Although the Constitution of 1791 preserved the monarchy, many revolutionaries

questioned whether the king remained committed to the new political order. Brissot repeatedly argued that the greatest threat to the Revolution came from counterrevolutionary émigrés gathered beyond France's borders and from their alleged cooperation with foreign monarchies. By portraying Austria as the protector of these émigrés, he transformed an internal political dispute into an international crisis. War therefore offered an opportunity not merely to defeat a foreign enemy but also to expose the monarchy's loyalty before the French nation.

This political calculation is particularly evident in Brissot's repeated insistence that Louis XVI should publicly confront Austria. If the king actively supported military resistance, he would be forced to demonstrate his commitment to the Revolution. If he hesitated or opposed war, revolutionary leaders could portray his actions as evidence of continued sympathy for foreign monarchies and counterrevolutionary conspirators. In either scenario, the Girondins stood to gain politically. War thus functioned less as an ideological crusade than as a political test through which Brissot hoped to redefine the balance of power within revolutionary France. Brissot likewise connected military conflict to the problem of political legitimacy. The Revolution after 1791 remained unstable. Economic hardship, regional unrest, and continuing disputes over the Constitution weakened confidence in the Legislative Assembly. Rather than viewing these challenges as independent domestic problems, Girondin leaders increasingly argued that France's divisions resulted from foreign interference. Brissot claimed that military victory would restore national unity by directing popular attention toward a common external enemy while simultaneously strengthening the authority of revolutionary institutions. His speeches therefore presented war as an instrument for consolidating political power rather than merely defending revolutionary principles.

The Girondins also believed that military success would accelerate the transition from constitutional monarchy toward a republican political order. Although republicanism remained politically controversial in early 1792, war created circumstances in which loyalty to the Revolution increasingly became inseparable from loyalty to the nation. Should Louis XVI fail to support the war effort enthusiastically—or should military setbacks reveal continued royal resistance—the constitutional monarchy itself would lose legitimacy. In this sense, Brissot viewed war as a mechanism through which political authority could gradually shift from the Crown to the elected representatives of the nation. Military conflict therefore became part of a broader strategy to reshape the constitutional future of France.

Contemporary critics recognized the political implications of Brissot's arguments. Robespierre, although equally committed to preserving the Revolution, rejected the assumption that war would strengthen republican government. In speeches delivered during the winter of 1791–1792, he warned that foreign conflict would increase executive authority, empower ambitious military leaders, and provide opportunities for counterrevolution rather than suppress it. More importantly, Robespierre challenged the Girondins' confidence that military victory would be swift and decisive. He argued that revolutionary enthusiasm could not compensate for France's organizational weaknesses and that military failure would intensify, rather than resolve, domestic political instability. His criticism suggests that contemporaries understood the debate

over war not simply as a disagreement about foreign policy but as a disagreement over competing strategies for securing the Revolution itself (Doyle 2008; Dendena 2012). Subsequent events largely confirmed that Girondin's expectations rested upon optimistic political assumptions. French armies suffered a series of defeats during the opening months of the war, undermining confidence in both the government and the military. Rather than producing national unity, military failure deepened political suspicion, intensified accusations of treason, and accelerated the radicalization of the Revolution. The insurrection of 10 August 1792, the suspension of Louis XVI, and the eventual establishment of the French Republic emerged not from the military triumph anticipated by Brissot but from the political instability that accompanied early defeats. Ironically, although war ultimately contributed to the destruction of the monarchy, it did so through a process of escalating crisis rather than through the orderly republican consolidation envisioned by the Girondins.

A close reading of Girondin political rhetoric therefore complicates the traditional interpretation of France's declaration of war as primarily an ideological campaign to liberate Europe. Revolutionary ideals undoubtedly shaped Brissot's language, but the evidence suggests that those ideals were inseparable from immediate domestic political calculations. War offered the Girondins an opportunity to isolate the monarchy, consolidate legislative authority, and redefine political legitimacy within France itself. Their support for military conflict cannot be understood solely as an expression of revolutionary ideology; it was equally a strategy for winning the Revolution's internal struggle over political power.

2. War as a Contested Instrument of Domestic Politics

The declaration of war against Austria in April 1792 has traditionally been interpreted as the triumph of revolutionary ideology over diplomatic restraint. Yet the debates preceding the declaration reveal a more complicated political reality. Rather than reflecting a consensus about France's revolutionary mission, support for war emerged because rival political factions believed military conflict would strengthen their own positions within the Revolution. Although the Girondins, the Feuillants, and Robespierre reached very different conclusions about whether war should be fought, each understood foreign policy primarily through the lens of France's domestic political crisis. Their disagreements therefore concerned not simply international relations but the future constitutional order of France.

For the Girondins, war represented an opportunity to consolidate revolutionary authority. Jacques-Pierre Brissot repeatedly argued that France faced a conspiracy involving émigré nobles, Austria, and counterrevolutionary forces within the kingdom. His speeches presented military conflict as a means of exposing the loyalty of Louis XVI while simultaneously uniting the French nation behind the Revolution. If the king wholeheartedly supported the war effort, he would publicly affirm his commitment to the constitutional order. If he hesitated, revolutionary leaders could portray his reluctance as evidence of sympathy with foreign monarchies and domestic counterrevolution. In either case, war promised to strengthen the political position of the Girondins by forcing unresolved constitutional tensions into the open. Revolutionary rhetoric

about liberating Europe therefore served not only ideological purposes but also immediate political objectives within France itself.

The Feuillants reached the opposite constitutional conclusion while supporting the same policy. Having accepted the Constitution of 1791 as the completion of the Revolution, constitutional monarchists hoped to restore political stability rather than continue revolutionary transformation. Because Louis XVI retained responsibility for foreign affairs under the new constitution, successful military leadership offered an opportunity to rebuild confidence in the monarchy after the damaging Flight to Varennes. War, from this perspective, was expected to reinforce cooperation between the Crown and the Legislative Assembly rather than destroy it. Even among royalist circles that anticipated military defeat, conflict was viewed as a political calculation: failure on the battlefield might expose the weaknesses of the revolutionary government and revive support for the monarchy. Military conflict thus became a strategic instrument through which constitutional monarchists sought to preserve, rather than overturn, the constitutional settlement.

The remarkable convergence of these competing factions illustrates that support for war did not necessarily indicate agreement about the Revolution's future. The Girondins viewed military victory as the path toward a stronger republic, while the Feuillants regarded the same victory as a means of stabilizing constitutional monarchy. Their agreement lay only in the assumption that foreign conflict could resolve France's domestic political instability. The declaration of war therefore reflected not ideological unity but competing efforts to reshape political authority through the same policy instrument.

Maximilien Robespierre offered the most significant contemporary challenge to these assumptions. In a series of speeches delivered during the winter of 1791–1792, he rejected both the Girondins' confidence in military victory and the constitutional monarchists' expectation that war would restore political stability. Robespierre argued that revolutionary governments should secure liberty at home before attempting to confront foreign enemies and warned that military conflict would strengthen ambitious generals, deepen domestic divisions, and create opportunities for counterrevolution. Most importantly, he questioned the widespread assumption that France would win a quick and decisive campaign, insisting that political enthusiasm could not compensate for military weakness and administrative disorder.

Events during 1792 largely confirmed Robespierre's concerns. French forces suffered repeated defeats in the opening months of the war, undermining confidence in both the monarchy and the Legislative Assembly. Rather than producing national unity, military setbacks intensified accusations of treason, heightened suspicion toward Louis XVI, and accelerated political radicalization. The insurrection of 10 August 1792, the suspension of the monarchy, and the eventual establishment of the First Republic did not result from the carefully calculated strategies envisioned by either the Girondins or the Feuillants. Instead, they emerged from a rapidly escalating political crisis in which war amplified existing constitutional conflicts rather than resolving them.

These developments suggest that historians should distinguish between the rhetoric used to justify war and the political purposes that war was expected to serve. Revolutionary leaders frequently invoked liberty, patriotism, and national honor, but their political calculations reveal that military conflict was equally valued as a means of influencing domestic struggles for legitimacy and power. Ideology undoubtedly shaped the language of revolutionary politics, yet ideology alone cannot explain why factions pursuing incompatible constitutional visions simultaneously advocated war. Their convergence is better understood as evidence that foreign policy had become inseparable from domestic political competition (Furet 1981; Tackett 2015; Doyle 2013).

Viewed from this perspective, the declaration of war in April 1792 marked more than the beginning of an international ideological conflict. It represented an attempt by competing revolutionary actors to resolve the Revolution's internal constitutional crisis through external military action. Ironically, the policy that each faction expected to strengthen its own political position instead undermined them all. The constitutional monarchy collapsed, the Girondins themselves were eventually removed from power, and the Revolution entered a far more radical phase than any of the principal advocates of war had anticipated. The failure of these competing political calculations demonstrates that the outbreak of the Revolutionary Wars cannot be understood solely as a response to ideological conflict abroad but must also be viewed as the product of unresolved struggles over political authority within revolutionary France.

Discussion

This study has argued that France's declaration of war in April 1792 cannot be adequately explained as either an ideological crusade against European monarchies or the inevitable result of diplomatic confrontation. Rather, an examination of political speeches, legislative debates, and diplomatic documents suggests that war became a contested instrument through which rival political factions attempted to resolve France's internal constitutional crisis.

Rather than treating diplomacy and domestic politics as competing explanations, the evidence suggests that revolutionary leaders used foreign policy to pursue domestic political objectives. International conflict and internal political competition were not separate processes; they became mutually reinforcing.

The comparative analysis of political factions also challenges interpretations that explain support for war primarily through revolutionary ideology. Girondin speeches certainly invoked the language of liberty, patriotism, and resistance to despotism. However, a close reading of these speeches indicates that ideological rhetoric frequently served immediate political purposes, particularly the effort to isolate Louis XVI, undermine confidence in constitutional monarchy, and strengthen republican leadership within the Legislative Assembly. Similarly, the Feuillants' support for war cannot be understood as ideological enthusiasm for revolution. Constitutional monarchists believed that successful military leadership could restore public confidence in the monarchy and stabilize the Constitution of 1791. Their support for the same military policy demonstrates that agreement on war did not imply agreement on political principles. Instead,

different factions expected the same conflict to produce fundamentally different constitutional outcomes.

The inclusion of Robespierre's opposition further illustrates the importance of viewing revolutionary debates as competing political strategies rather than ideological binaries. His criticism was directed less at the abstract principles of liberty than at the political assumptions underlying the pro-war movement. Robespierre questioned whether military conflict would strengthen the Revolution or instead empower counterrevolutionary forces and deepen domestic instability. The subsequent military defeats of 1792, followed by the collapse of the constitutional monarchy and the radicalization of the Revolution, suggest that neither the Girondins' nor the Feuillants' political calculations unfolded as anticipated.

More broadly, this study contributes to historical discussions about the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy during periods of revolutionary change. Revolutions frequently produce competing claims to political legitimacy, making foreign affairs an arena in which internal struggles are contested. The French case demonstrates that military conflict may be initiated not only because states confront external threats but also because political actors believe war can strengthen their position at home.

In this respect, the declaration of war in 1792 illustrates a broader historical phenomenon: governments facing internal instability may pursue external conflict in the hope of consolidating authority, creating political unity, or discrediting domestic rivals. While the outcomes of such strategies are often unpredictable, the decision to wage war cannot be understood without examining the domestic political calculations that shape foreign policy.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that the origins of the French Revolutionary Wars should be understood as the product of both ideological aspirations and political strategy. Revolutionary ideals provided much of the language through which war was justified, but the decision to support military conflict was equally shaped by competing efforts to determine who would govern revolutionary France and under what constitutional system. By comparing the arguments of rival political factions rather than examining each in isolation, this study demonstrates that foreign policy became one of the principal arenas through which the future of the Revolution itself was contested.

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Selective Visibility of Humanitarian Crises in the Age of Algorithms By Jiarui Lin

I. Introduction

As high-profile geopolitical tensions between Ukraine and Russia, Palestine and Israel, and China and the United States capture global attention, countless other crises remain unseen and unheard. This selective visibility is not incidental but is shaped by algorithmic systems that govern information circulation and reception in the digital age. People often think they see the world. But in the age of algorithms, people often merely see a selected world. Oftentimes, they hear only the voices in their immediate environment. The rest remains unrecognized and unpublicized.

In the age of technology and media, over five and a half billion people on earth are social media users, consisting of 93% of internet users (We are Social and Meltwater). The conventional channels through which people obtain news have shifted dramatically. Surpassing the once-dominant evening television broadcasts, social media has become the primary news source for more than half of Americans. In the United Kingdom, this figure rises to approximately 75% among individuals aged 16–24 (Savage). The present-day "news outlet" no longer operates solely under editorial judgment, but mainly under internet algorithms engineered to privilege engagement above all else. These algorithms typically rank content based on preset engagement measures, such as watch time, shares, comments, and completion rate, rather than a story's civic importance or urgency. Here, people are met with their "FYP", a specialized page living up to its name: The "For You Page".

Content that neither explicitly appeals to viewers' national or cultural identity nor capitalizes on "hot" trending headlines—and that lacks sensational narrative framing—struggles to gain visibility in the public sphere. For example, global humanitarian crises, which usually fail to appeal to viewers' direct relevance or interest, are omitted from viewers' pages. Research on global humanitarian crisis media coverage shows that media attention is highly uneven—conflicts or disasters affecting significant numbers of people do not always receive proportional media coverage (Dragomir).

This essay examines how modern algorithm-driven media determines global awareness by prioritizing engagement over severity and urgency, resulting in inadequate attention and funding. A self-reinforcing cycle of invisibility and underfunding is emphasized. Seven conflicts engulfed in protracted violence and severe humanitarian impacts in the Global South are highlighted as micro-case studies to raise awareness.

II. How Algorithms Manufacture Selective Silence

Algorithms amplify events that ignite emotions, while silently obscuring the deepest and most painful crises. No outrage, no immediate relevance, no extravaganza now equals no coverage.

Crises in the Global South—particularly long-running, protracted conflicts—often struggle to maintain international visibility unless a new or "newsworthy" event occurs. As

sustained suffering fades from coverage, the public becomes increasingly uninformed about what are framed as "less relevant" crises, further pushing these issues out of algorithmically curated feeds. A self-reinforcing cycle emerges: algorithmic invisibility reduces public awareness; diminished awareness leads to underfunding; underfunding prolongs humanitarian crises; and prolonged suffering is subsequently classified by algorithms as "old news."

In the past, human editors were the ones making judgement calls about what stories count as "newsworthy," but engagement-optimized platforms replace human judgement—which holds the potential of ethical and empathic considerations—with an automated feedback loop.

Yet those most in need of global attention do not disappear—they remain unseen and unheard. While humanitarian aid from international organizations and nation-states is essential for alleviating and resolving such crises, financial and political support remains disproportionately low. Many of these obscured conflicts constitute some of the gravest humanitarian catastrophes of the modern era, with consequences that extend far beyond national borders.

III. A Phenomenon With Historical Roots

This pattern of unequal attention is nothing new. Throughout history, the issue of unequal or disproportionate attention and support to political, economic, and societal events has always existed. While the Bengal Famine of 1943 resulted in the deaths of millions, it was largely overshadowed by wartime political priorities during World War II. During the Rwandan Genocide (1994), the killing of approximately 800,000 people occurred with minimal international media coverage and delayed global intervention.

These past historical cases serve as frameworks; their purpose lies within its demonstration of how selective visibility is a long-established structural bias in how attention and resources are allocated, in which algorithms are inherited and intensified rather than invented.

Today, despite living in a highly developed, technology-driven world, these historical tragedies serve as a stark reminder that progress alone does not guarantee justice. Technology must be deployed deliberately to bridge existing inequalities rather than deepen them. Ensuring this is a shared responsibility: one that requires holding institutions accountable for prioritizing profit over human well-being. True progress demands collective advancement—where no population is rendered invisible, left behind, or locked in stagnation.

Two critical questions remain unanswered for humanity to consider:

1. How can we bring equal attention to all issues in proportion to their urgency level?
2. How much funding or aid should be given in proportion to their urgency level?

IV. Neglected Case Studies

1) Myanmar Civil War (2021—present)

The Myanmar Civil War is the result of long-standing tensions between the military and civil society. It is the world's longest ongoing civil war, stretching nearly eight decades (Guinness World Records, n.d.). Media focus has faded mainly due to the situation's complexity, which requires readers to review the country's long colonial history to truly understand current events. Additionally, the exclusion of important events to simplify the conflict for readers harbors the risk of framing the revolution as a "unified civilian insurgency" (Stevens).

Four years after the 1 February 2021 coup, around 90% of Myanmar's population has been exposed to political violence, as millions live in active conflict (ACLED). Civilians also lack access to electricity, communications, healthcare, and education, and are vulnerable to crime and human and drug trafficking. As of now, 19.9 million people are in need, while the UN currently aims to help a targeted 5.5 million, holding no promise, with the current requirements needing $1.14 billion (OCHA, "Global Humanitarian Overview 2025").

The already expansive meth production and opium poppy cultivation are further stimulated by the internal turmoil as a way to gain profit for purchasing weapons. As the top opium producer, Myanmar's civil war likely contributed to new record highs of methamphetamine seizures—236 tons—across East and Southeast Asia in 2024, showcasing how a civil war has consequences stretching beyond its borders, even on a global scale (Peter).

2) Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) Conflicts (1996-present)

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has undergone decades of protracted conflict, starting from the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The genocide led to a spill-over war: The aftermath of the First Congo War (1996) and the Second Congo War (1998) lasts to date. The war was the deadliest conflict since WW2, with 5.4 million deaths, yet it remains overlooked and understudied (Moulton). Today, violence is driven by continuous ethnic tensions and competition over valuable natural resources (Amnesty International, 2024). There are over 100 armed groups, including the well-known M23, in the northeastern part of the country, where civilians are directly in the crossfire. War crimes and crimes against humanity have been widely documented. Since 1998, over six million people have lost their lives, many not from direct violence but from hunger, disease, and displacement. As of April 2024, 7.3 million people were internally displaced, marking DRC as one of the world's most severe displacement crises. The country ranks fifth as the poorest globally despite holding vast reserves of cobalt and copper, with 74.6% of the population living on less than US$2.15 per day.

The scale of suffering and instability within the region is severely disproportionate to the volume of international media coverage, being acutely underreported despite mass death tolls. This may have resulted from news editors' assumptions that "no one is interested in Africa"(Stroehlein). This presumption that their audience holds the belief of a "hopeless Africa" with permanent suffering further disinclines journalists to search for and cover potential solutions to those crises, even less so than on the deadly effects themselves. As of 27 October this year, only $412 million has been provided out of the 2.5 billion US dollars that the UN and partners appealed for at the beginning of the year for the Humanitarian Needs and Response plan

that hoped to reach 11 million out of 21.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance (NRC, “DR Congo: Decades of Neglect Must End.”).

3) Ethiopian Civil War / Tigray Conflict (2020–2022, aftermath ongoing)

In November of 2020, the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) broke into conflict that soon descended into a full-scale civil war. Today, millions of Ethiopians are still in desperate need of humanitarian aid and protection. In addition to the extremely severe food insecurity and shortfall, gender-based violence has increased significantly while women and children lack access to proper healthcare, social welfare, and justice services. UNICEF’s Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC) 2025 Appeal highlights that there is an urgent need for US$493.2 million for the critical humanitarian requirements of children, adolescents, women, and men in Ethiopia (United Nations Children’s Fund). Yet, the conflict has been almost completely ignored by mainstream media in Europe. SRF’s *Tagesschau programme* in 2022 had spent an estimated 113,315 seconds on the war occurring in Ukraine but merely gave one 150-second report for the war in Ethiopia in that entire year (Universität Mannheim et al.). One reason may be that multiple major headlines dominated the news during peak Tigray violence, including Covid-19, Afghanistan withdrawal, and Ukraine. Another could be the political and public perception that the conflict has a relatively limited immediate impact on Western security.

4) Sudan Civil War (2023—present)

The Sudan Civil War is between two rival factions of the national military government. This war is the world’s largest displacement crisis, having displaced over 12-14 million people, devastated communities, and exacerbated an already dire humanitarian crisis (Mureithi, 2025). Over 150,000 have passed, with starvation and disease killing more than direct violence, threatening millions with famine, devastating infrastructure, and sparking immense regional instability. Yet this humanitarian crisis has received little attention from the general public and almost no media coverage. The bits are sporadic, framed vaguely as “instability” or “tribal conflict”, obscuring accountability, reducing moral urgency, and drawing a stark comparison with the detailed, human-interest storytelling devoted to other events, such as Ukraine. Without a clear villain, victim, or resolution trajectory, Sudan’s story lacks a “narrative hook” to algorithmic media. Reasons may include the geographic and political distance from Western audiences, a complicated narrative, and the dangerous reporting environment. Moreover, aid organizations severely lack the money needed to cover the enormous demand for aid. In 2025, the UN and other aid organisations will need $4.16 billion to reach 20.9 million people in Sudan (Høvring). Yet, only 9.9 percent of the emergency appeal had been funded as of 8 April.

5) The Anglophone crisis / Ambazonia conflict (2016—present) and 6) Boko Haram Movement in Cameroon

Cameroon is being severely impacted by multiple, overlapping conflicts, dominated by two major crises.

The first one is called the Anglophone crisis or Ambazonia conflict, an internal separatist war in its English-speaking regions, arising from long-standing grievances over marginalization and second-class treatment of English-speaking communities within a majority-French state. The conflict now involves violence, kidnapping, targeted killings, attacks, and bombings, including school boycotts enforced with violence, with government forces being accused of serious abuses.

The second one is a war that shadows multiple borders: The Boko Haram movement by violent Sunni Islamist extremist groups. They act under the name of Islam, attempting to overthrow the existing Nigerian government and establish an Islamic state operating under a strict Salafi interpretation of Sharia law, free from Western influence. Tens of thousands of people have been killed in Nigeria and the neighboring countries of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.

In 2025, Cameroon had 3.3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, including protection, education, food security, health, nutrition, shelter, as well as water and sanitation. Of these, 2.1 million people are targeted by the 2025 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), which requires $359.3 million in funding. However, severe funding cuts have led to a significant reduction in assistance (OCHA, “Cameroon: The Cost of Inaction”). The Norwegian Refugee Council has named Cameroon as “a case study in global neglect: little diplomacy, underfunded and under-reported” (NRC, “Cameroon: The World’s Most Neglected Displacement Crisis”).

6) Yemeni Civil War (2014–present)

The Yemeni Civil War has been deemed one of the deadliest humanitarian crises, with 19.5 million people requiring humanitarian assistance and protection services in 2025, and millions are on the brink of famine, facing widespread hunger, disease, and displacement (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, n.d.). After a decade of conflict, the crisis has been thoroughly classified as “old news”. This can be seen in the crisis’s funding levels: The 2025 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan is severely underfunded (currently only 18% funded), the lowest level in over a decade (Solidarités International). Funding cuts to humanitarian aid programs and ongoing conflict have only worsened the crisis.

V. Solutions

Collaborative efforts across the government, humanitarian organizations, research institutions, media outlets, and the public will be crucial to address the lack of media coverage of certain selective humanitarian crises and the lack of funds resulting from this.

Institutional Measures

On a larger scale, it is critical to create official organizations or to integrate the responsibility of existing ones to analyze different conflicts’ media coverage and humanitarian funding relative to the total number of people affected, severity, and the amount of total humanitarian aid needed. A formal contact line should be created alongside a focus on building a

solid relationship between these organizations and journalists covering social issues, development, or humanitarian affairs. This not only allows for verified data and expert analysis, increasing the likelihood of sustained media coverage, but may also act as a potential incentive for media coverage. Furthermore, integrating media literacy and global humanitarian awareness into education systems is essential to informing young people about this phenomenon. Only through such education can meaningful awareness develop.

The government, potentially through ministries or departments of humanitarian development, should be involved to regulate such activities to ensure there is no illicit behavior engaged by any member, especially ones that could impact resulting perspectives and the amount of aid, to uphold fairness and the rights of all stakeholders involved. Moreover, governments could implement regulatory frameworks and laws that promote balanced news exposure. Such as requiring major media outlets above a certain market share to allocate a minimum proportion of coverage to humanitarian crises based on urgency and severity, rather than engagement metrics alone, while still respecting press freedom.

Individual Action

On the smaller scale, individuals should actively strive to educate themselves, seek information beyond the algorithm-curated feeds, and engage with multiple humanitarian news sources. As individuals collectively increase consumer demand for equitable media coverage, they can influence not only individual media firms but also the industry as a whole and, ultimately, government.

VI. Conclusion

It takes a collaborative effort between the global, macro-, and micro-stages—international organizations, businesses, and individuals—to see a more truthful world—a less depicted world. This essay does not answer the two questions proposed in Section III; they remain open and are calling for the current and future generation to figure out and act. Ultimately, accountability is bottom-up; it is up to the current generation to determine the following course of attention.

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Socioemotional Awareness and Skills Among Teachers in Two Private English-Arabic Bilingual High Schools in Kuwait: Participatory Action Research and a Context-Relevant, Research-Based Solutional Framework for a Theoretical Teacher Professional Development Program By Ahmad Albarjas, Shaikha Alfarhood, & Lulu Alsaleh

Abstract

This paper examines socioemotional awareness and skills among teachers in two private English–Arabic bilingual high schools in Kuwait using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology.

This paper variably uses the terms *socio-emotional*, *social-emotional*, and *social and emotional* with the terms *skills*, *intelligence*, and *awareness*, as well as the together-terms of *students* and *pupils;* here, these terms are treated as interchangeable and all-in-all refer to the same construct.

Semi-structured interviews with school stakeholders—who attend either of these two schools—were used to explore how current socioemotional awareness of teachers is interpreted, practiced, and supported throughout the learning process with students, and whether more training is needed—via means of teacher professional development (PD)—to equip or strengthen/advance preexisting socioemotional skills, awareness, and knowledge in teachers. Findings from both schools throughout interviews indicate that effective teaching extends beyond the teacher's sole subject-matter expertise or their responsibility of delivering content—it also relies on teachers' ability to communicate expectations clearly, respond to students' emotional and academic needs, and adapt instruction according to these needs—or particular concerns generally raised by students. Stakeholders in these interviews identified gaps in existing, rigid PD structures that fail to address overall the crucial concept of being an environmentally attuned and aware educator (i.e., 'reading the room') and additionally account for, let alone have basic expertise in dealing with, neurodivergent students who only partially spend time at learning support units compared to most of their time being spent in mainstream classes.

Based on these findings, the study proposes a context-relevant, research-based framework for integrating socioemotional awareness and skills into a theoretical teacher PD program—conducted across four spaced working sessions—within the contextual limit of a Kuwaiti private English–Arabic bilingual high school. The purpose of this is to address the evolving socioemotional needs of non-neurodivergent students and their neurodivergent peers, in the overall endeavor of strengthening educators.

Keywords

Social-emotional skills, social-emotional awareness, school reform, educational reform, pedagogy, Participatory Action Research, Professional Development, Subject-Matter Experts, educational psychology, human psychology, context relevance, educational quality.

Participatory Action Research (PAR): Data Collation at Two Kuwait-Based Private English-Arabic Bilingual High Schools

PAR is described in many ways, but common ground emerges across different takes. Farrow et al., citing Whyte et al., describe PAR as a process involving "researchers and stakeholders to solve organisational problems" with the researcher taking a more active role as an internal member of the community, rather than them seeing matters through a third person. The stakeholders—in the context of this paper—are the staff members we interviewed.

Farrow et al. continue to emphasize that PAR can be a tool to solve such problems "when no clear line of inquiry is indicated," underscoring how flexible and powerful a research methodology PAR is to target matters that are internal to organizations, specifically in education, as they put it. Meanwhile, Baum et al. further magnify the 'participatory' quality of PAR, explaining how those affected by the issue that is under study are active agents in the research process. This demonstrates partial concordance with Farrow et al., drawing on Whyte et al.'s approach to PD as researchers taking active roles through being persons internal to the organization *itself*.

In essence, PAR is generally portrayed by both Farrow et al. and Baum et al. as more of a distinct research methodology than conventional ones. The overarching goal of PAR is to drive action (hence, the inclusion of the word "action" in the term) and "[blur] the line" between the researchers and those being researched (Baum et al.), thereby balancing that power between the two groups. PAR is a methodology that actively engages, operates—with a higher emphasis—on intentionality and circling back to the initial purpose, and gives all those involved in its process a voice while generating findings that are relevant to their research context.

We conducted PAR, looking at two private English-Arabic bilingual high schools in Kuwait. For the sake of anonymity, the two schools will be respectively labelled as School A and School B. Our PAR included *interviews* with school stakeholders from different occupations and professional hierarchies. Throughout the interviews, all participants provided informed consent, and participation was voluntary.

The interviews were semi-structured, lasting no more than 30 minutes. Each group was represented by one staff member in that position, except for Neurodivergent Support (NS) at School B, which was represented by two. The purpose of the interview process was to gather unique and current perspectives on the effectiveness of PD, as conducted in that said school, as well as the importance of possessing strong socioemotional intelligence, in addition to relevant strategies that consider the emotional state of classrooms throughout teaching. This approach allowed for investing a combination of theory (current thoughts) and practice (direct classroom strategies in action).

All in all, consistent themes emerged across School A and School B interviews, with further reinforcement of said themes when interview findings were compared to student input from the questionnaires.

Interviews with School Stakeholders at School A

In School A, we interviewed four staff groups:

1. School leadership
2. Human Resource (HR) personnel responsible for PD coordination
3. Neurodivergent Support (NS)
4. Teachers

A logically sound and effective approach to learning—as emphasized by both school leadership and HR personnel at School A—stressed that having a student-centered approach to teaching is key to creating a sense of rapport in the classroom and improving the learning experience among students. They defined this so-called approach as a means of actively and consistently listening to students and adapting the lesson plan to fit students' needs on a day-to-day basis, which is a skill that can only be achieved through having high emotional intelligence, meaning that teachers should *also* be able to sense the current state of the students and adapt accordingly to create a positive learning environment. Together, this information suggests that being a teacher is more than just being knowledgeable about the lesson, but also being knowledgeable about the social and emotional needs of students, whether that was listening to individual students' concerns or by telling the general emotional case of the classroom.

An outlying and highly critical answer raised another question. This answer was given by a classroom teacher, who found that the inherent “one size fits all” approach of current PD programs fails to address the current context-unique learning and emotional needs of students, particularly of those with difficulties such as ADHD and dyslexia. The teacher frames this as an argument against ‘best practices,’ giving their example of taking case studies from different schools in different countries and attempting to apply them or use them as monoliths for current PD programs in this school, which take place in a totally different context.

While this teacher is properly equipped with strategies for teaching academics via their qualifications, they found that they have very limited strategies for managing emotional and behavioral challenges, which are commonly missing from current teacher training programs, highlighting a gap that PD on social-emotional skills can fill. The teacher demonstrates that those are skills they had to learn themselves, rather than being given or taught them at an early stage or through PD in an educational institution.

Apart from the *theoretical* aspects identified in the interviews, particularly socioemotional intelligence, *practical* classroom strategies also emerged as a recurring theme. Leadership at School A emphasized the importance of hands-on activities and the development of interactive learning strategies that balance the use of digital and traditional teaching methods. The purpose of this balance is to mitigate stress resulting from a screen-heavy day and, in turn, enhance pupils’ focus and creativity, thus promoting a more comfortable learning experience for them. We noted that while this may not be directly associated with or assist with improving socioemotional awareness of a classroom from the lens of a teacher or socioemotional skills as a teacher for a classroom, this can be depicted as

an auxiliary strategy to keep in mind when executing work as a teacher, if comfortable learning in the classroom is a priority.

All in all, our interviews with School A stakeholders highlighted six main, summarized *parent themes*:

1. Teachers inherently possessing the ability to 'read the room'—interpreting and responding to students' class-related emotional issues or concerns in real time, using this emotional intelligence to their advantage to modify instruction to said classroom's specific emotional norms and dynamics
    a. Answers the question: "What is happening emotionally with my students right now?"
2. High-quality teaching—possessing instructional fluidity when it comes to lesson plans by listening to students (i.e., tailoring lesson plans to certain classrooms), intentionally deciding to stray away from static and rigid pacing models
    a. Answers the question: "What am I going to change in my teaching because of what I see?"
3. A mismatch between PD's inherent design and classroom reality, i.e., as current PD is context-agnostic and rarely responds to the various emotional and behavioral realities teachers face daily
4. An imbalance between theoretical and practical expertise when it comes to teachers, i.e., teachers are strongly prepared in academic instruction through their educational qualifications, but are undertrained from the *practical* side in managing behavior, and neurodivergent needs let alone to a basic level
5. Limited transferability of decontextualized case studies used as archetypes in School A's PD—viewed as pedagogically weak and does not account for cultural nuances, sensitivities, and school dynamics that are disparate from one school or one culture to another
6. An additional method of teaching: a deliberate balance between digital and non-digital learning, depicted through screen reduction for comfortable learning, and hands-on learning, such as through paper or physical projects

Interviews with School Stakeholders at School B

In School B, we interviewed two staff groups:

1. School leadership
2. Neurodivergent Support (NS)—a group represented by two staff members from two different positions, but their positions are relatively similar, as they both lie in the intersection of academic and emotional support for students

School leadership emphasized that teachers' attentiveness to students' concerns or comments regarding the subject or their means of teaching often produces a greater instructional

impact than treating content delivery as the one and only teaching responsibility. School leadership also indicated that possessing nothing but subject-matter expertise is simply insufficient to achieve a high-quality standard of teaching. Teachers are expected to possess competence with communication as a whole—communicating expectations very explicitly, applying rules and routines consistently, and maintaining predictable interactions with students—all through communication.

NS confirms the views were generally raised from School A's interviews that teachers should receive formal training in core social and emotional awareness.

NS continues to confirm such training as necessary for supporting students who experience anxiety, attention-related difficulties, or nontraditional learning patterns, as students participate in NS sessions for only a minor part of the school day and otherwise return to their mainstream classes in all cases. However, we as researchers also noted that, although socioemotional training is clearly effective for these students, the innate versatility of socioemotional skills and awareness extends beyond this group and applies equally to practically all students, regardless of whether they're neurodivergent or not.

NS recommended structured collaboration between teachers and NS personnel through scheduled meetings and/or one-on-one NS sessions, noting that these interactions allow academic challenges and emotional concerns to be addressed simultaneously by both the parties of NS and teachers, for the sake of the student. Finally, NS further stressed the essentiality of ongoing career work—noting PD as one example of that—to reinforce teachers' capacity to respond to students' social and emotional needs in the classroom as student needs evolve—as well as education as a whole—as time passes. This reflects the broader need for ongoing revision of all teaching strategies in response to norms that shift progressively as time progresses, too, and not specifically socioemotional skills. Nevertheless, NS underscored PD as a way to fill the gaps that formal training could not or has not filled.

All in all, our interviews with School B stakeholders highlighted five main, summarized *parent themes*:

1. 'Responsive teaching,' i.e., teaching while being attentive and 'responsive' to student concerns regarding either content being taught, or the style of teaching, recognizing and believing as an educator that attentivity produces greater learning outcomes
2. Multi-dimensional communication that is innately explicit and consistent, predictably across classroom routines, expectations, and interactions, to achieve a high-quality standard of teaching
3. Structured socioemotional awareness training for teachers to address students' diverse learning patterns, whether neurodivergent or not, which is the inherent purpose of this study
4. Teacher–NS collaboration that focuses on the academic and emotional aspects of students
5. The importance of ongoing PD is reiterated; it subsumes:

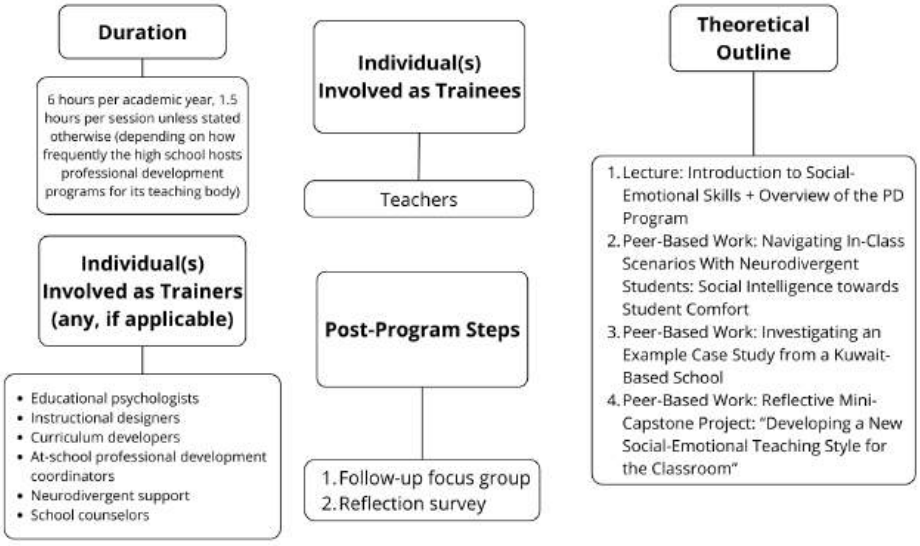
a. Utilizing the concept of socioemotional awareness and skill training for teachers in a contextualized PD format, conducted for teachers in a Kuwaiti private English-Arabic bilingual high school context:
    i. As a broader mechanism for these teachers to fill in gaps left by formal training
    ii. As a benchmark for these teachers to compare current teaching strategies with more recent, newer, and research-backed ones, as they pertain to progressively shifting educational norms of the current age

A Solutional Theoretical Framework: Outlining How Socioemotional Awareness and Skill Training Integrated Into a PD Program Structure Would Look to Achieve the Overall Goal

We collectively believed that in order for our collated data from the PAR to at least come to a beneficial, useful culmination, we needed a form of a 'solution' to the educational 'problem' we had previously identified. Thus, with the help of insight from the PAR findings too, we developed a theoretical framework illustrating how social-emotional intelligence could be integrated into a typical PD program, which serves—in one way or another—as a form of a solution to the gaps we pointed out that can benefit the target audience involved in relevant schools and strive for a more socially and emotionally intelligent teaching body. While this framework has not been directly tested in a Kuwaiti private bilingual English-Arabic context—hence, "theoretical"—it serves as a model reflecting a wrap-up that would serve good to countless context-relevant schools nationwide looking to improve social-emotional intelligence and awareness of teachers, specifically in dealing with pupils.

The theoretical framework is outlined below through a model similar to the format of a flow chart. It gives a birds-eye view of the PD program; what the model specifically subsumes are the resources required for the program (trainers as internal SMEs and teachers as trainees), the program's duration per academic year, the outline of the program *itself*, and the post-program steps, which comprise a wrap-up survey questionnaire.

Fig. 1: Proofread by Mr. Jasmin Kesetovic for grammar and coherence



Duration

The six-hour total duration of the PD program (split into four 1.5-hour sessions) serves as the most realistic option, ensuring that the program is neither overly long in duration nor overly short and insufficient. This duration is supposed to be time-efficient organizationally—for the school administration—*and* the teachers themselves; schools have the room to allocate time to other PD initiatives, assuming that teacher PD is a fixed practice of the school, and simultaneously, teachers are not too 'stuffed' with long PD sessions that take place all at once rather than consecutively. Part of a pedagogically sound and effective PD approach is one of sustained duration, with "adequate time to learn, practice, implement, and reflect upon new strategies" (Darling-Hammond et al.), and the format—as well as the duration of the sessions we set—seeks to attain just that. This duration is intended to achieve complete manageability and time-practicality.

Possible Individual(s) Involved as Trainers

Using Subject-Matter Experts (SMEs) as trainers/instructors to deliver the program to teachers was one of our top priorities for the theoretical framework, in order to maintain relevance. Rhetorically speaking, those who are actually specialized, qualified, and have firsthand experience in said subject matter, build a stronger chain of trust with their audience when speaking upon the subject, as it grounds inner comfort that what is being stated is legitimate; this connects to the rhetorical appeal of ethos as emphasized by Aristotle (Rhetoric I.2).

Specifically, SMEs that are internal to the school (internal SMEs) are better options. This is because internal SMEs have a preexisting bird's-eye view of the specific organization, and what they do every day—as it pertains to work—in accordance with the broader cultural norms as well as school-specific norms. This is better than possibly hiring external consultants or

trainers to train, as their breadth of knowledge may be too broad/overarching for the educational field, rather than for a specific, niche topic of interest like this. Because internal SMEs already work at the school, not only do they have preexisting operational knowledge—which also helps them adapt the training to exactly what's needed—but they may be personally familiar with the teachers they're training as colleagues, and that preexisting rapport "influences the learning environment for trainees" and may possibly "improve learning outcomes" (Bonnie et al.).

Utilizing internal SMEs is also more cost-efficient for schools. Unlike external consultants or trainers—whose hiring often involves substantial and recurring fees—internal SMEs already occupy fixed and salaried positions in the school. Leveraging their presence as SMEs, possibly with providing minor monetary compensation or a token of recognition for delivering the program, therefore represents a more financially sustainable solution that simultaneously ensures fair incentivization for the employee's diligent efforts.

The internal SMEs listed in the theoretical framework are intended merely as some examples of internal SME positions that are able to deliver the PD program to teachers. It includes a combination of those who work more 'backend,' such as instructional designers and curriculum developers, to those who work more 'frontend' with pupils and teachers, like educational psychologists, NS, and school counselors. Our deliberate inclusion of "at-school professional development coordinators" in the list serves as a placeholder example of any possible fixed salaried position for a stakeholder whose full-time job for the school is to solely plan in advance and host the periodic PD programs for teachers.

Individual(s) Involved as Trainees

The target audience of the PD program is teachers only. School-based PD is mostly targeted at teachers and not at other non-teaching positions in the broader staff context. In essence, almost all teachers in the United States have been active "in some form of professional learning" (Darling-Hammond et al.), proving that school PDs in the broader context have—by default—always been targeted to teachers only. Since this paper is dedicated to examining and improving teachers' social-emotional skills only, including unrelated target audiences within the framework would fall outside the intended scope of the study, so designating the program specifically for teachers is obviously the most logical and appropriate way to go.

Theoretical Outline: The PD Program's Actual Content

Sub-subheading: Lecture: Introduction to Social-Emotional Skills + Overview of the PD Program

We intentionally placed the first session's lecture format at the outset to ground all teacher participants in the conceptual foundations of socio-emotional skills.

The sole purpose of this is to set the foundation for what's forthcoming—giving clarity: introducing key terminology that will emerge later, theoretical constructs, the goals of the PD program, and expectations at the beginning ensures that all teachers share a common conceptual

vocabulary—which, in turn, safeguards coherence across the forthcoming peer-based activities in the schedule. Upon proofreading of this framework, a concern was raised regarding a lecture alone as a very passive mode of content delivery and a less effective option for engagement—as it pertains to previous PD given in this specific contextual environment (private English-Arabic bilingual high school). Therefore, we suggest educational institutions make the lecture short in terms of time—making this session of the PD be the only exception to the aforementioned duration of 1.5 hours that the other sessions will comply with, by having a suggested time of 45 minutes to 1 hour—as we still seek to preserve the intention of the lecture to transmit foundational knowledge to the group.

According to Weß et al.—drawing on Desimone's conceptualization of PD—content focus, defined as "subject matter … and how students learn that content," is associated with increases in teacher knowledge and skills. This idea of conceptual clarity justifies the deliberate inclusion of an introductory session at the outset, in which key socioemotional concepts and terminology are explicitly introduced before teachers engage in active, application-based work from sessions two to four.

Sub-subheading: Peer-Based Work: Navigating In-Class Scenarios With Neurodivergent Students: Social Intelligence towards Student Comfort

Peer-based learning is also known as Peer Instruction (PI) in other research contexts. The second session transitions immediately into teacher PI work—in this case, navigating effective socioemotional responses to in-class scenarios involving neurodivergent learners; this is also to target one of the inherent goals of this study, which is to promote a higher sense of expertise in dealing with neurodivergent students who spend more of their time in mainstream classes—*with these teachers*—in comparison to learning support units with specialists. Circling back to the PAR findings as well, both schools underlined the importance of leveraging PD to address the needs of this overlooked group—something current PD often fails to do and that future PD must take into consideration.

The rationale for this sequencing is grounded in the principle that active engagement and social interaction solidify conceptual knowledge introduced earlier and promote deeper understanding.

Arslan Dönmez and Şahin, referencing Murray et al. and Robbins, scope into PI specifically in teacher PD environments—they depict PI as a mechanism through which teachers collaboratively recall information and exchange insight, a process shown to consequently "improve the learning performance of [these teachers'] students." In further theorizing this exchange, Dönmez and Şahin echo Charteris and Smardon's view to describe PI as a favorable reciprocal process that also reflects favorably on teaching practice, *also* arguing—citing Netolicky—that PI structures, by default, dismantle barriers between peers in the endeavor of creating a harmonious balance between them

Grounded in the 'scenario-based' rationale for this session of the program, the immanent use of near-real representations of classroom practice (such as through a scenario-based

approach) has been investigated and found effective in developing practical skills within professional contexts, and also effective for enhancing teacher learning outcomes relative to reflective learning alone (Hursen and Gezer Fasli). Although Hursen and Gezer Fasli's study was on *prospective* teachers, their work still establishes the credibility of scenario-based approaches in 'teacher education' (PD) contexts.

Sub-subheading: Peer-Based Work: Investigating an Example Case Study from a Kuwait-Based School

Intending to address the "one-size-fits-all" predicament of PD—a concern raised during the PAR phase—and in alignment with the study's context, the inclusion of a relevant case study drawn from a comparable school setting in Kuwait was imperative. One of the defining features of PD that is effective in achieving meaningful impact—concluding based on our analysis, particularly through PAR findings—is contextual relevance. Specifically, the PD must align with the sociocultural, policy, and educational realities of a Kuwaiti English–Arabic bilingual high school.

For instance, a school operating within this context being dependent on a case study drawn from a vastly different setting—such as a random French school in Oslo, Norway—would undermine the inherent purpose of PD altogether. In such cases, teacher perception of the PD would likely be negative, as exposure to practices completely detached from social norms locally and nuances from school to school would possibly result in PD being neglected altogether, creating an atmosphere of mass dissatisfaction.

Continuing to illustrate the essentiality of contextual relevance, we further propose the formation of a collaborative alliance among private English-Arabic bilingual high schools in Kuwait; by forming an alliance, these context-similar schools would be able to develop, document, and exchange case studies to be used within this session of the PD program—cases that are locally grounded—assuming that this PD program is mass-implemented across these schools. While individual school environments may differ in very minor operational or cultural ways—differences that are trivial and not a source of variance here—these schools share the same languages of instruction and similar structures of institution to justify categorizing them within a single cluster.

Within the capacity of this alliance, over time, this would allow this PD program to draw on a rotating set of similar-context examples that remain relevant while still offering minor variation in perspective. We propose conducting and then sharing one case study on a recurring basis—such as every academic year when this program is conducted—which would enable schools to continuously refine socioemotional training practices while targeting the overall purpose: shared context. The overall essence of all this is the avoidance of limitations associated with opting for a one-size-fits-all PD route.

Nonetheless, in light of using case study analysis as the focus of the session, according to research by Jiménez Raya and Manzano Vázquez, 'case pedagogy' is purposed to help teachers uncover their own beliefs about instruction (as cited in Jiménez Raya and Vieira; Parker &

Tiezzi), link abstract principles to real classroom dilemmas (as cited in Shulman; Shulman et al.; Vieira), and build "a stock of educational strategies for use in analogous problem situations" in the overall endeavor of encouraging effective problem-solving (as cited in Kleinfeld; Carter and Anders; Serdar Tülüce).

Jiménez Raya and Manzano Vázquez's research ultimately supports the deliberate inclusion of concrete, real-case-study analysis in PD, since the preexisting impact of case studies is therefore amplified when the case studies reflect or depict actual events that occurred, rather than hypothetical, invented, or misaligned scenarios being used as archetypes. Real events are inherently self-relevant to teachers, allowing them to see themselves in the situations presented, which not only enhances the engagement of the teacher in the so-called PD activity but also memory retention and the transferability of the gained practice to the classroom. This aligns with psychological findings on the self-reference effect, where self-relevant material promotes elaborative and organized encoding (Symons and Johnson). Thus, the authentic case studies emphasized by Jiménez Raya and Manzano Vázquez, coupled with the self-relevance of actual events, create a powerful mechanism that sophisticates the nature of this PD program (making the PD of higher quality), and combats passive engagement that is anticipated, notwithstanding the innately collaborative PI structure of this session too, which may die down on the passivity even more.

Sub-subheading: Peer-Based Work: Reflective Mini-Capstone Project: "Developing a New Social-Emotional Teaching Style for the Classroom"

By the conclusion of this PD program, it becomes essential for teachers to translate all the theory gained into practice.

Nonetheless, effective teachers are expected to have the most nuanced knowledge of their students' learning needs, classroom dynamics, and the pacing and content of their own curricula; using that knowledge, they are uniquely positioned to craft pedagogical approaches that are both practical and sustainable.

In the context of our PD program, based on the preceding three sessions to the fourth one, teachers will be asked to take ownership of developing a new teaching style that is grounded in proving their newfound or developed socioemotional awareness and understanding, and when doing that, they move beyond being passively expected to receive prepackaged strategies that are generic.

Darling-Hammond et al. emphasize that PD's impact is maximized when teachers are engaging in that 'active' form of adopting new techniques for their own classroom, because it ensures fidelity, relevance, and even a higher likelihood of implementation, as it meticulously bridges the gap between the strategy itself and its practicality in the teacher's own context/classroom. This session is intended to target just that—the reflective activity functions not only as a culmination of the program, serving as the final session, but also as a nudge for the teachers to complete the PD with something—a deeply unique strategy they can use for themselves.

Lastly, we would like to shed light on the capstone-style structure of this session. Capstone-style projects have been implemented in teacher PD contexts to support consolidation and application of learning (Chin). In our session, the mini-capstone is a culminating synthesis task, requiring teachers to consolidate their learning into an actionable and tangible artifact. Deliberately positioned after engagement with core content, the mini-capstone prompts teachers to apply, reflect on, and articulate their PD in a creative fashion. Mini-capstone experiences like this are able to maximize the professional and practical benefit of teacher education initiatives by adding another layer of problem-solving expertise, which is further energized in the inherent PI structure of the session.

Post-Program Steps: Survey Questionnaire

Hussein et al. assert that post-program surveys are viable for capturing longitudinal development, particularly in teacher PD, through a quantitative questionnaire design to measure perceived growth and program impact over time. Al-Ofi further asserts the power behind this quantitative approach of a questionnaire as not only a methodology that measures efficacy, but a tool that also pinpoints PD surface implementation challenges and shortcomings in specific areas. For instance, by analyzing Likert-scale items in the questionnaire, Al-Ofi was able to elucidate and, more importantly, *quantify* the particular barriers that appear in his survey.

In essence, Hussein et al. and Al-Ofi are both on the same page when it comes to using the concept of a quantitative questionnaire as an effective, concrete methodology for gaining insight into PD.

From another paradigm, distributing reflective questionnaires to teachers ensures that information gained from the PD is further reinforced in the mind of the teacher (better knowledge retention).

In broader psychological and human nature contexts, Coleman et al. cite Schön on the concept of 'reflection-on-action': you think back over a specific event after it has been completed, making sense of it, and learning from it. Experience is then transformed into knowledge that has now been internalized; since you reprocess what happened—in this case, teachers reflect on their PD sessions—you basically consolidate the information in your mind. Building on this, reflection-on-action further establishes the claim that the kind of reflection undertaken in survey questionnaires aligns with Merkebu et al.'s discussion of metacognition as "thinking about thinking," which is how the concept of metacognition is mostly defined today—drawing on Dimmit and McCormick, and Flavell. You look at the situation from a multifaceted angle, as you regulate [your] "own knowledge, experiences, and emotions" by [...] "examining cognition" while you "[account]...for context" (Merkebu et al.). Thus, questionnaires force one to actively monitor their own cognitive processes to *account for context*, framing question responses within the questionnaire's context. In theory, this maps out as an incredibly active, demanding cognitive cycle that further retains self-referenced information, as you complexly recall it. In reality, though, this process is just part of human nature.

Of course, regardless of a quantitative questionnaire's several benefits in different areas,

it's important to note that the main purpose of the survey questionnaire, nevertheless, is for continuous improvement of the PD program in the qualitative sense. In the case that the school would like to gain feedback from the teachers as the only trainees and target audience of the program, they can use findings from the survey to gather data on factors like internal SME performance and examine teacher feedback on the program's training content (see Fig. 1), which may be valuable in future reimplementations.

Socioemotional Awareness and Skills for the Teachers' Own Professional Good: The Other Side of the Story

The characteristic of possessing social-emotional skills—in a more general context—is not only for improving teacher-pupil relationships, but it also benefits the teacher's *own* professional performance. On a more *personal* level, it's also about performing their job in a way that *personally* excels their own standards and goals of teaching as teachers. Teachers who continually raise the bar and, as a result, feel increasingly confident in their capabilities are significantly more likely to perceive their teaching as meaningful (Mudrák et al.).

That, in turn, can give teachers the emotionally rewarding sense of accomplishment that humans naturally and generally get when performing well and engaging in that increasingly confident state. It may be known informally as the 'dopamine response,' but it is in fact depicted more formally through Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT): when someone experiences accomplishment ('competence' in the SDT), it directly fuels intrinsic motivation; the feeling of satisfaction itself becomes the reward as a result of doing the action, rather than external gains such as money or recognition (Deci and Ryan 1985), which—in this context—would serve as the driving professional factor for the teacher's efforts.

On the contrary, Klassen and Chiu emphasize how a teacher experiencing poor/negative emotions is associated with teacher-pupil rapport of similar poor quality; even more personally to the teacher, *less self-efficacy* in delivering their job to the best of their capabilities, as a result (as cited in Abel and Sewell, Kokkinos, Schwarzer and Hallum). This may result in much lower motivation to continue teaching or—from the professional side of things, again—continually decreasing confidence in raising personal standards of teaching quality as teachers. The mere presence of self-determination as a driving professional factor for work is therefore eliminated. Very fundamentally, possessing social-emotional skills as a teacher assists in employing proactive and environmentally attuned (i.e., wholly aware of the immediate classroom atmosphere) classroom management strategies, which may then help teachers in mitigating such negative situations in the first place. The idea of being 'environmentally attuned' in the classroom as a teacher aligns with PAR interviews at School A: school leadership at the school stressed the importance of *listening* to students and adapting the lesson plan to fit students' emotional and academic needs on a day-to-day basis, two key strategies that feed into the idea of an environmentally attuned educator.

Another alignment can be found in Klassen and Chiu's research, as their focus on

teacher-pupil dynamics aligns with our PAR findings during School A's interviews: the presence of rapport is a critical component of a 'student-centered' approach.

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in the paper, sound educational instruction in context-similar schools calls for a substantial alteration from inflexible, content-focused instruction on the part of teachers toward a student-centered perspective that can only be truly established upon the development of strong socioemotional intelligence. This study reveals a notable gap in prevailing PD provision, which fails to address both the distinctive cultural context in which the student body is situated and the basic expertise needed to work with neurodivergent pupils in mainstream settings. Teachers can go the extra mile, moving beyond a surface-level viewpoint that limits them to sole academic delivery—and can create a stronger learning environment for both themselves and their pupils—by undergoing a socioemotional awareness- and skill-focused PD program, transferring gained theory from the program into practice. Thus, aligning theoretical pedagogy with socioemotionally aware, context-sensitive, environmentally attuned teaching methods is essential for both teachers' and students' overall flourishing in the classroom.

All in all, more research is needed into this particular matter to further examine the socioemotional skills in teachers, not only in this specific context but also in different cultures around the world—to account for distinct cultural and environmental nuances—with the vision of informing the design of more personalized PD structures that are more likely to produce the practice-level impact that PD has always sought to achieve since inception.

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The Confucian Usurper: The Paradox of Wang Mang By Thomas Wu

Introduction

For over two thousand years, Wang Mang has carried one of the worst reputations in Chinese history. Ban Gu's *Book of Han* helped to establish his image as a "rebellious subject and usurper" who hid his political ambitions behind displays of Confucian virtue. Later historians largely accepted that judgment and repeated it. In the eyes of history, Wang Mang became the minister who betrayed the Han, seized the throne, and founded the short-lived Xin dynasty. His reign was often treated less as a dynasty in its own right than as an interruption between the Western and Eastern Han (Ban Gu).

The reasoning behind this reputation is obvious, after all Wang Mang did usurp the Han. He rose within the Han court, accumulated extraordinary political authority, pushed aside the Liu imperial family, and in 9 CE ended the Western Han, establishing a dynasty of his own. Any assessment of Wang Mang has to begin with that fact. Ignoring his usurpation in order to portray him simply as a misunderstood reformer would be just as misleading as reducing his entire life story to an act of betrayal.

What makes Wang Mang worth reconsidering is what he tried to do after gaining power.

His government did not simply place a new ruling family at the head of the existing Han system. Instead, Wang Mang attempted to restructure major parts of Chinese political and social life. He changed official titles, restructured ritual practices, intervened in landholding, restricted the sale of slaves, altered the currency, expanded state regulation of markets, and tried to reshape the bureaucracy according to institutions described in ancient Confucian texts. Some of these reforms lasted only briefly and many created mass confusion. However, when taken together, these policies reveal a ruler who believed the problems of the late Western Han went far beyond the weakness of a single emperor or dynasty.

The scholar Yang Xiong captured this ambition when he described Wang Mang as having filled "the gaps in the imperial statutes" and tightened "the slackened bonds of royal order." The phrase points to two problems that Wang Mang believed were closely connected. The "imperial statutes" referred broadly to the rites, institutions, and political traditions associated with the ancient sage-kings. The "royal order" referred to the hierarchy that held government and society together: ruler and minister, office and responsibility, ritual and law, and the relationship between central authority and local society.

By the late Western Han, both the "imperial statutes" and the "royal order" appeared unstable. Confucianism had become increasingly important to the language of the imperial government, yet many scholars believed that the institutions described in the Classics had never been fully restored. At the same time, court families exercised enormous influence, wealthy landowners accumulated increasingly large estates, local magnates challenged state authority, and the gap between the ideals of government and its actual operation became harder to ignore (Ban Gu; Xu Fuguan).

Wang Mang tried to address both crises at once. He looked to antiquity for political reforms while using the power of a "modern" centralized empire to impose them. That combination produced one of the most ambitious political experiments in Chinese history.

This paper argues that Wang Mang is best understood as both a usurper and a reformer. His overthrow of the Han cannot be separated from his political legacy, but neither can it explain everything that followed. His rule represents an unusually ambitious attempt to turn Confucian political ideals into actual institutions of government. The experiment was a failure, but that failure revealed the difficulty of turning an idealized ancient political order into a working system for a massive and ever changing empire.

I. Crisis at the End of the Western Han

Wang Mang did not invent the problems he later claimed to solve. Long before the Xin dynasty, Western Han scholars had criticized the government for failing to live up to the political principles it increasingly claimed to represent.

Part of the problem reached back to the beginning of the imperial period. Confucian political thought looked toward the ancient rulers of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou as models of good government. The sage-kings supposedly ruled through a combination of personal virtue, ritual, education, hierarchy, and concern for the welfare of their subjects. Politics was not neatly separated into morality, administration, and social order. Ideally, each reinforced the others.

The Qin dynasty had disrupted much of the intellectual tradition through which that ancient world was remembered. The *Records of the Grand Historian* describes the destruction of classical texts and persecution of scholars during the Qin, events that left parts of the classical tradition fragmented (Sima Qian). When the Han replaced the Qin, classical scholarship saw a revival, but the Han retained much of the old centralized administrative system of the Qin.

The result was an uneasy combination. Han rulers increasingly spoke the language of Confucian government, yet many of the institutions through which they ruled had developed from a different political tradition.

This tension became more visible under Emperor Wu. Confucian scholarship gained enormous prestige, and knowledge of the Classics became increasingly useful for entering government service. Yet elevating Confucian learning did not automatically create a Confucian state. New Text scholars often focused on cosmology, omens, and the relationship between Heaven and human affairs. These ideas provided a powerful language for evaluating whether a ruler governed morally, but they created conflict over how the institutions of the empire themselves should be organized (Xu Fuguan).

By the later Western Han, frustration with this gap had become increasingly apparent. The *Book of Han* records criticism of scholars who became absorbed in textual disputes while larger problems of government remained unresolved (Ban Gu). The "King's Way" (Confucian ideal of ruling through virtue, benevolence, and proper moral order) could be praised repeatedly without anyone fully agreeing on what it demanded in practice.

Ritual(the system of ceremonies and social practices used to reinforce hierarchy and proper behavior) was one of the clearest examples.

To a modern reader, arguments over ancestral temples, sacrifices, or court ceremonies may seem to be of secondary importance compared with taxation, corruption, or land concentration. Political thinkers during the Han dynasty often saw things differently. Ritual established hierarchy. It taught the importance of a strict distinction between ruler and minister, elder and younger, parent and child. If those relationships became unclear, social and political disorder could follow.

Scholars such as Jia Yi, Dong Zhongshu, Gong Yu, and Liu Xiang would criticize weaknesses and inconsistencies of Han ritual and proposed reforms (Chen Shuguo). Their concern wasn't simply that the dynasty was conducting ceremonies incorrectly, rather it was the fact that the Han had embraced Confucianism as an ideology creating the institutional order that supposedly came with it.

Meanwhile, the court was creating problems that had become increasingly difficult to ignore.

During the later Western Han, imperial relatives and consort families gained tremendous political influence. Members of these families could occupy powerful offices and, at times, exercise authority that rivaled that of even the emperor. The Wang clan was among the most powerful of these families.

The irony is difficult to miss: Wang Mang rose through the same system of consort-family politics that he would later criticize.

Economic changes created another source of instability. Wealthy families would accumulate increasingly larger estates, while poorer farmers faced debt, tenancy, and displacement. Local magnates were able to convert wealth into political influence and many became powerful enough to weaken the central government. As more land and influence became concentrated in the hands of a small number of powerful families, social and political order became increasingly difficult to maintain (Ban Gu; Qian Mu).

These were not abstract concerns. The Han government depended heavily on independent agricultural households for taxes, labor, and social stability. When farmers lost their land and became dependent on wealthy families, the central state could lose both revenue and political authority.

There was also a more direct political consequence. A wealthy landlord who controlled land, employment, credit, and local connections may matter more to an ordinary rural household than an emperor hundreds of miles away.

By the end of the Western Han, the dynasty faced two related questions. First, what would Confucian government actually look like if its principles were translated into institutions? Second, could the existing government still control the families, officials, landowners, and local interests operating within its territory?

Wang Mang eventually concluded that only by taking drastic action could the issues of the Western Han be solved.

II. From Minister to Emperor: Wang Mang's Seizure of the Han Throne

Wang Mang's rise was gradual enough that the line between loyal service and political domination is blurry. At first, he was one powerful member of an already powerful family, but he gradually became something different.

Accounts at the time noted that Wang Mang cultivated a public reputation that separated him from many of his relatives. While other members of the Wang clan were associated with luxury and privilege, he presented himself as restrained, scholarly, and attentive to Confucian standards of conduct. He cultivated relationships with scholars and was widely known for displaying the virtues expected of an exemplary official (Ban Gu).

Later historians had an obvious explanation for his behavior: it was an act.

Once Wang Mang seized the throne, his displays of humility could easily be seen as nothing more than a facade. His modesty became calculation, his generosity became political strategy, and his scholarship became another instrument through which he built support.

However, this interpretation could be too one dimensional. Wang Mang could have understood that a reputation for virtue benefited him politically while also genuinely believing in the ideals he promoted.

As the Han court became increasingly unstable, his authority grew. Weak emperors and succession crises created opportunities for senior ministers to act with unusual independence. Wang Mang repeatedly presented his own intervention as necessary to protect the dynasty from disorder.

His treatment of Emperor Ping's maternal relatives provides a good example of how reform and self-interest could overlap. Wang Mang argued that powerful consort families had damaged the government and restricted the Wei clan's ability to interfere in court politics (Ban Gu).

The policy had a clear institutional defense: imperial relatives should not be allowed to dominate the government.

It also removed Wang Mang's political rivals.

This pattern appeared throughout his rise. Measures designed to strengthen central authority often also strengthened Wang Mang personally. Eventually, it became almost impossible to tell where one ended and the other began.

Then the distinction disappeared completely.

Wang Mang moved from exercising authority on behalf of the Han to claiming imperial power himself. In 9 CE, he displaced the Liu imperial house, brought the Western Han dynasty to an end, and founded the Xin.

For later historians, this was the defining moment of his career. A minister who usurped the throne from the ruling house had violated one of the clearest political hierarchies in Confucian thought. Wang Mang's constant emphasis on ritual, loyalty, and proper relations between ruler and subject suddenly appeared deeply contradictory. How could a man claim to restore the proper distinction between ruler and minister after crossing that distinction himself?

Wang Mang's political ideology offered an answer, even if it did not satisfy his critics.

Confucian political thought did not treat dynastic legitimacy as completely unconditional. Classical history contained rulers who lost moral legitimacy and dynasties that were replaced. The Shang replaced the Xia and the Zhou replaced the Shang. A ruling house that abandoned proper government could lose the Mandate of Heaven.

The same tradition that demanded loyalty from ministers could therefore also provide a justification for dynastic change.

Wang Mang could present the transition from Han to Xin within this broader language of restoration. If the Han had allowed the political and moral order to deteriorate, then preserving one ruling family could be portrayed as less important than restoring the principles that justified rulership in the first place.

This did not make his ascension to the throne any less of a usurpation. It did, however, give that usurpation an ideological framework. The argument was also very convenient for Wang Mang personally. A political theory based on moral legitimacy allowed him to explain why he was entitled to replacing the Han.

Yet convenience does not necessarily equal insincerity.

What Wang Mang did after taking the throne suggests that his interest in classical government went beyond the immediate need to justify his accession. He could have kept most Han institutions, placed himself at their head, and ruled through them.

Instead, he tried to reconstruct them.

III. Reconstructing the "Imperial Statutes"

Wang Mang's answer to the issues of the late Han were peculiar because it looked towards the past. He believed that the political traditions associated with the ancient sage-kings contained institutions capable of correcting the failures of his time.

This belief brought him into close contact with scholars associated with Old Text learning, particularly Liu Xin. Texts including the *Rites of Zhou*, the *Book of Documents*, and the *Zuo Commentary* became important because they appeared to preserve information about the institutions of earlier political orders (Xu Fuguan).

For Wang Mang, these texts were more than objects of scholarship. They could become models of government.

The *Rites of Zhou* was particularly useful. It described an elaborate structure of offices, ranks, and responsibilities attributed to the Zhou government. These ancient models of government seemed to offer a solution to the disordered political institutions of the Han.

Wang Mang therefore began reorganizing the bureaucracy around classical terminology and hierarchy. Offices were renamed and ranks were restructured. The Three Ducal Ministers, Nine Ministers, twenty-seven Grand Masters, and eighty-one Senior Scholars became part of the political vocabulary of the Xin administration (Ban Gu).

To a modern reader, these changes appear to be cosmetic. Renaming an official does not automatically make that official more capable, and it doesn't transform a first-century bureaucracy into the government of the Zhou.

For Wang Mang, however, names carried political meaning.

Confucian thought placed considerable importance on the idea that titles should correspond to responsibilities. A ruler should behave as a ruler and a minister as a minister. Political disorder emerged when people held positions without fulfilling the obligations attached to them or exercised powers their positions did not hold.

From that perspective, the language of government was not superficial. Correct names could clarify responsibilities, and clear responsibilities could strengthen hierarchy.

These changes made sense on paper, but in practice the results were questionable.

Ritual reform followed much the same reasoning. The Western Han had never settled every question surrounding imperial sacrifices and ceremonial practice. Wang Mang sought to organize these rituals more systematically through classical precedents. Sacrifices involving Heaven and Earth, ancestral temples, mountains and rivers, and the gods of soil and grain were restructured. Court audiences, investitures, imperial ceremonies, and official ranks received similar attention (Chen Shuguo).

These ceremonies mattered because Wang Mang understood ritual as a form of government.

A court ceremony did more than display authority. It placed every participant within a visible hierarchy. The emperor stood at the center, officials occupied positions appropriate to rank, and clothing, titles, actions, and ceremonial responsibilities reinforced the political relationships each participant was supposed to occupy.

Wang Mang extended this logic beyond the palace. Marriage, funerals, coming-of-age ceremonies, and family sacrifices were also part of his understanding of political order. Confucian government assumed that stable politics began below the level of the state. Individuals first learned hierarchy and responsibility within families and communities.

Wang Mang therefore tried to connect these layers. Proper ritual in the household would encourage proper conduct in society, which in turn would support political stability.

There was real ambition behind this project. Earlier Han rulers had employed Confucian scholars and incorporated Confucian ideas into imperial government. Wang Mang attempted to make the institutions of government themselves resemble the political world those scholars described.

The difficulty was that the world had changed.

The political institutions described in ancient texts belonged—or were believed to belong—to societies very different from the unified empire of the first century CE. Population, commerce, landholding, administration, and political geography had all developed significantly over the centuries.

An office described in an ancient text could not simply be inserted into a contemporary bureaucracy and expected to function exactly as it supposedly had in antiquity.

Wang Mang nevertheless often treated the ancient past not merely as a source of political principles, but as a set of instructions.

That assumption would become one of the central weaknesses of his government.

IV. Tightening the "Royal Order"

Wang Mang's reforms were not confined to ritual or bureaucratic titles. Some of his most ambitious policies dealt directly with who controlled land, labor, and wealth.

Land concentration had become a persistent concern by the late Western Han. Powerful households accumulated large estates while poorer cultivators lost property through debt or economic pressure. Farmers who lost their land might become tenants, laborers, or dependents of wealthy families.

For the state, the problem operated on two levels. Economically, independent farming households were an important source of taxes and labor. Politically, large landowners could exercise authority over people who might otherwise have dealt more directly with the government.

Wang Mang attempted to confront this problem through the Royal Fields, or *wangtian*, system. Inspired by the ancient well-field model, the reform redesignated land as "King's Land" and attempted to restrict private sales (Ban Gu).

The reasoning behind these actions was simple. If unrestricted transactions allowed wealthy households to constantly absorb larger amounts of land, limiting those transactions might preserve a broader class of independent cultivators.

What is more revealing is where Wang Mang looked for the solution. Again, he responded to a contemporary problem by searching antiquity for an institutional model.

His policies toward slavery followed a similar pattern. Wang Mang restricted the buying and selling of slaves and bondservants. This measure formed part of a broader attempt to prevent wealth from developing into forms of private power that competed with the state.

His economic intervention continued through the Five Equalizations and Six Monopolies policies. The Xin government sought to influence prices, regulate credit, and strengthen control over important economic resources. Salt, iron, liquor, and other profitable activities became areas in which the government attempted to limit the influence of wealthy merchants and magnates (Ban Gu).

The introduction of these policies complicate the image of Wang Mang as a ruler interested mainly in obscure rituals and ancient titles.

His classicism would have major economic consequences.

Wang Mang's political philosophy centered partly on protecting agricultural households, naturally producing suspicion toward private actors who accumulated enormous wealth or monopolized important resources. If rulers were responsible for preserving social stability, allowing private fortunes to grow without restraint could itself be interpreted as a failure of government.

In this sense, Wang Mang's economic and ritual reforms belonged to the same political project. Both tried to place relationships back into what he considered their proper order.

Currency reform, however, demonstrated how quickly intervention could become disruption.

Wang Mang repeatedly changed the monetary system in an effort to increase state control. However, money depends heavily on stability and confidence. When forms of currency and their assigned values changed repeatedly, ordinary economic exchange became more difficult. Counterfeiting and evasion became attractive responses to the growing economic uncertainty.

A pattern emerged: Wang Mang recognized a genuine weakness, intervened aggressively, and then created a new problem through the intervention itself.

The Royal Fields policy encountered an even more fundamental difficulty. Land was not an abstract resource that could simply be redistributed through an imperial decree. Property was tied to inheritance, debt, tenancy, family relationships, and local political influence.

Announcing a new system did not erase any of those relationships.

Local officials still had to enforce the policy, and those officials worked inside the same communities whose political and economic structures the reform threatened. Regulations could be interpreted inconsistently. Wealthy families resisted. Ambiguity gave officials opportunities for corruption, while ordinary people could find themselves facing new legal restrictions without receiving the economic protection Wang Mang had promised (Ban Gu).

This revealed a deeper contradiction within his effort to restrain private power.

The state needed greater administrative strength to control powerful local families. Yet the reforms intended to strengthen the state demanded even more from a bureaucracy that was already struggling to administer the empire effectively.

Wang Mang could declare that landholding should follow an ancient model.

Making thousands of officials and millions of subjects behave accordingly was another matter.

V. Why the Xin Experiment Failed

The Xin dynasty collapsed remarkably quickly. Wang Mang had attempted to create a more ordered political system, yet by the end of his reign the empire faced economic disruption, social unrest, rebellion, and a weakening central government..

One problem that plagued the Xin was simply the amount of reforms being attempted at the same time. Landholding, currency, markets, official titles, administrative structures, and ritual practices were all revised within a relatively short period. Even a highly effective bureaucracy would have struggled to make so many changes at once, and the Xin bureaucracy was far from effective.

Officials were forced to learn new titles, regulations, and responsibilities while continuing to collect taxes, administer justice, and maintain local order. Some policies were changed after they proved difficult to implement. Rules announced confidently could later be modified or abandoned.

At some point, reform itself became a source of instability.

Government stability requires a degree of predictability. Officials need to know what their responsibilities are. Merchants need to know what currency will be accepted. Farmers need

to know what they can do with their land. If the rules are repeatedly altered, even reforms intended to create order can have the opposite effect.

Wang Mang's political philosophy contributed to this problem because he placed enormous faith in ancient institutions, many of which didn't have a place during his time.

The well-field system may have possessed enormous symbolic authority, but symbolic authority couldn't solve property disputes. Ancient official titles might represent an ideal hierarchy, but taking on these names didn't magically increase the government's efficiency.

Wang Mang's idealism more often than not failed to translate into workable policy.

The problems he identified were real. Wealthy families were buying up more and more land, government offices were becoming difficult to manage, and a small number of elites were gaining enormous economic influence. His solutions, however, often created new problems. The well-field system did little to reverse existing patterns of landownership, repeated changes to official titles and responsibilities made the bureaucracy even harder to navigate, and frequent currency reforms disrupted everyday trade instead of stabilizing it.

The Xin also faced serious problems that Wang Mang could not control. Droughts, floods, locust infestations and poor harvests increased pressure on communities already struggling to adapt to political and economic change (Ban Gu).

These natural disasters became a massive political problem. In the political culture of the period, rulers were expected to maintain harmony between Heaven and the human world. Wang Mang had justified the existence of the Xin partly by arguing that the old political order had decayed and needed to be restored. When floods, droughts, and other disasters plagued his rule, they could be interpreted as signs that the Xin had lost the Mandate of Heaven.

As suffering grew, so did rebellion. The Xin government struggled to preserve authority, and the political reconstruction Wang Mang had imagined began to fall apart.

The results were ironic. Wang Mang had justified his rise partly through the claim that the late Han could no longer maintain order. His own dynasty ended amid even greater disorder.

Traditional historiography interpreted this outcome through a moral lens. Wang Mang had violated the proper dynastic order, and the collapse of his government demonstrated that his rule had never been legitimate.

That interpretation fit neatly into the broader historical judgment against him.

A more revealing conclusion would be that Wang Mang discovered that pointing out problems of the Han was easier than fixing them.

The problems he tried to confront were real. Wealthy families were becoming powerful enough to challenge the central government, more and more land was gobbled up by the elites, government offices were inefficient, and the wellbeing of ordinary citizens was at risk.

But an accurate diagnosis didn't guarantee an effective treatment.

Wang Mang's failings came from assuming that all of the problems of the present could be solved by looking to the past. The more he attempted to replicate the governments of ancient times, the more difficult it became to fix the issues that plagued the Xin.

VI. Usurper or Reformer? Reassessing Wang Mang

The simplest interpretation of Wang Mang is that of a man who wanted power, used Confucian virtue to gain it, seized the throne, governed poorly, and was deposed. While there is truth to this interpretation, it leaves much about Wang Mang unexplained.

If Wang Mang's Confucianism had been entirely performative, his policies after taking the throne become difficult to understand. He continued pursuing reforms that angered elites, disrupted the existing economy, and created enormous administrative burdens. Many of these reforms would have been unnecessary if his only goal had been maintaining his own power. However, Wang Mang was by no means a selfless saint. His actions instead suggest something more complicated: Wang Mang wanted power, but he seemed to genuinely believe in the ideals he used to justify taking it.

His beliefs helped justify his authority, and his authority gave him the ability to pursue those beliefs.

His understanding of dynastic legitimacy makes this especially clear. Wang Mang argued that political legitimacy rested on principles deeper than loyalty to a particular ruling family. If a dynasty no longer embodied proper government, replacing it could be presented as restoration rather than betrayal. While this is seen as a convenient excuse for usurping the throne, he may have genuinely believed it.

That tension between sincere belief and personal ambition appears constantly throughout Wang Mang's life, making it difficult to separate genuine conviction from self interest.

Wang Mang criticized the political influence of powerful consort families even though he rose to power because he belonged to one. He insisted that ministers should remain subordinate to the emperor even though he used his own position as a minister to take the throne for himself. He tried to weaken the economic power of wealthy elites while concentrating enormous political power in the imperial state. He sought to make the government more orderly through reforms that repeatedly created even more administrative confusion.

This tension doesn't weaken the historical interpretation of Wang Mang. On the contrary, it's precisely what makes his career worth studying.

His legacy is similarly mixed.

The Xin dynasty collapsed, but the intellectual questions surrounding Wang Mang's experiment live on. His support for Liu Xin and scholarship of the Old Texts contributed to debates that continued long after his death. Texts promoted during his reign continued to remain significant in later Confucian intellectual life (Xu Fuguan).

His concern with ritual also belonged to a broader development in Chinese imperial government. Later dynasties continued to treat sacrifices, ancestral temples, official hierarchy, and court ceremonies as serious matters of statecraft rather than as ceremonial details separate from politics (Chen Shuguo).

Even Wang Mang's unsuccessful economic reforms addressed problems that later rulers would repeatedly confront. How much land could powerful families accumulate before their wealth threatened the state? How should the government respond when merchants gained

significant economic influence? Could rulers protect small agricultural households without becoming disruptive?

Wang Mang did not solve these problems, but his significance comes from the methods he used to answer them.

The label "usurper," therefore, remains accurate but incomplete.

It describes how Wang Mang became emperor but fails to explain the reforms and actions he took as emperor.

At the same time, replacing the old image of a villainous usurper with a heroic reformer would be far from accurate. Wang Mang's policies caused massive problems. His confidence in ancient institutions often exceeded his understanding of contemporary issues. His government was inconsistent, inefficient, rigid, and intrusive.

The best interpretation leaves both sides visible.

Wang Mang overthrew the Han. He also attempted one of the most extensive reconstructions of Confucian political order in early imperial China.

Those two facts do not cancel each other out, rather, they explain each other. Wang Mang's theory of political restoration helped him justify overthrowing the dynasty he served, while overthrowing that dynasty gave him the power to attempt the reforms he believed restoration required.

The conflict between usurpation and reform is therefore not a problem that must be solved before Wang Mang can be understood.

It is central to understanding him.

Conclusion

Yang Xiong's description of Wang Mang as a ruler who filled the "gaps in the imperial statutes" and tightened the "slackened bonds of royal order" sounds almost triumphant when separated from what happened afterward.

The Xin dynasty survived for little more than a decade.
Its land reforms faltered. Currency changes disrupted economic exchange. Changes to the administration created confusion and inefficiency. Natural disasters and rebellion plagued the empire. The political order Wang Mang had promised to restore ultimately collapsed around him.

Yet Yang Xiong's language still captures something important about what Wang Mang was trying to accomplish.

Wang Mang looked at the late Western Han and saw more than a dynasty experiencing temporary decline. He saw a government whose political ideals and political institutions had drifted apart. Confucianism had become central to the language of imperial legitimacy, yet the institutions of the state did not consistently resemble the political world described in the Classics. Powerful families competed with central authority. Wealth and land accumulated unevenly. Ritual remained contested. Powerful local families weakened the reach of the imperial government.

Wang Mang believed these were parts of the same problem.

His answer was extraordinarily ambitious. Rather than changing a single policy, he attempted to reshape the political structure that produced those policies. He reorganized ritual, changed bureaucratic titles, supported ancient institutional traditions, intervened in landholding, restricted slavery, regulated markets, and repeatedly experimented with currency.

The reforms often failed to produce what he expected. Wang Mang was too willing to assume that an institution with classical authority would also have contemporary usefulness. The empire he governed was not the political world of the Zhou, no matter how carefully its offices were renamed.

That may be the most important lesson of the Xin experiment.

Political ideals do not enter history unchanged. They encounter existing institutions, economic interests, administrative limitations, local power structures, and people who may have little interest in reorganizing their lives according to a ruler's interpretation of an ancient text.

Wang Mang underestimated that resistance.

Still, the failure of the Xin should not reduce his reign to an eccentric interruption between two Han dynasties. His government tested a question that had developed throughout Western Han political thought: what would happen if Confucian principles were treated not merely as standards for judging government, but as instructions for building it?

Wang Mang attempted to answer that question.
It was ambitious, deeply rooted in classical scholarship, frequently impractical, and ultimately unsuccessful.

It was also historically significant.

For that reason, choosing between "usurper" and "reformer" obscures more than it explains. Wang Mang was a minister who overthrew the dynasty he had served. He was also an emperor who used the resulting power to attempt a sweeping reconstruction of government. His reform ideology helped justify his seizure of power, while his seizure of power made the reform experiment possible.

Understanding Wang Mang does not require forgiving the first fact or celebrating the second. It requires taking both seriously.

He tried to restore political order by breaking an existing one. He looked to the ancient past for solutions to contemporary problems, only to discover how difficult it was to make that past govern the present.

The Xin dynasty vanished. The tension Wang Mang exposed—between political ideals and the institutions expected to realize them—did not.

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How Can Mental Health Be Better Integrated Into Public Policy and Social Norms to Create an Environment Where Individuals Can Pursue True Psychological Progress?
By Ayesha Gaur

In 2021, Simon Biles made a decision that challenged longstanding societal views on mental health by withdrawing from multiple events at the Tokyo Olympics. Her choice challenged deeply-rooted expectations surrounding athletes and their mental abilities (Sky Sports, 2021; OpenLearn, 2022). Dating back to the 19th and early 20th century, athletes have always been portrayed as individuals who embody strength, courage and emotional endurance. In fact, sporting culture has consistently reinforced the idea of athletes as 'modern warriors,' replacing the battlefield with the sporting arena as the locus of contestation over national pride (Alaxus, 2024). Against this backdrop, they are expected to endure strain and stress to achieve success.

These norms have influenced public perception of what it means to be an athlete. However, being built on this framework, mental health is rarely addressed through formal sporting policies, which primarily focus on performance and results (USOPC). Athletes are expected, primarily through the influence of societal norms, to suppress emotional 'weakness' in order to maintain a competitive spirit. As a result, psychological struggles are stigmatised rather than treated as legitimate health concerns requiring support (Choulet, 2024).

The public reaction to Simone Biles' withdrawal, including both support and online backlash, shows how social norms and public policy can act as barriers towards psychological progress (OpenLearn, 2022). While growing awareness of mental health, supported by psychological approaches such as the cognitive behavioural models, has begun to influence public attitudes, stigma remains when expectations of constant performance aren't met. Without consistent mental health policies and supportive attitudes, athletes remain vulnerable to stigma, and their role as public role models means policies in this sector also have broad implications on mental health across society (Park, 2025).

One significant mental health crisis affecting society is depression and mental burnout, which elite athletes in the United States frequently experience. Depression is a mental health condition which is characterized by emptiness, feeling mentally and emotionally drained, and losing motivation (Institution of Mental Health). These emotions can worsen in an environment where people are put under a great deal of pressure. In elite sports, athletes are judged by medals, rankings and—arguably most importantly—the court of public opinion. This creates an ongoing cycle of stress with athletes trying to perform at their top performance level and prove themselves to the audience (McDougall,2021). Athletes often feel pressured to perform at their best at all times in order to meet expectations from coaches, sponsors and the general public.

This pressure may lead to burnout, where athletes feel completely exhausted both mentally and emotionally. Many athletes train intensely from a young age, which makes their performance strongly tied to their sense of self and identity (Park, 2025). Hence, when they fail or face criticism, it can strongly affect their mental health. Additionally, mental health stigma in

sport makes athletes less likely to speak up, as they fear being seen as weak or uncommitted (Choulet, 2024). Because of this, many athletes choose to hide their struggles, which allows their mental health problems to worsen over time.

A clear example of this is tennis player Naomi Osaka, who withdrew from the French Open and Wimbledon after speaking openly about her struggles with anxiety and depression. While many people supported her decision and prompted her to get rest, others criticised her, showing that negative attitudes towards mental health still exist (PBS News, 2024). This highlights that stigma and pressure from the public can contribute to depression and burnout amongst athletes, making it a systemic social issue rather than just a personal one.

In response to the growing awareness of athlete mental health issues, governments and sporting institutions in the United States have begun implementing policies aimed at providing better psychological support. Organisations such as the U.S Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) now employ licensed mental health professionals and offer counselling services to athletes that compete in international competitions. These measures indicate that countries are increasingly recognising mental health as essential to performance and the athlete's safety.

However, many of these initiatives are limited. Support is often prioritised for elite athletes, while others receive minimal care (McDougall, 2021). Meanwhile, sporting systems are influenced by both economic and political pressures, as athletes gain national pride and revenue from sponsorship. Thus, performance is frequently prioritised over wellbeing, sustaining the ideal that athletes must sacrifice their mental health to succeed. Public policy could be reinforced through the use of mandatory mental health education and scheduled rest periods into athletic programs rather than taking action only after an incident occurs. Although the government's involvement has led to progress, these efforts are wasted without gradual structured change. For prolonged success, mental health must be treated as important as physical training, allowing athletes to thrive without injuries.

Alongside policy changes, social norms that surround mental health in sport are shifting over time. Athletes were expected to exemplify emotional strength and suppress psychological distress, this reinforces the belief that resilience meant enduring pain in silence. This norm discouraged open discussions about mental health and framed that seeking help as a weakness. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), this stigma has traditionally stopped athletes from getting psychological treatment while enduring serious performance related to stress (Choulet, 2024).

Because of recent actions, they have begun to challenge these assumptions. Athletes speaking openly about mental health struggles have majorly contributed to a shift, especially amongst the younger generation. Examples like Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles stepping back from high-stakes contests directly questioned developed standards of athletic performance.

The increased media coverage and social media platforms have allowed athletes to share their experiences directly, avoiding the traditional narratives that emphasized toughness. According to Sky Sports, public discussions following these sentences show growing public

support for these athletes, suggesting greater acceptance of vulnerability and self-care as part of strength (PBS News, 2024; Sky Sports, 2021).

However, negative reactions and online criticism show that stigma around mental health continues to exist, especially when athletes choose to not participate in competitions due to these mental health issues. This strongly suggests that although social attitudes are slowly changing, it often contrasts with traditional assumptions that athletes should always be strong and durable. For actual progress to happen, both greater representation of mental health sightings and education are needed, as the public attitudes strongly influence whether mental health support is accepted or ignored. If social norms still remain unsupportive, even effective government policies may not successfully encourage these people to seek help.

In conclusion, the mental health crisis among elite athletes shows how public policy and social norms together can shape psychological progress. Depression and burnout can get worse by intense performance pressure and other stereotypes that connect strength with downplaying mental health. Although governments and sporting organisations have started introducing mental health support, these efforts are wasted without acceptance from the public. Athletes speaking openly about their struggles have begun to challenge traditional norms and gradually shift public attitudes. In conclusion, true psychological growth depends on strong public policy working alongside growing societal norms to protect mental well-being while maintaining success.

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The Many Masks of Energy: A Unified View of Its Forms and Its Flow Between Organisms
By Oleg Konovalov

Introduction

Energy is a term ubiquitous throughout science, philosophy, and culture, yet across these disciplines and fields there exists many interpretations of the idea and its associated implications. Since the vision of energy was split into these different categories, it has left society without a full picture. Below, I'll talk about the properties of each conceptual variation and argue that energy as a metaphysical concept is the same in every category but in a different shape–like a costume for every appearance on stage for a magician. Developing this unified picture would advance our understanding not only of the living-organism philosophy, but also a new perception of closed systems like our universe and dynamics of it that can be applied to the living world.

My main instruments to break it down into the simplest conceptual material for understanding will include: perspectives of energy from such sciences like biology, physics and sociology. I'll describe how energy has been involved in culture and traditions. Then I'll explore a more philosophical view into the relationship between energy and life, which will include: energy definitions and properties, metaphysical origin of the energy, life as a higher level organism, process of energy exchange between organisms and psychology behind it.

I kindly ask the reader to consider some of these concepts with an open mind as they still may appear distant, strange, and in some cases even illogical. This will not always be the case; many of the principles here will also be really easy to understand, or may seem really familiar to us, as they make up a deep part of our individual and collective lives. For instance, consider the cosmos, philosophers say that we *are* the cosmos, but in a more spiritual way. However, adopting a more practical perspective, everything in our bodies is made out of the molecules that once were parts of the stars and literally made up the cosmos. Thus this spiritual interpretation is also grounded in physics.

My goal is for the principles and concepts from this paper to change the way you see everyday life. For a better interaction with the reader this paper will involve some mental exercises that will focus you on the correct state needed for this paper. The exercises may appear funny or strange, however it is essential to at least try to perform them. In some cases you may feel nothing from performing them, but it does not mean that nothing has changed. Just try to be as open as possible.

1. Energy Definitions and Properties

When you think of energy what comes to your mind first? A process? A quality? Maybe a property? Depending on the field all of them are right. In today's science there is no energy definition that could be applied to all uses and beliefs. The most common description comes from physics which may relate it to a capacity to do work or cause change that cannot be destroyed or created, only transferred from one form to another. This includes many examples of energy such as: kinetic, gravitational, chemical, etc.

Biology talks about it as a form of powering instrument that is used in life processes, a good example is energy in the form of ATP, this energy is produced inside of the cells in the mitochondria. This is achieved in plants by capturing light energy from the sun during photosynthesis, and in animals by obtaining chemical energy from food. We also can say that biological energy causes change. The first rule of survival is change. Organisms exist in constantly-changing environments so they need energy to change themselves to keep up with the changing environment. Without added energy, they would not be able to keep up with the changing world over time.

As I said previously, the concept of energy was divided between sciences leaving society without a big picture. The two different concepts of energy just described, from physics and biology, follow a similar thread; they are the same as both cause change. Yet there is another type of energy that we should also consider: spiritual energy, aura, and biofield. Different names but they come from the same ground. All this comes from a more philosophical and subtle way of feeling and looking into energy. This concept actually shows us a way of seeing energy that the sciences don't focus much on. It teaches that energy is everywhere, it makes up all of the things that surround us and that it is a vital force. This is what makes it philosophical. That philosophical concept is what joins them all together and we will be looking at it in depth. So what is energy in reality?

As we discussed, energy is a broad topic to talk about, however it can be described with a mathematical function where there is an input and an output. What happens between the input and the output is a transformation of matter but yet energy itself always remains the same. Input could be considered in the form of a particle and output is the result after the particle’s interaction with added energy. The output of the transformation will depend a lot on the input. Specifically, there are limits to what transformations can occur; it’s impossible to create gold from wood.

However energy is not just restricted to these physical transformations, it is definitely something we can feel, rather in an auric/metaphysical way as opposed to a more common one like thermal exchanges. The difference between these two is that we are sensing them on different levels, the energy itself does not change, our perception of it does. Thermal energy we feel on physiological level, while auric energy on mental or emotional level. So in practice we interact with energy in more ways than we typically think.

Energy has different properties, such as polarity. That's what makes us think about it as a positive or negative concept. Sometimes we say that a person with strong energy has a warm presence as we feel heat emanating when next to that person. That is one of the qualities of it and it also can be cold depending on the biofield of a person. However, it often doesn't matter whether the energy is positive or negative, the density and size of it are the main things to consider. Those are the qualities that make it easier to feel or to connect with.

Another thing that can be associated with energy is color, and here the state an individual is in plays a big role. Depending on the process that person is passing through, the color of their energy field may vary. This can be viewed using special cameras, one of the first methods was

Kirlian photography (Krivtsun), but it’s believed some sensitive people can see it without a camera.

One more property that was demonstrated to us by modern physics is that energy cannot be zero, even in the vacuum (Bunge). It fluctuates around zero but never stops at it, showing us that it truly exists everywhere and always. If we accept the fact that energy is the source of change and that it exists everywhere in time and space, it will be straightforward to get into a deeper philosophical concept about energy.

Thus far, we've talked about how energy can be seen and felt, but I didn't mention how it can be transferred from one organism to another; what states can it cause and why we need it. Energy can diffuse between different cosmic systems, such as galaxies and stars, and we are made out of cosmic material, then we can infer that there should exist some similarities between our energy transfer dynamics. Before we’re able to understand this, however, we must understand where energy comes from.

2. New Vision of the Concept of Energy

2.1 Origin of Energy

Let's begin with where does energy come from. For you to be able to receive this information properly we also need to do a little exercise to put you in a deeper state of consciousness. If you're sitting straight, relax your facial muscles and imagine that you're reading through the text. After you've relaxed, try to imagine that you're sitting alone on the top of a high mountain, above 8000 meters, but assume no discomfort. No need for extra oxygen, chunky warm clothes, or anything else; you're just there in the moment watching the sun rising and setting with a feeling of absolute serenity. In physics terms, you are in a super position, at the same time you're physically here (within the body) and mentally there (in the image that we’re drawing). Now carry out the same exercise, but near the ocean. Try to smell the sea, at this moment your brain is in such a frequency that you will be able to have a perfect sense of the freshness of the ocean air. It's strange how it works but this is the right state to feel where the energy comes from.

Consider that everything comes to you at the right time and in the right form. There is no right or wrong. Thus, allow yourself to experience the feelings and sensations in the way they come to you. Now in this state, let’s try to feel the origin of the energy in these places and then move on to understanding it with our mind. Your feelings may vary from frigid to warm, fear to happiness, indifference to attachment as everybody has their own perception of the mountains and ocean. All these feelings and emotions give life texture. Without emotions life would be thin and non descript. From these emotions we are given energy. Thus, life is inherently the source of energy since life gives rise to emotion when experiencing the world.

2.2 Life as a Higher Level Organism

A good idea to understand as well is that life can exist in many forms, it can be both something metaphysical and something more material. It's complicated to describe this kind of life in usual terms but it is something that each one of us has felt at least once, this deeper connection with something more powerful within ourselves. It's the highest level of love and manifestation. Life exists in the material world, not only as an organism but also as an event. It uses energy as an instrument of connection with the material world. In this understanding energy takes on a new identity, because here it is just serving a secondary purpose–as an instrument. Energy does not need to know where to go, where it came from, and where it is now, it just exists. It can't be classified as something good or bad, it just acts as a carrier of the experiences and processes emitted by life.

3. Energy transfer between organisms

Since ancient times we've had traditional medicines which focus on energy healing and interaction with the human energy field. It's interesting how similar the knowledge from different cultures about this topic around the world is and how beautiful the intersections are. Qigong practice in China and jewish Kabbalah could be good examples, first one talks about vital energy and second mentions astral light, both concepts have many similarities ("Scientific Analysis"). Many cultures also talk about energetical fields that people have and we are going to take a closer look to that. When we talk about the energy field it's highly related to our body, mind and spirit. The energy field plays a crucial role internally, not only generating and holding our own energetical data, but also interconnecting with different organisms, objects and various systems with their own unique energetic fields.

3.1 Human energy field

What is an energy field? To start, this energy field is given to everybody from birth. On its own this field is a sort of a cloud around us that has some electromagnetic properties. This field acts as an attractor or repellent depending on the polarity of the other field it is connecting with. Also this field may vary in size and density. A lot of it depends on our physical body, the stronger and healthier the physical body is the stronger the energetical field will be. Figure 1 shows how it looks in a healthy human:

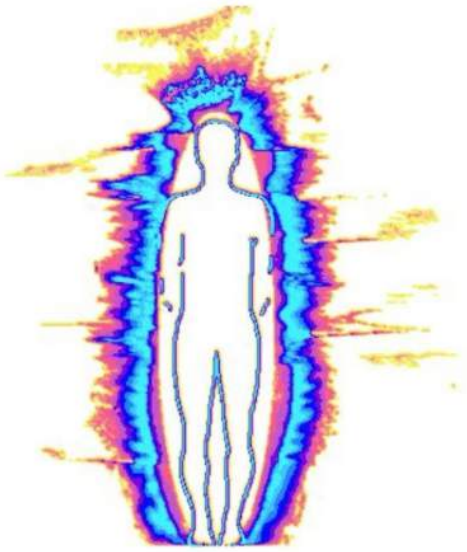

Figure 1: Whole body aura, front view composite of normal healthy human computed from digital Kirlian auras of 10 fingers according to algorithms based on empirical correlations with biomedical data and Traditional Chinese Medical theory of the acupuncture meridians. Right and left side views (not shown), can also be computed from the finger data. The total area, intensity distribution, density distribution, fractality, and other parameters can also be calculated (Krivtsun).

Many people call this field “auric field” or “biofield” and they’re correct as well as they are the same thing (“Scientific Analysis”). In each person this field is different in one way or another, in this type of photography the dissimilarities are usually in colour and size which makes this field sort of a signature because of the uniqueness.

As we know already, energy is flowing around in all the space around us, so a logical question would be how do we interact with it? The field that we have from birth helps us with that, it allows us to connect with the space around us allowing the energy to flow inside and outside of us, representing different types of diffusion. Most of the time it happens at a really slow pace, other times it may happen really fast, the velocity of diffusion depends on the receiver and on other factors that we are going to talk about later. This whole process of diffusion is crucial for us. What makes it so important is that we achieve a change in our state through energy exchange, as it brings us different experiences that may be lived by other organisms, their emotions and various feelings that later on can be integrated in our life.

We all know that for a stable life we need people around us, and this can be described from the energy point of view. Our psychological system is made in a certain way that we cannot stay alone for a long time. We are social animals and this has roots in the energy exchange process. All of us experience some moments of deprivation in our lives, when we are far from people mentally or physically. Sometimes we're locked in our apartment and it's enough to feel

like something inside has become stagnant. If you walk to the street or change to another location you will feel different, and it's normal because the energy inside was sitting for too long. As a result of prolonged isolation we may become sick physically or mentally, that's why the energy exchange is so important for us.

So how does the energy transfer? We already know that energy exists everywhere and it is around us, but we need to look at the mechanism of its transfer. Much like how sound needs a medium to move through, so does our general form of energy. This medium is made up of quantons, the basic particles that make up the whole universe. As we discussed in the first section the energy exists everywhere and always as it is never zero even in the vacuum. If energy exists always and everywhere, then it is constantly acting on the quantons because they are the medium for energy transmission. So let's say that those quantons that are around us enter in contact with our energy field and exchange energy, we would receive the energy that was transmitted by quantons while other quantons would adapt our energy and transmit it to others. This is the exchange process between an organism and the environment it is located in. Now we will add another organism into the exchange process.

Let's imagine that we have organisms X and Y and we need to understand how energy will flow from one to another. Let's imagine that X appears in the environment at the same time as Y, they each individually will start interacting with the space around them with the energetical fields. After some time passing the space around them will adopt the energy they brought and particles charged from X will reach the energy field of Y and vice versa. So we can conclude that energetical fields are connected through space. The energy will then tend to go from higher concentration to lower concentration. So if X has a lot of energy that is different from Y’s energy, energy will try to exchange between X and Y until the moment when the concentrations are equal.

3.2 Factors Affecting Energetical Diffusion

There are several factors that can affect this type of energy transmission and good examples would be: how open and prepared the receiver is and the temperature of the space in which diffusion happens.

We discussed earlier that the power and force of the receiver is way more important in the energy transmission than of the sender (McIrvine and Tribus). The environment may be really charged and have a lot of energy but if the receiver does not want to interconnect or is not able to receive that much energy or is leaving the environment then the diffusion will be moderate.

The diffusion is also moderate in cold environments. I'm sure that you notice the difference in the emotional distance between people during the summer and winter. On warmer days it seems like you can feel society better, what mood the people are in and what are their feelings. That's the information that you receive from the states of people that resonate with space through energy. So the lower the temperature the slower the rate of diffusion.

4. Conclusion

We've covered in this paper the common understanding of the concept of energy in the sciences like physics and biology, combining it with traditional medicine and cultural knowledge. There were various examples from these fields elaborating both on the scientific and philosophical sides of this concept with the main idea of aggregating the definition of energy into something universal. As we found out what makes all of these principles similar is that in one way or another they cause change.

The unification of the energy concept was needed for us to be able to look into its dynamics as our main point was to describe energy exchange between organisms. After reuniting all the definitions of energy, the second part took a strong philosophical turn. There we've covered the origin of energy, why life is the source of energy, mechanisms of energy creation and a deeper look into the metaphysics of life.

These first two parts gave us enough information to start looking into the energy transfer between organisms which was covered in part 3. In this section we looked into the human energy field, how it interacts with energy that surrounds us, psychology behind human energetical exchange, and a broader explanation of energy exchange between organisms.

In conclusion, we can say that everything in this universe is made with the help of energy. Energy is present in all events and processes in space and time, causation and chance, law and trend (Bunge). If the atoms and molecules are the construction material of our body then energy is the great connector, mediating all the processes, eternal and infinite. We interact with it every moment of our life and we can consider energetical exchange the most important processes in our lives as it fundamentally is life.

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Colonial Legacy: The Impact of British Colonialism on Malaysian International Relations
By Sena Wakamatsu

Abstract

This literature review synthesizes published studies on the effects of British colonization on Malaysia's post-independence international relations to identify the current understandings of the field. It focuses on research about the impact of British colonization on Malaysia's international relations through the political institutions placed during the colonial era, the economic terms set during independence, and the cultural tensions it created.

Introduction

Malaysia's independence from Britain in 1957 is not widely known worldwide and is not remembered as much as other independence movements in the world. Utilizing previous research done by scholars, this literature review will suggest the findings from the current research on the impact of British colonization on Malaysia's international relations through political institutions, economic relationships, and cultural tensions. Understanding these impacts matters because it clarifies how much of Malaysia's international identity is shaped by the colonial era, by its own post-independence agency, and by older political culture.

Political Impacts: Colonial Institutions, Borders, and Security

Previous research on the effects of British colonialism on Malaysia has suggested that British indirect rule preserved traditional Malay monarchical structures and established a conservative administrative foundation that influenced post-independence international relations (Ikhwan and Aidulsyah, 2020; Ott, 1972; Milner and Kasim, 2018). Ikhwan and Aidulsyah suggest that Malaysia, unlike neighboring countries such as Indonesia, which were colonized by the Dutch, was able to sustain its sultanates and post-independence political stability due to Britain's administrative strategies (Ikhwan and Aidulsyah, 2020). The Dutch's direct rule stripped local authorities of their power, in contrast to Britain's indirect rule, which allowed Malaysia's leaders to maintain their authority, a pattern that research says distinguishes Malaysia from other former colonies ruled by powers other than Britain (Ikhwan & Aidulsyah, 2020; Ott, 1972). Ikhwan and Aidulsyah further point out that Malaysian sultans represented both ethnicity (Malay) and religion (Islam) of Malaysians at once, and claim that this fused identity made the sultans politically difficult to remove, since both aspects fostered strong loyalty among their people (Ikhwan and Aidulsyah, 2020). On the other hand, it is suggested that Indonesia, a country with a more diverse demographic, could not offer any protection equivalent to that of Malaysia (Ikhwan and Aidulsyah, 2020). Milner and Kasim complement this study by suggesting that British policy actively protected the Malaysian sultanate's authority by allowing and acknowledging the traditional concept of kerajaan, the ideology of being loyal to a ruler rather than to a territory, to integrate into modern governance (Milner and Kasim, 2018). While Ikhwan and Aidulsyah emphasize that British rule is the reason for the existence of the sultanates, Milner

and Kasim suggest that the preservation of kerajaan also allowed these institutions to retain their legitimacy within the state. These studies suggest that British colonial governance shaped Malaysia's international relations indirectly by preserving domestic institutions and political concepts that continued to influence Malaysia after its independence.

Another argument, stated in published papers, suggests that the same administrative arrangements that preserved internal political structures left external borders unresolved for decades (Nathan, 2002; Lathrop, 2008). Lathrop suggests that the division of the former Johor Sultanate into British and Dutch spheres of influence in 1824 is what directly caused the Pedra Branca/Pulau Batu Puteh case to be brought to the International Court of Justice in 2008 (Lathrop, 2008). The court, rather than consulting the formal treaty, ultimately ruled that the sovereignty over the island had slowly shifted toward Singapore through decades of unofficial administrative actions, such as patrols, installations, and official colonial maps. This international dispute showed that it is possible for nineteenth-century colonial practices to be replaced, and this also complements Nathan's argument that the failed merger of Malaysia and Singapore has left a legacy of unresolved tension that still impacts relations over water pricing, border regulations, and airspace management (Nathan, 2002). Nathan indicates that Malaysia's posture in international relations towards Singapore is more guarded and legalistic than its posture towards much larger and more distant powers such as China, despite their shared history (Nathan, 2002). This suggests that Malaysia's foreign policy is heavily influenced by its geographical location and its shared colonial and political history (Nathan, 2002). While Lathrop demonstrates how colonial era territorial arrangements produced legal disputes, Nathan shows that these boundaries also influenced Malaysia's broader diplomatic relationship with Singapore. These studies indicate that the same colonial administrative strategies that gave Malaysia internal political stability also influenced its international relations through unresolved colonial era disputes.

Several scholars have argued that Malaysia's independence narrative from Britain was shaped not only by peaceful political transition but also by colonial security frameworks and propaganda (Ott, 1972; Phillips, 2016). Research has argued that official written records of British Borneo made by Britain portrayed Malaysia's independence as peaceful and ignored the dissatisfaction with British rule among Malays (Phillips, 2016). Phillips suggests that events like the Brunei Rebellion in 1962 and the Konfrontasi from 1963 to 1966 were caused by local administrative failures, economic neglect, and British propaganda (Phillips, 2016). Phillips indicates that British authorities constructed the narrative of a satisfied colony, and Ott adds that this narrative was adopted by post-independence Malaysian political leaders to legitimize political and foreign policy decisions. (Phillips, 2016; Ott, 1972). Phillips identifies that Britain created the security narrative, while Ott shows how it influenced political leaders in Malaysia and its post-independence international relations. They both suggest that Malaysia's colonial narratives continued to impact its post-independence political development and international relations. Malaysia's early post-independence defense policy relied heavily on formal arrangements within the Commonwealth, and Ott and Kershaw argue that, after independence,

administration progressively became less dependent on these arrangements to strengthen national sovereignty (Ott, 1972; Kershaw, 1983). These published findings suggest that British colonial rule shaped Malaysia's international relations through narratives, political institutions, and defense arrangements from the colonial period.

Economic Impacts: Decolonization, Economic Relations, and Independence

While some research focuses on the influence of colonial governance and institutions, other scholars have focused on how the economic terms implemented during independence shaped Malaysia's post-independence development. According to White, the method by which the colonizer ruled a colony is unrelated to its post-colonial economic trajectory; rather, decolonization was negotiated and structured (White, 2017). White argues that Indonesia's 1949 Financial and Economic Agreement with the Netherlands, which guaranteed Dutch businesses while leaving Indonesia with debt, compared with Britain's comparatively less restrictive 1957 and 1963 settlements with Malaysia, which provided development assistance and defense support without forceful intervention by British firms, were the differences in how decolonization took place (White, 2017). Other research has suggested that Malaysia's politicians treated the avoidance of visible economic dependence as a deliberate diplomatic priority in the settlement negotiations, rather than a byproduct of Britain's declining economic stake (Ott, 1972). White further indicates that, unlike the abrupt nationalization Indonesia pursued by cutting ties with the Dutch, Malaysia kept British firms, expertise, and shipping networks embedded in its economy, which Kershaw states is the reason why Malaysia was able to avoid the economic lag Indonesia experienced (White, 2017; Kershaw, 1983). White emphasized the different terms of decolonization, while Kershaw demonstrates the economic consequences of those terms, particularly the continued presence of British firms. Together, these studies imply that Britain's economic influence impacted Malaysia through negotiations that allowed access to British firms, while maintaining the power to govern for itself. The British settlement did not impose visible economic subordination on Malaysia, and so previous researchers suggest that the country was able to create an international reputation as an open country, open to direct investment, and closely linked to a major power into the 1970s (White, 2017; Ott, 1972; Dosch, 2014). Malaysia's international economic identity was not simply inherited from colonial era British frameworks but was flexible on the rapidly changing international stage.

Another aspect of economics, when looking at British influence on Malaysia's international relations, is the shift from obeying to challenging the economic influence Britain retained after Malaysia's independence. The 1981-1983 "Buy British Last" boycott was driven by the lingering colonial era economic privileges for British corporations and a controversial increase in tuition fees for Malaysian students at British universities. Kershaw and Dosch indicate that Mahathir's specific approach promoted the Malaysian economy to be more independent rather than simply retaliating against Britain (Kershaw, 1983; Dosch, 2014). Others argue that this continued economic approach of Malaysia, prioritizing infrastructural

development and maritime trade competitiveness, signaled that economic growth was pursued alongside global integration (White, 2017; Nathan, 2002). This suggests that Mahathir's policies sought greater control over Malaysia's governance while preserving the economic benefits of international trade rather than cutting ties with Britain. Scholars suggest that Malaysia's economic nationalism was not the result of a complete rejection of its colonial economic ties, but rather a triumph of economic independence. Therefore, the colonial economic relationship was rebuilt rather than abandoned.

Further research has suggested that reducing colonial economic dependence was only one way Malaysia sought economic growth beyond Britain, and the other was to retrace historic ties with Islamic countries (Kershaw, 1983; Dosch, 2014). Scholars have suggested that initiatives such as Mahathir's "Look East Policy" were introduced to diversify Malaysia's international connections by expanding its commercial links across East Asia and the Islamic world (White, 2017; Bishku, 2021). Although Tunku and Mahathir had different approaches in international relations, both saw economic development as their main goal. During both the pro-Western era under Tunku Abdul Rahman and the more assertive era under Mahathir Mohamad, scholars have suggested that economic development remained the core of state legitimacy, regardless of the ideological differences (Ott, 1972; Dosch, 2014). Malaysia's present-day identity as an economically open country with global ties derives from a strategic post-independence realignment.

Cultural Impacts: Identity, Traditions, and Post-Colonial Tensions

Previous research has stated that Malaysia's international relations cannot be simply explained solely by colonial legacy, and how culture was preserved during British colonial rule offers insight into its current international presence. (Ikhwan and Aidulsyah, 2020; Milner and Kasim, 2018). Kerajaan and nama, a word for reputation and status, are concepts that are included in traditional Malay court writings such as the Hikayat Hang Tuah and Sejarah Melayu, which Milner and Kasim claim to have left a long-lasting impact on Malaysia's diplomatic style today (Milner and Kasim, 2018). While Ikhwan and Aidulsyah emphasize that British indirect rule is what preserved these traditions, Milner and Kasim demonstrate how these continued to shape Malaysia's international relations. Ikwan and Aidulsyah suggest that these traditional ideologies were only able to be preserved through indirect rule, where Britain allowed Malays to keep their history (Ikwan and Aidulsyah, 2020). They argue that this older concept explains Malaysia's diplomatic style known as the mousedeer diplomacy, where they call themselves a small country and work closely with much larger powers (Milner and Kasim, 2018). Malaysia's international relations with the Middle East are suggested by authors to have been well-positioned, as they keep a modest relationship with the Middle Eastern countries, allowing Malaysia to still be able to keep connections with other larger countries in different regions without provoking confrontation (Bishuku, 2021). Traditional and historical traditions still provide Malaysia with a foundation that helps shape its international relations even after colonization.

Other research suggests that Malaysia's post-colonial identity was reconstructed after independence through historical ties (Milner & Kasim, 2018; Bishku, 2021). Published research indicates that Malaysia's Islamic identity has helped it foster relationships with Middle Eastern nations by tracing connections it made during the Ottoman era, which were interrupted due to British colonization, while avoiding entanglement in regional conflicts (Bishku, 2021). Researchers suggest that being an Islamic nation has allowed it to expand its international presence through the power it holds within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Dosch, 2014; Bishku, 2021). This shift in branching out to nations outside of the Anglo-Sphere is suggested by scholars to be proof of Malaysia's evolution into a more global nation (Ott, 1972; Bishku, 2021). Research implies that British rule both shaped Malaysia to become reliant on the Anglo-Sphere and set the foundation for Malaysia to extend beyond it.

Other researchers have suggested that Britain did not just provide a foundation for Malaysia's international stance today, but it also left unresolved psychological tensions that lingered after independence (Ott, 1972; Kershaw, 1983; Dosch, 2014). Kershaw and Dosch claim that the "Buy British Last" boycott proves the continued ideological hostility and that it was not just a single incident (Kershaw, 1983; Dosch, 2014). Kershaw highlights that the relationship between Britain and Malaysia from the colonial period is still visible in Malaysia's international relations with the rest of the world (Kershaw, 1983). Both Kershaw and Dosch suggest that the boycott was resolved through gestures rather than officially resolving economic tensions, and this dispute and Phillips' research show that post-independence leaders in Malaysia used the same strategy just as British authorities had perceived external threats to justify centralized control (Kershaw, 1983; Dosch, 2014; Phillips, 2016). These show that Malaysia's approach to international relations was shaped by unresolved disputes during the colonial era and by post-colonial leaders, highlighting how colonial legacies and leadership have interacted.

Conclusion

The previous research on the impact of British colonization on Malaysia's international relations suggests that the political, economic, and cultural aspects of colonial rule left a lasting influence on Malaysia's presence on the international stage. Politically, the colonial institutions, borders, and security arrangements were suggested to continue to influence Malaysia's international relations. Terms of decolonization and the international relationships formulated through British rule for the economic aspect, and tensions between colonial influence and Malaysia's unique identity from the pre-colonial era for the cultural influences, were suggested by research to be the shapers of Malaysia's international relations. Further research could examine how these political, economic, and cultural aspects interact with each other and how their influence has changed over time. As this literature review focuses on differences from those of a Dutch colony, comparative research with other former British colonies could help determine which aspects of Malaysia's history are unique to it. Malaysia's international relations are influenced not only by current political and economic interests but also by colonial legacies. Understanding these legacies can provide a clearer explanation of how Malaysia balances its colonial history as an emerging independent nation.

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A Literature Review on the Impact of Chess Practice on General Intelligence and Mathematical Abilities By Kolesnyk Ahniia

Abstract

Given that chess requires a lot of logic and calculation, it is often seen as a potential tool to help students learn. However, there is still a gap in understanding whether chess actually improves academic skills or if already smart students simply prefer playing it. To understand whether it is a good tool, this literature review explores the connection between playing chess, general intelligence, and mathematical abilities. It is conducted by comparing different studies, but the answer is not precise, as was expected. The research has some limitations in asserting due to quite different results. However, some key conclusions can be drawn. Studies usually show a positive link between chess practice and cognitive skills, and this effect is especially strong for children and beginners. For math, regular chess practice can improve basic numerical skills, but short-term programs rarely show big academic changes. Despite some weaknesses in this literature review, schools might consider using chess to support students, but it definitely cannot replace normal math classes.

Introduction

Chess is a popular game of logic and skill that is played all around the world. Because it requires a lot of deep thinking and strategy, people often assume that mostly smart people play it. Also, since chess involves calculation and recognition patterns, it makes logical sense to see if playing it can help with math skills. However, the research on whether chess actually improves intelligence and mathematics has shown mixed results. Some studies report high IQ or better math scores in chess players (Frydman and Lynn; Rosholm et al.; Sala and Gobet; Burgoyne et al.), while others find only small effects or no effect at all (Bilalić et al.; Hong and Bart) . Currently, many schools are looking for more engaging ways to help students learn, especially since math can be a difficult subject. Because of this, it is crucial to explore the association between chess and cognitive skills to inform students' education. If chess is proven to enhance intelligence and math skills, it could be used in the educational system to help students advance their capabilities in a fun way. On the other hand, if research suggests that chess has no significant effect, schools should focus their time on other educational methods that help students with these abilities more.

Methodology

This review aims to explore the association of chess, intelligence, and mathematics by analyzing and comparing different information from a variety of research studies (Bilalić et al.; Burgoyne et al.; Frydman and Lynn; Hong and Bart; Grabner et al.; Rosholm et al.; Sala and Gobet). To investigate this, Google Scholar was used for the following key words and phrases: “chess and intelligence”, “chess and mathematics”, “cognitive ability in chess”, “literature review chess and strategic thinking”, “meta analysis of chess and memory”. Only peer-reviewed

articles from reputable journals, such as those from ScienceDirect and PLOS One, were included. It is hypothesized that chess improves general intelligence and mathematical capability.

Chess and intelligence

Research suggests that chess may have a positive impact on intelligence, mostly for children. An early study by Frydman and Lynn (1992) measures the intelligence of chess players (Frydman and Lynn). This study tested 33 highly skilled young chess players from a 1989 Belgian tournament; their mean age was 11, with 4 girls and 29 boys. Their chess ability was measured using the Elo rating system, and their average rating was 1450 (a good rating for 11-year-old kids). The Elo rating system is based on the results of the games and strength of the opponents. Later, they compared these results with Elo ratings to see how much each cognitive ability has influenced chess performance. Everyone completed the French version of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC). The WISC includes specific sections that measure different types of thinking; based on the scores from this test, the results suggest that high-level chess requires strong visuospatial abilities and good general intelligence. However, Frydman and Lynn (1992) state that it is still unclear whether the children had the skills of visuospatial abilities before they started practicing chess or after (Frydman and Lynn).

Additionally, the unequal number of boys and girls in the study creates a potential gender bias. Because of this, it is difficult to know if these results apply to all children equally, or mostly just to boys.

Despite the fact that Frydman and Lynn focused on children, Grabner et al. (2007) looked at different ranges of age. Researchers often call chess the "Drosophila" of psychology because it is perfect for studying human expertise (Grabner et al.). However, scientists still argue about what makes a great chess player. The psychometric investigation by Grabner et al. (2007) looked at how intelligence, practice, experience, and personality relate to chess skill (Grabner et al.). The study is crucial because it tested chess players with IQ tests, personality and emotion questionnaires, and a chess experience survey, then used correlations and regressions to see which variables predict chess skill. The experiment explored verbal, numerical, and figural intelligence. As could be expected, the performance in the chess memory task correlated significantly ($r = 0.68$) with playing strength; shape memory performance, in contrast, was entirely unrelated to chess skill ($r = .03$). In order to measure the intelligence of the chess players, Grabner et al. (2007) used a standard German test, which is the I-S-T 2000 R (Grabner et al.). This test is appropriate because it measures different parts of intelligence, such as verbal, numerical, and figural skills. From these subtypes, the authors found that higher chess strength is strongly associated with better results in general ($r=.35$), verbal ($r=.38$), and numerical intelligence ($r=.46$). Interestingly, they also noticed that the highest-rated players in the study did not actually have the absolute highest verbal or numerical IQ scores. As such, several correlations with ELO ranking were found: higher chess strength is associated with higher results in general intelligence, verbal intelligence and numerical intelligence. This connection

makes sense because playing chess at a high level requires continuous calculation and board evaluation, which relies on numerical skills. Simultaneously, players need to understand complex abstract concepts and study written strategies, which explains the link to verbal and general intelligence.

However, when Bilalić et al. (2007) measured the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Third Edition (WISC-III) in 57 young chess-club players, they found that intelligence was related to chess skill only for beginners, but not among highly skilled young players (Bilalić et al.).

This finding is crucial because it suggests that chess might not actually make children smarter. It is possible that children who are already intelligent could have selected playing chess. So, these results can be used to argue that smarter people just like playing chess more, rather than the game itself improving their general intelligence.

In order to investigate whether chess could improve intelligence rather than attracting smart people, Hong and Bart (2007) conducted a study where they showed that short chess lessons did not improve IQ overall, but an association was found between how well students played chess and their scores on the TONI-3 (Test of Nonverbal Intelligence) (Hong and Bart). There were 38 students, aged 8 to 12, from 3 different elementary schools in Seoul, Korea. The experimental group of students at risk of failure due to bad grades took a 90-minute chess lesson per week. The control group students regularly attended school activities after class. In general, chess lessons did not change intelligence scores, but inside the chess group, better players had slightly higher nonverbal IQ ($d=0.29$). This is an exceptional example of the difference between correlation and causation. The correlation between good chess skills and higher nonverbal IQ could be seen, but it does not prove causation. It is impossible to claim that chess caused them to become smarter, as it is possible that students who already had good nonverbal skills simply learned the game faster.

The study by Hong and Bart (2007) was limited in that it was only conducted over a short time period, and hence broader research is needed (Hong and Bart). A meta-analysis by Sala and Gobet (2016) examined the effect of chess instruction on academic and cognitive abilities in children (Sala and Gobet). Chess instruction showed a small to moderate positive effect on cognitive skills (overall $g=0.33$). They reviewed many “chess in school” studies that measured cognitive abilities after chess lessons. Sala and Gobet (2016) found that several studies contend chess players are more intelligent than the general population (Sala and Gobet; Bilalić et al.; Grabner et al.; Frydman and Lynn). Overall, the authors note that this effect is not very large, and study limitations, such as the short period of time that students spend studying chess, make it hard to prove that chess training really increases general intelligence.

By supporting that chess correlates with cognitive skills, Burgoyne et al. (2016) have found small to medium positive correlations between intelligence and chess skill (Burgoyne et al.). Their comprehensive meta-analysis combined 26 independent samples to evaluate the relationship between cognitive ability and skill in chess. Their work found both positive and negative correlations across studies. However, the overall meta-analytic average of the

correlations was (r = 0.24). The studies used standard IQ and cognitive tests (fluid reasoning, knowledge, memory, processing speed), which were measured through standardized psychometric batteries like Raven's Progressive Matrices and different versions of Wechsler scales. The authors took the correlations between these test scores and chess skill (Elo rating or chess tests) and used them to calculate the overall correlation for their meta-analysis. Interestingly, the correlation was stronger for children and beginners. This is likely because new players have to rely heavily on their general intelligence and problem-solving skills to play, while advanced players rely more on their specific chess experience and memorized patterns. However, it is important to mention that it is impossible to conclude causality here.

Overall, these studies show strong support that chess and intelligence are connected. Some researchers (Burgoyne et al.; Frydman and Lynn; Grabner et al.; Sala and Gobet) found that chess players, especially stronger ones, often have slightly higher IQ and better numerical skills, and that chess lessons can give a small improvement in thinking skills. However, other studies (Bilalić et al.; Hong and Bart) show that at higher levels, chess practice and experience are more important than IQ, and short chess courses, which were used by some researchers in the above, do not meaningfully change intelligence test scores. So chess is related to intelligence, especially for children and beginners, but it does not make people smarter on its own.

Chess and mathematics

While general intelligence is a broad concept, it is also important to look at specific academic skills. Mathematics is highly based on logic and calculation, just like chess, which is why researchers often study them together to see if board games can actually help with school grades. Multiple studies have claimed that chess contributes to an increase in mathematical ability (Burgoyne et al.; Rosholm et al.; Sala and Gobet). However, other research has claimed that there is no effect (Hong and Bart), leaving open the question of whether playing chess actually contributes to the improvement of mathematical skills.

In the same meta-analysis discussed earlier, Burgoyne et al. (2016) also evaluated the relationship between numerical ability and skill in chess (Burgoyne et al.). Burgoyne et al. specifically focused on numerical ability because it refers to basic number processing and arithmetics, which are much easier to link to the calculation skills used in chess. In contrast, they didn't measure general mathematical ability because that involves much broader, more complex concepts. Participants took standard numerical and math tests. Chess skill was assessed by Elo rating or chess tests. The meta-analysis found a significant positive correlation between chess skill and numerical ability ($r = 0.35$, 95% CI = [0.30, 0.40], $p = 0.001$). In short, they found that numerical ability explained 12% of the variance in chess skill, which means that 12% of the difference between players comes from basic number skills, meaning players who are better at chess tend to score higher on math or numerical tests.

Unlike the previous research, which looked at the relationship, Sala and Gobet (2016) focused on the results of whether teaching chess can actually improve math scores (Sala and

Gobet). They conducted a meta-analysis that examined the effect exerted by chess instruction on children in school. They reviewed 24 different studies, which included 2788 students from primary and secondary schools. Their goal was to see if chess could improve skills in math, reading, and general thinking. The results showed a moderate positive effect overall ($g=0.338$), but the impact was higher for math ($g=0.382$) than for reading ($g=0.248$). Sala and Gobet (2016) also found that more hours of chess led to better academic results, which were mostly measured by standardized test scores in subjects like math and reading ($p < .05$). This study is relevant because it demonstrates that chess could help with logical subjects like math. So their results can support the notion that chess instruction improves children's mathematics (Sala and Gobet).

In order to test the hypothesis that chess instruction could directly improve children's math skills, Rosholm et al. (2017) gathered data provided by different local schools in Aarhus, Denmark (Rosholm et al.). The researchers used the results to track a sample of 482 Danish children in grades 1-3. The researchers gave standardized math tests, focusing on calculation, geometry and problem-solving, to these students at the beginning of the academic year and in the end. Participants with weekly chess-based mathematical lessons were compared to participants who took the same mathematical lessons but without the chess intervention. For the chess group, the researchers replaced one of the four weekly math lessons with a chess lesson. After a year, authors found that chess instruction led to a small but positive effect on overall mathematical ability. When they looked deeper into the data, a specific finding really stood out: participants in the chess group did better on numerical pattern recognition (around 0.10-0.18 standard deviations, with a significant
p-value of 0.04). While improving overall math was their main hypothesis, this specific subscore result is very interesting. Numerical pattern recognition is a crucial part of mathematical reasoning, as it involves identifying the logic or rules behind some sequence of numbers. This relates directly to chess because the game also relies on recognizing visual and tactical patterns on the board. Because of that, practicing pattern recognition in chess likely trains the brain to spot logical sequences in math more easily.

Despite these findings, in the same study by Hong and Bart (2007), the researchers suggest that there is no correlation between chess and numerical abilities (Hong and Bart). Using the Korean Basic Skills Test, they found that the experimental group's performance, students at risk of failing who received chess lessons for just 90 minutes a week, was not significantly different from the control group ($p > .05$). So in this study, short chess lessons did not improve numerical abilities of the students. Unlike the studies with positive results, this experiment focused only on struggling students for a very short time.

In short, despite the contradictory study (Hong and Bart), most studies suggest that chess can have a positive effect on mathematical skills (Burgoyne et al.; Rosholm et al.; Sala and Gobet). There is evidence that shows that regular practice may support children with numbers, pattern recognition and understanding math at school.
However, Hong and Bart show that a short chess program may not be able to fix the knowledge

of students who struggle with their grades. So, while chess appears to be a good tool to support math learning, it might not improve academic knowledge. In order to actually gain strength in academic performance, the practice of chess must be consistent and long-term, because Sala et al. (Sala and Gobet) found that more hours of instruction directly led to higher test scores.

Discussion

The goal of this literature review was to explore the connection between playing chess, intelligence, and math skill. The initial hypothesis was that chess practice makes general intelligence better and improves math abilities. It is still difficult to claim, but it was found that some studies indicate a potential for chess to improve intelligence and mathematics.

In general, most studies support the original hypotheses, but it is crucial to analyze some of them. While Hong and Bart (2007) found no correlation between chess and numerical abilities, the fact that a weekly lesson was part of their methods makes the results dubious (Hong and Bart). This is because it is impossible to see big academic changes in such a short time (12 weekly lessons over a 3-month period). Another weakness is the use of short-term programs. To fix this, future research should conduct longitudinal experiments across greater time frames. Testing the same students over a few years with the exact same tests would show the real impact of chess.

While Frydman and Lynn (1992) found that young chess players have high general intelligence, they did not test the children's skills before they started practicing chess (Frydman and Lynn).

Therefore, it is hard to say if chess made them smart or if they were already intelligent before playing. Also, considering age and experience, Bilialic et al. (2007) showed that intelligence is important mostly for beginners, rather than highly skilled young players (Bilalić et al.). This is supported by Burgoyne et al. (2016), who found that the correlation between chess skill and cognitive ability is actually stronger for children than for adults (Burgoyne et al.).

The numerical ability results are interesting because some chess players commonly report that they are not good at math (*Are Chess Players Good at Math?*). At the same time, most people believe that playing chess automatically makes you smart (Ormsby). Indeed, this literature review shows that chess correlates with intelligence and math skills (Burgoyne et al.; Rosholm et al.). However, playing chess cannot change your academic skills significantly (Hong and Bart). While this review primarily focuses on math, it is worth noting that several studies also found a positive connection between chess and verbal or reading skills (Grabner et al.; Sala and Gobet). This suggests that the cognitive benefits of playing chess might be broader and not exclusively limited to numbers.

Limitations

The main strength of this research is comparing different studies, from huge

meta-analyses (Sala and Gobet) to local experiments (Rosholm et al.). However, one key limitation is that studies defined intelligence and math in very mixed ways. For example, Frydman and Lynn (1992) used the WISC test, while Hong and Bart (2007) used TONI-3. The results from the WISC test and from TONI-3 could lead to different conclusions because it measures many types of intelligence including verbal and focuses on nonverbal, abstract problem-solving respectively (Frydman and Lynn; Hong and Bart). The meta-analysis by Burgoyne et al. (2016) commented on this issue and focused only on basic numerical ability because it connects more easily to chess. Other studies used broad math tests, which makes comparing results difficult (Burgoyne et al.).

Additionally, since most research focused on children, there is a need for more studies to be conducted which analyse adults. Future research should also focus on the differences between genders, as many of the studies discussed had a gender imbalance within their participant groups or did not even report the gender distribution. In these conditions it is impossible to tell if the cognitive benefits of chess apply to everyone equally, or if they affect boys and girls divergently. To sum up, more research is needed to determine the real effects.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that playing chess is connected to better intelligence and math skills, especially for children and beginners. The studies compared suggest that regular chess practice helps students with things like number patterns and logic. However, it is important to understand that this takes time. Short chess programs do not instantly improve academic scores, and playing chess does not make you a smarter person in general. However, schools can confidently add chess to their system as a regular school club. Teachers could also use chess to improve intelligence and math by combining it with usual lessons to help their students with pattern recognition, just like Rosholm et al. (2017) did in Denmark. For the bigger picture, utilizing the game to support students in these ways provides a really good workout for the brain. Ultimately, people must analyze different studies and understand that chess definitely cannot replace normal math classes (Rosholm et al.).

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AI tools were used during the preparation of this work strictly for language editing, grammar checking, and improving the logical flow of the text. All literature research, data analysis, critical evaluation, and final conclusions are the original work of the author.

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From Baroque to NeoGothic: Catholic Architecture in Colonial China
By Charles Huang

Introduction

Catholic architecture in China was never neutral; it had to persuade, translate, defend itself, and later, distance itself from earlier missionary failure. Following the Chinese Rites Controversy, the first Jesuit mission was suppressed by the Chinese imperial court and ultimately exiled in the 1770s. It was not until the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, following the British victory in the First Opium War, that Catholic missions were able to return legally. While scholars have examined the material hybridity of missionary architecture, less attention has been paid to how stylistic choices themselves functioned as conversion strategies.

The earliest Jesuit mission was first coordinated by Matteo Ricci, who arrived in Macau in 1582 and Beijing in 1601. But the mission really took shape under the efforts of the later leader, Niccolo Longobardo, and Nicolas Trigault, as it became more organized and systematic.

For the entire duration of the first Jesuit mission, the Chinese side occupied the dominant position in the exchange. They held geological and numerical advantages, and their widely accepted 'cultural imperative' strategy, which obliged foreigners to accommodate the native culture[1], disallowed liturgical attempts in the Jesuits' own terms. A missionary could not go out into the streets to preach to the public without interference from the authorities. Discussing topics that at times conflicted with Chinese conceptions and traditions, missionaries naturally incurred the displeasure of the people and authorities. As a result, they often faced persecution and ended up in jail. Holding a weaker political and cultural position, missionaries thus had to ground their work and ideologies in Chinese interests. Moreover, directly targeting the masses would expose the evangelization mission to persecution by authorities. Thus, it could only begin with the authorities themselves, and in China, they were the *literati*[2]. As a result, Jesuits' early liturgy work took the path of transmitting Western ideologies within the context of Chinese traditions, translating concepts into common Chinese terms rather than in the Latin originals. Conclusively, the first Jesuit mission depended heavily on cultural translation towards the *literati*, in hopes that it would "trickle down" eventually.

One such method of transmission is through books, one of the most effective ways to gain recognition from the educated Chinese *literati*[3]. Ricci and Trigault reported on it in the following way :

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[1] Standaert, "The Transmission of Renaissance Culture in Seventeenth-Century China," Renaissance Studies 17, no. 3 (2003), 370.
[2] The literate elite were referred to as the "literati." The literati were the gentry class, composed of individuals who passed the civil service exams and who were both the scholarly and governmental elite of the society
[3] Standaert, "Transmission of Renaissance Culture," 367.

There was no doubt among the educated Chinese that these Europeans had a reputation for doctrine and learning. It was this reputation that accounted for the fact that some of the highly lettered class requested a fuller explanation of the precepts of Christianity than was contained in a copy of the Commandments[4].

Chinese interest in Western maps facilitated the rapid transmission of the latest knowledge in cartography, astronomy, mathematics, technology, and medicine. Ricci's world map proved to be an important device for arousing the interest of the Chinese literati in his scientific and religious work. In addition, Ricci acquired proficiency in Chinese and translated mathematical and astronomical writings with the help of Chinese scholars, while interpreting the ideologies of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism for the European audience, establishing a link between the European humanist tradition and the Confucian tradition. Following Ricci's example, the Jesuits adopted a gradual acculturation approach among the elite and the court in China; many held high positions and closely collaborated with the literati in translating and in the 1629 calendar reform[5].

This paper argues that the Cathedral's adoption of Neogothic forms represented a deliberate shift from Baroque theatricality to an architecture of "moral universality", one that aligned Catholic values with European Gothic Revival ideals of spiritual authenticity, structural rationality, and natural order, and more importantly, functions as a redefined missionary language.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section explores the early Jesuit mission and the crisis caused by the Rites Controversy, then briefly mentions the political background of their 19th-century return. The second section explores the Gothic Revival's emergence in Europe as well as its ideologies and values. The third section then examines how Gothic is used in the new Catholic missions in China through a case study of the Cathedral of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in Shanghai.

I. The Baroque Discredit: How the visual language of the first Jesuit mission thrived and died

Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, Jesuit architecture in China reflected the opulence and theatrics that characterized Baroque architecture in Europe. A typical Jesuit's approach to architecture is flexibility in architectural idiom. This is due to a term less frequently used by the Jesuits and less cited by specialists: *mediocrità religiosa[religious mediocrity]*, a phrase that the fathers general of the Society sometimes employed in reference to the kind of art and architecture perceived to conform more closely to their religious ideals[6]. Jesuits did not initially adopt the Baroque style; instead, they followed the poverty ideals of Ignatius Loyola himself and constructed *modo nostro* architecture. However, following his death, in the General

[4] Matteo Ricci and Nicolas Trigault, quoted in Standaert, "Transmission of Renaissance Culture," 371.
[5] Standaert, "Transmission of Renaissance Culture," 373, 382.
[6] César Guillen-Nuñez, Macao's Church of Saint Paul: A Glimmer of the Baroque in China (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009):10-11.

Congregation of 1558, the churches of the order were excluded from architectural austerity. The subsequent rise of the Jesuits, resulting from a shift in the historical and artistic climate in the seventeenth century, from Counter-Reformation militarism to that of the Ecclesia triumphants, led to a change in aesthetic sensibilities. In this more relaxed religious climate, the Jesuits now accepted that the arts could not only edify but also delight[7]. Jesuits have since embraced the Baroque in their missions.

Jesuits mostly preached in Macau before 1601, as part of the Portuguese settlement. In 1601, the Jesuits traveled to Beijing to gain permission from the Ming Wanli emperor to evangelize in mainland China and to construct architecture. The attempt was successful, culminating in the emperor allowing Jesuit missions in China and allowing some members to serve in court. This is due to their scientific advances and material culture, as evidenced by the various objects presented to the emperor. A letter by Ricci listing gifts to the Emperor upon request states:

Your Majesty, I herewith humbly present before your Royal presence one portrait of our Heavenly Lord, two portraits of our Holy Mother, one copy of the Bible, one cross inlaid with pearls, two clocks, one copy of the World atlas, and one clavichord.

Ricci's assistant, young Jesuit Diego de Pantoja, wrote a *Carta* in 1602 to Luis de Guzmán, revealing that the Wanli Emperor was very curious about the gifts Pantoja and Ricci sent, including images and clocks, as well as about the Spanish monarchy and its cultural customs. Pantoja wrote that the Ming emperor often sent the eunuchs to ask about their land. Upon this request, Ricci and Pantoja presented the engraving of El Escorial, a vast Baroque building complex of a monastery, basilica, and royal palace of the Spanish King Philip II. Although no evidence of direct interest in the Escorial engravings was recorded, the emperor nevertheless showed great interest in Spain's culture and architecture. Scholar César Guillen-Nunez, in his book on the church Mater Dei (Mother of God) in Macau (1602-1603), identifies the retable façade, the "portada", of the Escorial as a potential precedent for the Macau church, showing the importance of the diffusion of baroque architecture as an instrument for persuasion of the local authorities, and later, conversion of the local population.

Time and again, Matteo Ricci and his fellow Jesuit missionaries speak of the usefulness of the imagini as an aid to proselytizing, as it is difficult to understand the complicated theology behind the simple stories. In one of the best-known examples, Ricci wrote a letter from Beijing in May 1605 to João Álvarez, S.J., assistant to Father General Aquaviva in Rome. Ricci asks for an extra copy of Nadal's book, declaring with Jesuitical pragmatism[8]

"perchè più utile é anco quel libro che questo della Bibbia per adesso; poichè con quello dichiariamo, anzi poniamo avanti agli occhi quello che alle volte con parole non possiamo

[7] Guillen-Nuñez, Macao's Church of Saint Paul, 10.
[8] Guillen-Nuñez, Macao's Church of Saint Paul, 6.

dichiarare" (because that book lof Nadal] is even more useful than the Bible itself; as we speak the words we put before the eyes of the listener those concepts [of the Bible, illustrated by the images in Nadal's book] which at that moment we cannot explain with mere words).

Visual strategies like text and Baroque architecture thus served as a persuasion strategy employed by the Jesuits to present European architectural knowledge and gain recognition from the emperor and the literati, and became strongly associated with the mission itself. The books, maps, clocks, images, translations, and eventually architecture all helped make Catholicism legible to Chinese elites, enabling them to secure support for the mission.

The first major churches outside of Macau built by the Jesuits were funded by the emperors and high-ranking officials, and also employed Baroque devices. The land of the Nantang church(Xuanwumen Cathedral)(Figure 1), the earliest one to be built, for example, was given by the Ming Wanli emperor, while later enlargements, reconstructions, or restorations received official support from the Qing Shunzhi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong emperors[9]. The overall architectural style shows that the ornamental and spatial program closely adhered to European models, suggesting it served as a literal showcase of Western architectural language and techniques for the imperial court, thereby further earning the emperor's trust and support for the expansion of the evangelization mission. Subsequently, two more churches were constructed in the 17th and early 18th Centuries in Beijing by the Jesuits: the Dontang and the Beitang. The churches constructed in this period employed a mannerist Baroque architectural style, characterized by elaborate facades, with grouped and layered columns, curved and broken pediments, volutes, and niches.

[9] César Guillen-Nuñez, “Rising from the Ashes: The Gothic Revival and the Architecture of the ‘New’ Society of Jesus in China and Macao,” in Jesuit Survival and Restoration (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 178–298, at 286.

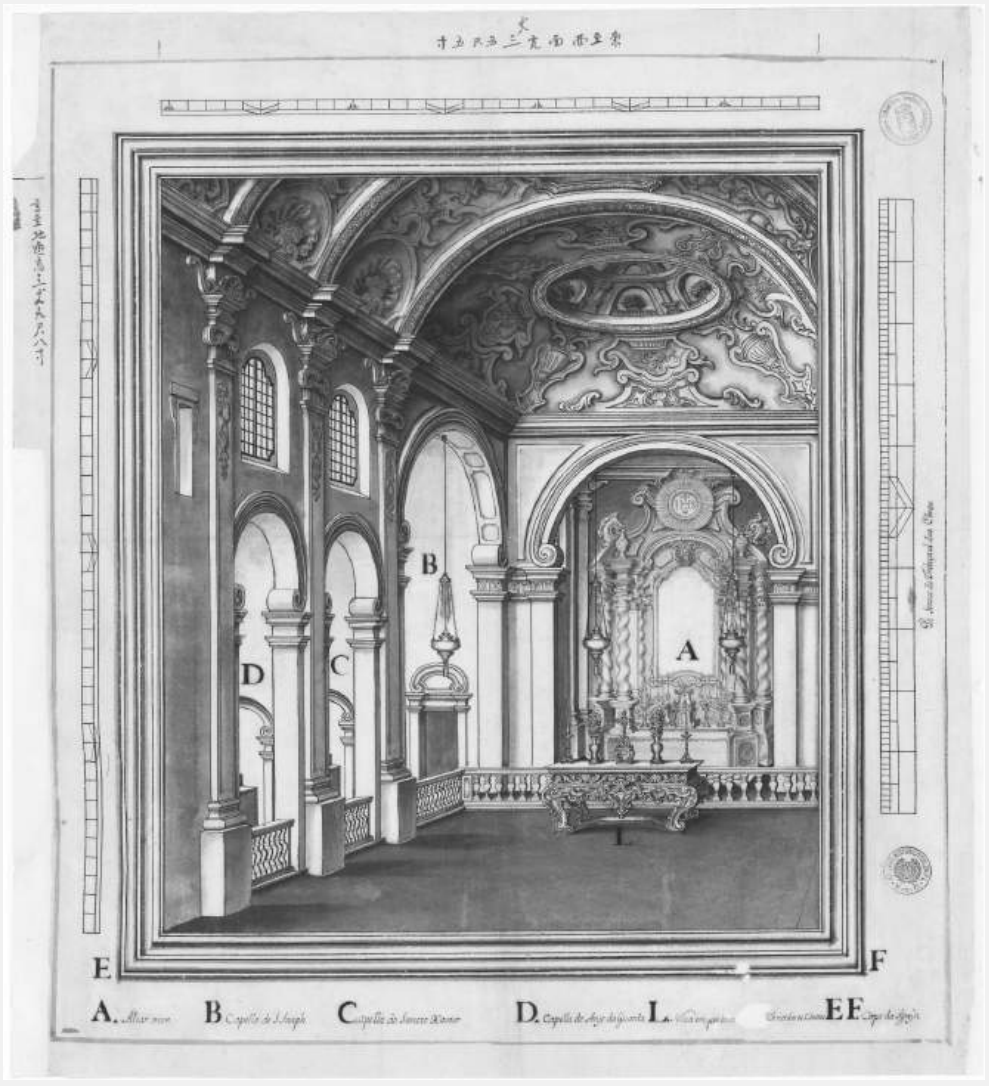

Figure.1: Ferdinando Buonaventura Moggi (attr.), the interior of the Nantang church, ink on paper, 50.5 x 55.5 cm, ca. 1730. Lisbon: Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Cart. Ms–XI. CM 758.

Outside of Beijing, the Jesuits expanded their mission to more regions. A 1703 report on the Chinese vice-province, written in Rome by the Bavarian missionary Gaspar Castner (1665–1709) for Pope Clement XI, stated that Jesuits were active in 12 provinces, had 300 churches and chapels, as well as 5 colleges and 36 residences. However, construction dates for individual buildings are mostly unclear. Major documented churches include Immaculate Conception Cathedral of Taiyuan and Hangzhou, as well as Jingyi Church in Shanghai.

As the mission grew, Jesuits embraced accommodation across all levels. Books, maps, and even visual language were translated into Chinese by early missionaries. Works like Giulio Aleni's *Four-Character Scripture,* for example, are a summary of Catholic teachings in four-character lines designed to be easily memorized by Chinese children and converts. It combines Bible stories with Catholic dogma in a format mimicking the Confucian

Three-Character Classic. Aleni also utilized Chinese philosophical concepts to explain Christian teachings, such as using "repaying the roots" to explain the Mass.

Jerónimo Nadal (1507–1580), a Spanish priest from the island of Majorca, conceived his book, the Evangelicae Historiae Imagines (Images from the New Testament), for Jesuit novices on Gospel passages used in the liturgy of the Mass. In the Jesuits' China missions, the engravings appearing in Nadal's piece and similar works by these masters were adapted by Chinese artists for several devotional books in Chinese. A 1635 life of Christ by the Italian Giulio Aleni contained a large number of prints adapted from those of Nadal; a Life of Christ was composed for the Chinese emperor in 1640 by the German Jesuit Johann Adam Schall von Bell." In addition, there are the four prints given as gifts by Matteo Ricci to the ink master Ch'eng Ta-yüeh that were incorporated in his 1606 illustrated catalog of ink tablets, the Mo Yuan 墨苑[10]. Among the most remarkable is the 1619 Prática de rezar o rosário (「誦」念珠規程), or Method of Saying the Rosary, by the Portuguese João da Rocha, which included 15 woodcuts attributed to the artist Tung Ch'i-Ch'ang (董其昌) (1555-1636). Images of figures, architecture, and clothing were hybridized to include more Chinese elements, as seen in the Annunciation scene, portrayed in both the original Evangelicae Historiae Imagines (Figure 2) and the adapted version (Figure 3). Although the composition of the scene remained the same, most elements have been replaced with versions that better align with Chinese art and architecture traditions. Shadings on the figures, shed, and clouds have been removed and replaced with simple line art. The shape and style of the clouds changed from three-dimensional to that of traditional Chinese cloud motifs. Architecture, clothing, furniture, plants, and terrain were accommodated to include distinctive Chinese elements.

[10] Guillen-Nuñez, Macao's Church of Saint Paul, 5.

Figure. 2(left): The Annunciation, from Jerónimo Nadal, Evangelicae Historiae Imagines (Antwerp, 1593), copperplate engraving. Getty Research Institute (Internet Archive).

Figure. 3(right):The Annunciation, Chinese woodcut adaptation, from João da Rocha (Luo Ruwang), Song nianzhu guicheng (誦念珠規程), or Method of Saying the Rosary (Nanjing, ca. 1619), woodcut attributed to Tung Ch'i-Ch'ang (董其昌). Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gallica.

This hybridization is, of course, also seen in Architecture. Construction of the Madre de Deus church in Macau began in 1602. Its final façade was finished c. 1644. The uniquely decorative nature of its classical supports and the strongly Eucharistic connotations of its decoration characterize it as a Spanish retable facade[11]. However, its elaborate and dramatic inventions present a visual vocabulary belonging not only to European references but also to Chinese ones. The façade's balustrades are decorated with obelisks, next to which a pair of stone lions carved in the style of Buddhist temple lions are placed. In the Chinese Buddhist tradition, stone lions symbolize wisdom and protection against evil and are widely used at the entrances of Chinese temples, palaces, and residences as status symbols. The implementation of such a symbol connects Christian ideas of omnipotence and the Armor of God with a similar, yet more tangible, representation for the Chinese audience.

[11] César Guillén-Núñez, "The Façade of St. Paul's, Macao: A Retable-Façade?" Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 41 (2001): 131–88, at 151.

The statues of angels that surround Mary in the centerpiece wear clothing that appears to be blowing in the wind or reminiscent of traditional Chinese scroll paintings. They also resemble apsaras, flying figures in Buddhist mythology. This is also to associate Christian figurative subjects with familiar Chinese ones. When looking at the façade in its entirety, the large number of carvings recalls the great Buddhist cave temples of Yungang (fifth century) and Luoyang (seventh century), and their forceful carved images of Buddhist saints and guardian kings[12]. In the upper half, there are several inscriptions as well. One of the Chinese inscriptions states: "The Holy Mother tramples on the dragon's head" (Figure. 4). Both the left and the right scrolls have carved inscriptions in relief (as opposed to the incised inscriptions explaining the dragon), consisting of six large vertical characters. Like those on the dragon, they explain the two images that spread horizontally across the scroll, enclosed in a frame[13]. The dragon, however, is also changed to become a hybrid of a six-headed hydra and a demon head, only faintly incorporating elements of a mythologically accurate dragon, with its scales, claws and tail. This is also to accommodate Chinese traditions, as dragons are seen as auspicious rather than evil. By skewing the visual depictions of dragons, they would not be associated with traditional Chinese dragons or any royal representations that come with them. The Jesuits aimed to translate Catholic ideologies not only into Chinese text but also into visual terms familiar to the Chinese audience.

Figure. 4: Christian Tørrissen, B. (2016, June 26). *Virgin Mary stepping on a seven-headed hydra*. Wikipedia.

[12] John W. O'Malley et al., The Jesuits and the Arts (2005), quoted in Christian Wagner, "The Façade of St Paul's in Macao Reflects Christian, Confucian and Buddhist Spirituality," MRI Journal, 2020.
[13] Guillen-Nuñez, "Façade of St. Paul's, Macao," 131–88, at 153.

However, such accommodations were often perceived as a denature of core theological principles. The Jesuit approach to architecture and visual art reflected a systematic tendency to translate Catholic doctrines into local contexts, sometimes to the point of rendering them unrecognizable. This practice fueled the Chinese Rites controversy; opponents, particularly Dominican missionaries like Father Navarrete, argued that Jesuit Baroque iconography bordered on idolatry and distorted the faith. These accusations of religious syncretism were rooted firmly in both the Jesuits' conversion strategy and their associated visual culture. Architecture did not directly cause the controversy; rather, it belonged to the same world of accommodation, translation, and visual ambiguity that critics attacked.

The Dominicans further argued that the Jesuits had become a "rogue" order. The controversy became a political tool for the Dominicans to challenge Jesuit autonomy. Since the 16th century, the Jesuits operated under the Padroado, led by figures such as Matteo Ricci, a system in which the Portuguese Crown, rather than the Pope, controlled missions in Asia in return for funding. Consequently, the Chinese Rites issue was not simply a matter of religious purity but also part of a proxy war for ecclesiastical power. Nevertheless, the Jesuits' accusations of improper religious practices and the allowance of paganism prompted the Propaganda Fide to ultimately intervene. Pope Clement XI's 1715 decree stated that:

...the worship of ancestors, is not allowed among Catholic converts. ... if they have been converted to Roman Catholicism, are not allowed to worship in Confucian temples on the first and fifteenth days of each month... No Chinese Catholics are allowed to worship ancestors in their familial temples...a Chinese Catholic is not allowed to perform the ritual of ancestor worship.. Such a ritual is heathen in nature regardless of the circumstances.[14]

This not only meant a prohibition in accommodation in liturgical practice, but also in visual language. In response, the Kangxi Emperor's decree in 1721:

...I have concluded that... It is impossible to reason with them because they do not understand larger issues as we understand them in China. There is not a single Westerner versed in Chinese works, and their remarks are often incredible and ridiculous...From now on, Westerners should not be allowed to preach in China, to avoid further trouble.[15]

Jesuits were subsequently expelled from mainland China, with two imperial Edicts, one in the years 1724-1732 and another in 1745-1748, unleashing persecutions against foreign missionaries, which included expulsion to the Portuguese enclave of Macau, and even imprisonment and death penalties. By August 1774, only forty-one Jesuits remained in the Chinese Empire. The brief, Dominus ac Redemptor, suppressing the Society of Jesus in the

[14] Clement XI, "Decree on the Chinese Rites" (1715), in Internet Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham University, https://sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/mod/1715chineserites.asp.
[15] Kangxi, "Decree on Western Missionaries" (1721), in Internet Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham University, https://sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/mod/1715chineserites.asp.

whole Catholic world, was signed in Rome on July 21, 1773, by Pope Clement XIV[16]. Intense pressure from European Bourbon monarchs (France, Spain, Portugal), who viewed the order as too powerful, wealthy, and loyal to the Pope rather than the crown. Pope Clement XIV succumbed to this political pressure, suppressing them to maintain peace in the church. Fourteen foreign Jesuits continued to work in the imperial palaces of Peking as mathematicians, astronomers, geographers, botanists, writers, interpreters, mechanics, musicians, and painters. The expropriation and incarceration of the Society of Jesus in Portugal has endured since 1759(even the Jesuits who at that time lived in Macau were arrested and sent by ships to Portuguese jails), resulting in fewer missionaries preaching in China. Jesuits quickly declined in Europe and China. In Portugal, the Padroado lost its world domination and fell into British, French, and Dutch hands. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Society of Jesus was a victim of several liberal and anticlerical governmental policies, so that the Jesuits were expelled several times from France, Spain, Portugal, Russia, and the Italian States. In China, the situation of Christian missions was even worse. In 1805, Emperor Renzong (Yongyan 1796-1821) issued a drastic decree proscribing all foreigners from China. In 1814, he decreed that capital punishment should be imposed for all missionary activities[17].

Jesuits were expelled from China on the basis of the most visible aspects of their liturgical practices, associated with Baroque monumentality and failed religious syncretism. Baroque, as an evident conversion strategy utilized by the Jesuits, became associated with the religion that was to be eliminated, both by the Chinese and the Propaganda Fide. After this first tentative of evangelization failed, the second attempt had to detach itself from the stylistic peculiarities of the Baroque. The restored Jesuit missions were not merely returning after a political interruption; they were returning after accommodation itself had been discredited.

II. 19th Century Return and Adoption of NeoGothic

By the time the Jesuits returned and invested in treaty ports, the conditions of missionary architecture had changed drastically. The return of Jesuits was prompted by the European Victory in the Opium Wars. Following the Nanking Treaty in 1842, 5 treaty ports, Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai, were opened for international trade and European settlement. According to Article 23, Frenchmen were allowed to circulate within the five open ports. On December 28, 1844, the French Ambassador, De Lagrené, wrote to the Emperor demanding that any Chinese or foreigner practicing it be exempt from any punishment nor guilt. The demand became an imperial Edict, allowing Chinese faithful and priests to do their ministries in peace. As a result, a dramatic reversal occurred in the number of missionaries entering China and the new Christian churches and chapels that emerged. There were twenty-nine French Catholic missionaries by 1839, and the total number rose to seventy-five by 1843, largely under France's protection. As regards the Jesuits, there were fifty-eight members of the order after the signing of

[16] Fernando Mateos, S.J., “Suppression and Restoration of the Society of Jesus in China” (Macau Ricci Institute, 2014), 1, 3.
[17] Mateos, “Suppression and Restoration.”12-13

the new treaties, an increase that continued during the last decades of the century[18]. In the concessions, Catholics were permitted to build churches and hospitals with extraterritorial rights[19]. The Peking Convention of 1860, following the Second Opium War, officially established the French Catholic Protectorate, which allowed Jesuits to preach without persecution outside the concessions, opening the door to missions across China. While earlier Jesuits had depended on Chinese tolerance and elite acceptance, nineteenth-century missionaries could often build under the protection of foreign law and diplomacy.

This context framed the adoption of the Neogothic in the second Jesuit mission. Even before the shift in China's political and economic dynamics, the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment in nations such as France and Britain brought about profound transformations in intellectual, social, and material life. Rapid urbanization, technological advancement, and the rise of secular rationalism reshaped nearly every aspect of society. Yet this new and unfamiliar social and economic order also provoked a deep sense of nostalgia for the perceived moral and spiritual stability of the medieval past, a period symbolized by the unity and faith embodied in Gothic art and architecture. Reviving the Gothic" in the nineteenth century, the Neo-Gothic sought to reinterpret medieval ideals in an industrial context. The contemporary term opus modernum ("modern work") embodied the shift from the historicist architecture of the Romanesque to an overtly progressive or forward-looking architectural movement. Reformers no longer premised their spiritual agendas on an atavistic return to the purity of the early church (a central idea informing the Romanesque) but legislated for change in the present, calling themselves the moderni[20].

Although social conditions in China were in certain respects very different from those of the West, the emergence of Neo-Gothic churches and educational and charitable institutions by the Jesuits and other Catholic religious orders cannot be divorced from the humanitarian and artistic ideals, stemming from the industrial revolution and the enlightenment, that gave birth to the movement in Europe[21]. While Western colonies were established as early as 1842, the industrialization of Shanghai truly took off after the Treaty of Shimonoseki, imposed on China after the Sino-Japanese War in 1896, granted foreigners the right to establish industrial enterprises in the treaty ports, opening the floodgates for foreign direct investment. Throughout the first three decades of the 20th century, both the growth and the shares of modern industry and services were disproportionately concentrated in Shanghai, which alone produced about 40% of the national manufacturing output (including Japanese-controlled Manchuria) in 1933[22]. China, through a series of unequal treaties that allowed commerce and technological inflows, as well as domestic movements such as the Western Affairs Movement and the Wuxu Reform, entered a period of rapid industrialization and social and economic reform, similar to that of Europe earlier

[18] Guillen-Nuñez, "Rising from the Ashes," 285.
[19] Mateos, "Suppression and Restoration."15.
[20] Matthew M. Reeve, "GOTHIC," Studies in Iconography 33 (2012): 233–46, at 234, 235.
[21] Guillen-Nuñez, "Rising from the Ashes," 285.
[22] Debin Ma, "Shanghai-Based Industrialization in the Early 20th Century: A Quantitative and Institutional Analysis" (LSE Research Online, February 2006), 8.

in the century. Given that the Neo-Gothic was already in use in most Catholic architecture in France and England, as well as in missions in other locations such as the Americas and India, it makes sense for the Jesuits to employ it in their second China mission.

It is not, however, only for convenience or to follow an architectural "trend" that the NeoGothic was employed in the China mission; the NeoGothic embodies values that the 19th-century Catholic Church seeks to emphasize, especially in China. English Catholic architect A. W. N. Pugin, in *Contrasts* (1836), opposed the materialism of the Industrial Revolution to the spiritual and artistic integrity of the Middle Ages. He condemned the "Paganism" of seventeenth-century and Enlightenment architecture for abandoning Christian values and envisioned Gothic, or "Christian art," as a means to restore moral and religious order[23]. He sought the Gothic as a measure of Christian moral truth. Others, such as John Ruskin, saw the Gothic Revival as a method of reestablishing the medieval conceptions of "charity, communalism, incentive craftsmanship, and civic responsibility" that were lost in the industrial 19th century. In an architectural sense, Eugène Viollet-le-Duc advanced a rationalist view of Gothic architecture as a scientific system that expresses a balance among mass, gravity, and rigidity. This rationalism created order from tension while acknowledging the constant possibility of collapse into disorder. Viollet-le-Duc saw the Gothic not as a fixed style but as a "living whole," evolving through adaptation and innovation. He viewed architecture as a growing lifeform, embodying social progress, collective will, and creative freedom[24] The Neogothic presents values of morality, rationality, and universality, which align with ideal Catholic visual representation.

More significantly, the Jesuits adopted NeoGothic to completely distance themselves from the visual representations of the first Jesuit mission. Although the Jesuit mission continued to expand, the Chinese Rites issue, specifically regarding the visual program employed, was not resolved. The term *Jesuitenstil* [Jesuit style] was already in use in Germany by 1842–43.4 Coming after the anti-clericalism of the Enlightenment and French Revolution, the anti-clerical ideology of the nineteenth century continued its attack on the Society of Jesus even after its restoration. The denigration of Jesuit architecture was achieved by associating Jesuit constructions with a style that was considered a degeneration of Renaissance architecture[25]. In his entry in the 1845 edition of Brockhaus's *Allgemeine deutsche Real-Enzyklopädie, Swiss* historian Jacob Burckhardt dismissed Jesuit architecture and decoration as hollow and theatrical, a debased form of mid-seventeenth-century Italian architecture. He argued that it reflected the Society of Jesus's broader institutional nature[26]. The Baroque Jesuit style was seen as lacking stylistic consistency, as "degenerate," and as constantly morphing to adapt to local contexts, which is true given the ideologies of *mediocrità religiosa,* in which Jesuits sought to make art

[23] Reeve, "GOTHIC," 235; A. W. N. Pugin, Contrasts: Or, A Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day, 2nd ed. (London: John Weale, 1841).
[24] Martin Bressani, "Viollet-le-Duc's Rationalism," in A Companion to the History of Architecture (Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 229, 233; Ivana Mladenovic, 7.
[25] Guillen-Nuñez, "Rising from the Ashes," 280.
[26] Guillen-Nuñez, "Rising from the Ashes," 281.

conform to religious ideals, and their previous approach to evangelization was based on accommodation. Thus, one of the goals, still persistent in the 19th and 20th centuries, for the mission, as Jesuits were restored and continued their mission in the Americas, India, and China, was to overcome this stigma and distance itself in its approach to liturgy. This needed to be done through a complete shift in visual language, which the NeoGothic, both in its architectural forms and the ideologies embedded in them, satisfied.

By the nineteenth century, the Baroque had become associated with theatricality, degeneration, manipulation, and lack of stylistic integrity. The move to Gothic was not only a matter of taste or convenience. It allowed the restored Jesuits to build in a style that seemed more serious, more orthodox, more universal, and less compromised by the reputation of earlier Jesuit accommodation. Hence, in nineteenth-century China, as had been true of India under the British Raj and earlier, many of the finer examples of ecclesiastical architecture under Catholic and Protestant missionaries were neo-Gothic structures. Apart from the distinct Gothic style of the Protestant churches of Britain, shaped by liturgical and aesthetic considerations, it has been argued that Catholic missionaries in China tended to replicate the Gothic revival style of their respective countries as an expression of their distinct religious identities. These various trends resulted in Protestant British, as well as Roman Catholic French, Portuguese, Italianate, British, and Flemish neo-Gothic ecclesiastical buildings arising in the various Western concessions or settlements into which treaty port cities were divided, as well as in the two European colonies of Macao and Hong Kong[27]

III. How Saint Ignatius Loyola's Chinese Neogothic "operates" to convert people

The returning Jesuit missionaries were still bound by the rejection of the Chinese rites: the mission's Secretary, Mgr. Cadelini, sent (on June 30, 1840) the credential letters to the first Jesuits arriving in China, stressing their duty to take the oath on the Chinese Rites, as prescribed by Benedict XIV in "Ex quo singulari", of July 11, 1742. The Bull was stating that:

> *"... All and every one of the clergymen, diocesan as well as religious, who are sent to China -- being Chinese or from other countries, chaplains of the army or of the navy, and all the missionaries -- before they exercise there any missionary office, they are strictly bound to take the oath of observing faithfully, entirely and inviolably the directives of "Ex quo singulari", according to the formula prescribed there"* [28].

Jesuits did not return to the same world as Ricci; They returned under pressure to avoid the old accommodationist methods. A prime example of this "Ex quo singulari" in architecture is the construction of the Cathedral of Canton(The Sacred Heart Guangzhou) of 广州 (Guangzhou, Guangdong province) in the years 1863-88. It is a remarkable example both of cultural clash and

[27] Guillen-Nuñez, "Rising from the Ashes," 289.
[28] Mateos, "Suppression and Restoration", 14.

technological transfer[29] in the form of imposition. Funded by Emperor Napoleon III, this French Gothic cathedral with two tall spires, almost a literal copy of St. Clotilde in Paris, aimed to express France's 'civilizing mission'.The erection of such a symbol on the site of a wooden palace set on fire by the French military was considered particularly arrogant. Very present in the public space, this architecture reinforced the 'feudal and colonial' character of Catholic missions in China[30]. This cathedral shows the violent side of "moral universality". Gothic here does not translate itself into Chinese terms; it asserts itself completely. The second Jesuit mission, along with its visual language, could not and did not accommodate cultural specificity; it focused strictly on the need for universality. In contrast with Madre de Deus, where Catholicism was made legible through hybridization, the Sacred Heart Cathedral's lack of hybridization reflects treaty-port Gothic's refusal to translate.

Naturally, this statement of colonial imposition exacerbated xenophobic feelings. The Boxer Rebellion climaxed in Beijing in June-August 1900. Thousands of Chinese Christians and missionaries were killed, and hundreds of churches were destroyed in the provinces of Hebei, Shandong, Shanxi, and Inner Mongolia. But the eventual failure of this rebellion further provoked European desire to assert political and visual dominance. The Boxer Protocol obliged the Chinese state to finance the reconstruction of churches. From then on, there was no more obstacle to 'triumphant' churches in Western styles.

The Cathedral of Saint Ignatius Loyola in Shanghai, built in Xujiahui (徐家匯), reached the height of expression of moral universality and doctrinal clarity. The XujiaHui district was not part of the official dedicated French Concession; however, it has been an important moral and social landmark for the Jesuits in Shanghai. Since the beginning of the first Jesuit mission, barring the plots of land donated by Ming and Qing emperors to the Jesuits for their residences, churches, and even burial grounds, there are few donations in the history of the China mission that can rival that of the Ming scholar Xu Guangqi (1562–1633), better known among Christians today by his baptismal name, Paul Siu (徐光啟). Siu was a prominent Ming dynasty Chinese convert, part of the *literati* who collaborated with Matteo Ricci, and made significant contributions to the initiation of the first Jesuit missionary. The Xujiahui, or Zikawei district of Shanghai, is named after the Xu family, Christians whose patronage of the Jesuits made the Shanghai mission prosper during the late Ming dynasty. At that time, the Jesuits' churches were counted (according to the seventeenth-century Belgian Jesuit Philippe Couplet) among the most magnificent in China, thanks to the generosity of Diego Siu, son of Paul Siu, and his family (a family of Chinese Christian converts). After the return of the Jesuits, it was on the same lands that a new church and the Collège de Saint-Ignace for boys were built[31].

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[29] Jean-Paul Wiest, "The Building of the Cathedral of Canton: Political, Cultural and Religious Clashes," in Religion and Culture: Past Approaches, Present Globalisation, Future Challenges (Macao: Macau Ricci Institute, 2004), 231–52.

[30] Thomas Coomans and Yitao Xu, "Gothic Churches in Early 20th-Century China: Adapting Western Building Techniques to Chinese Construction Tradition," in Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress on Construction History, vol. 1 (Chicago: Construction History Society of America, 2015), at 524.

[31] Guillen-Nuñez, "Rising from the Ashes," 294.

The Cathedral of Saint Ignatius Loyola Shanghai was an architectural expression of this new condition: a church that looks unmistakably Catholic, European, and Gothic. The Church was built of red brick, a technique that was foreign to China. William Dowdall's design, which can house some 2,500 faithful, is closer to Pugin's more functional works. There is a studied use of arches as ornamental motifs, with three pointed arches with hood-molds in the second bay and blind arches in the first bay. The middle bay forms a portico, behind which the front of the main nave and a large rose window appear. The Neo-Gothic silhouette is distinctly European, resembling canonical French Gothic cathedrals such as Chartres, with its paired towers flanking a central portal and a prominent rose window above the main entrance. Elaborate usage of such architectural forms explicitly connects this church to medieval European Catholicism. Its ground plan is cruciform with a large nave and side aisles, and an ambulatory at the head with five radiating chapels (Fig. 5). The main nave of the interior is divided into seven bays with triforium galleries above up to the crossing. It was the tracery of the windows and the now-lost stained glass images that provided the colorful effects of the interior[32]. The cruciform plan and Gothic vocabulary present Catholicism as ordered, historical, and universal. It is dominated by two tall steeples, composed of octagonal spires with corner pinnacles, all in grey slate, in juxtaposition to the red color of the body of the church. These tall spires with openings in four of their faces stand on gabled towers, which in turn rise on top of two lower stories. The first of these stories encloses the side entrances to the aisles that frame the magnificent main entrance to the middle bay. The massive square structures of the towers stand forward, away from the middle bay. The size of the church contrasts with its surroundings and creates a sense of monumentality. This cathedral is not just "in" Xujiahui; it acts as a strong statement that defines Xujiahui as a Catholic institutional landscape. Yet this commemorative form is noticeably simplified and symmetrical. The decoration is not excessive. The rose window is only decorated with blind arcades, and the rib-vault ceiling is simple and unadorned. Its façade is pared down and less ornate than its medieval prototypes. All of which suggests an adjustment that may reflect both sensibilities toward minimal ornament and the broader aesthetic currents of the Industrial Revolution, which favored clarity, regularity, and functional restraint, but also distances the building from the Baroque's more ornate decorations and elaborate visual program.

[32] Guillen-Nuñez, "Rising from the Ashes," 296.

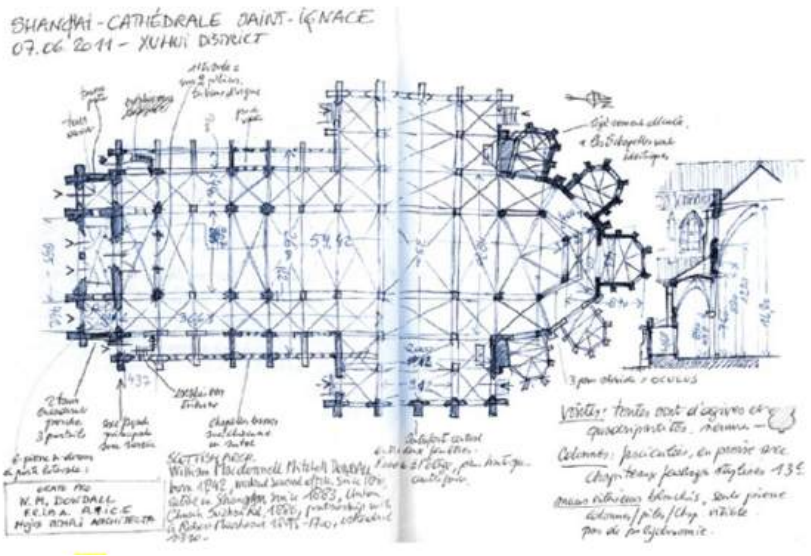

Figure 5. Cathedral of St. Ignatius, Xujiahui District, Shanghai, 1910. Drawing of ground plan, with cross section of nave, left isle, and low chapel. Measurements and annotations in French by Thomas Coomans.Courtesy of Thomas Coomans, 2011.

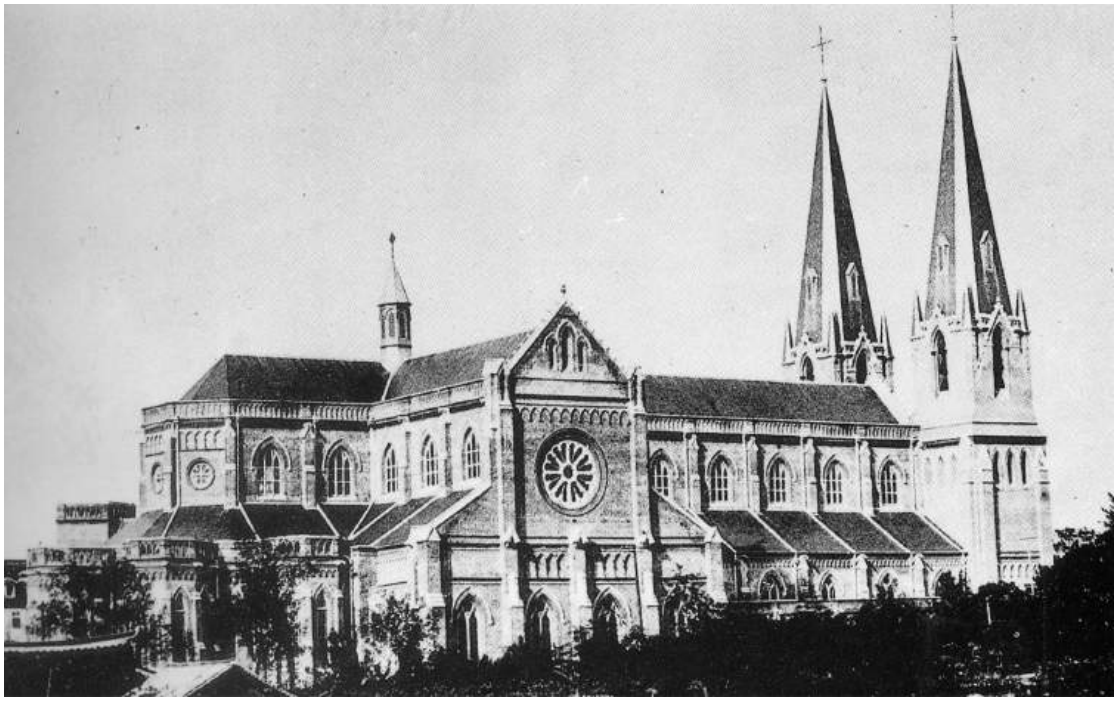

Figure 6. Saint Ignatius Cathedral, Xujiahui District, Shanghai, 1910. Image of exterior. Black-and-white photograph by Zhenchang Tang.

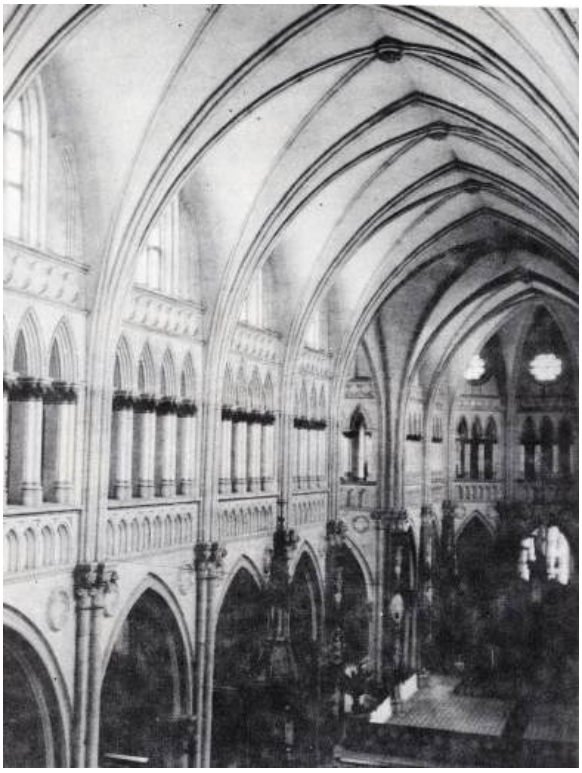

Figure 7. Saint Ignatius Cathedral, Xujiahui District, Shanghai, 1910. Image of interior. Black-and-white photograph by Zhenchang Tang.

It is, however, inaccurate to say that there was no hybridization at all in Saint Ignatius Cathedral and other major cathedrals built during this time in Concessions. Although minimal visual forms were hybridized, materials and techniques remained limited by resource and workforce availability. Similar to that of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Guangzhou, plans sent from France had to be executed by Chinese workers who were totally alien and hostile to Gothic architecture[33] and thus did not translate European traditional architectural technique and language completely.

Despite the new conversion strategy employed in the concessions, as seen in the Neo-Gothic style of Saint Ignatius Loyola Cathedral and contemporaries like the Sacred Heart Guangzhou, there was, however, significant hybridization outside the concessions, often associated with a more precarious establishment of neo-colonial dominance, which therefore resulted in visual programs more similar to the Baroque churches in hybridization and "accommodation." Many of these churches were destroyed during the anti-Christian revolts in the Tianjin Massacre, Boxer Rebellion, etc., or were later replaced by larger churches. Others still exist, such as St. Joseph Cathedral in Guiyang (Guizhou Province, built 1874-1876) and St.

[33] Coomans and Xu, "Gothic Churches in Early 20th-Century China," 524.

Francis Cathedral in Xi'an (Shaanxi Province, rebuilt in 1884), which are notable hybridizations of Western revival and Chinese ornamentation[34].

A significant reason this accommodation began to exist again can be attributed to the protection advertised by the French Religious Protectorate actually being provided by the Chinese government, not by French forces. The official French role was to present Chinese authorities with concerns about the safety, well-being, and interests of missionaries and Chinese Catholics[35]. This meant that, outside the concessions, their audience would be only Chinese civilians and officials, creating a situation similar to that of the first mission, where Chinese political and cultural influences heavily dictated the creation and transmission of Christian art. Compromises in architectural and visual language were again needed to achieve greater acceptance and familiarity, thereby attracting Chinese followers. The idea was that local Christians should feel "at home" in "their" church. Some missionaries had architectural skills and sketched Western elements and furniture then built by local Chinese people, which generated a variety of crossbreeds of regional architectural traditions and missionary identities[36].

Style ultimately depended on political geography. For SIL and other major cathedrals within the political influence of the French and International Concessions, creating familiarity among Chinese converts is not a concern, as the audience is mainly foreigners residing within the concessions; therefore, ostentation to appeal to the Chinese audience is not a necessity.

It is only because of the military victory over the Chinese authority that created a temporary, dominant imperialist-colonial situation for Western political and religious power that Jesuits and other missions were able to avoid compromise under the pressure of the Chinese people and government. The ability not to compromise visually within the sphere of influence of the French and International powers, shaped by only a specific colonial context and carried out through visual programs of evangelization, reveals a temporary approach that is based on moral universality and orthodoxy rather than accommodation. Where Catholic missions were protected by treaty-port and concessionary power, they could build in a more uncompromising European Gothic language; where they depended more directly on Chinese communities, under the influence of officials, builders, and converts, hybridization often returned.

[34] Thomas Coomans, “Indigenizing Catholic Architecture in China: From Western-Gothic to Sino-Christian Design, 1900–1940,” in Catholicism in China, 1900-Present: The Development of the Chinese Church, ed. Cindy Yik-yi Chu (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 125–44, at 127.
[35] Ernest P. Young, Ecclesiastical Colony: China’s Catholic Church and the French Religious Protectorate (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).5.
[36] Coomans, “Indigenizing Catholic Architecture in China,” 127.

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Social Connection, Belonging, and Competition in Adult Chinese-Heritage Women's Recreational Basketball Participation By Qiannuo Olivia Jian

Abstract

Asian women appear to remain underrepresented in competitive basketball settings, yet some adult women of Chinese heritage have returned to the sport through community-based recreational organizations. This study explores how adult women of Chinese heritage in community-based recreational basketball describe the role of social connection, belonging, and competition in sustaining their participation. Using an exploratory, mixed-methods design, data were collected through an online survey administered to 38 participants connected to the She Got Buckets (SGB) community network, primarily in the United States with some participants based in China. The survey included closed-ended, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions addressing participation frequency, childhood sport experiences, current motivations, and perceived identity expression through sport. Findings suggest that social and wellness-oriented motivations — including having fun (92.1%), staying active (89.5%), social bonding (73.7%), and stress relief (68.4%) — were reported substantially more often than competition (44.7%). Qualitative responses revealed three recurring themes: a shift from performance-oriented to socially-oriented participation, structural and cultural barriers during adolescence, and continuity of engagement for a minority of participants. The study also identifies a divergence between identity expression as a motivation (18.4%) and as a perceived outcome (65.8% reporting moderate to strong identity expression through play). These findings suggest that community-based organizations like SGB may function as participation infrastructure — lowering the social and emotional cost of sustained engagement — rather than primarily as competitive platforms. This study is exploratory and limited in scope; findings should not be generalized beyond the SGB community.

1. Introduction

Asian women are underrepresented in competitive and organized basketball settings. A 2023 press release from She Got Buckets reported that Asian women accounted for only 0.7% of NCAA women's basketball players. NCAA demographic data from 2023–24 also show that basketball was not among the top five sports by total number of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) women student-athletes (NCAA). These figures provide context for examining whether similar access and participation issues may also appear in recreational and community sport settings.

Limited access to female-centered sporting spaces, academic pressure, gender-based cultural expectations, and the absence of welcoming environments can discourage Asian women’s participation during adolescence and make re-entry as an adult feel difficult or socially risky (Hopkins et al.; Zhou and Liu). Despite these barriers, some adult women of Chinese heritage in the United States have returned to basketball through community-based recreational organizations.

She Got Buckets (SGB) was founded by Ellen Wang as a college basketball group in 2017 and has since grown into a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization serving Asian women athletes. SGB "aim[s] to create an open platform for all Asian Women to enhance their recreational skills and confidence through basketball tournaments, competitive leagues, and training events" (She Got Buckets). SGB has over 600 participants across the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom. One 2023 tournament in Englewood, New Jersey drew over 300 participants and 14 teams across five North American regions with 90% of SGB players never having participated in NCAA or professional sports settings (She Got Buckets). SGB described the event as the East Coast's largest Asian women's basketball league gathering in 2023.

Despite the growth of organizations like SGB, relatively little research has examined why adult Asian women sustain recreational basketball participation over time, or what role community structure plays in that process. Even among South Asian women — the most extensively studied Asian subgroup in Western physical activity research — a recent scoping review identified only 13 eligible studies from over 1,700 screened articles and noted that intervention research remains limited (Rehman et al.). Research on East Asian and Chinese-heritage women's community-based sport participation in Western contexts is scarcer. Existing research on women's sport participation has focused primarily on adolescent participation and dropout (Hopkins et al.), or on adult sport participation and well-being in samples not defined by cultural background or community context (Eather et al.). Research on sport participation in Chinese sociocultural contexts has identified academic pressure, gender norms, and limited support structures as barriers (Zhou and Liu), but less is known about how community-based organizations may address these barriers in adulthood.

This study addresses how adult women of Chinese heritage sustain participation in community-based recreational basketball. Drawing on survey data from 38 participants connected to the SGB community, this study explores how adult women of Chinese heritage describe the role of social connection, belonging, and competition in sustaining their recreational basketball participation.

2. Literature Review

Prior research suggests that girls' and women's sport participation is shaped by personal, social, structural, and cultural factors, particularly during adolescence and young adulthood. Hopkins et al., in a systematic review of 36 studies on factors associated with sport participation among adolescent females, found that personal factors — including self-perceptions, confidence, and desirable personal outcomes related to sport — were the most frequently cited influences on participation (Hopkins et al.). Peer, family, socioeconomic, and environmental factors also played significant roles, with family factors identified as the second most impactful category (Hopkins et al.). The review also noted that sport participation declines during adolescence, and that over 85% of adolescent females fail to meet recommended levels of physical activity (Hopkins et al.).

2.1 Barriers to Girls' and Women's Sport Participation

Environmental and structural barriers are particularly relevant to the present study. Hopkins et al. identified environmental factors, alongside peer and family support, as significant influences on whether girls remain involved in sport (Hopkins et al.). When these conditions are absent or unsupportive, participation may become increasingly difficult to sustain regardless of individual interest or motivation.

Research on sport participation in Chinese and cross-cultural contexts adds an important dimension. Zhou and Liu, in a narrative review of barriers and promotion strategies for female college students' sport participation, identified four categories of barriers: physiological, psychological, sociocultural, and environmental (Zhou and Liu). In Chinese educational settings specifically, academic pressure and gender-role expectations were found to be especially prominent obstacles (Zhou and Liu). Girls were frequently socialized to prioritize academic achievement over athletic participation, and competitive or public sporting spaces were often associated with social discomfort and risk of negative evaluation (Zhou and Liu). Similar patterns appear in quantitative research: in a survey-based study of 503 women in China, He et al. found that traditional gender consciousness contributed to barriers to participation in contact leisure sports such as basketball, with gender stereotypes—including the perception of such sports as "masculine" —mediating that relationship (He et al.). These findings suggest that for many women of Chinese heritage, barriers to sport participation are not only structural but deeply embedded in cultural expectations about gender, achievement, and appropriate behavior.

Together, Hopkins et al. and Zhou and Liu establish that girls' and women's sport participation is shaped by a complex intersection of personal, environmental, and sociocultural factors. These early experiences of constrained participation provide important context for understanding why some adult women of Chinese heritage may have reduced, interrupted, or reshaped their sport participation during adolescence — and what conditions might make continued or renewed participation possible.

2.2 Adult Sport Participation, Team Sport, and Social Connection

While the barriers to early participation are well-documented, a separate body of research examines the role of sport in adult well-being and the social dimensions that sustain long-term engagement. A 2013 systematic review found that sport participation among adults was associated with a range of psychological and social benefits, including reduced stress and improved social functioning, mental health, and life satisfaction, with team- and club-based participation offering particularly strong social benefits (Eime et al.). Building on this foundation, a 2023 systematic review of 29 studies on sport participation and health outcomes in adults, found that participation was consistently associated with improved mental health and social outcomes (Eather et al.). Key benefits included reduced anxiety and depression, improved life satisfaction, and stronger interpersonal connection (Eather et al.). The review proposed a "Mental Health through Sport" conceptual model in which social mechanisms — belonging, companionship, and perceived support — function as pathways through which sport participation

influences well-being (Eather et al.). Notably, adults participating in team sport reported more favorable health outcomes than those participating in individual sport, suggesting that the social structure of team participation may carry value beyond physical activity alone (Eather et al.).

An integrative review of 17 studies on the social and psychological health outcomes of team sport participation in adults, similarly identified a wide range of positive outcomes, with emotional social support and sense of belonging among the most consistently reported (Andersen et al.). The review also suggested that these outcomes depend on the structure and inclusiveness of the sport environment, flagging that competitive structure and continued participation are significant considerations — not all team sport environments produce these outcomes equally (Andersen et al.).

These studies suggest that adult sport participation cannot be understood through competitive motivation alone. The social and emotional dimensions of team sport — belonging, routine, mutual support, and the experience of being recognized within a community — may play an important role in sustaining long-term engagement.

2.3 Research Gap: Community-Based Recreational Sport and Participation Infrastructure

The existing literature establishes two important foundations: that girls and women face significant barriers to sport participation across adolescent and adult life stages (Hopkins et al.; Zhou and Liu), and that adult team sport participation is associated with meaningful social and psychological benefits (Eather et al.; Andersen et al.). However, a gap remains in the literature regarding how these two dynamics interact within community-based recreational sport organizations — particularly for adult women of Chinese heritage in the United States.

Most research on women's sport participation has focused on adolescent populations or on broad adult samples without distinguishing community-based recreational contexts from competitive or institutional ones. The specific experiences of adult women whose sport participation changed, declined, or became difficult to sustain during adolescence — and who later returned through informal community networks — remain underexplored. Similarly, while the social benefits of adult team sport are documented, less attention has been paid to the organizational and structural conditions that make participation accessible in the first place, particularly for populations who may have encountered repeated barriers to entry.

The present study addresses the gap in how community-based recreational organizations shape sustained participation by examining participation patterns and motivations within one such basketball network. It introduces the term participation infrastructure to describe the social and organizational conditions that make repeated participation easier, including access to teams, recurring events, peer networks, and socially comfortable spaces. This term is used here as an analytic concept rather than as an established framework in prior literature. Rather than treating sustained participation as a function of individual motivation alone, this framework directs attention to the structural and relational conditions that lower the cost of continued engagement — and asks how organizations like SGB may create those conditions for adult women of Chinese heritage.

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Design

This study employed an exploratory, community-based, mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected through closed-ended survey items and qualitative data were drawn from open-ended survey responses. The researcher's informal observations and community involvement provided contextual background for interpreting the findings, but were not analyzed as a separate formal dataset. The study does not seek to establish causal relationships between variables. Rather, it aims to document how participants describe the role of social, community, and competitive factors in their continued recreational basketball participation. This design was selected as appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research question, the small sample size, and the community-embedded context of data collection.

3.2 Researcher Positionality

The principal researcher conducted this study as a member of the community being studied. She first joined SGB as a recreational basketball player in spring 2024, during her freshman year of high school. Over the following year, she became involved in SGB's Events and Operations Team, contributing to tournament planning, volunteer coordination, and on-court logistics. These experiences gave the researcher direct familiarity with the community's structure, events, and participant interactions.

The researcher's background allowed her to occupy both participant and observer roles during the research process — a dual position that qualitative methodologists describe as occupying "the space between" insider and outsider status, which can offer valuable access and understanding while requiring attention to its influence on the research (Dwyer and Buckle). This insider position helped the researcher understand the social dynamics of SGB and design survey questions that reflected participants' actual experiences. This positionality may have also influenced the survey design, participant responses, and interpretation of findings. Some respondents may have been familiar with the researcher through SGB events, which may have increased trust and response willingness while also introducing potential social desirability bias.

Rather than treating this insider role as purely neutral, the study acknowledges it as both a strength and a limitation. The researcher's community involvement provided useful context for interpreting the data, while also requiring careful attention to potential bias. These limitations are addressed further in the Limitations section.

3.3 Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a convenience sampling approach via the SGB North America Players WeChat group, a community messaging platform with 478 members. On August 4, 2025, the researcher posted a brief introduction explaining the study's purpose and shared a link to the Google Form survey (see Appendix A). A total of 38 responses were

received from adult women connected to the SGB community, primarily based in the United States, with some respondents based in China (see Table 1and 2, Section 4.1, for participant demographics) Participation was entirely voluntary.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through a mixed-format online survey designed by the researcher and administered through Google Forms in August 2025 (see Appendix B for the full survey instrument). The survey was bilingual, with Chinese and English included to accommodate participants based in both the United States and China.

The survey consisted of 11 questions across several formats and domains. Multiple-choice questions asked about demographic information including country of birth and age range (under 25, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55+), current basketball participation frequency, adolescent sport participation frequency, and openness to a follow-up interview. Likert-scale questions (rated 1–10) asked participants to rate perceived encouragement to play sports while growing up as an Asian girl, parental support for basketball during childhood, and the extent to which playing basketball challenged stereotypes or expressed strength as an Asian woman. One multiple-select question asked participants to identify their current motivations for recreational basketball participation, including staying active, having fun, social bonding, stress relief, competition, identity expression, and habit or routine. Short-answer free-response questions asked participants to describe how their reasons for playing sports had changed since childhood and what challenges they faced growing up as Asian girls interested in sports.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The survey introduction stated the purpose of the study and informed participants that their responses would be used for academic research and reporting purposes. All participants were adults, and consent was obtained through the survey itself: the Google Form began with an introductory statement explaining the study's purpose and how responses would be used, and participants indicated their voluntary consent by choosing to proceed and submit the survey. None of the survey questions were marked as required, so participants were free to skip any question they preferred not to answer, and no personally identifiable information was required for participation.

Ethical safeguards were implemented by the researcher to protect respondents' privacy and ensure that participation felt comfortable and low-risk. These included voluntary participation, confidentiality protections, bilingual accessibility, and anonymization of responses in reporting. All survey responses were collected and stored through Google Forms, accessible only through the researcher's password-protected personal account. The response data was not shared with any other individual or organization. Confidentiality was maintained by reporting all findings in aggregate form and anonymizing any qualitative responses quoted in this paper.

Optional contact information for follow-up interviews was collected within the same survey form as the final question. This information was excluded from the analysis dataset and

was not linked to any findings reported in this paper. Because no follow-up interviews were conducted beyond any initial interviews, this contact information was deleted following data analysis.

4. Results

This section presents the survey findings in the following order: participant demographics, current and adolescent participation patterns, childhood support and encouragement, current motivations, identity expression, and qualitative themes. Three findings stand out. First, social and wellness-oriented motivations — having fun (92.1%), staying active (89.5%), and social bonding (73.7%) — were selected far more frequently than competition (44.7%). Second, participants reported notably higher parental support for basketball than broader societal encouragement as Asian girls. Third, while few participants selected identity expression as a motivation (18.4%), a majority (65.8%) reported a moderate to strong sense of expressing strength and challenging stereotypes through play. Beyond these quantitative patterns, participants' open-ended responses showcased three recurring qualitative themes: a shift from competition toward social connection and well-being, structural and cultural barriers experienced during adolescence, and continuity for a subset of participants whose motivations remained stable. Each finding is presented in detail below.

4.1 Participant Demographics

A total of 38 participants completed the survey. Respondents were recruited from the SGB North America Players WeChat group, a community platform for women's recreational basketball, and are described in this study as adult women based on the recruitment context. The majority fell within the 25–34 age range (55.3%, n=21), followed by under 25 (31.6%, n=12), and 35–44 (13.2%, n=5). No respondents selected 45–54 or 55+.

Country of birth data was provided by 22 of 38 respondents, as this question was added to the survey after initial distribution. Because 16 respondents did not provide country of birth data, these percentages should be interpreted cautiously. Among those who responded, 86.4% (n=19) were born in China, 4.5% (n=1) in the United States, and 9.1% (n=2) in other countries. Because participants were recruited through the SGB North America Players group, the sample reflects women connected to a North American recreational basketball network, regardless of country of birth.

Table 1: Participant Age Distribution (n = 38)

Age Range	n	%
Under 25	12	31.6%
25–34	21	55.3%
35–44	5	13.2%
45–54	0	0%
55+	0	0%

Table 2: Participant Country of Birth (n = 22)

Country of Birth	n	%
China	19	86.4%
United States	1	4.5%
Other	2	9.1%

Note: Country of birth data were available for 22 of 38 respondents, as this question was added to the survey after initial distribution. Percentages are calculated out of the 22 respondents who answered.

4.2 Current Participation Frequency

The majority of participants reported playing recreational basketball at least once per week. Nearly half (47.4%, n=18) played once a week, 23.7% (n=9) played 2–3 times a week, and 13.2% (n=5) played 4 or more times a week. A smaller proportion played 1–2 times a month (10.5%, n=4), while 5.3% (n=2) reported no longer playing currently but having played before. Combined, over 84% of respondents reported active weekly participation.

4.3 Adolescent Sport Participation

When asked about sport participation between the ages of 13 and 18, the majority of participants reported having been active. Most respondents (65.8%, n=25) reported playing sports very often during adolescence, 18.4% (n=7) occasionally, 13.2% (n=5) rarely, and 2.6% (n=1) never. This suggests that most participants had some prior experience with sport before adult recreational basketball participation.

4.4 Childhood Support and Encouragement

Two Likert-scale questions addressed participants' experiences of support during childhood.

For Question 5 ("Growing up as an Asian girl, I felt encouraged or supported to play sports"), responses covered the entire 1–10 scale, with a median of 6.5. Responses were distributed fairly evenly across both halves of the scale rather than concentrating in one region. This wide spread suggests considerable variation in how encouraged participants felt to play sports as Asian girls.

For Question 6 ("How supportive were your parents about you playing basketball when you were growing up?"), responses were shifted toward the upper end of the scale, with a median of 8. The observed range began at 2 rather than 1, and the distribution was skewed toward higher values, with responses thinning out at the low end.

The distributions for Q5 and Q6 differed, with parental support for basketball (Q6, median 8) centered higher than broader societal encouragement as an Asian girl (Q5, median 6.5). This descriptive difference may reflect a distinction between family-level support and broader social encouragement, though no statistical test was conducted to evaluate it.

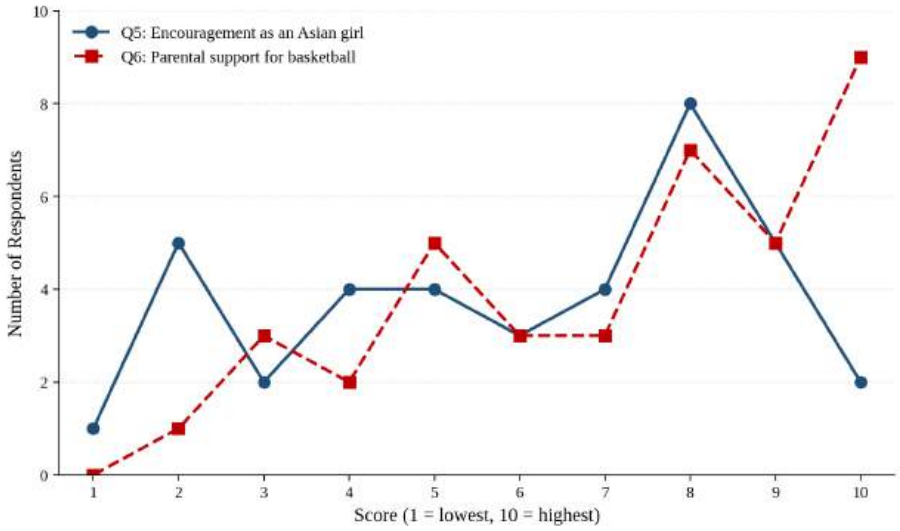

Fig 1: Distribution of Q5 and Q6 responses (n = 38)

4.5 Current Motivations for Participation

Participants were asked to select all motivations that applied to their current recreational basketball participation (Q7, multiple select, n=38).

Table 3: Current Motivations for Recreational Basketball Participation

Motivation	n	%
Having fun	35	92.1%
Staying active and healthy	34	89.5%
Social bonding	28	73.7%
Relieving stress	26	68.4%
Habit/routine	21	55.3%
Competition (even casually)	17	44.7%
Expressing identity	7	18.4%

Having fun (92.1%) and staying active (89.5%) were the most frequently selected motivations. Social bonding (73.7%), stress relief (68.4%), and habit/routine (55.3%) also ranked highly. Competition was selected by fewer than half of participants (44.7%), and expressing identity was the least selected motivation (18.4%). These results indicate that social and wellness-oriented motivations were more salient than competitive motivations among this sample.

4.6 Identity Expression Through Sport

Question 9 asked participants to rate the extent to which playing recreational basketball made them feel they were challenging stereotypes and expressing strength as an Asian woman (1–10 scale). Responses skewed toward the higher end: 21.1% (n=8) selected 7, 18.4% (n=7) selected 9, and 13.2% each selected 8 and 10. Scores of 7–10 accounted for 65.8% of responses, suggesting that a majority of participants reported a moderate to strong sense of identity expression through basketball. Low scores (1–4) accounted for only 18.4% of responses.

Notably, only 18.4% of participants selected “expressing identity” as a current motivation in Q7, yet 65.8% reported a moderate to strong sense of identity expression through basketball in Q9. This apparent divergence suggests that identity expression may function less as a primary motivation for participation and more as a meaningful outcome that emerges through continued engagement. This distinction is explored further in the Discussion.

4.7 Qualitative Themes from Open-Ended Responses

Two open-ended questions collected qualitative data: Q8 (how reasons for playing sports have changed since childhood) and Q10 (challenges faced growing up as an Asian girl interested in sports). All 38 participants answered both questions, though some wrote a single word and others wrote several sentences. The researcher read all responses and grouped them into recurring themes. Approximate counts are included to show how common each theme was. Quotes are reproduced as written, with small punctuation edits marked by brackets when needed.

Overall, three patterns stood out. In Q8, about half of the participants described a shift away from competition and toward social connection and well-being, while about one-third said their reasons had not really changed. In Q10, about 27 of 38 participants described at least one challenge related to growing up as an Asian girl in sports, while about 10 said they faced no major challenges.

Theme 1: Shift from competition to social connection and well-being

Approximately half of the responses to Q8 described a shift in their connection to basketball In childhood, participants associated the sport with competition, performance, and skill development; in adulthood, they described playing for social connection and personal well-being. What is striking about these responses is that the shift was rarely framed as a loss. Participants did not describe giving up on competing so much as discovering that the game held value they had not previously drawn on.

The most direct statements of this change set the two orientations side by side. One participant wrote: "It used to be for being better at the sport and winning games, now it's for social bonding and health reasons." Another recalled: "When I was a kid, I played competitively in leagues. Now it's more for fun and wellness purposes." In both, the sport itself is constant while its purpose is replaced. A third response located the difference in where the motivation originated, describing the shift as moving "from external pressure to internal pursuing for health, growth, and developing hobbies." For these participants, childhood participation is characterized as responding to demands set by others and adult participation as self-directed.

A subset of answers centered specifically on community rather than on individual well-being. One participant described basketball as having become "like a weekly gathering (social events)" — a phrase that repositions the game as an occasion for meeting rather than an athletic event that happens to be social. Another offered an extended reflection that names several functions at once: "I realized sports can help me with releasing pressures from work, meeting new friends, reunion and maintaining the bond with old friends. And most importantly, feeling included by a community." This response is notable for its ordering. Stress relief and friendship are listed first, but the participant explicitly ranks belonging above them. It also distinguishes between making new friends and maintaining existing ones, suggesting that recurring participation does work that one-off socializing does not: it supplies a reliable occasion for relationships to continue.

These accounts align with the quantitative finding in Section 4.5, where social bonding (73.7%) and stress relief (68.4%) were selected substantially more often than competition (44.7%). The convergence matters because the two data sources were generated differently — one by selecting from a fixed list, the other by writing freely — yet both point toward the same ordering of priorities.

The pattern was not universal, however. One participant described the opposite trajectory, playing "for fun at my childhood" before transitioning "to enhance competitiveness." This response is a useful corrective to reading the theme too broadly. It indicates that the direction of change was not fixed by age or life stage, and that competitive motivation remains genuinely present for some participants in this community — consistent with the 44.7% who selected competition in Q7. The shift toward social motivation described here is a common trajectory within this sample, not a universal one.

Theme 2: Structural and cultural barriers during adolescence

Responses to Q10 revealed recurring barriers during participants' adolescent years. What stands out across these responses is not that participants lacked interest in basketball, but that the conditions required to act on that interest were frequently unavailable to them. Approximately 27 of 38 participants described at least one such challenge, and the obstacles they named clustered into four sub-patterns — limited access, gender-based expectations, academic pressure, and physical stereotypes.

The most frequently mentioned barrier, appearing in approximately 10 responses, was the difficulty of finding other girls or basic resources to play with. Participants described this in concrete, logistical terms rather than as a matter of discouragement: "Not able to find a group of girl[s] playing basketball together," and "No indoor court available, no coach, no family support. Sports are way less important than academics." The second response is notable for how many separate absences it stacks into a single sentence — facility, instruction, and family backing — and for closing with an explanation that treats the absence as expected rather than exceptional. In these accounts, the obstacle was not that participation was forbidden, but that nothing existed to participate in.

This scarcity had a direct consequence: girls who wanted to play were routed into male-dominated spaces. One participant explained, "It's hard to find a group of girls to play basketball with, so I have to join boy's games." The phrasing matters — "have to" frames this as a compromise made in the absence of alternatives, not a preference. Those spaces then introduced a second barrier. As another participant described: "Playing pick-up games, or going to a public basketball court filled by men. Very few team[s] will ask me to join them." Access to a court, in other words, did not guarantee access to a game. Being physically present in a basketball space still left participants dependent on being chosen by the men already occupying it.

Gender-based expectations, mentioned in approximately 10 responses, supplied the reasoning that made these exclusions feel natural rather than arbitrary. Participants reported being told that "basketball is for boys[s]" and that "people feel like girls should learn more about dance or music." These messages did more than discourage individual girls; they explain why the resources described above were missing in the first place. If basketball is understood as a boys' activity, then the absence of girls' teams, girls' coaches, and girls' court time is not an oversight to be corrected but a reflection of how sport is expected to be organized. A related cluster of approximately four responses shows how this logic was applied to individual bodies, with participants citing "bias on height" and being seen as "physically less powerful and competitive" — assessments that positioned them as unsuited to the sport before their actual play had been evaluated.

Academic pressure, appearing in approximately six responses, added a further constraint, and was described not as a personal choice to prioritize studying but as a structural feature of the school environment. This was most explicit among participants educated in China, where preparation for the Gaokao — the national college entrance examination that largely determines university placement — organizes the final years of secondary school. One participant listed "Time" as her central obstacle before explaining: "Growing up in a small city facing Gaokao, teachers won't let people spend much time playing." Her account is notable for where the restriction originates: not from her own disinterest or from her parents, but from teachers enforcing an academic timeline. Geography compounded this, as a smaller city offered fewer facilities and programs, meaning that even permitted time had fewer outlets.

Taken together, these responses describe barriers that were environmental and institutional rather than motivational. Participants did not report losing interest in basketball. They reported an absence of teammates, courts, coaching, permitted time, and social permission — conditions external to the individual and largely outside her control.

Theme 3: Continuity and variation

Alongside the participants who described change, a substantial minority — roughly one-third — reported that their reasons for playing had not meaningfully shifted. These responses were brief and often emphatic. One participant wrote simply, "It never changed, I just love playing," and another described "consistently thinking playing sports is a huge thing in my

life." The brevity itself is informative: where participants who described a shift tended to narrate a before and after, those describing continuity had no transition to explain. For this group, basketball appears to have been a stable presence rather than something lost in adolescence and recovered later.

A similar pattern appeared in responses about early barriers. Roughly 10 participants reported facing no significant challenges growing up. One response illustrates what those conditions looked like: "Not a lot, I grew up in an international school where sports was required. My parents were also very interested in sports and encouraged me to try different sports." Read against Theme 2, this account is almost a point-by-point inversion. Where other participants described absent facilities, absent teams, and academic systems that crowded out play, this participant described an institution where sport was mandatory. Where others described parents who treated athletics as secondary, she described parents who actively encouraged it. The contrast suggests that the barriers documented in Theme 2 were not inevitable features of growing up as an Asian girl, but consequences of specific institutional and family environments — environments that some participants simply did not encounter.

This variation is consistent with the wide spread of Q5 responses reported in Section 4.4, where reported encouragement as an Asian girl ranged across the full 1–10 scale rather than settling around a single value. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data indicate that participants' early experiences genuinely differed: many faced substantial structural and cultural obstacles, while a meaningful subset grew up in supportive settings. The relationship between childhood context and adult participation is therefore not uniform across this sample.

5. Discussion

This study set out to understand how adult women of Chinese heritage describe the role of social connection, belonging, and competition in sustaining their recreational basketball participation. The findings point to three interrelated patterns, each examined in turn below. First, participants described their continued participation primarily in social and wellness-oriented terms rather than competitive ones, a shift consistent with self-determination theory's account of movement from externally driven to self-determined motivation. Second, the barriers participants faced during adolescence were largely structural and interpersonal rather than motivational, which suggests that SGB sustains participation by functioning as participation infrastructure — an organization that supplies the teammates, courts, and recurring occasions to play that individuals could not assemble on their own. Third, identity expression appeared to operate less as a reason participants began playing than as a meaningful outcome that emerged through sustained participation. Together, these patterns indicate that for this community, the value of recreational basketball lies less in competition than in the social and organizational conditions that make continued play possible.

5.1 Social Connection and Well-Being as Primary Drivers of Sustained Participation

Quantitative results suggest that participants most often described their sustained recreational basketball participation in social and wellness-oriented terms rather than primarily competitive ones. Having fun (92.1%), staying active (89.5%), social bonding (73.7%), and stress relief (68.4%) were the most frequently selected motivations, while competition was chosen by fewer than half of respondents (44.7%). This pattern is broadly consistent with Eather et al. (2023), whose review found that sport participation among adults is associated with improved mental health and social outcomes, including belonging and interpersonal connection, and with the earlier review by Eime et al. (2013), which identified comparable psychological and social benefits and found that club- and team-based participation was particularly associated with them.

Qualitative responses reinforce this picture. Several participants described a clear motivational shift from childhood — when sport was primarily associated with performance, winning, or proving oneself — toward adult participation centered on connection, routine, and emotional belonging. As one participant wrote: “I realized sports can help me with releasing pressures from work, meeting new friends, reunion and maintaining the bond with old friends. And most importantly, feeling included by a community.” Another described basketball as having become “like a weekly gathering.” Responses like these closely mirror the social mechanisms — belonging, companionship, and perceived support — that Eather et al. identified as pathways through which sport participation supports well-being. These accounts suggest that for many participants, the game itself became a vehicle for something beyond athleticism: a recurring social structure that was difficult to replicate elsewhere.

Self-determination theory offers a framework for interpreting the motivational shift participants described. Ryan and Deci distinguish extrinsic motivation, in which behavior is driven by external rewards or pressures, from intrinsic motivation, in which an activity is pursued for its inherent satisfactions, positioning the two along a continuum of increasing self-determination. Several participants described their trajectory in strikingly similar terms. One characterized the change as moving "from external pressure to internal pursuing for health, growth, and developing hobbies" — a description that tracks that continuum almost directly. Another wrote that basketball "used to be for being better at the sport and winning games," and is "now... for social bonding and health reasons," relocating the source of value from external achievement to personally held goals. This suggests that what participants describe is not only a change in what they want from basketball, but a change in the regulation of participation itself: from something undertaken in response to others' expectations to something chosen and sustained on their own terms.

The shift away from competitive motivation and toward social connection also echoes research on women’s sport participation in Chinese sociocultural contexts, where academic pressure, social expectations, and limited support structures can shape access to sport (Zhou and Liu). For some participants in this study, adolescence was described as a period in which participation was constrained by academic pressure, limited access to facilities, and gender-based exclusion from basketball spaces. The adult return to sport through a community like SGB may

therefore represent not simply a resumption of prior activity, but a renegotiation of the terms under which participation feels possible. In practical terms, SGB may allow participants to return to basketball under conditions that are more socially supportive and less exclusionary than the environments they encountered earlier in life.

5.2 SGB as Participation Infrastructure

This study's findings suggest that SGB functions as more than a tournament organizer. Rather, it operates as participation infrastructure: the social and organizational conditions that make repeated participation easier, including access to teams, recurring events, peer networks, and socially comfortable spaces. This concept extends beyond simply providing courts or scheduling games; it encompasses the relational and structural elements that lower the social and emotional cost of continued engagement.

Although Hopkins et al. focused on adolescent females, their review highlights the importance of environmental, peer, and social factors in shaping girls' sport participation, and the present study suggests these factors continue to matter in adult recreational contexts. Leisure constraints theory helps specify what kind of barriers participants faced. Crawford et al. describe three kinds of obstacles that keep people from taking part in an activity. Some are internal, having to do with how a person sees herself or what she has come to believe is appropriate for her. Some come from other people — most often, simply not having anyone to do the activity with. And some are practical: no time, no facilities, no money. Participants in this study described the second and third kinds far more often than the first. What kept them off the court was usually the absence of other girls to play with or of a place to play, not a belief that basketball was not for them. One noted: "I grew up in China and at my school we do not have a women's team for any sports I like and the schools focused heavily on the academics side" — a case where both the team and the institutional support were missing. Another wrote: "Playing pick-up games, or going to a public basketball court filled by men. Very few teams will ask me to join them," describing a barrier that came from other players rather than from the facility itself, since the court was available.

In contrast, organizations like SGB appear to reduce these frictions by creating a dedicated, women-centered space where participation does not require prior elite-level skill or pre-existing access to teammates. SGB does this by turning participation from an individual search for courts, teammates, and acceptance into a recurring community structure. The act of joining does not demand that a participant already belong; belonging, as several responses suggested, is something that develops through repeated participation itself. This distinction — between requiring belonging as a precondition and generating it as an outcome — may be central to why community-based organizations succeed in sustaining long-term participation where more competitive or informal structures do not. This is consistent with Andersen et al.'s observation that the social benefits of team sport depend on the structure and inclusiveness of the sports environment. This reading is supported by work on constraint negotiation, which holds that constraints are not necessarily absolute — individuals may negotiate them and participate in

modified form, with the outcome depending on the interaction between constraint strength and available resources. Ntovoli et al. found that social support functions as a key facilitator in this process, and that offering group programs alone is insufficient; what matters is whether those settings generate trust, mutual assistance, and durable social networks. SGB can be understood as an organization that addresses interpersonal and structural constraints directly, supplying the teammates, courts, and scheduled play that participants could not assemble individually during adolescence.

The researcher's involvement in SGB provided contextual background for interpreting this pattern, though these observations were not analyzed as a formal dataset. This context is consistent with the survey finding that social bonding and habit/routine ranked among the strongest motivators for continued participation.

These findings suggest that adult recreational sport programs should not be designed only around competition. For communities like SGB, long-term participation may depend more on social belonging, flexible skill levels, and repeated low-pressure opportunities to play than on the competitive experience itself.

5.3 Identity Expression as Outcome Rather Than Motivation

One of the more nuanced findings of this study involves the relationship between identity expression and participation. In Q7, only 18.4% of participants selected "expressing identity" as a current motivation for playing basketball — the lowest of all options offered. Yet in Q9, 65.8% of respondents reported a moderate to strong sense of challenging stereotypes and expressing strength as an Asian woman through basketball (scores of 7–10 on a 10-point scale).

This divergence suggests that identity expression may not function as a primary reason why participants choose to play, but rather as a meaningful outcome that emerges through continued participation. In other words, participants may not begin playing because they want to challenge stereotypes; they may discover that playing does challenge stereotypes, and that this becomes part of how they understand their relationship with the sport over time.

This pattern is consistent with qualitative responses describing how basketball allowed participants to push back against cultural expectations. One participant wrote: "Now it is more for social bonding and athletic identity. In my childhood it was more like exercising and proving that girls could play as good as boys." Another reflected: "People feel like girls should learn more about dance or music" — implying that continued participation itself constituted a form of resistance to those expectations, even if identity expression was not the explicit reason for playing. He et al. help explain why this resistance is available through basketball specifically: because contact sports are widely coded as masculine, women's participation in them is counter-normative by default, and therefore carries expressive weight regardless of the participant's intent.

Research on women's community sport describes a similar dynamic. In a qualitative study of thirteen Australian women across community-based sports, Timperley and Phillips found that community sport functioned as a site of gender norm negotiation and identity

transformation, and that access to social support and role models enabled participants to develop sporting identities that did not conform to external gender expectations. Their findings position identity as something constructed through sustained participation in a supportive setting rather than imported into it — which parallels the divergence observed here between identity expression as a stated motivation (18.4%) and as a reported experience (65.8%).

This finding has implications for how recreational sports organizations understand their own role. If identity expression is an emergent outcome rather than an entry motivation, then designing programs primarily around identity-based messaging may be less effective than creating the structural conditions — accessible spaces, welcoming environments, flexible skill levels — that allow participants to discover that meaning through participation itself.

5.4 Direction for Future Research

Future research could build on both the findings and limitations of this study in several ways. First, because the survey relied on participants' retrospective accounts, it cannot show how individual motivations develop over time. Longitudinal studies that follow players across multiple seasons could more directly examine whether competitive motivations gradually give way to social ones. Second, in-depth interviews could provide richer insight into themes that brief written responses only began to reveal. This approach may be especially useful for understanding how repeated participation fosters belonging and how identity expression may develop through involvement rather than precede it; notably, 34.2% of respondents indicated that they would be willing to participate in follow-up interviews. Third, the current sample included only women who joined and continued participating in SGB. Including former members, women involved in more competitive basketball environments, and nonparticipants would help determine whether these findings are characteristic of community-based recreational basketball more broadly or partly reflect the self-selection of women who remain involved. Finally, comparisons across organizations serving different cultural communities could test whether similar forms of participation infrastructure operate elsewhere or whether they vary according to the particular barriers faced by each community.

6. Limitations

The most significant limitation of this study concerns sampling. All 38 participants were recruited through a single community platform, the SGB North America Players WeChat group. Everyone in this sample is someone for whom a community-based basketball organization already works well enough that they joined and stayed. Women who tried SGB and left, or who prefer more competitive settings and play elsewhere, are not represented here. The finding that social connection ranked well above competition may therefore partly reflect who chooses to join and remain in this kind of organization, rather than a pattern that holds for adult women of Chinese heritage in recreational basketball generally. For the same reason, respondents may hold more positive views of community-based sport than the wider population, which may have elevated responses related to social bonding, belonging, and organizational support.

In general, this study's findings should not be interpreted as representative of all Asian women, all Chinese women, or all adult recreational basketball players. It should also be noted that heritage was never asked directly; participants are described as women of Chinese heritage based on the recruitment context — a Chinese-language survey distributed through a Chinese-language community group.

A second limitation involves the researcher's position in the community. As a member of the SGB operations team, the researcher was known to some participants before the survey. This familiarity may have increased trust and willingness to respond, but it may also have led participants to describe their experience with SGB more positively than they otherwise would — which is relevant given that the study's central argument concerns SGB's role. This risk is inherent to community-embedded research and cannot be fully eliminated.

A third set of limitations concerns the data itself. All findings rely on self-reported motivations and experiences. This matters most for the questions about childhood: participants were asked to rate how encouraged they felt as girls and to describe how their reasons for playing have changed, sometimes recalling experiences from decades earlier, which introduces recall bias. Relatedly, the survey captured perspectives at a single point in time. The study's account of a shift from competition toward social connection rests on participants' retrospective descriptions rather than on data collected across time, so it cannot trace how motivations actually changed for any individual. Finally, although 34.2% of participants expressed willingness to be interviewed and another 36.8% expressed possible interest, no interviews were conducted, so the qualitative findings rest on short written responses rather than extended narratives.

7. Conclusion

This study explored how adult women of Chinese heritage in community-based recreational basketball describe the role of social connection, belonging, and competition in sustaining their participation. Drawing on survey data from 38 participants connected to the SGB community, the findings suggest three interconnected patterns.

First, sustained participation was most often described in social and wellness-oriented terms. Having fun, staying active, social bonding, and stress relief were consistently identified as primary motivations, while competition ranked substantially lower. This pattern suggests that for this sample, the social and emotional dimensions of recreational sport, rather than competitive outcomes, appear central to continued participation.

Second, SGB appears to function as participation infrastructure: a social and organizational structure that lowers the cost of continued engagement by providing access to teams, recurring events, peer networks, and socially comfortable spaces. Most participants — about 27 of 38 — described structural and cultural barriers that limited their sport participation during adolescence: academic pressure, male-dominated courts, absence of female teams, and cultural expectations that positioned athletics as secondary to academic achievement. Community organizations like SGB may reduce these frictions in adulthood by generating belonging through participation rather than requiring it as a precondition.

Third, identity expression appeared to function less as a motivation for participation and more as a meaningful outcome that emerges through continued engagement. While few participants selected identity expression as a reason they play, the majority reported a moderate to strong sense of challenging stereotypes and expressing strength as Asian women through basketball. This suggests that the significance of sport for identity may develop over time, rather than driving initial or ongoing participation.

Taken together, these findings point to the importance of social infrastructure in sustaining adult recreational sport participation — particularly for communities where structural and cultural barriers have historically limited access. For organizations like SGB, long-term participation may depend less on competitive programming and more on creating the conditions under which belonging, routine, and connection can develop.

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Labour Market Barriers and the Integration of Refugees in the UK

By Aimee Zheng

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

By the end of 2024, more than 122 million people worldwide had been forcibly displaced, including over 43 million refugees, according to the United Nations Human Rights Council. This, in turn, makes refugee integration one of the defining humanitarian and policy challenges of the 21st century. Hence, there has been ongoing discussion regarding how to ensure displaced individuals are not only protected, but successfully integrated into host societies.

Before determining the obstacles to achieve refugee integration, it is important to correctly distinguish and identify refugees as a member of the host society using the definitions of the UN conventions, as it establishes the primary legal baseline that creates a universal, legally binding standard across 149 nations. By employing such standards, it prevents countries from arbitrarily denying protection, ensures the right to asylum, and strictly enforces non-refoulement, which denotes the legal ban on returning an individual to a territory where they face persecution.

The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines refugees as “A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”. Refugees are given the right to work within the new host society, which differs from asylum seekers, who have restricted access to employability aspects of the country. As individuals migrate to a new host society, they become an asylum seeker, having to go through a prolonged waiting period in order to be granted the status as a refugee. Hence, asylum seekers and refugees are viewed as separate groups and the two terms cannot be used interchangeably.

Although refugee integration presents challenges across many host countries, the UK provides a particularly significant case study because of the existing tension between its international humanitarian obligations and the rise of domestic political movements seeking to restrict migration. This tension has become especially evident in the post-2015 period, when the European refugee crisis and the 2016 Brexit referendum intensified public debate over labor market policies, sovereignty, and sparked patriotism. The prolonged asylum decision-making processes and labour market barriers have generated growing concern among policymakers and researchers regarding the country's capacity to translate legal protection into social and economic inclusion. Examining the UK therefore offers insight into how national institutions in high-income democratic countries can influence refugees’ long-term outcomes.

What the UN Convention demonstrates is that the process of integration, as it pertains to refugees, is inextricably intertwined with employment status. The UNHCR's differentiation between asylum seekers and refugees are precisely noted in order to protect individuals from arbitrary deportation and allow settlement without automatically granting legal residency to anyone who crosses a border and claims persecution. What the Convention fails to understand is that integration is multidimensional, and includes aspects such as but not limited to employment, housing, education, health, social networks, and language proficiency (Cheung and Phillimore). In the context of refugee migration, integration serves as a crucial means of enabling refugees to participate fully in social and cultural life within the society while preserving aspects of their original identity. This sense of identity and community is being distorted as the significant shift in UK public discourses regarding nationhood and the issue of migration makes the process of embracing a new cultural context more challenging (Geddes and Scholten). The ongoing systematic failures have transformed integration from a reciprocal process of inclusion into a prolonged state of exclusion, where legal recognition for the refugee status alone is not sufficient enough to secure meaningful participation in economic, social, and cultural life. Consequently, barriers such as limited access to language training (ESOL) and discrimination determine whether refugees can exercise their rights and experience social inclusion.

The UK's labor force and employment system fails to support refugees because it hinders socio-cultural, cognitive, and economic integration. distinguish the differences between the three perspectives regarding integration. The article defines these three aspects as the following: Socio-cultural integration refers to the refers to the process in which individuals adopt the norms, values, or beliefs in their host society; Cognitive integration refers to the establishment of 'sense of belonging' in self when immersed in one's host society, moving past cognitive dissonance, which is when there is an existing psychological discomfort when values between the original and host society clash; Economic integration refers to how an individual is adjusted within the host society's economy, where they become financially and economically stable. Through a synthesis of current research, this scoping review aims to identify and characterize existing interventions for refugee support in the UK and evaluate their degree of effectiveness in regard to integration. The UK's labor force and employment system fails to support refugees because it hinders socio-cultural, cognitive, and economic integration for refugees of the community.

2. Methodology

There is currently no theoretical framework or method that adequately and holistically addresses how integration and psychological stress are inextricably connected to the employability of refugees based on socio-cultural, cognitive, and economic factors in the specific context of the UK. Though relevant, this serves as a limitation as current research does not focus on the particular landscape of UK policy and immigrant experience. In order to address this gap, this paper analyzes published articles, empirical studies, and policy research concerning refugee integration, employment, psychological stress, and UK migration policies. This paper therefore adopts a socio-cultural integration framework in which socio-cultural integration is treated as the

central mechanism connecting the UK's employability policies to refugees' cognitive and economic integration.

Sources were selected according to their relevance to the relationship between socio-cultural integration and either cognitive or economic outcomes. The paper looks at theories by interlocutors such as Calo et al., Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, Cheung and Phillimore, Cheung and Phillimore, Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, Hughes, Pollard and Howard, Asif and Kienzler, Walsh, Mayblin and James, alongside Schumann's Acculturation Theory that reveals the ongoing systematic failures of the UK's labor force and employment system and its causal relationship to a lack of refugee integration. Rather than treating socio-cultural, cognitive, and economic integration as independent dimensions, the paper examines how they interact, with socio-cultural integration positioned as the primary pathway influencing the refugees' psychological well-being and subsequent labour-market outcomes. This framework is then applied to the UK policy context to identify how the labour-force and employment system obstructs socio-cultural integration and, through its associated cognitive and economic consequences, contributes to barriers to refugee employability.

3. The Labor Force and Employment System Policies

3.1 Historical Labor Market Policies and Background

Understanding the UK's labor force and employment system for refugees requires distinguishing between asylum seekers and refugees. Recognized refugees, who are immigrants who have been officially granted legal protection and the right to stay in a host country, typically receive the full right to work within the UK whilst asylum seekers' right to work is historically restricted (Gower et al.). However, according to the Refugee Council, there are around 39% of asylum approved claims, while the other 61% are either refused or withdrawn during the initial decision stage. In 2022, the annual grant rate for asylum applications peaked at 73%, dramatically dropping to 42% by 2025.

Historically, the UK granted asylum seekers the right to work after going through 6 months of the waiting process – 6 months shorter than the current policy introduced from 2005 onwards. However, the annual grant rate for asylum seekers was 12% in 2004. Hence, the increased uncertainty established through the increase in waiting periods may result in further discontent.

The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999's work ban established a general rule that asylum seekers are not permitted to work. However, the transition in status from asylum seekers to refugees does not indicate that there is a profound benefit for refugees, nor does it indicate that they are qualified to become secured refugees, as defined previously. Under the 1999 Act, when an individual is granted refugee status, they are given a 28-day "move-on" period that requires them to transition from state-provided asylum support to finding housing and employment. This is primarily being determined by the Biometric Residence Permit (BRP), which proves legal status and is required to access work, housing, and benefits, and the digital Universal Credit system, which requires online access and digital literacy to claim financial support. Although

granted refugee status, new refugees have a very limited time to ensure that they gain access to social benefits or secure housing.

After an asylum seeker received a positive decision either directly from a judge or indirectly through a solicitor via call or post, the UK Visas and Immigration Team (UKVI) contacts the new-refugee's housing contractor; a 'Notice to Quit' letter is then sent, informing individuals that the locks on their accommodation will be changed after 28 days (Hughes). In an interview conducted with 47 interviewees, many refugees have reported the "lack of guidance and support" throughout the process until the eviction (Hughes).

3.2 Current policies in Language Skills, Development, and Resources

UK policies promote an "employability" narrative through its descriptions of its Refugee Employability Programme (REP) while simultaneously setting ones that block refugees' access to employment, emphasizing the presence of significant systematic failures. The sub-pillars of this narrative include employment and skills training, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs, and social integration, set by initiatives from the Home Office.

The Employability support is set to ensure that an "appropriate level of support" is provided to refugees to build their skills in a working environment, including CV writing classes, sector specific training, and interview practices. Issues from employability programs stem from the job center pressures, where refugees are forced to accept any jobs quickly and receive little assistance for career progression; coaching inconsistencies, where quality support varies widely depending on the staff member; and limited benefits, where apprenticeships pay too little to survive.

The English language support includes English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) program, invitations to formal and informal conversation clubs, and lessons to support learning capacity such as literacy. However, it is reported that there are ESOL (English language) access problems across refugee communities, while many interviewees emphasized limited access to English classes due to long waiting lists, limited capacity, regional inequality creating the issue of "postcode lottery", difficulty enrolling mid-term, and geographical travel distance issues to colleges (Calo et al.). Refugees need pre-employment support because they face language barriers, trauma, and unfamiliar labor systems. There are several policy differences between regions, where in Scotland asylum seekers can attend significantly more ESOL classes compared to England.

3.3 Impacts of current policy

In the short term, approximately 8% of refugees that serve as members of the Refugee Employability Programme (REP) secure employment during their first several months of active support. For refugees engaged in the program for at least one year, employment rates reach 36%. However, the results from qualitative research do not provide indications of the refugee's mental health, psychological stress, and challenges from uncertainties when joining these programs. The

lack of distribution of these support opportunities and the lack of access to certain regions, reveal how the current policy could be modified.

4. Limited access to Language trainings (ESOL)

4.1 Policies that hinder language acquisition

Language barriers are closely intertwined with employment (Schellekens). Limited language proficiency restricts refugees' access to work opportunities and delays integration. Though offered, the limited accessibility of the UK's English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses across refugee communities has significantly hindered language acquisition. The removal of ESOL Plus Mandation funding after 2015 raised significant impacts on the learners and providers of the program (Foster and Bolton). The Association of Colleges claimed that the funding withdrawal "added to the isolation of some communities and made it harder for colleges to work with Jobcentre Plus to get people ready for work," affecting over 47 colleges and 16,000 learners (Foster and Bolton). Furthermore, colleges were not warned about the removal of the mandate and learners were only given 2 weeks to adapt to changes. The withdrawal of the ESOL mandate indicated that refugee jobseekers will no longer be referred to free ESOL classes within their structured program to improve their employability. Instead they were asked to find alternative ways to access ESOL learning if it is available locally. However, regional inequalities have made the process significantly more challenging as the individuals face a lack of resources. The removal or reduction of free ESOL classes has further intensified inequalities. For example, refugees experiencing financial hardship may be unable to afford private language education. Refugee women face additional barriers due to childcare responsibilities, cultural expectations, trauma, and social isolation. Without gender-sensitive programs, female refugees often experience slower language development and integration.

The multifaceted and ongoing systematic barriers include prolonged waiting lists, regional inequality (creating the issue of "postcode lottery"), and geographical travel distance issues (Calo et al.). These discrepancies illustrate how the policy differences which exist between regions, provide uneven opportunities as in Scotland asylum seekers can attend significantly more ESOL classes compared to England (Mulvey). Despite the recognized importance of English language acquisition, UK ESOL provision remains inconsistent and underfunded. When considering research on the UK as a whole, the geographical inequalities skews the data from the UK as England, with significantly less access to language training, are considered together with Scotland within a UK context. Hence, there is not enough emphasis on the lack of ESOL training both in general and in specific areas like England.

4.2 Impacts on Socio-cultural Integration

Socio-cultural integration refers to the process in which individuals adopt the norms, values, or beliefs in their host society through establishing a positive connection with members of the community (Promoting integration through social connections, 2024). Limited language acquisition negatively impacts socio-cultural integration, making individuals more prone to

marginalization or isolation, defined as rejecting one's new culture or both their new and native cultures (Berry). Socio-culturally, refugees with limited English proficiency experience greater isolation and reduced participation in community activities.

Acculturation occurs when individuals or groups adopt elements of another culture, usually due to a prolonged contact between different cultural groups. Schumman's Acculturation model distinguishes the taxonomy of factors that influence second-language acquisition, such as social factors and instructional factors. Applying it to a refugee context, social factors could include factors like the current refugee employment program, policies regarding waiting periods, subordination established within the host society, etc. Instructional factors could include the quality and duration of ESOL programs, refugee worker skills training, quality of teachings, etc.

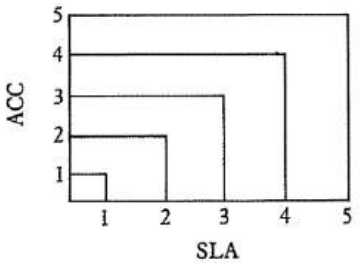

Figure 1: Schumman's Acculturation Model illustrating the relationship between SLA (Second Language Acquisition) and Acculturation (ACC).

The model proposes that there is a positive relationship between second language acquisition and acculturation at each degree. Hence, it could be deduced that a lack of sufficient acquisition in second languages could result in less acculturation. Refugees that do not have sufficient access to ESOL training due to systematical barriers therefore would lack the ability to integrate socio-culturally within the society. As they lack the medium to exchange thoughts and beliefs with members of the host society, it becomes more difficult to establish and foster positive relationships.

Language often acts as a medium for the exchange of social interactions, enabling individuals to build social networks and navigate new environments. According to the model, individuals acquire a new language more effectively when they are socially and psychologically integrated into the host society. Refugees who experience greater levels of contact within the community are more likely to successfully acquire the dominant language. Refugees who are socially or economically isolated due to previous systematic failures may experience slower language acquisition as opportunities for immersion become restricted.

Language therefore functions as both a mechanism and indicator of integration, allowing refugees to access employment opportunities, healthcare systems, educational institutions, social relationships, and public goods or services. Refugees with limited English proficiency may therefore become isolated from mainstream society and increasingly dependent upon interpreters, family members, or ethnic networks.

4.3 Impacts on Economic Integration

Economic integration refers to refugees' ability to achieve financial independence and participate fully in the labour market through stability in employment aspects within the host family. As mentioned previously, employment is a key indicator of successful economic integration, providing not only income but also skill development and long-term economic security.

The barriers discussed previously have significant implications for refugees' economic integration. Refugees who are unable to secure employment that matches their qualifications and experience often experience underemployment, receiving part-time jobs that are typically low-paid. This, in turn, reduces both individual earning potential and the economic contribution refugees can make to the host economy.

Prolonged underemployment can also create long-term economic disadvantages. Lower earnings reduce individuals' marginal propensity to consume and save, invest in further education, or achieve financial stability. Consequently, refugees may remain economically vulnerable for extended periods, increasing their risk of poverty and dependence on the inadequate welfare support provided by the government, with half of all children in migrant families living in poverty (Fernández-Reino and Brindle).

On a broader picture, this indirect discrimination reduces overall labor market productivity while successful economic integration benefits both refugees and the country's wider economy. Refugees who obtain employment appropriate to their qualifications contribute to the economy by taxation, increased consumer spending, and providing skills required within sectors.

Economic integration should therefore be understood as both an individual and societal outcome. Addressing these barriers is therefore essential not only for improving refugees' sense of financial stability within the country but also for maximizing the economic benefits of refugee integration within the UK.

5. Discrimination in Labor Market and Society

5.1 Discrimination in employing refugee workers in work forces

Although inadequate English proficiency creates significant disadvantages in securing employment, the lack of language training provision alone cannot explain refugees' persistent labour market exclusion. The following section therefore examines how workplace discrimination and biases, labour exploitation, and media portrayal further restrict refugees' opportunities for meaningful labor market and societal participation as well as long-term cognitive integration.

Discrimination within the labor market stems from pre-existing employer bias. This is often expressed through racial discriminations when hiring employees, preference for 'local' experiences, difficulty for refugees in getting interviews. All of these aspects reinforce structural exclusions, creating an environment where refugees struggle to find jobs within the UK

economy. Even if the refugee is employed, they are also more likely to experience labor exploitation such as underpayment, informal labor, exploitative working conditions, and a lack of legal protection knowledge. Zero hour contracts are often signed and undocumented working hours serve as elements of the working conditions (Calo et al.). The exploitation forces refugees to be embedded into the most insecure employment sectors of the UK economy. Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers typically do not have the same access to jobs or jobs that match their skill set (Calo et al.).

Once the job is secured, refugees remain to experience employment barriers, largely due to the misconceptions regarding their legal statuses, biases in "British work cultures", and devaluations. Research shows that nearly half of UK hiring managers believe British citizens should get preference for job vacancies, with 22% assuming refugees are fundamentally incompatible with local workplace cultures (Kandola). Furthermore, the minority of refugees who are working are in secondary sector jobs with little opportunity for progression (Bloch).

Ultimately, there is a fundamental paradox in the current refugee problem, where refugees are required and demanded to work immediately after gaining refugee status, yet systematic barriers and discrimination in workforces prohibits their ability to work - discrimination was most commonly seen as the major perceived barrier towards accessing the job market.

5.2 Non-Recognition for Foreign Qualifications

The hidden work restrictions could be expressed through the preference in UK credentials; in other words, foreign qualifications from refugees are not recognized. Thus, this generates a qualification recognition barrier. Under this policy, migrants must restart careers from entry level, where their professional skills are often wasted, leading to deskilling as highly educated migrants continue to work in low-skilled jobs.

As deskilling occurs, structural unemployment towards refugee communities occurs as the skill sets of refugees no longer align with the requirements of skill sets that the economy demands. Hence, this, in turn, creates further unemployment within refugee communities. The discrimination fundamentally rooted within the working environment creates further difficulties for refugees to navigate within the host society, as they would face spending time acquiring qualifications rather than being offered a stable working environment. Gaining a UK qualification could take up to months, where the refugees will then remain unemployed until they gain the qualifications required by the company. This, in turn, creates long-term stagnation, as newly incoming refugees are prevented from entering the labor market and are instead compelled to obtain local qualifications equivalent to those they already possess, solely because their existing credentials remain unrecognized.

5.3 Media portrayal: Patriotism and Xenophobia

Currently, the news media act as a mediator between political elites and the public, influencing how people interpret migration. Migration debates are highly politicized, taking

place on various social media platforms, especially after events like Brexit, serving as a medium where many citizens rely on, in order to understand migration issues particularly during crises. However, media framing and narratives can either encourage hostility toward migrants or generate sympathy. Asylum seekers and refugees are often portrayed as economic burdens, security threats, and are criminal or dangerous individuals. Common metaphors include describing migration as “waves” or “floods,” implying and connoting that the UK is under threat or invasion. This framing contributes to fear and hostility in public discourse (Cooper et al.). Anti-migration organizations produce reports, blogs, and statements which spread narratives online and through media attention. Their roles also include stage protests and campaigns that attract media attention, further spreading misinformation (Newton).

Furthermore, coverage varies significantly depending on where asylum seekers come from. Asylum seekers from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) were more often associated with terrorism, violence and security threats. Migrants located in Europe were also frequently connected with terrorism. These associations occurred even when attackers in real events were not migrants, showing how media narratives can exaggerate links between migration and security threats. This reinforces racialized and Islamophobic stereotypes within media discourse

The inconsistent terminology used further poses a barrier for refugees to adapt into European society. Journalists frequently use migration terms interchangeably, even though they have distinct meanings. The difference between refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and immigrants are often neglected. When refugees are labelled as “immigrants” or “illegals,” they are more likely to be linked with crime or terrorism. This mislabeling shapes public perception by blurring the difference between vulnerable people and voluntary migrants.

5.4 Impacts on cognitive integration

Cognitive integration refers to the refugee’s personal sense of belonging to the host society. The hostility in media portrayal and social media contents creates a barrier that prohibits the refugees from integrating with the unwelcoming host society. This activating event may trigger irrational thoughts, impacting an individual's cognitive process.

Applying Ellis’ ABC model, activating events such as experiences of discrimination in daily lives may lead to the belief of inadequacy under white supremacy, leading to consequences such as psychological distress. The repeated negative thoughts about themselves of their original culture may strengthen maladaptive cognitive schemas, causing refugees to automatically interpret events in a pessimistic way. This then serves as a self-perpetuating cycle, intensifying the psychological distress they originally experienced.

Psychological distress represents one of the most severe consequences of prolonged uncertainty and structural exclusion. Refugees often arrive with pre-existing trauma resulting from war, persecution, or forced displacement. Structural barriers within employment and housing systems therefore not only hinder integration but also intensify mental health vulnerabilities. One of the UK’s key policy narratives were levels of “deservingness”, as the UK

political discourse frames migrants and refugees in terms of “deserving” and “undeserving” welfare recipients. Policy narratives such as these emphasize that migrants must prove their value through work and economic contribution. Furthermore, hard work is seen as a moral test, and the government documents that migrants should be “welcomed” if and when they show “talent, hard work, and skills”. However, foreign qualifications of refugees are often not recognized by the UK, hence most of the group of asylum seekers are viewed as “unskilled” and therefore “undeserving”. Under this system, the government creates a hierarchy within the refugee community, further creating distress within ones who are unskilled and therefore have less or limited access to unemployment benefits. This reflects neoliberal “employability” ideology where responsibility for integration is shifted onto individuals rather than structural factors.

5.5 Other aspects of cognitive integration

Refugees often experience cognitive dissonance as a result of psychological challenges they face when moving into a new host society. Cognitive dissonance occurs when the beliefs and values experienced in a refugee’s host society contradicts with their pre-existing knowledge or beliefs, thereby creating a sense of dissonance and detachment (Festinger). This arises due to discrimination and prejudice discussed in this section, language barriers discussed in the previous section, as well as cultural and religion conflicts and a loss in social support networks (Zhang). In the context of religion and beliefs, refugees often struggle to preserve their traditions and religious beliefs while adapting to a different set of norms in their new society. Hence, the increased levels of difficulty in practicing religious beliefs in environments that may not accommodate them causes cognitive dissonance. Refugees may experience increased pressure to conform to host-country expectations while remaining connected to one's original community (Zhang).

6. Conclusion

The structural barriers experienced, particularly discrimination, during the initial stages of resettlement frequently generate long-term scarring effects that persist well beyond the refugees' transition into the labor market. Prolonged unemployment, underemployment, language barriers, and repeated experiences of discrimination do not merely delay economic participation but can permanently reduce future employment prospects and psychological well-being (Calo et al.; Ruiz and Vargas-Silva). Hainmueller et al. exploited quasi-random variation in asylum processing times in Switzerland and found that each additional year spent waiting for an asylum decision reduced refugees' subsequent employment rates by approximately 4–5 percentage points, even after receiving legal protection. These effects persisted years after resettlement, suggesting that delayed labor market entry causes depreciation of human capital, erosion of networks, and reduced employer confidence (Hainmueller et al.). These scarring effects tend to be long term and everlasting. Similarly, the non-recognition of foreign qualifications and

occupational deskilling force many highly educated refugees into low-skilled employment, reinforcing a limited career progression (Calo et al.).

Beyond economic outcomes, these structural disadvantages reinforce psychological scarring. Discrimination further intensifies feelings of exclusion and weakens refugees' sense of belonging, making successful integration increasingly difficult over time (Zhang). As these barriers accumulate, refugees become increasingly vulnerable to persistent anxiety and social isolation or marginalization, which links back to section 4.3. The cycle in which individuals increase further distress ultimately entrenches socio-cultural, cognitive, and economic disadvantage across the life course.

In conclusion, the ongoing systematic failures in the labor market within a UK context hinders refugee's ability to social-culturally, cognitively, and economically integrate within the host society. In particular, limited welfare programs such as the ESOL and discrimination have severely impacted one's ability to establish a sense of belonging and stability in a new environment and calls for organizational interventions to limit these deeply rooted systematic barriers. In order to address these issues, government funding is needed and the paper calls for an adjustment in current labor market policies in order to ensure that refugees do not face employer biases based on preexisting judgements about their qualifications or education levels. By creating tangible policies that address the root causes of limited refugee integration, the UK can foster more equitable labor market participation and promote sustainable socio-cultural, cognitive, and economic integration.

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Vocal Training, Performance, and Adolescent Confidence: A Literature Review of Music Participation and Expressive Development By Zainab Alam

exploring how musical engagement and performance experiences contribute to self-esteem, emotional expression, and identity formation in teenagers.

Abstract

Self-esteem and self-expression both play an important role during the crucial period of adolescence where teenagers form a unique identity and sense of self. Due to the importance of this fact, studies have shown that teenagers who participate in musical activities experience a positive influence in their self-expression, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Additionally, by analyzing existing research, it is evident that participation in performance boosts a teenager's self-expression and confidence in a similar way as music participation. Based on the previous research, it is hypothesized that vocal training will have a positive impact on adolescent self-esteem and self-confidence as it combines both music and performance. Potentially, the beneficial effects will be more prominent than musical instrument performance as voice is a unique instrument that is part of a person's body, carrying emotion, personality, and self-interpretation. Future research should consider exploring the unique relationship between vocal training and performance and teenage self-esteem and confidence.

Introduction

Adolescence is a key developmental stage where teenagers begin to experience rapid cognitive, emotional, and social change. During this period, teenagers can struggle to form a unique identity for themselves, navigating increasing social pressure, peer comparison, and heightened self-awareness. For example, a teenager may hesitate to share an unpopular opinion in class, avoid trying out for a solo performance, or hide personal interests out of the fear of judgement. These are the exact factors that come together to impact self-confidence and self-expression. As adolescents attempt to understand who they are and how they are perceived by others, their willingness to communicate their own ideas, opinions, emotions, and personal identity become both more important and vulnerable (Smetana et al.). In fact, a large meta-analysis found that self-esteem is less stable during childhood and adolescence, increases in stability throughout young adulthood, and becomes more consistent as individuals mature (Trzesniewski et al).Because adolescents are still developing their sense of self and are highly influenced by social and environmental factors, self-esteem during this period remains particularly malleable. This makes adolescence a critical stage for intervention and experiences that can strengthen positive self-thoughts and support healthy psychological development.

Self-confidence and self-expression both play central roles in this early developmental age. For the purpose of this paper, self-confidence refers to an individual's belief in their own abilities, value, and capacity to succeed, while self-expression is the ability to communicate one's thoughts and emotions to others. They are closely linked to effective communication,

academic engagement, emotional regulation, and long-term positive mental health (Calsyn et al.; Henriksen et al.; Warnholtz,; Zhao et al.). Teenagers who are able to express themselves confidently and clearly tend to demonstrate stronger social relationships and greater adaptability (Marcionetti). However, many teenagers experience challenges in these domains, including fear of judgment, public speaking, performance, and difficulty expressing emotions or ideas in socially visible contexts (Alves et al.; Tillfors et al.). These challenges can limit opportunities for personal growth and overall reduce confidence during a crucial period of life.

In response to the potentially negative impact of these developmental challenges, researchers have increasingly examined the role of creative activities in supporting adolescent growth. Creative fields such as music, visual arts, and dance have been shown to contribute positively to emotional expression, stress reduction, and confidence development (de Witte; Gustavson et al.; Mak et al.). These activities provide structured yet flexible environments in which teenagers can experiment with self-expression in ways that are both personally and socially engaging. For example, theater programs require adolescents to work closely with cast members, directors, and stage crews, fostering communication, teamwork, and meaningful social connections through a shared creative process.

Among these creative fields, music participation has received particular attention in research on adolescent development. This focus may come from the fact that music possesses a unique combination of emotional, cognitive, and social elements, allowing adolescents to engage in self-expression while simultaneously developing skills through practice, collaboration, and performance. Overall, engagement in music has been associated with improved emotional regulation, higher discipline and persistence, a stronger sense of identity, and enhanced opportunities for self-expression (Jean-Berluche; Loureiro et al.; Saarikallio et al.). In addition, unlike completely verbal forms of communication, music acts as a way for people to express emotion and meaning through sound and performance, offering an alternative for processing and communicating internal experiences.

Within music participation, performance is a huge aspect and plays an important role. Many musical experiences involve presenting your work in front of an audience, whether it be individually or in a group. While these performance situations can initially increase anxiety, especially for teenagers with limited experience, they also create opportunities for social evaluation and feedback to be normalized. Over time, this exposure can contribute to increased resilience, reduced performance anxiety, and strengthened self-confidence (Candia et al.; Hylton et al.; Zarza-Alzugaray et al.). In addition, being observed or evaluated in a structured environment can also serve as encouragement to refine skills and develop a stronger sense of competence and self-efficacy (Kleppang et al.).

Building on this foundation, vocal training is a particularly interesting yet under-researched area within teenage development. Although general instrumental music participation is undeniably beneficial, vocal training is unique as it directly connects the music instruments to the body and identity of the performer. It combines technical skill development, emotional expression, and repeated performance exposure within a highly personal form of

communciation. However, existing research has primarily focused on broader categories such as general music participation, ensemble performance, or public speaking anxiety, with limited attention given specifically to vocal training and its many psychological benefits on adolescents.

Therefore, this literature review explores how music participation and performance independently contribute to adolescent self-confidence and self-expression, and how these findings can be combined to better understand the potential impact that vocal training could have at a similar level. It is guided by the following research question: How does vocal training and performance influence a teenager's self-reported confidence, and overall self-expression? Because there is currently limited research examining the specific effects of vocal training on adolescent confidence and self-expression, this review draws upon related literature to explore the topic indirectly. Section One examines the impact of music participation on teenage development, while Section Two focuses on the unique psychological effects of performance. Together, these findings are synthesized to demonstrate how vocal training may serve as a particular effective method to foster self-confidence and self-expression in teenagers by combining the benefits of musical engagement with the experience of performance.

Music Participation

Music participation is widely associated with positive psychological and social outcomes in teenagers (Hao et al.). Research suggests that involvement in music can support areas such as self-esteem, emotional expression, and social confidence (Bussu et al.; Saarikallio et al.). These outcomes are especially relevant to adolescent development because teenagers are often forming their identities, learning how to express themselves, and building confidence in social settings (Trzesniewski et al). Together, the studies reviewed suggest that music participation may play an important role in supporting teen self-confidence and self-expression.

One study that supports this idea examined how long-term piano instruction impacted the development of children (117 fourth-graders) across a variety of areas, including academics, school performance, and self-esteem (Costa-Giomi). However, for the purpose of this literature review, the most relevant part of the study is its finding on self-esteem, since self-esteem is closely connected to self-confidence. This study provides evidence that structured music instruction, specifically piano training over three years, was associated with an increase of self-esteem in children. This is crucial as it suggests that long-term music learning can lead to measurable psychological benefits, not just academic ones.

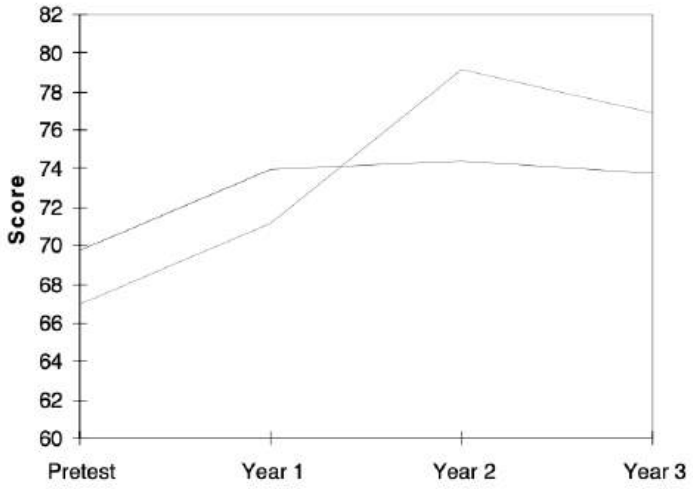

Fig 1: Results from the previously referenced study show that participants in the experimental group exhibited higher levels of self-esteem than those in the control group at the conclusion of the study.

One possible explanation for this improvement is that learning an instrument helps students experience mastery, discipline, and personal growth. As children practice consistently and improve their musical skill, they develop a stronger sense of competence and self-worth . Psychologically, self-esteem often grows through achievement and perceived ability , so music training may help students feel more capable and confident (Bandura). Although this study focuses on piano rather than voice, it still supports the broader argument that music participation can strengthen self-confidence and self-expression in teenagers. If structured instrumental training can improve self-esteem, then vocal training may have similar or potentially stronger effects. This is due to the fact that singing not only requires disciplined practice and mastery of skill, like instruments, but also a separate factor of personal expression and emotional vulnerability. Through this kind vocal practice, adolescents could potentially feel more comfortable and confident in themselves - potentially even more so than playing a physical instrument. Overall, this study supports the idea that structured music education can contribute to confidence development, suggesting that vocal training may also help teenagers build self-esteem, self-expression, and a stronger sense of personal identity.

Another study that suggests that music participation may play an important role in supporting self-confidence and self-expression examined Chinese university music students and measured variables such as group music activity participation, music self-expression, musical empathy, and pro-social behavior (Qiao). Although the participants were university students rather than adolescents, university students often fall within the developmental stage known as emerging adulthood, which typically includes the late teens through the twenties. During this period, individuals are still developing their identities, emotional awareness, relationships, and adult roles (Wood et al.). Therefore, the study can still provide relevant insight into how active music participation may support emotional and social development in young people, even though it does not focus specifically on teenagers.

The primary finding in this study was that group music participation positively predicted musical self-expression (Qiao). This is important because musical self-expression involves the ability to communicate emotions through musical performance and interaction (Gabrielsson et al.). In other words, music gives participants an opportunity to express feelings through art, sound, and shared performance (Gabrielsson et al.). Music may support emotional expression because it allows people to communicate feelings without always needing to use words. Through elements such as tone, rhythm, dynamics, and interpretation, musicians learn to understand and express emotion in a more detailed way (Eerola et al.; Gabrielsson et al.). This can also improve communication skills because emotional understanding is an important part of how people connect with others (Fu et al.).

This particular study supports this literature review's main research question because emotional expression is a key part of self-expression. If music participation helps people express emotions more effectively, then vocal training may be especially beneficial because the voice is directly connected to the body and personal identity, making singing a more vulnerable and expressive form of music participation. Unlike some forms of instrumental music, vocal performance requires students to use their own voice to communicate emotion, which may strengthen both emotional expression and confidence. One somewhat surprising finding was that group music participation was found to strengthen individual musical self-expression, since group activities might initially seem more closely connected to collaboration than personal expression. However, this suggests that interacting with other musicians may actually help individuals become more emotionally aware and confident in communicating their own feelings. Overall, this study supports the idea that music involvement can strengthen emotional self-expression, suggesting that vocal training may be especially effective in helping teenagers communicate their feelings, identities, and personal experiences with greater confidence.

Finally, scholars such as Susan Hallam have brought together research on children and young people to examine how actively making music can influence development beyond just musical ability (Hallam) This literature focuses in particular on Hallam's discussion of personal and social development. She explains that active music-making is connected to areas such as self-confidence, social skills, teamwork, emotional sensitivity, self-disciple, and self-expression. This is important because it shows that music participation can help young people become more comfortable working with others, communicating, and expressing themselves in shared environments.

One reason music participation may build social confidence is that group music-making requires communication and coordination with others (Hallam). Students must listen carefully, respond to the people around them, and contribute to a shared performance goal. Repeated participation in rehearsals and performances may also reduce fear of judgment because students become more used to being heard and seen in a supportive group setting (Anari et al.). Over time, these experiences can create a sense of belonging and shared achievement, both of which can strengthen social confidence (Hallam).

Because Hallam's work already shows that active music participation can support confidence and social development, vocal training may be especially powerful within this larger pattern. Unlike some forms of music participation, singing uses the body itself as the instrument, making the experience more personal and emotionally vulnerable. Vocal training requires students not only to learn music skills, but also to become comfortable being heard, using their own voice, and communicating emotion directly to an audience (Scherer et al.). In group settings, vocal training can also strengthen social confidence because singers must listen to others, blend their vocals, coordinate harmonies, and trust the people around them—usually done in choir (Weinstein et al.). Therefore, if general music participation can support social confidence and self-expression, vocal training may have an even stronger effect because it combines collaboration, emotional communication, and the courage to express oneself through one's own voice.

Together, the literature generally suggests that music participation can support important parts of teenagers' personal and social development. Structured music instruction appears linked to increased self-esteem, music involvement itself is associated positively with musical self-expression, and active music-making can support social confidence, teamwork, and belonging. It is evident that music appears to strengthen self-confidence and self-expression through both individual growth and social connection.

However, while general music participation shows clear psychological and social benefits, it does not fully explain the role of performance-based experiences. Performing requires teenagers to be seen, heard, and evaluated by others, which may create a different kind of confidence-building experience. Therefore, the next section focuses on how performance-based scenarios may influence the development of self-confidence and self-expression in teenagers.

Performance-Based Experiences

While music participation can support confidence, self-expression, and social development, performances add another important layer because it puts teenagers in situations where they are seen and heard by others. Unlike the safe haven of private practice or general music involvement, performances require adolescents to present themselves in front of an audience, where they may feel observed, judged, or evaluated. This visibility can initially create anxiety, especially for teenagers who are still developing their unique identity and are highly sensitive to peer perception (LeBlanc et al.). However, with repeated exposure and structured support, performance experience can help adolescents become more comfortable expressing themselves in public (Osborne et al.). Over time, performing may strengthen self-confidence because it encourages teenagers to face fear, communicate emotion, receive feedback, and recognize their own growth (Osborne et al.). Therefore, performance helps teenagers build confidence and self-expression because it requires them to be seen, heard, evaluated, and expressive in front of others.

One study that supports the idea that performance can build confidence examined six high school students who struggled with public speaking anxiety (Rickards-Schlichting et al.).

The study explored whether repeatedly seeing themselves speak confidently and successfully would reduce students' anxiety and increase their confidence during real-life speaking situations. First, students gave speeches in front of randomly selected peer audiences while researchers observed signs of anxiety, such as hesitation, speech errors, and nervous movements. Then, the researchers edited the recordings to remove mistakes, creating videos where each student appeared completely calm and successful in front of the audience. After watching these self-modeling videos multiple times, participants would then give new speeches to fresh audiences. The results showed that every student had reduced observable anxiety, and these improvements continued during follow-up speeches. Participants also reported themselves feeling less anxious, more confident, and more able to use their improved speaking skills in real-life situations.

This study is relevant as it demonstrates how structured public performance can reduce anxiety and strengthen confidence over time. When students speak in front of others, they know they are being watched and evaluated, which can initially create fear (Westenberg et al.). However, repeated exposure helps students learn that they can succeed even while being observed by an audience (Osborne et al.). The self-modeling videos may have helped students to alter the way they view themselves, allowing them to see themselves as more capable speakers rather than anxious ones. This suggests that confidence does not always exist before performance; instead, it can be built through performance experiences themselves.

Additionally, this study also connects to self-expression because public speaking requires students to communicate their ideas, emotions, and inherent personality to others (Gallego et al.). By practicing in front of an audience, students may become more comfortable sharing their true selves. This connects directly to vocal training because solo singing also requires teenagers to perform individually onstage, using their own voice to express raw, unfiltered emotions behind the message of the song. At the same time, they must manage nerves, responding to audience attention as they are constantly being observed and judged (Bodie). Therefore, individual performance may help teenagers build confidence and self-expression by forcing them to face audience judgment in a structured setting and gradually see themselves as more capable, expressive, and confident.

Another study that supports the importance of performance examined whether drama pedagogy could improve adolescents' general self-confidence (Asimidou et al.). The study involved forty-two eleventh-grade students, ages sixteen to seventeen, from the Music School of Piraeus in Greece. Students were divided into an experimental group and a control group, with twenty-one students in each. Over 16 weeks, only the experimental group participated in weekly ninety-minute drama workshops that included improvisation, role-play, educational drama, playback theater, and group performance exercises. These activities repeatedly placed students in structured situations where they had to interact, perform, and express themselves in front of others. The researchers measured self-confidence using a Personal Evaluation Inventory, while also collecting qualitative data through observation diaries, teacher notes, and student interviews.

The results of this study showed that students in the experimental group experienced a significant improvement in general self-confidence, while the control group had no significant change. More specifically, students improved in six out of seven self-confidence areas, including social interaction, mood, physical appearance, confidence, personal relationships, public exposure, and school performance. The only area that did not show a significant improvement was athletic competence, which makes sense as the intervention was focused on drama and performance rather than sports. Students themselves also reported having less fear of speaking or performing in front of others, feeling more comfortable being seen by peers, developing strong rapper relationships, expressing emotions more openly, and experiencing a greater sense of belonging in group settings.

This study suggests that group performance can build teenage confidence through collaboration, communication, shared experience, and repeated expressive practice. Unlike individual performance, group performance allows teenagers to be visible without being completely alone in front of an audience. This shared visibility may reduce the pressure of individual judgement through a sense of community while still requiring public expression (Pearce et al.). Over time, peers may start to feel less like evaluators and more like collaborators, creating a sense of social safety that encourages students to open up and take expressive risks. In this kind of environment, performances become much more than just an act of being watched, helping to form connections with others (Pearce et al.).

As demonstrated by this study, performance can also strengthen confidence students must respond in real time while interacting with others. Drama activities, such as the ones utilized in the experiment, require teenagers to listen, adapt, communicate, and express emotion in the moment. These repeated experiences may help participants become more comfortable with uncertainty, social attention, and public expression. This connects to vocal training because singing often happens in group settings, such as choirs and ensembles, where teenagers develop confidence alongside others. Therefore, group-based performance may help teenagers build self-confidence and self-expression by placing them in structured supportive citations where they are socially visible, emotionally expressive, and connected to their peers.

The third study explored how drama and performance workshops affected the self-esteem and confidence of teenagers diagnosed with dyslexia (Antonelli et al.). The study focused on twelve teenagers, aged twelve to fifteen, and examined dyslexia not only as an academic challenge, but also an emotional aspect connected to self-worth, confidence, and generally feeling understood at school. The researchers argued that students with dyslexia may feel left out, misunderstood, or less capable than their classmates, which can lower self-esteem while also making self-expression more difficult (Alexander-Passe et al.). To address this, the study implemented drama and performance workshops where participants collaborated in acting, storytelling, role-play, group activities, and performances in front of audiences. The goal was to provide a safe space where students could express themselves, recognize their strengths, and build confidence through performance-based experiences. Parents were also included as

observers, which allowed the researchers to understand changes in the students from both the teenagers' and families' perspectives.

The results of the study showed that the workshops significantly helped students improve their self-esteem and feel more confident and less ashamed of having dyslexia. Students also felt less isolated because they realized that others struggled with the same thing, reducing feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Additionally, many became more expressive, spoke more openly, and shared feelings they had previously kept hidden. The workshops also appeared to build empowerment and resilience, as some students became more willing to self-advocate to teachers and keep trying even when school felt difficult. Parents also observed positive changes, including that their children seemed more confident, outgoing, willing to express opinions, and able to stand up for themselves at school. Overall, the main finding was that drama-based performance experiences helped teenagers with dyslexia develop strong self-esteem, confidence, emotional expression, and self-advocacy.

This improvement may have happened because the workshops created a performance space where students could be viewed in a new way—by both themselves and others. Instead of being judged mainly through academic tasks, something that students with dyslexia often struggle with, students were able to show creativity, emotion, humor, personality, and strength through drama (Humphrey et al.). This matters because performance can shift how teenagers understand themselves and how others perceive them. When students repeatedly act, tell stories, and perform in front of others, they practice being visible without being reduced to their struggles (Goldstein et al.). The group setting also created a sense of community, helping students feel supported by peers who understood their experiences rather than isolated by them.

Overall, this study supports the broader idea that performance can improve teenage confidence and self-esteem because it repeatedly places adolescents in structured situations of visibility, expression, and social feedback. For these teenagers involved in this study, performance became a way to speak, be heard, and build a more positive sense of identity. This connects to vocal training because vocal performance also provides teenagers a structured space to express emotion, develop confidence, and experience being heard by others in a supportive setting. Therefore, performance-based activities may help teenagers build self-confidence and self-expression by allowing them to transform visibility and exposure from something intimidating into something more empowering.

Together, these studies show that performance can support teen confidence, self-esteem, and self expression in several ways: individual performance builds confidence through repeated exposure to being seen and evaluated, group performances build self-esteem through collaboration and shared visibility, and expressive performance helps teenagers communicate emotions, identity, and personal experience more openly. However, performance alone does not fully answer this literature reviews' research question—and the same goes for music participation. To understand how vocal training and performance may influence teenagers' self-reported confidence and self-expression, it is necessary to bring together the findings from both music participation and performance-based research.

Vocal Training

The previous two sections of this literature review suggest that both music participation and performance-based experiences can support teenagers' self-confidence and self-expression. However, vocal training is especially relevant and takes this concept to another level as it combines both of these areas at once. Vocal training is a form of music participation, demanding practice, discipline, emotional interpretation, skill development, and personal investment. At the same time, it is also a performance-based activity because singers present their voices in front of others, whether through solo performance, choir, ensemble singing, auditions, or recitals. Therefore, vocal training and guided performance may positively influence teenagers' self-reported confidence, stage presence, and self-expression because it combines the psychological benefits of music participation with the confidence-building effects of repeated performance exposure.

This connection is very important to the main research question of this literature review: How does vocal training and performance influence a teenager's self-reported confidence, and overall self-expression? Since there is a very limited amount of research focused specifically on vocal training in teenagers, the literature review uses related research involved in music participation and performance to indirectly answer the question. Section One shows that music participation can support self-esteem, emotional expression, social confidence, teamwork, and belonging. Section Two proves a similar point of performance experiences being linked to helping teenagers build confidence by repeatedly placing them in situations where they are seen, heard, evaluated, and expressive. When these two areas are combined, they help to explain why vocal training may be an especially powerful form of adolescent development.

Discussion

The first section of this review demonstrates that music participation can support confidence and self-expression in young people. For instance, Costa-Giomi's study on piano instruction showed evidence that structured music learning was associated with increased self-esteem, suggesting that the process of developing musical skill can strengthen a student's sense of competence and self-worth. The second study highlighted in this section also showed that group music participation positively predicted musical self-expression, which supports the idea that music can help young people communicate emotion, identity, and meaning through artistic activity. Similarly, Hallam's work suggests that active music-making can support self-confidence, teamwork, emotional sensitivity, social skills, and self-expression. Together, these studies show that music participation is not only about learning notes or technique; it can also shape how young people view themselves, express emotion, and interact with others.

Vocal training evidently fits into this overarching term of music participation, but it may also intensify some of its beneficial effects. Like classic instrumental training, singing requires consistent practice, technical improvement, patience, and discipline. Singers must master breath control, pitch accuracy, tone, phrasing, rhythm, diction, and interpretation—just to name a few. As teenagers improve in these areas, they may develop a strong sense of mastery and personal

ability, a trend highlighted earlier in this review when participating in music. This can then contribute to self-confidence because they are able to see and hear their own progress over time. However, vocal training could have heightened effects as it also adds an emotional dimension because singers often use their voice—something that is undeniably part of them—to communicate the meaning and feeling behind a song. This makes vocal training closely connected to self-expression because singers are not only performing music; they are communicating emotion through their own bodies and voices.

The second section of this review shows that performance experiences can also support teenage confidence. The public speaking study showed that repeated performance and self-modeling helped students reduce their anxiety and see themselves as more capable speakers. The drama pedagogy data demonstrated that group performance workshops improved students' general self-confidence, especially in areas such as social interaction, public exposure, emotional expression, and relationships. In addition, the study on drama workshops for teenagers struggling with dyslexia also showed that performance could help students feel more confident, less ashamed, more expressive, and more willing to self-advocate. Together, these students suggest that performance can transform visibility from something intimidating into something empowering.

This matters for vocal training because it has many of the same benefits as other performance-based experiences because it places teenagers in situations where they must be seen, heard, evaluated, and expressive in front of others. Like public speaking or drama, singing requires adolescents to manage nerves, respond to audience attention, and gradually become more comfortable with visibility. On top of that, vocal training may be even more beneficial because what a singer performs is not separate from them in the way that an instrument, script, or character might be. When someone sings, they are not attempting to act as another person or prove a point in debate; they are using their own bodies and voices to communicate emotion, meaning, and identity. This means vocal performance can feel more vulnerable at times, but also more powerful. Because adolescence is a period when teenagers are still developing their sense of self, learning to trust their own voice may help them feel more confident not only as performers, but also as individuals who deserve to be heard. In this way, vocal training may strengthen confidence and self-expression more deeply than performance alone because it combines public exposure with personal emotional expression.

Vocal training is also unique because the voice is part of the body and is closely connected to identity. A teenager who sings is not only learning an external skill, such as playing a physical instrument. Instead, they are learning to use their own voice publicly, emotionally, and confidently. This can make singing feel especially vulnerable. Whenever anyone sings, including teenagers, their own body becomes their instrument, and their voice carries emotion, personality, and interpretation. Because adolescence is already a period when young people are developing identity and becoming more aware of how others perceive them, learning to trust and use one's own voice is especially meaningful (Elkind). Vocal training may help teenagers feel that their voices are worth hearing, both musically and personally.

Identity formation itself is another important part of adolescence, as teenagers begin to develop a clear understanding of their values, interests, emotions, and place within social environments. Music expression can contribute to this process by providing a structured way for adolescents to explore different emotions and parts of their unique personalities. Through choosing songs, interpreting lyrics, developing a personal style, and deciding how to communicate meaning through performance, teenagers can experiment with how they want to present themselves to others. Music may also help them recognize the feelings and experiences that are often difficult to express in a normal conversation, allowing them to develop a deeper understanding of themselves. As teenagers receive feedback, connect with other musicians, and become more comfortable expressing their own interpretations, they may begin to view themselves as more capable, creative, and authentic. In this way, vocal training may support identity formation by helping teenagers discover not only how they sound, but also who they are and how they want to be perceived and understood.

This makes vocal training especially relevant to self-expression. Singing often requires emotional honesty because the performer must connect with the meaning of the song and communicate that message to others (Saarikallio). A singer cannot rely only on technical accuracy; they must also interpret lyrics, tone, dynamics, and emotion in a way that feels believable. For teenagers, this process may create a structured way to explore and express feelings that may otherwise be difficult to communicate directly. In this sense, vocal training can act as both a musical practice and a personal development experience. It gives teenagers a space to experiment with identity, emotion, and confidence in a guided and artistic way.

All in all, because vocal training combines music participation and performance exposure, it may influence how teenagers perceive their own confidence over time. This is why self-reported confidence is especially important to the current research question. The goal is not only to understand whether teenagers appear more confident to the people around them, but whether they actually feel it themselves as well. A teenager may develop stronger stage presence or seem more comfortable performing, but the most meaningful change may be internal: feeling more willing to speak up, express emotion, take risks, or believe that their voice and opinions matters. Therefore, studying self-reported confidence allows the research to focus on how teenagers themselves experience changes in confidence and self-expression.

Overall, the existing literature supports the logic of the hypothesis that vocal training may positively influence teenage confidence and self-expression. Research on music participations shows that musical engagement can support self-esteem, emotional expression, discipline, social confidence, and belonging. Similarly, research on performance proves that repeated exposure to being seen, heard, and evaluated can reduce fear and increase confidence simultaneously. Vocal training brings these two areas together in a particularly personal way because it uses the body and voice as the instrument. However, the literature does not fully answer the exact research question because fewer studies focus specifically on vocal training in teenagers. Much of the available research examines broader music participation, instrumental instruction, drama, public speaking, performance anxiety, or adult and university populations (Hallam). This gap supports

the need for the next phase of research, which will focus more directly on how teenagers themselves report changes in confidence, stage presence, and self-expression through vocal training and performance.

Conclusion

Overall, this literature review suggests that music participation and performance-based experiences can both support teenage confidence and self-expression. The first section showed that music participation may help adolescents build self-esteem, emotional expression, discipline, and social confidence. Studies on structured music instruction and group music participation all prove that music can influence how young people understand themselves, connect with others, and express emotion. These findings are important because they show that music is more than just an artistic activity: it is a developmental experience that can support confidence and personal growth. Additionally, the second section showed that performance-based experiences can also strengthen confidence by placing teenagers in situations where they are seen, heard, and evaluated. Research shows that these exact scenarios can help adolescents reduce anxiety, become more comfortable with visibility, and develop a stronger sense of self. This section proved that performance can transform public exposure from something intimidating into something empowering through community, discipline, and support.

Vocal training brings these two areas together. It includes the benefits of music participation because it requires practice, discipline, technical growth, emotional interpretation, and artistic expression. At the same time, it includes the benefits of performance because singers must learn to use their voices in front of others. This combination naturally makes vocal training especially relevant to adolescent confidence and self-expression—more so than music participation and performance individually. Singing is deeply personal as the voice is part of the body and closely connected to identity, making it so that a teenager who sings is not only developing a music skill; they are learning to own and trust their own voice, communicate emotion, and express themselves publicly.

While this literature review establishes a working theoretical foundation, it also serves as the first phase of the author's larger research project. The next phase will transition into original, teen-focused primary data collection examining how consistent vocal training and guided performance influence adolescents' self-reported confidence and self-expression over time. Through surveys, small and personal vocal workshops, guided performances, participant reflections, and longitudinal tracking, the author plans to collect evidence directly from teenage participants during their involvement in vocal training. Unlike many of the studies discussed in this review, which generally focus on observed confidence, general self-esteem, public speaking anxiety, drama performance, or broader music participation, this project will focus specifically on teenagers describing changes in their own internal confidence and willingness to express themselves. This distinction is crucial because the goal is not only to determine whether participants appear more confident to others, but also whether they genuinely feel more capable, expressive, and comfortable using their voices. By applying the mechanisms identified in the

literature review to real-world adolescent settings, this next phase will help determine whether those patterns remain evident and develop over time through direct vocal training and performance experiences.

Therefore, although the current literature review can evidently stand alone as an analysis of research, it also creates the foundation needed for future teen-focused primary research and data collection. Based on the findings reviewed, the hypothesis is that vocal training and guided performance will positively impact a teenager's self-reported confidence, stage presence, and overall self-expression. This hypothesis is based on the idea that vocal training combines music development, emotional expression, and repeated performance exposure in a way that may be especially meaningful during adolescence.

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Sustainable Practices and Social Impact in Upcycling Textile Wastes
By Annika Mehta

Abstract

Due to rising production, shifting customer preferences, and the rise of quick fashion, the global fashion business has grown significantly. However, resource depletion, environmental deterioration, and textile waste levels have all increased as a result of this rise. Increased landfill usage, greenhouse gas emissions, and inefficient resource consumption are the outcomes of the textile industry's linear "take-make-dispose" strategy. In order to address the growing problem of textile waste and facilitate the shift to a circular textile economy, this study looks at textile upcycling as a sustainable approach. There are social, economic, and environmental advantages of textile upcycling. Benefits to the environment include lowering carbon emissions, preserving natural resources, cutting down on landfill waste, and lowering the production of textile waste in general. While social consequences center on women's employment, artisan livelihoods, community involvement, and skill development, economic benefits are examined through the prism of low-cost entrepreneurship, circular economy models, and employment prospects. The primary obstacles to textile upcycling are scale constraints, implementation difficulties, customer opposition, and preserving product quality consistency. Textile upcycling offers a multifaceted strategy for lowering textile waste while creating social, economic, and environmental benefit.

Keywords

Textile waste; Textile upcycling; Circular economy; Sustainable fashion; Fast fashion; Waste reduction; Social sustainability; Community initiatives

1. Introduction

Industrialization, international trade, and shifting consumer behavior have changed the global fashion industry from a small-scale luxury sector to a highly integrated global enterprise. The shift from haute couture and handmade clothing to ready-to-wear production made it possible to produce clothing on a bigger scale and make it available to a greater number of people. In addition to increasing production, consumption, and environmental pressures, this expansion turned fashion into a significant global economic industry (Miranda and Roldán, 2025). Fashion and design are crucial elements of the creative economy, generating opportunities for small and medium-sized businesses while adding commercial and cultural value (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2026). The emergence of fast fashion is one of the key trends influencing the modern fashion business. Low-cost apparel, quick manufacturing cycles, frequent introduction of new styles, and shorter garment wear times are characteristics of fast fashion. The rise of fast fashion has been linked to lower production costs, higher consumption, and shorter clothing lifespans. Customers are encouraged to buy clothes more frequently by this business strategy. This leads to overproduction and early disposal. Clothing can be viewed as a transient consumer good rather than a long-lasting resource as trend cycles

quicken. Natural resources and waste-management systems are further strained by the ensuing rise in output and consumption (Niinimäki et al., “The Environmental Price of Fast Fashion”, 2020). The amount of textile waste has grown to be a significant sustainability issue. In 2020, each individual in the EU consumed about 16 kg of textiles, of which only 4.4 kg were collected separately for recycling and reuse, with the remaining 11.6 kg ending up in mixed domestic waste streams (European Environment Agency, 2023). The average EU consumer's textile usage consumed about nine cubic meters of water, 400 square meters of land, and 391 kilograms of raw materials, resulting in a carbon footprint of about 270 kg per person. Less than 1% of textiles worldwide are recycled into new textile goods despite growing efforts toward circularity, underscoring serious flaws in the current waste management and recycling systems (European Environment Agency; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2023). The manufacture of fibers and fabrics, clothing manufacturing, selling, consumer usage, and disposal are all stages of the product lifecycle that produce textile waste. Reuse, recycling, and ethical disposal are made extremely difficult by rising consumption, low collection rates, and short garment lifespans (Niinimäki et al., “The Environmental Price of Fast Fashion”, 2020). Millions of people, especially women, depend on the textile and apparel industry for their livelihoods, yet workers may face poor pay, unstable employment, and restricted access to possibilities for skill development and promotion (“Rethinking Economy to Heal Our Planet: A UNESCO Campus Empowering Youth for a Sustainable Future”, 2024). Upcycling provides an opportunity to minimize waste while generating economic and social value by turning discarded fabrics into valuable and usable items. Therefore, this study looks at textile upcycling as a possible way to deal with textile waste, emphasizing its advantages for the environment, economy, and society as well as its implementation difficulties and the contribution of community-based projects to a more sustainable and circular textile system.

2. Methodology

In order to investigate textile waste, textile upcycling, its sustainability advantages, related difficulties, and community-based efforts, this study used a comprehensive literature review technique. The review's goal was to compile the body of knowledge from credible reports from reputable international organizations, peer-reviewed research articles, and scholarly journals. Understanding textile waste, understanding upcycling, sustainable benefits of textile upcycling, issues related to upcycling, and community-based efforts were the five key topics in which the literature was thematically analyzed. Academic and institutional resources, such as ScienceDirect, Springer, Nature, Wiley, the European Environment Agency, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, UNESCO, UNCTAD, WRAP, Textile Exchange, and the European Commission, were used to find pertinent literature. Peer-reviewed research and reputable institutional publications that provide information on the production and disposal of textile waste, circular economy practices, environmental effects, economic opportunities, social results, and obstacles to textile upcycling were given priority. Included were studies that had a direct bearing on community-based textile practices, circularity, recycling, upcycling, sustainable fashion, and

textile waste. The review's initial phase concentrated on comprehending textile waste, including its origins and contemporary disposal techniques. The second phase looked at the idea of upcycling and made a distinction between it and recycling and reuse. The benefits of textile upcycling for the environment, economy, and society were examined in the third stage, with a focus on carbon emissions, landfill reduction, resource conservation, waste reduction, entrepreneurship, the development of the circular economy, employment, artisan livelihoods, and skill development. The results from the chosen literature were arranged using a qualitative thematic analysis. To detect recurrent opportunities and constraints related to textile upcycling, similar data were categorized into common themes and compared. Similar themes of circular practices, obstacles, sustainability results, and research needs are found throughout systematic reviews of textile circularity. To give a real-world example of textile upcycling, a community-based case study was included.

2.1 Inclusions

- Scholarly studies and peer-reviewed research publications about upcycling and textile waste.
- Reports from reputable agencies including Textile Exchange, EEA, WRAP, UNEP, UNESCO, and UNCTAD.
- Research on the social, economic, and environmental advantages of upcycling textiles.
- Research on issues including quality, user impression, and scalability.
- Case studies on fashion firms, NGOs, craftspeople, and community-based projects.
- English-language full-text sources.

2.2 Exclusions:

- Research unrelated to sustainable fashion, upcycling, or textile waste.
- Sources that lack reliable authorship or proof.
- Duplicate research or publications.
- The full text of the sources is not available.
- Publications that are not in English.
- Articles that had nothing to do with upcycling, simply addressed traditional recycling.

3. Discussion

3.1 Understanding Textile Waste

From production to post-consumer disposal, wasted textile materials produced during the lifecycle of apparel, shoes, home textiles, and other textile goods are referred to as textile waste. Offcuts from manufacture, faulty goods, unsold merchandise, and used clothing that isn't wanted or functional are all included. Fast fashion and shifting consumer tastes have led to an increase in textile production and consumption, which has greatly increased the amount of textile waste produced globally. In terms of their effects on climate change and the environment, textiles rank fourth after food, housing, and mobility, according to the European Environment Agency (EEA),

making them one of the consumption sectors with the greatest environmental implications. Large amounts of raw materials, energy, water, and chemicals are needed for the production of textiles, and the use stage adds to environmental stresses by washing, drying, and releasing microfibers into wastewater (Textile Exchange, 2019). Only a small percentage of textiles are recycled or reused into new textile goods when their usable lives are over, with the majority being disposed of in landfills or burned. The EEA highlights the unsustainability of the existing linear model of textile production and consumption, which is typified by the take, make, and dispose method. Reducing textile waste and minimizing its environmental impact thus requires a shift to a circular textile system that emphasizes durability, repair, reuse, recycling, and enhanced product design ("Textiles and the Environment: The Role of Design in Europe's Circular Economy", 2022).

3.2 Sources of Textile Waste

From the production of raw materials to the disposal of used garments, textile waste can arise at several points in the clothing value chain. Fiber processing, fabric manufacture, clothing cutting, defective items, and unsold inventory all produce large amounts of waste during the manufacturing stage. Retail businesses' unsold seasonal collections, refunds, and excess inventory all contribute to textile waste. A significant amount of household clothing is left unused for long periods of time before being thrown away, according to the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP). Fast fashion's inefficient consumption practices are because many clothing items are thrown away despite still having functional worth. The production of textile waste is further accelerated by consumer shopping behaviors, which are typified by frequent purchases and shorter garment lifespans. Additionally, the buildup of abandoned textiles in landfills or incinerators is a result of poor repair, reuse, and recycling procedures. In order to support a more resource-efficient and circular textile system, WRAP highlights that prolonging the active life of clothing through better care, reuse, resale, and responsible disposal can significantly reduce textile waste and lower the environmental impacts associated with clothing production and consumption (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). From the production of raw materials to manufacturing, distribution, consumption, and end-of-life disposal, textile waste is produced at every stage of the fashion and textile value chain. Niinimäki et al. (2020) claim that because fast fashion encourages quick production cycles, frequent purchases, and shorter clothing lifespans, it has greatly increased textile waste. Fiber processing, fabric manufacture, cutting, stitching, dyeing, and finishing are the stages of production when waste is produced. These processes result in excess materials, defective products, and chemical residues. Fashion businesses' overproduction also results in significant amounts of unsold inventory, which is frequently thrown away or destroyed. Consumers are encouraged to discard clothing that is frequently still wearable too soon due to shifting fashion trends, deteriorating apparel quality, and rising costs. Post-consumer textile waste has sharply increased as a result of the roughly twofold increase in clothing production since 2000 and the significant decrease in the average duration of garment usage. A large portion of this abandoned apparel is either shipped to underdeveloped nations, where waste management systems are often insufficient, or dumped in

landfills or burned. These linked sources show that textile waste is a systemic problem caused by unsustainable production methods, excessive consumption, and the dominant linear "take–make–dispose" model of the global fashion business rather than just a consumer problem (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

3.3 Current Disposal Method

The majority of current methods for disposing of textile waste are based on a linear economic paradigm, in which goods are produced, used, and then discarded after their useful lives are over. The European Environment Agency (EEA) reports that a significant amount of end-of-life textiles are being burned or dumped in landfills, especially when they are thrown away with mixed domestic waste rather than being collected separately. The bulk of wasted clothing is not successfully diverted from traditional waste streams, despite the fact that recyclable and reusable textiles can be recovered using specialized collecting systems. Textiles that are gathered separately are sorted to see if they can be recycled, reused, or disposed of. Less than 1% of textiles worldwide are recycled into new textile products due to technological constraints, mixed fiber compositions, and the presence of accessories like buttons, zippers, and chemical finishes that complicate recycling procedures. Fiber-to-fiber recycling is still incredibly limited. A large amount of textile waste is either dumped in landfills or burned for energy recovery, which results in the loss of valuable resources and more greenhouse gas emissions. Products must be made to be durable, repairable, and recyclable in order to improve textile collection, reuse, and recycling. A circular textile system can reduce reliance on landfills, preserve natural resources, prolong product lifecycles (“Textiles and the Environment: The Role of Design in Europe’s Circular Economy”, 2022). Inadequate infrastructure and insufficient recovery systems contribute to the growing buildup of rejected materials, which has an impact on current textile disposal practices as well. According to the World Bank's What a trash study, landfills continue to be one of the most popular ways to dispose of trash globally, with a sizable amount of waste being dumped in landfills or unmanaged disposal sites. Used clothing is combined with household waste and it misses the chance to be recycled or reused. It is either taken to landfills or burned. In addition to contributing to environmental issues related to waste accumulation and greenhouse gas emissions, landfilling textiles causes the long-term loss of important fibers and resources. Open dumping and unregulated disposal are major issues in areas with inadequate waste management infrastructure. They raise dangers to human health and ecosystems. Textile waste can be converted from an environmental burden into a useful resource by lowering reliance on landfills and incineration (Cook et al., 2018).

3.4 Upcycling- Recycle, Reuse and Upcycle

Upcycling is a sustainable approach that entails creating new things with higher value, better quality, or increased functionality from waste materials, undesired objects, or abandoned resources. Upcycling concentrates on maintaining the current value and qualities of materials by imaginatively changing them into higher-value products. Upcycling is a crucial strategy in the

circular economy because it minimizes the demand for new resources and reduces material waste. It promotes sustainable production and consumption. Upcycling helps lessen the environmental effects of raw material extraction, manufacture, and trash disposal by prolonging the life of materials. It promotes innovation, creativity, and consumer involvement. As a circular economy tactic, upcycling offers chances to cut waste production while fostering more sustainable design and consumption habits that benefit the environment, economy, and society (Sandanayake et al., 2017). By extending the useful life of materials and products, upcycling is a sustainable strategy that helps the shift from a linear textile system to a circular economy. Upcycling in the fashion industry is the process of creating new things out of discarded materials, textile waste, or existing clothing without lowering the material's original worth. Upcycling seeks to conserve resources as opposed to the conventional "take, make, dispose" approach. According to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, a circular fashion system should prioritize creating goods that are reusable, constructed from safe, recycled, or renewable materials, and designed to be remade. Examples of upcycling processes are reconstructing old clothing, merging various textile pieces, revamping out-of-date apparel, or turning fabric waste into new fashion items and accessories. Upcycling helps reduce waste, conserve resources, and lessen its negative effects on the environment by lowering the need for virgin materials and minimizing textile disposal. Additionally, by adding value to materials that would otherwise be thrown away, it promotes creativity and new prospects for sustainable fashion companies (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, “Fashion and the Circular Economy”, 2022).

3.5 Common Upcycling Techniques

In the textile and fashion industries, upcycling frequently entails imaginatively repurposing used clothing, leftover fabric, and textile waste to create new goods with increased value and longer usability. Upcycling concentrates on preserving the original material structure while altering or redesigning pre-existing textiles, in contrast to traditional recycling, which breaks things down into fibers. The first step in upcycling design is to comprehend the waste materials that are available and develop solutions that adjust to the size, shape, and features of discarded fabrics. Garment redesign is a popular technique that involves reconstructing, altering, or merging various garments to create new looks. Assembling smaller textile pieces, fabric scraps, or leftover materials into new clothing, purses, and accessories is known as patchwork and fabric combining techniques. Repurposing involves turning old clothing and textile waste into non-clothing things like bags, cushions, home décor, and other useful products (“Fashion and Textiles - Springer”, 2018). Typical textile upcycling methods entail imaginatively repurposing old clothing, discarded fabrics, and unused textile resources to create new goods with increased utility and value. Garment redesign is a popular technique that involves altering old clothing by cutting, reshaping, fitting, or mixing multiple styles to create new looks. Another popular technique is patchwork, which creates new clothing, purses, and accessories by piecing together tiny pieces of fabric or textile scraps. Additional methods for enhancing the look and usability of used fabrics include surface decoration, printing, dyeing, and embroidery.

Additionally, textile waste can be recycled into useful household items, accessories, and home décor items (“Fabric Fabric”, 2026).

3.6 Sustainable Benefits of Textile Upcycling

a. Environmental

By lessening the detrimental effects of traditional textile production, use, and disposal, textile upcycling offers substantial environmental advantages. Throughout the supply chain, the fashion sector significantly increases greenhouse gas emissions, water consumption, chemical pollution, and textile waste. It also demands a large amount of natural resources. Short garment lifespans, excessive production, and rising textile waste volumes have all contributed to the fast fashion industry's rapid rise and increased environmental concerns. By prolonging the useful life of already-made clothing and materials, lowering the demand for virgin fiber manufacture, and minimizing the environmental effects of raw material extraction, manufacturing, and transportation, upcycling tackles these issues. Upcycling helps divert waste away from landfills and lessens the amount of textile waste entering disposal systems by turning discarded fabrics into new clothes, accessories, or useful products. By preserving inherent energy, water, and materials previously utilized in the original product, it also promotes reduced resource usage. Keeping clothing in circulation through upcycling can help lower the fashion industry's overall carbon footprint because the creation of textiles entails significant carbon emissions throughout the fiber production, processing, and manufacturing phases. Additionally, by opposing the fast-fashion model of frequent purchase and disposal, upcycling promotes sustainable consumption habits and longer product lifecycles. Upcycling textiles is a successful circular economy tactic for cutting waste production, preserving resources, and lessening the fashion industry's environmental impact (Niinimäki et al., “The Environmental Price of Fast Fashion”, 2020). By encouraging a move toward circular textile systems that lessen reliance on virgin materials and lessen the effects of textile production, textile upcycling promotes environmental sustainability. Textile Exchange draws attention to the fashion industry's heavy reliance on materials from fossil fuels, agriculture, and forests, which puts a lot of strain on the environment along the supply chain. Reusing, redesigning, and upcycling existing textiles can prolong their lifespan and reduce the need for new fiber manufacturing, saving resources and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. By extending the useful life of valuable materials, cutting down on textile waste, and lowering dependency on disposal techniques like landfills and incineration, upcycling also promotes circularity (Textile Exchange, “Textile Exchange”, 2019). The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) is an international environmental action group that promotes sustainable production and consumption systems, reduces waste, and increases resource efficiency in order to hasten the shift to a circular economy. WRAP works with governments, companies, and organizations in the textile industry to improve the sustainability of textile manufacturing and consumption practices, cut greenhouse gas emissions, reduce

clothing waste, and use less water. Its programs encourage responsible consumer behavior, longer product lifecycles, better recycling infrastructure, and circular design (WRAP, 2024).

b. Economical

By promoting entrepreneurship, fostering the shift to a circular economy, and generating new job opportunities, textile upcycling offers substantial economic opportunities. Upcycling supports this strategy in the textile industry by turning used clothing and textile waste into worthwhile new goods, saving production costs, and reducing reliance on newly manufactured resources. This gives small companies, designers, and entrepreneurs the chance to produce affordable sustainable fashion projects by utilizing pre-existing materials instead of making significant investments in the manufacturing of raw materials.In response to growing customer demand for eco-friendly items, textile upcycling businesses can create economic value through redesigned apparel, accessories, and recycled textile products. Additionally, the European Commission highlights that circular economy initiatives have a significant potential to create jobs, especially in industries like sustainable manufacturing, recycling, repair, and reuse. Upcycling can help create jobs for designers, craftspeople, repair professionals, and workers in material processing and collection within the textile sector. Therefore, by opening up new markets, encouraging entrepreneurship, and creating green job possibilities within a circular textile economy, textile upcycling not only reduces waste but also strengthens the economy ("Circular Economy", 2025).

c. Social

By fostering community development, maintaining traditional handicraft, and offering chances for skill development and employment, textile upcycling produces significant social advantages. In order to support the livelihoods of artisans and creative workers, preserve traditional knowledge, and foster inclusive economic growth, UNESCO highlights the significance of cultural and creative industries. Upcycling in the textile industry can improve these social outcomes by giving people and communities the chance to use craft-based methods to turn waste materials into useful goods. Artists can apply ancient skills while adapting them to sustainable fashion markets through techniques including weaving, embroidery, textile repair, and garment reconstruction ("Rethinking Economy to Heal Our Planet: A UNESCO Campus Empowering Youth for a Sustainable Future", 2024). Fashion, design, and traditional crafts are examples of creative industries that help sustainable development by generating revenue, fostering innovation, and fostering cultural expression. Upcycling gives small-scale producers, designers, and craftspeople in the textile industry the chance to add value to waste materials while preserving traditional craftsmanship and creating new, sustainable goods. Initiatives that promote upcycling can especially help women by opening up job opportunities in fields like textile repair, sewing, embroidery, weaving, and clothing redesign (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2026).

3.7 Challenges of Textile Upcycling

Scaling up from small, craft-based companies to larger commercial ones is one of the main obstacles facing textile upcycling. Upcycling promotes resource efficiency, waste reduction, and the growth of the circular economy. The majority of upcycling companies continue to operate on a limited scale because of many operational obstacles. The uneven availability and quality of textile waste materials is a major problem. Upcycling companies rely on discarded clothing and fabrics that differ in composition, condition, color, and quantity, in contrast to traditional manufacturing processes that use uniform raw materials. Establishing reliable supply chains and upholding regular production procedures become challenging as a result. It takes skilled labor, ingenuity, manual sorting, repair, redesign, and specialized craftsmanship to turn discarded textiles into new items, which can lengthen production times and raise costs. Small upcycling businesses' capacity to grow is further hampered by limited access to capital, manufacturing facilities, equipment, and skilled labor. Businesses also struggle with marketing and raising consumer awareness of the benefits of repurposed goods. In order to create supportive infrastructure and business models, cooperation between material suppliers, designers, retailers, customers, and legislators is necessary for successful scaling (Singh et al., 2019). There are a number of operational and technological difficulties in implementing circular textile systems and textile upcycling. Inadequate collection and sorting methods, low investment in textile waste processing technology, poor stakeholder coordination, and challenges in commercializing recycling and reprocessing solutions are some of the obstacles. While technological constraints continue to be long-term obstacles to attaining large-scale textile circularity, social and management-related problems, such as inadequate cooperation throughout the supply chain and little market support for recycled textiles, present short-term difficulties (Chen et al., 2024). Adoption of textile upcycling and other circular fashion approaches is still severely hampered by consumer opposition. Customers may be reluctant to embrace circular fashion models because of issues with product quality, cost, hygienic practices, and societal acceptance. Market acceptability could be hampered by unfavorable opinions of used or upcycled goods (Rasfeld, 2026).

3.8 Community-based Initiatives Case Study

Threads of Change project gathers used denim and textile materials. It is initiated in Baruch, India. Then the local artisan women turn them into handcrafted goods like blankets and reusable bags. It also gives workers a means of subsistence. Working with craftsmen, repurposing materials, and producing circular fashion items are the main goals. It demonstrates the possibility of community-driven solutions to combat textile waste, under the direction of young activist Annika Mehta. The project gathers used denim and textile materials and collaborates with regional artisan women to turn waste into practical goods like blankets, purses, and other handmade goods. By using this strategy, the project supports traditional craftsmanship, generates jobs, and lessens textile waste (Jain, 2026).

4. Conclusion

The growing problem of textile waste has been greatly exacerbated by the size of the global fashion industry and the quick growth of fast fashion. Greenhouse gas emissions, resource depletion, pollution, and an increased reliance on landfill systems are only a few of the significant environmental challenges brought about by the conventional linear model of textile production, which is defined by resource extraction, mass production, consumption, and disposal. By creating new goods with longer lifespans and extra value from discarded clothing, fabric scraps, and textile waste, textile upcycling offers a practical solution to these problems. Upcycling conserves existing materials through inventive redesign, repair, rebuilding, and repurposing, in contrast to traditional recycling techniques that can call for extensive processing and may lower material quality. Upcycling helps reduce waste, the need for virgin materials, carbon emissions, and the shift to a circular textile economy by extending the life of textiles. In addition to its positive effects on the environment, textile upcycling offers significant social and economic advantages. By allowing small companies and designers to add value to pre-existing materials while lowering reliance on pricey raw materials, it promotes low-cost entrepreneurship. Due to intermittent textile waste supplies, labor-intensive processes, inadequate infrastructure, and challenges in attaining large-scale manufacturing, scalability continues to be a major obstacle. Governments, fashion labels, trash management companies, designers, customers, and community organizations must work together to address these issues. A viable route toward a more circular and sustainable fashion industry is textile upcycling.

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Self-Silencing in First Encounters: A Cross-Cultural Comparison Between the United States and China By Zihan Tang

Abstract

How directly do people express themselves during first encounters has been widely discussed across cultures, yet the extent remains debated. Most studies claim that "the Chinese do it more", but few studies quantify this cultural difference. This study aims to examine to what extent Americans and Chinese speak contrary to their thoughts in order to satisfy other people's common beliefs, and whether Americans exhibit comparable levels of such conformity in certain situations. We hypothesize that Chinese will show higher conformity overall, but Americans will catch up under high social pressure. A mixed-methods cross-cultural experimental design was applied with participants from the university subject pool in both the United States and China. In the experimental session, participants completed a 15-item conformity task including factual and attitude questions, with exposure to pre-programmed peer responses to drive conformity rates. In the observational component, unacquainted dyads engaged in structured face-to-face conversations ranging from neutral topics to conversational topics, and their verbal agreements and nonverbal alignments were video-recorded and coded. We anticipate that the overall cultural difference will yield a moderate effect size (Cohen's $d \approx 0.50$), with the interaction primarily driven by U.S. participants' increasing conformity on attitudinal and controversial topics. Findings should be interpreted with caution, as the expected outcome is hypothesized, and limits mostly due to slightly narrow sample size. If confirmed, these findings will suggest that cultural norms shape expressive behavior and help prevent social misunderstandings.

Keywords: self-silencing; cross-cultural comparison; conformity; first encounters; expressive suppression

Introduction

Cultural variations manifest from many aspects, and how directly individuals express their true opinions during initial social encounters has long been recognized as a fundamental perspective. In cross-cultural communication research, Asians (particularly Chinese) are more often characterized as indirect communication and face preservation, while Westerners (particularly Americans) are symbols of prioritizing directness and self-expression (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Hofstede, 2001). However, although these cultural stereotypes still exist in scholarly discourse and public imagination, the evidence to support this concept is surprisingly limited in both scope and precision.

An early research done by Lily C.Huang and Mary B.Harris (1973) provided significant evidence for this cultural difference. Using a cross-cultural field experiment, they found out that Chinese participants showed higher conformity than the American counterparts when imitating a model's choice in public settings. Importantly, they also claimed that participants' choices are slightly influenced by the model's social status. This study remains an important direct evidence

for discussing the conformity between Chinese and Americans in face-to-face conversations. Yet, despite its historical significance, this study, like most of the other papers, remains a critical question unanswered: How much "more" are Chinese compared to Americans? Also, they rarely quantified its magnitude among different social contexts. Moreover, the literature implicitly treats "Chinese conformity" as a fixed cultural trait rather than a socially responsible behavior. They neglected the possibility that the Americans, especially when under certain social pressure, will show the same conformity as Chinese participants.

To address this gap, the present study aims to quantify the extent to which Chinese and Americans express their opinion during first encounters, and also whether cultural differences will play a minor role under high social pressure. Use cross-cultural theories of self-explanation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) for reference, we claimed that people from interdependent culture (e.g., China) generally value social expectations more than people from independent culture (e.g., America), therefore, Chinese display higher conformity overall. However, we also developed that people from independent cultures are not totally immune from social desirability. When the cost of expressing themselves becomes too high, for instance, when a debate threatens social harmony, they will let their personal opinions align with group norms. Thus, social gap is a predominant factor under low pressure situations, and significantly reduced or even eliminated in high pressure circumstances.

Specifically, we hypothesis that: (1)Chinese participants will show higher conformity than Americans overall in both experimental and observational tasks; (2)The social difference in conformity will be moderated by social pressure: U.S. participants will turn to be more conformed on attitudinal (versus factual) questions in the experimental task and on controversial (versus neutral) topics in the observational task; (3)The conformity of individuals will be positively correlated in two tasks, demonstrating the hypothesis non-accidental rather than task-specific artifacts. By clarifying the logic of people's conformity under different situations, whether in business, diplomacy, or in daily social situations, costly misunderstandings will be reduced.

Literature Review

How directly individuals express their true opinions during initial social encounters has long been recognized as a fundamental dimension of cultural variation. Proponents of the cultural script perspective argue that East Asian societies emphasize interpersonal harmony and indirect communication, whereas Western societies prioritize self-expression and directness (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Hofstede, 2001). Indeed, cross-cultural meta-analytic evidence suggests that individuals from interdependent cultures consistently display higher levels of conformity than those from independent cultures (Bond & Smith, 1996). However, these aggregate effects neglect considerable difference across situational contexts, with some conditions producing large differences and others yielding minimal or no differences (Bond & Smith, 1996; Huang & Harris, 1973). This inconsistency has prompted researchers to move

beyond the simple question of "who conforms more?" toward more slighted inquiries regarding the conditions under which cultural differences emerge, persist, or even disappear.

Early behavioral evidence for this cultural difference came from field experiments. For instance, Huang and Harris (1973) conducted a field experiment in Taiwan and the United States, finding that Chinese participants are significantly more conforming than Americans in public settings. Importantly, they also concluded that the model's social status has significant influences on how people in both cultures demonstrate their thoughts, while specific task competence had negligible effects. However, early studies focused on establishing the direction of conformity, leaving the magnitude across varying social contexts largely unexplored.

Beside field experiment findings, a more psychologically oriented line of inquiry has pulled attention towards underlying mechanisms of cultural conformity. Drawing on Self-Construal Theory (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), researchers have argued that individuals from interdependent cultures are more attuned to social expectations and relational harmony, and thus more likely to suppress private views in the presence of others. In contrast, individuals from independent cultures prioritize authenticity and self-expression, rendering them less susceptible to social influence in low-stakes situations. However, recent theorizing has suggested that these cultural tendencies are not fixed but contextually responsive. When the social costs of dissenting become sufficiently high, for instance, when discussing value-laden topics or when public disagreement threatens relational harmony,individuals from independent cultures may exhibit conformity levels comparable to their interdependent counterparts (Bond & Smith, 1996; Kim & Markus, 1999). This theoretical insight demonstrates that the cultural gap is not a static trait but a dynamic pattern that depends on the social pressure inherent in the situation.

Despite these important contributions, the existing literature presents two significant limitations that warrant attention. First of all, the vast majority of studies, including Huang and Harris (1973), have relied on categorical comparisons, simply concluding that "Chinese are more conforming than Americans," without quantifying the magnitude of this difference across varying conditions. Second, and more critically, few studies have systematically manipulated social pressure to test whether the cultural gap narrows under high-stakes conditions. That is, while we know that cultural differences exist in low-pressure contexts (e.g., factual questions, neutral topics), we know very little about whether Americans "catch up" to Chinese when the pressure to align is sufficiently strong. It is reasonable that on neutral topics Chinese conformity exceeds American conformity, but on controversial or value-laden topics, Americans suppress their private views to avoid relational conflict, thereby narrowing or even eliminating the cultural gap. This absence of quantified, context-sensitive research limits both theoretical models of cultural influence and practical recommendations for cross-cultural communication training.

Method

Research Design

This study will involve a mixed-method cross-cultural experimental design to examine cultural differences in expressing conformity during first encounters between strangers in the United States and China. The experiment includes two components: (a) a laboratory conformity task based on the classic Asch paradigm, and (b) a supplementary observational component conducting face-to-face interactions. Both components will be conducted independently in both cultural contexts to enable cross-cultural comparisons. The experimental component is designed to quantify conformity under controlled conditions, while the observational component aims to capture naturalistic alignment behaviors during real-time social interactions. No pre-existing data will be used; all data will be collected prospectively following the procedures described below.

Participants

For the experimental component, a total of 120 participants (60 per culture) will be recruited from university subject pools in the United States and China. Participants will be undergraduate students aged 18–25 years, with no prior acquaintance with any other participant in the same session. Recruitment will be conducted through campus-wide email announcements and subject pool management systems.

For the observational component, an independent sample of 40–60 participants (20–30 groups per culture) will be recruited through similar channels. Each participant will be paired with an unacquainted same-culture peer to ensure that initial encounter dynamics can be captured.

The sample size was determined based on prior meta-analyses of cultural differences in conformity (Bond & Smith, 1996), which reported moderate effect sizes (Cohen"s $d \approx 0.50$). An a priori power analysis using G Power (Faul et al., 2009) indicated that a total sample of 96 participants (48 per condition) is sufficient to detect a moderate effect with 80% power at $\alpha = .05$ (two-tailed). We will oversample to account for anticipated attrition and exclusion due to suspicion of the manipulation. All participants will provide written informed consent prior to participation, and the study protocol will be submitted for approval to the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) of the respective universities.

Procedure

The study will be conducted in two phases. In Phase 1, participants will complete the experimental conformity task in a private laboratory setting. In Phase 2, a separate sample of participants will complete the observational dyadic interaction task. Both phases are described in detail below.

Phase 1: Laboratory-based conformity task. Participants will complete the task individually in a private laboratory room equipped with a computer terminal. The procedure will consist of three steps. First, participants will be presented with 15 questions (5 factual, 5 aesthetic or attitudinal, and 5 filler items) and asked to make an independent selection from two or three response options. Second, after completing their initial choice for each question, participants will be shown a summary screen displaying their own answer alongside the

purported answers of five other participants from the same session. Participants will be led to believe that these are real peer responses, but in reality, these responses will be pre-programmed by the experimenters. For factual questions, the preset responses will be deliberately set to be incorrect; for aesthetic/attitudinal questions, the preset responses will be designed to be strongly biased toward one option. Third, participants will be given an opportunity to change or retain their original answer. This final choice will be recorded as the dependent measure. At the conclusion of the session, a fully debriefing will be conducted, during which participants will be informed of the preset nature of the peer responses and given the opportunity to withdraw their data.

Phase 2: Observational dyadic interaction task. Twenty to thirty unacquainted dyads per culture will be recruited. Each dyad will engage in a structured face-to-face conversation lasting approximately 20 minutes, organized around 10 sequentially presented topics ranging from neutral (e.g., daily routines) to controversial (e.g., social values). Each topic will be discussed for 2 minutes, with brief transitions between topics. All interactions will be video-recorded from a frontal angle. Trained coders will later rate the recordings using a standardized coding scheme assessing verbal conformity behaviors (e.g., direct agreement, opinion revision, hedging) and nonverbal alignment cues (e.g., nodding frequency, facial mimicry, postural mirroring). These scores will be aggregated to generate a composite contrary-to-thought score per participant per topic.

Measures

Experimental conformity task: Conformity in the laboratory component will be manipulated as the proportion of trials on which participants change their final answer toward the pre-programmed majority response. This binary measure (change vs. no change) will be computed separately for factual questions and aesthetic/attitudinal questions, allowing for within-subject comparisons across question types.

Observational coding scheme: The composite contrary-to-thought score will be derived from the coding of video recordings. Each of the six behavioral indicators (four verbal: direct agreement, opinion revision, hedging, topic avoidance; two nonverbal: nodding frequency, facial mimicry) will be rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (not present) to 4 (highly frequent/intense). Weighted scores will be summed to produce a composite index, with higher scores indicating greater divergence between private thought and public expression. Inter-rater reliability will be assessed by having two independent coders rate 20% of the recordings, with Cohen's κ calculated for each behavioral indicator. The coding manual will be developed based on prior observational studies of cross-cultural interaction (e.g., Huang & Harris, 1973) and will be pilot-tested prior to full implementation.

Data Analysis Plan

All statistical analyses will be conducted using SPSS (Version 28.0) or R (Version 4.2).

Primary analysis: The primary hypothesis (Chinese participants will exhibit higher overall conformity than U.S. participants, but that Americans will catch up under high social pressure) will be tested using a mixed-design analysis of variance (ANOVA). For the experimental component, a 2 (Culture: U.S. vs. China) × 2 (Question Type: factual vs. attitudinal) repeated-measures ANOVA will be conducted, with Question Type as the within-subjects factor and conformity rate as the dependent variable. For the observational component, a 2 (Culture) × 2 (Topic Type: neutral vs. controversial) repeated-measures ANOVA will be performed, with Topic Type as the within-subjects factor and the composite contrary-to-thought score as the dependent variable. A significant Culture × Question Type interaction is expected to indicate that the cultural gap narrows on attitudinal (high-pressure) items.

Secondary analysis: To test the cross-component consistency hypothesis (H3), Pearson correlations will be computed between experimental conformity rates and observational contrary-to-thought scores, aggregated by cultural group and individual-level matching where possible.

Effect sizes: Partial eta squared (η_p^2) will be reported for ANOVA results, and Cohen's d will be reported for planned contrasts. The significance level will be set at $\alpha = .05$ (two-tailed) for all analyses. Effect sizes of $\eta_p^2 \geq .06$ and Cohen's $d \geq .50$ will be interpreted as moderate effects.

Missing data: In cases of missing data (e.g., incomplete responses, video recording failure), intention-to-treat analyses will be performed using multiple imputation with 20 imputations.

Expected Outcomes

Based on the theoretical framework of self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and prior meta-analytic evidence on cultural differences in conformity (Bond & Smith, 1996), we propose three sets of predictions corresponding to our hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Main Effect of Culture

We expect that Chinese participants will exhibit higher overall conformity than U.S. participants in both components of the study.

In the laboratory task, we predict that Chinese participants will change their answers toward the pre-programmed majority on a greater proportion of trials than U.S. participants. Based on prior meta-analyses (Bond & Smith, 1996), we anticipate a moderate effect size for this cultural difference (Cohen's $d \approx 0.50$). In practical terms, we expect Chinese participants' conformity rate to be approximately 10–15% higher than that of U.S. participants.

In the observational component, we predict that Chinese participants will display higher composite "contrary-to-thought" scores than U.S. participants, reflecting greater verbal and nonverbal alignment, including more frequent agreement, hedging, and facial mimicry. We again anticipate a moderate effect size (Cohen's $d \approx 0.45$–0.55).

Hypothesis 2: Interaction Effect (Culture × Social Pressure)

Our central prediction is that the cultural difference will be moderated by social pressure, such that the gap between Chinese and U.S. participants narrows under high-pressure conditions.

In the laboratory task, we expect a significant Culture × Question Type interaction. On factual questions (low social pressure), we expect Chinese participants to show higher conformity than U.S. participants. On attitudinal questions (high social pressure, where no objective answer exists), we expect U.S. participants to show a substantial increase in conformity, thereby narrowing, and potentially eliminating, the cultural gap.

In the observational component, we anticipate a parallel Culture × Topic Type interaction. On neutral topics (low pressure), we expect Chinese participants to display higher contrary-to-thought scores than U.S. participants. On controversial topics (high pressure), we expect U.S. participants to show increased alignment behaviors, similarly reducing the cultural difference.

We anticipate a moderate interaction effect (partial $\eta^2 \approx .06$), consistent with prior cross-cultural moderation research (Bond & Smith, 1996). This interaction is expected to be driven primarily by U.S. participants' increased conformity on high-pressure items, rather than by Chinese participants' decreased conformity on low-pressure items.

Hypothesis 3: Cross-Component Consistency

We predict that individual conformity tendencies will be positively correlated across the experimental and observational components. Participants who show higher conformity rates in the laboratory task are expected to display higher contrary-to-thought scores in the dyadic interaction task. Such a correlation would suggest that the observed cultural patterns reflect stable, culturally ingrained response styles rather than task-specific artifacts.

We anticipate a moderate positive correlation ($r \approx 0.30$-0.40) between the two components, consistent with prior research on cross-situational consistency in social behavior (Kenrick & Funder, 1988).

Why These Predictions Matter

If confirmed, these findings would make three contributions. First, they would move beyond the general claim that Chinese are more conforming than Americans by specifying how large this difference is and under what conditions it appears or disappears. Second, they would challenge the view that cultural differences are fixed, showing instead that Americans can exhibit "Chinese-like" conformity when social pressure is high. Third, they would provide evidence that these patterns are not task-specific but reflect stable, culturally shaped dispositions.

Conclusion

This study proposes a mixed-methods cross-cultural experimental design to examine whether Chinese and American strangers speak contrary to their private thoughts during first encounters, and whether this cultural difference narrows under high social pressure. By

integrating a laboratory-based conformity task with a face-to-face observational component, the study aims to provide both controlled and ecologically valid evidence on how cultural norms shape expressive behavior in real-time social interactions.

The primary contribution of this study is quantification. While previous research has established that Chinese individuals are generally more conforming than their American counterparts (Bond & Smith, 1996; Huang & Harris, 1973), few studies have specified the magnitude of this difference or examined its boundary conditions. This study addresses that gap by estimating the effect size of the cultural difference and by testing whether the gap narrows or disappears when social pressure is high. If confirmed, our predictions would suggest that cultural differences in conformity are not fixed traits but contextually responsive patterns, with Americans exhibiting "Chinese-like" conformity when the social costs of dissenting are sufficiently salient.

Beyond theoretical contributions, this research has practical implications for cross-cultural communication training. In increasingly globalized educational and professional settings, misunderstandings often arise not from ill intent but from divergent cultural scripts regarding when and how to express disagreement (Gudykunst et al., 1996). By identifying the specific conditions under which individuals from different cultural backgrounds suppress their true opinions, our findings could inform the development of targeted training programs that help professionals (such as international educators, diplomats, and multinational team leaders) recognize when silence or agreement may reflect cultural adaptation rather than genuine consent.

This study also contributes methodologically by combining controlled experimental measurement with naturalistic observation. The parallel design allows for cross-validation: if laboratory conformity correlates with observational alignment behaviors, it would strengthen the argument that the observed patterns reflect stable, culturally ingrained dispositions rather than task-specific artifacts. This dual-component approach offers a template for future cross-cultural research seeking to bridge the gap between internal validity (experimental control) and external validity (real-world generalizability).

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample will be drawn from university student populations in two countries, which may not represent the broader populations of the United States and China. Second, the use of deception in the experimental component raises ethical considerations, although participants will be fully debriefed and given the option to withdraw their data. Future research could extend this work by examining: (a) whether the observed patterns replicate in non-student samples and across other cultural contexts, (b) whether individual-level variables (e.g., self-construal orientation, prior intercultural contact) moderate the cultural effects.

In sum, this study offers a theoretically grounded, empirically testable framework for understanding how cultural norms regulate expressive behavior when strangers first meet. If the predicted patterns are confirmed, they will contribute to a more nuanced, context-sensitive model of cultural influence on social interaction, one that acknowledges both the persistence and the plasticity of culturally shaped behaviors.

Teen Loneliness Epidemic: Protective Impact of Teen Participation in Family Cooking and Other Shared Dining Practices By Sofia Ogulluk

Abstract

This study investigates whether adolescent participation in shared family cooking and other dining practices is associated with reduced loneliness, and whether this relationship is mediated by stronger parent-teen relationships and higher self-efficacy. This study addresses a gap in existing research that has not directly connected family meal participation with teen loneliness outcomes. While prior literature identifies strong parent-teen relationships and self-efficacy as protective factors against teen loneliness, and separately highlights the benefits of family meals, their intersection remains largely unexplored. Using a mixed-methods design, this study combines cross-sectional survey data from 157 high school students with qualitative insights from a semi-structured focus group discussion. Measures assessed levels of loneliness, parent-teen relationship quality, self-efficacy, and involvement in shared cooking and other dining practices. Findings indicate that adolescents who participate in shared cooking or other dining practices report consistently lower levels of loneliness compared to non-participants. The results also suggest that parent-teen relationships contribute to this association, as participants also report higher levels of parental understanding and communication. In contrast, participation in shared cooking or other dining practices is not shown to be directly associated with higher self-efficacy. However, when further conditioned by adolescents' perceived lack of cooking ability, non-participation appears linked to lower self-efficacy and higher loneliness. Overall, the study presents shared family cooking and other dining practices as accessible interventions for mitigating adolescent loneliness, offering a practical approach to addressing a growing public health concern.

Introduction

Loneliness has reached crisis proportions in the United States, prompting the US Surgeon General to issue an advisory declaring it a public health epidemic and calling for urgent action to "mend the social fabric of our nation" ("Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," 2023). The advisory emphasizes that social connection is as essential to human health as clean air and safe water. Loneliness is defined as a subjective feeling of social disconnection, arising from a lack of sufficiently deep or meaningful relationships (von Soest et al., 2020; see also Sabo et al., 2025; Qualitza et al., 2025). Contrary to popular belief, loneliness is not synonymous with being alone. Rather, it can be experienced even when surrounded by others, arising from the perception that the quality of one's relationships is not as robust or fulfilling as desired. The CIGNA Group, a prominent health insurance company, reports that 57% of Americans experience loneliness today, a condition that increases the risk of premature death and stroke by 26% and 32%, respectively ("Loneliness in America 2025: A Pervasive Struggle Requires a Communal Response," 2025; "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," 2023).

Loneliness, further, is not only an American crisis but a global one. The World Health Organization ("WHO") reports that one in six persons worldwide is affected by loneliness, with an estimated 100 deaths linked to it every hour (World Health Organization [WHO], 2025). Teens are particularly susceptible to experiencing loneliness more frequently and acutely than other age groups due to the profound "restructuring of social life" that occurs during adolescence (von Soest et al., 2020; see also Sabo et al., 2025; WHO 2025). Over 21% of teens worldwide face loneliness, with long-term consequences including diminished career success, hindered social skills development, and increased maladaptive social attitudes (WHO, 2025; Qualitza et al., 2025; von Soest et al., 2020).

Two factors consistently associated with lower levels of teen loneliness are strong parental support and high self-efficacy (Cheng et al., 2021; Qualitza et al., 2025; von Soest et al., 2020; Szcześniak et al., 2025). Despite increasing independence being a common feature of adolescence, the parent-teen relationship remains "one of the best predictors of adolescent loneliness," underscoring the continued importance of parental support (Cheng et al., 2021; Qualitza et al., 2025; von Soest et al., 2020). Similarly, self-efficacy, which refers to a person's confidence in their ability to manage challenges, is associated with decreased loneliness (Szcześniak et al., 2025; Cheng et al., 2021). These findings raise an important question: are there effective, everyday strategies that can strengthen parent-teen relationships and/or boost self-efficacy to address the global teen loneliness epidemic?

One promising context for such intervention is the family meal, referring to occasions when family members eat together at home. While frequent family meals has been consistently found to predict stronger parent-child relationships, with research suggesting an optimal frequency of five to seven dinners per week (Snuggs et al., 2023; "The Importance of Family Dinners VIII," 2012), such regularity is often difficult to maintain with overburdened modern family schedules (Yen-Cheng et al., 2025). More recent research has focused on the qualitative aspects of family meals (ie., how families engage over meals as opposed to their frequency). Recent evidence indicates that shared mealtime responsibilities strengthen family relationships (Yen-Cheng et al., 2025), while identifying as a "cook" during childhood has been linked to increased confidence (Lavelle et al., 2016). However, the relationship between shared mealtime responsibilities and adolescent loneliness remains largely unexplored. Addressing this gap, this study hypothesizes that teen involvement in shared cooking and other dining practices is associated with lower teen loneliness, and that this relationship is mediated by stronger parent-teen relationships and higher self-efficacy.

Literature Review

Teen Susceptibility to Loneliness

A University of Rochester study has examined multiple demographic and contextual factors to identify the strongest predictors of loneliness (Shovestul et al., 2020). Among these variables, age emerges as the most influential by far, accounting for approximately 88% of the

variance explained in the study. The authors demonstrate that loneliness increases sharply beginning around age 10 and continues to rise until peaking at approximately age 18.6, reinforcing adolescence as a developmental period of heightened vulnerability to loneliness (Shovestul et al., 2020).

Recent research further suggests that teen vulnerability to loneliness has only intensified in the digital era. Drawing on data collected between 2000 and 2018 from an international survey of adolescents across 37 countries, a study led by San Diego State University professor Jean Twenge finds that teen loneliness has doubled worldwide between 2012 and 2018, coinciding with the widespread adoption of smartphones and social media (Twenge et al., 2021). Although digital technologies expand opportunities for connection, they often lack the depth and quality of connection necessary to mitigate loneliness (Twenge et al., 2021). As the CIGNA Group reports, individuals who grow up "alongside digital technologies…are the most connected, yet they have higher levels of loneliness than older generations" ("Loneliness in America 2025: A Pervasive Struggle Requires a Communal Response," 2025). Moreover, the pervasive nature of digital environments means that adolescents may be affected "no matter what their personal level of use." (Twenge et al., 2021). These findings suggest that addressing adolescent loneliness requires strengthening meaningful, high-quality social bonds that extend beyond digital connectivity.

Parental Relationship and Self-Efficacy as Protective Factors

Among the sources of high-quality social connection available to adolescents, parental relationships emerge as especially influential. Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies from different cultural contexts consistently show that strong parent-teen relationships play an important role in preventing teen loneliness (von Soest et al., 2020; ; Cheng et al., 2021; Qualitza et al., 2025). From 4-wave longitudinal data of 3,116 Norwegians aged 13 to 31, a University of Oslo study traces the development of loneliness from early adolescence into young adulthood, demonstrating the pivotal role parents play across this period (von Soest et al., 2020). In early adolescence, parents serve as a primary source of emotional support. As adolescents mature, the quality of the parent-child relationship shapes teens' capacity to form and maintain peer relationships, providing lasting protection against loneliness (von Soest et al., 2020). Consistent with these findings, a recent Santa Clara University study analyzing cross-sectional US national survey data finds that teens who perceive their parents as attentive and emotionally responsive report substantially lower loneliness (Qualitza et al., 2025). Notably, the authors also suggest that parents are often best positioned to recognize and respond to early signs of loneliness in their children (Qualitza et al., 2025).

In addition to parental support, higher self-efficacy is also associated with lower levels of loneliness. A Taiwanese study of students from 32 high schools, led by the National Changhua University of Education, showed that both strong parent-child relationships and self-efficacy independently predict reduced loneliness among adolescents (Cheng et al., 2021). Similarly, a recent University of Szczecin study of 191 Polish teens finds that adolescents with higher self-efficacy report not only lower loneliness but also greater openness in peer communication

(Szcześniak et al., 2025). The Polish study suggests more openness can lead to deeper communications, fostering stronger peer relationships and buffering adolescents against loneliness.

Teen Involvement in Family Meals

Family meals have long been recognized as providing a "natural framework" for cultivating parent-teen engagement (Qualitza et al., 2025; Skeer et al., 2018). While earlier studies emphasize the virtues of frequent family meals ("The Importance of Family Dinners VIII," 2012; Snuggs et al., 2023), more recent work highlights the importance of their qualitative features, including communication and shared routines (Skeer et al., 2018). This shift reflects a broader recognition that the benefits of family meals may depend less on how often they occur and more on how family members engage with one another during these interactions.

One important qualitative factor is adolescent involvement in meal preparation and related tasks. Although research in this area is limited, existing evidence indicates that participation in family cooking is associated with stronger parent-teen relationships. A University of Auckland study analyzing survey data from 8,500 New Zealand secondary school students finds that students who report *any* cooking ability have stronger parent-teen relationships (Utter et al., 2016). For most teens, these benefits occur regardless of cooking frequency (that is, whether the teen cooks one to two times per week for their family, one to two times per month, or a few times per year), suggesting that even intermittent participation in family cooking can strengthen parent-teen bonds (Utter et al., 2016).

Qualitative research further suggests that shared cooking and dining practices create opportunities for meaningful familial interaction. Using focus group sessions of Latinx youth from low-income immigrant families in the US Northeast, public health professors Michelle Romero and Lori Francis examine youth involvement in home food tasks, including meal planning, grocery shopping, and cooking (Romero and Francis, 2020). Teens describe shared cooking and dining practices as providing opportunities for positive connections with their parents (Romero and Francis, 2020). Although the study did not directly measure self-efficacy, participants report a strong sense of accomplishment and pride in contributing to their family's well-being, aligning with a UK study led by professors at Queen's University Belfast indicating that early identification as a "cook" is associated with increased confidence (Lavelle et al., 2016).

Building on this literature, the present study examines three related and largely unexplored hypotheses. First, adolescent involvement in shared cooking or other dining practices is associated with lower loneliness. Second, such participation strengthens parent-teen relationships which in turn contributes to lower loneliness. Third, such participation also enhances adolescents' self-efficacy, which further contributes to reduced loneliness.

Methods

This study's primary aim is to determine whether teen participation in shared family cooking and other dining practices is associated with reduced teen loneliness. Secondary and tertiary objectives are to examine whether such participation protects against teen loneliness by strengthening parent-teen relationships and fostering adolescents' sense of self-efficacy. To address these questions, this study employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection, most similar to designs used by Romero and Francis (2020) and Sabo et al. (2025). First, a cross-sectional survey was administered to assess teens' involvement in family cooking and dining practices, their experiences with loneliness, quality of parental relationships, and levels of self-efficacy. A survey was selected for obtaining quantitative analysis, as surveys are the most common methodology used by scholars to examine such variables and enable data collection from broad, diverse samples.

Second, given that questionnaire data can lack depth and personal reflection, the study incorporated a semi-structured focus group discussion, lasting approximately one hour, to gather richer qualitative insights. This component allowed for a deeper exploration of the roles participants played in family meals and their perceptions of these experiences. Consistent with the approach of Romero and Francis (2020), the focus group session was conducted in a conversational format to encourage open-ended responses. This mixed-method design allowed for both a broader sample and a more detailed understanding of the lived experiences of a smaller number of teens. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the use of categorical survey data, analysis focused on identifying consistent directional patterns and magnitude differences across groups rather than inferential statistical testing.

The survey instrument used in this study adapted questions from several established public surveys on loneliness, family meal participation, self-efficacy, and parental relationships, similar to the design approach utilized by Yen-Cheng et al. (2025), Cheng et al. (2021), and Sabo et al. (2025). Items were drawn and informed by the UCLA Loneliness Scale, the University of Minnesota's Project EAT-I Survey, the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale, and the 2012 CASAColumbia Survey of Teenagers.

The survey was distributed as a Google Forms questionnaire to students' school email addresses through their social studies teachers. Respondents were asked to complete the survey and submit their responses electronically. The final question invited students to indicate their interest in participating in a follow-on focus group discussion. Those who responded affirmatively were asked to provide their email address. The focus group discussion was held in person at a local public library's meeting room.

Results

A total of 157 high school students completed the survey. Of these respondents, 141 attended a coeducational public high school and 16 attended a Catholic all-girls high school, as Table 1 shows. The two high schools are located in different suburbs in the US Northeast; 68.8% of the participants were female, while 31.2% were male.

Table 1**:** School Attended and Male/Female

Public High School	**Catholic All-Girls High School**
89.8% (n = 141)	10.2% (n = 16)
Female	**Male**
68.8% (n = 108)	31.2% (n = 49)

As Table 2 indicates, respondents varied in age (13-18 years), race, and ethnicity. Nearly half of the sample (47.8%) were 16 years old. The two largest racial groups were white (55.4%) and Asian (43.3%).

Table 2: Age and Race/Ethnicity

13 y/o	**14 y/o**	**15 y/o**	**16 y/o**	**17 y/o**	**18 y/o**
0.6% (1)	0.6% (1)	30.6% (48)	47.8% (75)	17.8% (28)	2.5% (4)
White	**Asian**	**Black / African American**	**Latino / Hispanic**	**Middle Eastern**	**Native American/ Other**
55.4% (87)	43.3% (68)	1.9% (3)	6.4% (10)	3.2% (5)	1.9% (3)

Of 157 survey respondents, 17 expressed interest in participating in the focus group discussion, and provided their email addresses. Ultimately, three confirmed and participated. Of these, two were female and one was male. Two attended the public high school and one attended the Catholic all-girls high school. The participants were informed of the nature of the study, the confidentiality of information provided, and their right to withdraw at any time, signing a consent form.

Quantitative Results

General Comments

The survey included several Likert-scale items in which respondents selected one of the following options: “strongly disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” “somewhat agree,” “strongly agree,” or “prefer not to answer.” Responses marked “prefer not to answer” were excluded from analysis. The remaining responses were combined into two groups: “strongly disagree” and “somewhat disagree” were grouped together, as were “somewhat agree” and “strongly agree.” Likert responses were collapsed into broader agreement and disagreement categories to simplify interpretation and enable clearer group comparisons, an approach used in exploratory social science survey research, particularly with smaller samples (Boone & Boone, 2012; Sullivan & Artino, 2013).

Impact on Teen Loneliness

To determine how shared cooking or other dining practices affect teen loneliness, students answered three Likert-scale questions about their feelings of loneliness. As Table 3 indicates, teens who reported "never" participating in shared family cooking showed higher levels of loneliness on all three measures. For example, about one-third of these teens (32.6% and 38.6%, respectively) agreed with the statements "No one really knows me well" and "I often feel left out." These rates are much higher (by 63% and 54.4%, respectively) than those reported by teens who participate in family cooking. This pattern remained consistent at different shared cooking frequencies. As Table 4 shows, teens who cooked only once or twice per month and those who participated once or twice per week both reported lower loneliness than those who never participated.

Table 3: Results of Loneliness Measures - Share in Cooking vs. Never Participate in Cooking

Respondents who…	**No. of Respondents**	**L1*** "No one really knows me well"	**L2*** "I often feel left out"	**L3**** "I can always find someone to talk to"
Share in Cooking Family Meals	113	20%	25%	17.9%
Never Participate in Cooking any Family Meals	44	32.6%	38.6%	27.3%
% Differential		**63%**	**54.4%**	**52.5%**

*L1 and L2 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Agree

**L3 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Disagree

Table 4: Results of Loneliness Measures - Share in Cooking at TWO Frequencies vs. Never Cooking

Respondents who…	**No. of Respondents**	**L1*** "No one really knows me well"	**L2*** "I often feel left out"	**L3**** "I can always find someone to talk to"
Share in Cooking Family Meals 1-2 TIMES PER MONTH	37	16.7%	14.3%	8.1%
Share in Cooking Family Meals 1-2 TIMES PER WEEK	47	15.6%	22.2%	19.6%
Never Participate in Cooking any Family Meals	44	32.6%	38.6%	27.3%

*L1 and L2 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Agree

**L3 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Disagree

A similar trend was found for other shared dining activities. As Table 5 shows, teens who never took part in one or more other dining practices also reported higher loneliness across the three loneliness measures.

Table 5: Results of Loneliness Measures - Share in Other Dining Practices vs. Never Participating in a Non-Cooking Dining Practice

Respondents who…	**No. of Respondents**	**L1*** "No one really knows me well"	**L2*** "I often feel left out"	**L3**** "I can always find someone to talk to"
Share in Other Dining Practices	104	22.8%	27.3%	20.4%
Never Participate in one or more Other Dining Practice	53	25%	32.1%	20.8%
% Differential		**9.6%**	**17.6%**	**2%**

*L1 and L2 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Agree;
**L3 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Disagree

Impact on Parent-Teen Relationship

To examine how shared cooking or other dining practices shape parent-teen relationships, respondents completed three survey items. The first asked them to rate their relationship with their parents or guardians as "excellent," "good," "fair," "poor," or "prefer not to answer." The next two were Likert scale items measuring the parent-teen relationship. The results indicate that teens who take part in shared cooking or other dining activities have stronger relationships with their parents. As Table 6 shows, teens who never participate in cooking any family meals were 43.2% more likely to rate their parental relationship as "fair" or "poor" compared to those who participate. Non-participants were also more likely to disagree with the items, "I often go to a parent/guardian when I have a problem" and "My parents/guardians understand me well," by 16.6% and 23.6%, respectively.

Table 6: Results of Parental Relationship Measures - Share in Cooking vs. Never Participate in Cooking

Respondents who…	**No. of Respondents**	**P1*** "How would you describe your relationship with your parents / guardians?"	**P2**** "I often go to a parent/guardian when I have a problem"	**P3**** "My parents / guardians understand me well"
Share in Cooking Family Meals	113	8.1%	25.9%	21.2%
Never Participate in Cooking any Family Meals	44	11.6%	30.2%	26.2%

% Differential		**43.2%**	**16.6%**	**23.6%**

*P1 - % Reported Fair or Poor
**P2 and P3 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Disagree

The foregoing pattern was even more pronounced for teens who do not participate in other dining practices as compared to teens who participate. As Table 7 demonstrates, non-participants were about twice as likely to report a "fair" or "poor" relationship with their parents, and even higher disagreement with the parental relationship measures.

Table 7: Results of Parental Relationship Measures - Share in Other Dining Practices vs. Never Participating in a Non-Cooking Dining Practice

Respondents who…	**No. of Respondents**	**P1*** "How would you describe your relationship with your parents / guardians?"	**P2**** "I often go to a parent/guardian when I have a problem"	**P3**** "My parents / guardians understand me well"
Share in Other Dining Practices	104	6.8%	23.3%	16.3%
Never Participate in one or more Other Dining Practice	53	13.7%	34.6%	33.3%
% Differential		**101%**	**48.5%**	**104%**

*P1 - % Reported Fair or Poor
**P2 and P3 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Disagree

Table 8 shows respondents who reported weaker relationships with their parents also experienced higher loneliness levels. Those who rated parental relationships as "fair" or "poor" were more than twice as likely to agree with the statement "No one really knows me well," and about 2.5 times more likely to disagree with "I can always find someone to talk to," compared to respondents reporting "excellent" or "good" relationships. Such findings suggest that shared cooking and other dining practices are linked to stronger parent-teen relationships, which in turn are associated with lower loneliness levels.

Table 8 : Results of Loneliness Measures - Positive View of Parent-Relationship

Respondents who…	**No. of Respondents**	**L1*** "No one really knows me well"	**L2*** "I often feel left out"	**L3**** "I can always find someone to talk to"
Rated Parent Relationship as "Excellent" or "Good"	143	21.4%	28.6%	18.3%

Rated Parent Relationship as "Poor" or "Fair"	14	46.2%	33.3%	42.9%
% Differential		**116%**	**16.4%**	**134%**

*L1 and L2 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Agree
**L3 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Disagree

Impact on Teen Self-Efficacy

To examine the relationship between shared cooking or other dining practices and teen self-efficacy, respondents answered two Likert-scale questions about their confidence in handling challenges and achieving goals. Unlike earlier findings on loneliness and parent-teen relationships, the self-efficacy results were mixed and relatively small. As Tables 9 and 10 show, teens who participated in shared cooking or other dining practices did not consistently report higher self-efficacy than non-participants. Further, differences between the groups were consistently modest (generally, between about 1% and 2.5%), with non-participants generally reporting slightly higher self-efficacy. Such findings suggest that simply participating in shared cooking or other dining practices is not strongly linked to higher self-efficacy.

Table 9: Results of Self-Efficacy Measures - Share in Cooking vs. Never Participate in Cooking

Respondents who…	**No. of Respondents**	**S1*** "No matter what comes my way, I'm usually able to handle it"	**S2*** "It is easy for me to stick with and accomplish my goals"
Share in Cooking Family Meals	113	84.8%	77.8%
Never Participate in Cooking any Family Meals	44	86%	79.1%
% Differential		**1.4%**	**1.8%**

*S1 and S2 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Agree

Table 10: Results of Self-Efficacy Measures - Share in Other Dining Practices vs. Never Participating in a Dining Practice

Respondents who…	**No. of Respondents**	**S1*** "No matter what comes my way, I'm usually able to handle it"	**S2*** "It is easy for me to stick with and accomplish my goals"
Share in Other Dining Practices	104	84.5%	78.8%
Never Participate in one or more Other	53	86.5%	76.9%

Dining Practice			
% Differential		**2.4%**	**2.5%**

*S1 and S2 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Agree

However, a clearer, more substantial pattern emerges when cooking ability is also taken into account. Teens who were non-participants in shared cooking or other dining practices and reported they "do not know how to cook anything" showed noticeably lower self-efficacy than participants. As Tables 11 and 12 demonstrate, self-efficacy rates of those who never participated in cooking family meals and expressed not having any cooking ability was 13.1% and 2.4% lower, respectively, than those who did cook, while the rates for those who never participated in a non-cooking dining practice and reported a lack of cooking skills was 16.2% and 6.6% lower, respectively.

Table 11: Results of Self-Efficacy Measures - Share in Cooking vs. Never Cooking AND Lack of Cooking Skill

Respondents who…	**No. of Respondents**	**S1*** "No matter what comes my way, I'm usually able to handle it"	**S2*** "It is easy for me to stick with and accomplish my goals"
Share in Cooking Family Meals	113	84.8%	77.8%
Never Participate in Cooking any Family Meals **AND** Do Not Know How to Cook	25	75%	76%
% Differential		**13.1%**	**2.4%**

*S1 and S2 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Agree

Table 12: Results of Self-Efficacy Measures - Share in Other Dining Practices vs.Never Participating in a Dining Practice AND Lack of Cooking Skills

Respondents who…	**No. of Respondents**	**S1*** "No matter what comes my way, I'm usually able to handle it"	**S2*** "It is easy for me to stick with and accomplish my goals"
Share in Other Dining Practices	104	84.5%	78.8%
Never Participate in one or more Other Dining Practice **AND** Do Not Know How to	24	72.7%	73.9

Cook			
% Differential		**16.2%**	**6.6%**

*S1 and S2 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Agree

In addition, these same groups (ie., teens who reported not having any cooking skills and never participated in either shared cooking or a non-cooking dining practice) also reported higher levels of loneliness. As Tables 13 and 14 show, their loneliness levels were consistently higher across the three loneliness measures, with differences ranging from 19% and 60% for those who never cook, and from 19.7% and 59.3% for those who never participate in a non-cooking dining practice, as compared to the participant sample.

Table 12 : Results of Loneliness Measures Moderated by Self-Efficacy - Share in Cooking vs. Never Participate in Cooking AND Lack of Cooking Skills

Respondents who…	**No. of Respondents**	**L1*** "No one really knows me well"	**L2*** "I often feel left out"	**L3**** "I can always find someone to talk to"
Share in Cooking Family Meals	113	20%	25%	17.9%
Never Participate in Cooking any Family Meals **AND** Do Not Know How to Cook	25	23.8	40%	28%
% Differential		**19%**	**60%**	**56.4%**

*L1 and L2 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Agree
**L3 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Disagree

Table 13: Results of Loneliness Measures Moderated by Self-Efficacy - Share in Other Dining Practices vs. Never Participating in a Dining Practice AND Lack of Cooking Skills

Respondents who…	**No. of Respondents**	**L1*** "No one really knows me well"	**L2*** "I often feel left out"	**L3**** "I can always find someone to talk to"
Share in Other Dining Practices	104	22.8%	27.3%	20.4%
Never Participate in one or more Other Dining Practice **AND** Do Not Know How to Cook	23	27.3%	43.5%	26.1%

% Differential		**19.7%**	**59.3%**	**27.9%**

*L1 and L2 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Agree
**L3 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Disagree

Demographic Considerations

Demographically, several patterns emerged across the three loneliness measures (see Table 14). Female students consistently reported higher levels of loneliness than male students. Differences were further pronounced when comparing school type. Among female students, those attending the all-girls Catholic high school reported substantially higher levels of loneliness than those at the public high school. Racial patterns also show consistent differences: white students reported lower loneliness levels in each of the three measures compared to Asian students and those in the combined "Other" category.

Table 14: Results of Loneliness Measures - Demographic Comparison

Respondents	**No. of Respondents**	**L1*** "No one really knows me well"	**L2*** "I often feel left out"	**L3**** "It is easy for me to make friends"
Gender Comparison				
Male	49	20.4%	22.4%	14.3%
Female	108	25%	32%	22.4%
School Comparison				
Public HS (F)	92	22.7%	26.1%	17.6%
Catholic HS (F)	16	37.5%	66.7%	50%
Racial/Ethnic Comparison				
White	73	12.9%	22.9%	16.4%
Asian	61	31.7%	32.2%	18%
Other (incl. Black + Hispanic)	23	34.9%	39.1%	40.9%

*L1 and L2 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Agree
**L3 - % Reported Strongly or Somewhat Disagree

Qualitative Results

The focus group discussed various ways participants helped their families, including during family meals. Participants shared that family meals foster a sense of closeness and connection, often involving discussions about school and work. Special traditions, like playing

music at the end of meals, were highlighted as bonding experiences. One participant noted that many of her family memories reflect "stuff that happens during dinner," which her family will continue to reference and remember fondly years later. Participants expressed that cooking and family meals helped reduce loneliness and strengthen relationships. One participant stated he sometimes "fe[lt] detached from my family, just because we're not eating together." Additionally, participants mentioned that learning and sharing family recipes made them feel more connected to their families and heritage. The importance of shared cooking and dining practices was also noted for building life skills, with one participant stating that "it teaches you personal responsibility and…decision-making."

Analysis of Findings

This study was designed to examine one primary and two secondary questions: whether teen participation in shared cooking or other dining practices is linked to lower loneliness; whether such participation strengthens parent-teen relationships that help reduce loneliness; and whether such participation improves self-efficacy, which also lowers loneliness. Both the survey results and qualitative responses show a consistent pattern that supports the same findings.

Shared Cooking and Other Dining Practices and Teen Loneliness

The results strongly support the first hypothesis. Across each of the three loneliness measures, teens who participated in shared cooking or other dining activities consistently reported lower levels of loneliness than those who never participated. These findings were reinforced by the focus group discussion, where participants described how cooking and eating together helped them feel more connected and less alone. Some participants noted that preparing and sharing family recipes strengthened their sense of identity and connection to family members, even across generations, with one participant stating, "It makes me feel connected with my great grandma…even though she lives in Croatia." Others emphasized that spending time together while cooking or preparing meals created opportunities for conversation and shared experiences.

Similar to Utter et al. (2016), benefits of shared cooking and other dining practices participation were observed even with infrequent participation, suggesting interaction quality matters more than interaction frequency. Such findings also align with research conducted by Twenge et al. (2021) which posits that quality in-person interactions are essential for building the deep connections necessary to protect against adolescent loneliness in the digital age. The findings are also consistent with the US Surgeon General's 2023 advisory, which encourages people to "[m]ake time to share a meal" and "[l]isten without the distraction of your phone," noting that the "keys to human connection are simple, but extraordinarily powerful" ("Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," 2023).

Shared Cooking and Other Dining Practices and Parent-Teen Relations

The results are also supportive of the second hypothesis. Teens who participated in shared cooking or other dining practices reported stronger relationships with their parents, including greater feelings of understanding and communication. Consistent with research on family mealtime frequency previously conducted by Columbia University's National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (2012), study participants who took part in shared family cooking or other dining practices reported having "excellent" and "good" parental relationships at a materially higher rate than those who did not. Further, similar to Romero and Francis (2020), focus group participants ascribed significant value to involvement in family meals for their relationships with their parents and families, with one participant stating, "I feel like it's important to help your family and share key moments about your day." Another participant observed that family meals were important for building lasting memories that tie the family together, such as when a parent makes a joke "that kind of just sticks forever." Such views are consistent with the observations that family meals can "increase family connectedness" (Skeer et al., 2018) and contribute "to a shared sense of identity and belonging" (Yen-Cheng et al., 2025).

Study results demonstrate a strong association between adolescents' perceptions of their relationships with their parents and lower levels of loneliness. For each of the three loneliness measures, respondents who characterized their parent-teen relationships as "poor" or "fair" exhibited substantially higher levels of loneliness compared to those reporting more positive relationships. This pattern aligns with prior research, including Qualitza et al. (2025), which finds that adolescents who perceive their parents as more responsive to their emotional needs tend to experience lower levels of loneliness than those who perceive lower parental responsiveness. Collectively, these findings suggest that shared cooking and other dining practices help reduce loneliness by strengthening familial relationships.

Shared Cooking and Other Dining Practices and Self-Efficacy

Results for the third hypothesis were more mixed. Overall, participation in shared cooking or other dining practices was not strongly associated with higher self-efficacy, and differences between participants and non-participants were small (at 2.5% or lower). However, focus group insights suggested that teens feel more confident and capable through participation in such activities, particularly in problem-solving and taking responsibility, with one participant stating, "[I]f something goes wrong, if there's like a fire, you need to learn how to…put it out." Such statements are consistent with those made by the participants in group discussions conducted by Romero and Francis (2020), who reported great pride in assisting their families with meal preparation and learning useful life skills.

Each focus group participant expressed confidence in their cooking skills, regardless of self-reported levels of participation in cooking family meals. For example, one focus group participant reported "never" in response to the survey item regarding participation in cooking family meals yet revealed he is "pretty confident" in his cooking skills during the group discussion, stating that while he did not "cook…normally," he did "cook a lot when I was younger." Such sentiment is consistent with research by Lavelle et al. (2016), which linked early

identification as a “cook” with increased confidence. Additionally, Romero and Francis noted that their study participants (who ranged from ages 9 to 17), “exhibited a diverse set of cooking skills” (Romero and Francis, 2020).

A clearer pattern emerged when cooking ability was taken into account, and the sample was further segregated by teens who never participated in cooking family meals or in another dining practice and also reported lacking any cooking skills. With this additional consideration, those who did not participate demonstrated meaningfully lower self-efficacy across each of the two self-efficacy measures.

Additionally, these subgroups with lower self-efficacy (ie., respondents who never participate in cooking any family meals and do not know how to cook, and respondents who never participate in another dining practice and do not know how to cook) also exhibited higher loneliness rates across each of the three loneliness measures. Such findings are consistent with the research findings of Cheng et al. (2021) and Szcześniak et al. (2025), which demonstrate a negative association between self-efficacy and loneliness. Taken together, the study results suggest that participation in shared cooking or other dining practices may play a role in enhancing teen self-efficacy which has an ameliorative impact on teen loneliness, but in a more indirect manner and when linked with cooking skill perception, rather than participation alone.

Fulfillment of Gaps in Research

Prior research identifies adolescence as a period of heightened vulnerability to loneliness (von Soest et al., 2020; Shovestul et al., 2020) and documents a global increase following the widespread adoption of smartphones (Twenge et al., 2021). At the same time, existing literature has also established that strong parent-child relationships and higher self-efficacy serve as protective factors against teen loneliness. A separate body of work on family meals finds that sharing in cooking and other family meal responsibilities strengthen parent-teen relationships and increases teens’ sense of accomplishment. However, these literatures have largely developed in isolation. This study integrates them by examining the impact of participation in shared cooking or other dining practices on teen loneliness. In doing so, it fulfills a notable gap in existing research, revealing a potentially accessible and impactful pathway for addressing teen loneliness.

Limitations

While this study is valuable in examining a practical, previously unexplored area for lessening teen loneliness, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, most students in the sample attended a single public high school in the US Northeast and identified as predominantly white and Asian. A sample including students from other public high schools outside the Northeast and with a more diverse student population may yield different results. Second, the number of participants from the all-girls Catholic school was comparatively small. A larger sample size of this subgroup, and inclusion of a co-educational or an all-boys private institution, may also have shaped the results. Third, this study does not consider socioeconomic

backgrounds. It is possible, for example, that adolescents from lower economic backgrounds may experience more extensive family meal obligations which may lead to differing results. Fourth, although the focus group discussion provided rich insights, its size was small and would have benefitted from a larger number of participants who may have provided greater diversity of perspective and more examples of real-life family meal experiences. Finally, because this study does not use inferential statistical testing, the findings should be interpreted as associations rather than statistically confirmed relationships.

Future Research

The study's findings point to several important directions for future inquiry. First, the nuanced relationship observed between self-efficacy and perceived cooking ability warrants deeper investigation, particularly with respect to the timing and context in which cooking skills are acquired. Future studies should examine whether early exposure to cooking (regardless of continued participation during adolescence) has a lasting impact on self-efficacy and, in turn, on vulnerability to loneliness.

Demographic patterns identified in this study (as summarized in Table 13) also suggest meaningful areas for further research. For example, survey data indicated that teen girls experience loneliness at higher rates than teen boys, and that among the girls in the sample, Catholic school students reported higher loneliness than public school students. Future research should investigate whether variations in family meal participation and parental relationship quality differ meaningfully by gender and school type. For example, one consideration is whether teen girls attending private school participate less in family meals and/or have poorer parental relationships due to higher pressures placed on them to focus on academic or extra-curricular success, given the attendant high costs paid by parents for their education. Similarly, the sample finding that white teens reported lower loneliness levels compared to peers from other racial or ethnic groups calls for more rigorous examination. Subsequent studies should also seek to disentangle the relative contributions of socio-economic status and/or cultural norms to observed differences.

Longitudinal studies would also be beneficial to help determine causality and assess the long-term impact of shared cooking or other dining practices. Such research could assess loneliness trajectories from adolescence into adulthood to determine whether shared cooking or other dining practices during adolescence has lasting benefits.

Implications

As a widely recognized public health crisis in both the United States and globally, adolescent loneliness warrants immediate and targeted intervention. This study's findings suggest that shared family cooking and other dining practices represent a practical, accessible strategy for mitigating teen loneliness, even when participation is intermittent rather than routine. From an applied perspective, these insights support the development of school or community-based educational initiatives aimed at raising awareness of the loneliness epidemic

while equipping families with concrete strategies to incorporate shared cooking and meal practices into everyday life. Policymakers and healthcare providers should consider developing programs or public campaigns to encourage the acquisition of cooking skills by children, teens, and adults and provide demonstrations on how such shared practices can be incorporated into family life. Such programs have the potential to not only improve parent-teen relationships and cooking skills while reducing teen loneliness, but to also contribute to broader family well-being.

Conclusion

This study provides compelling evidence that adolescent participation in shared family cooking and other dining practices is strongly associated with lower levels of teen loneliness, primarily through the strengthening of parent-teen relationships rather than through direct effects on self-efficacy. By demonstrating that even infrequent shared family cooking and other mealtime practices corresponds with improved parent-teen relationships and reduced feelings of loneliness, the findings underscore the importance of qualitative, interaction-rich family experiences in addressing the adolescent loneliness epidemic. While the anticipated mediating role of self-efficacy was not supported, further analysis suggests that perceived cooking ability may condition this association, an area worthy of further research. This study fills an important gap in the literature by identifying shared cooking and other dining practices as accessible, practical interventions for reducing teen loneliness in an increasingly digital world.

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Are They Third Culture Kids? A Narrative Study On Impact of Family Expectations and International School Experiences on Local Chinese Students' Identities Development

By Aqua Zhang

Introduction and Literature Review

Third Culture Kids' Identity Development: the case of international schools

Adolescent identity development is shaped by the social environments in which youths live, study, and form relationships. Identity develops through continuous interaction with the people, institutions, and cultural expectations that structure everyday life (Verhoeven et al., 2019; Branje, 2022). Among the most influential of these environments are the family and the school. Families shape adolescents through emotional attachment, value transmission, and expectations about behavior and future life; schools influence identity through curriculum, peer interaction, institutional norms, and the social roles students are encouraged to inhabit (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006; Shifflet-Chila et al., 2016). Consequently, much of the literature treats adolescent identity as co-constructed through home and school rather than formed in a single setting (Branje, 2022).

However, this general perspective often assumes that family and school operate within broadly compatible cultural frameworks. In many studies, the two institutions may differ, yet still reflect overlapping assumptions about language, values, achievement, and belonging. This assumption becomes less sufficient in educational contexts where students move between distinct cultural logics across home and school. Such a condition is especially relevant to adolescents attending international schools, including China's Type-C international schools, where students may remain embedded in local Chinese family life while studying in institutions shaped by international curricula, English-medium instruction, and global-minded educational ideals (Nagrath, 2011; Long, 2016). In such contexts, identity development may involve not only the ordinary challenges of adolescence, but also the negotiation of partially divergent social worlds (Fail et al., 2004; Bagnall, 2015).

One body of scholarship that appears especially relevant to this issue is the literature on Third Culture Kids (TCKs) as they grow up in distinctive cultural settings (Van Reken & Bethel, 2005). Yet whether students in China's Type-C international schools should be straightforwardly understood as TCKs remains uncertain. To clarify this distinction, it is necessary to examine three related strands of scholarship: research on TCK identity, research on international schools as identity-forming institutions, and research on the co-construction of adolescent identity through family and school, particularly in Chinese contexts.

Third Culture Kids and the Problem of Belonging

The concept of the Third Culture Kid has conventionally been used to describe children who spend a significant portion of their developmental years outside their parents' culture and who develop meaningful relationships to more than one cultural environment (Pollock, 1988). In

Pollock and Van Reken's definition, TCKs often do not feel full ownership of any single culture. Instead, they develop a sense of belonging tied to the shared experience of living across cultures (2001). Later scholarship broadened this definition. Van Reken and Bethel (2005: 3), for instance, argue that TCK experiences may arise for "any reason," suggesting that such identity formation is not limited to the classic expatriate family model. In both cultures, the "third culture" refers less to a simple blending of two cultures than to an in-between space produced through movement, adaptation, and negotiation across multiple contexts.

As such, related terms such as "global nomads" and "transculturals" reflect similar attempts to describe young people whose lives unfold across cultural boundaries (McCaig, 1992; Willis et al., 1994; Fail et al., 2004; Tan et al., 2021). A recurring argument is that TCK identity is marked by both intercultural flexibility and incomplete rootedness. These young people may develop strong cross-cultural skills and broadened perspectives, yet still struggle with belonging, stability, or a sense of being fully claimed by any one cultural community (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Berry, 2008; Jeon, 2022). Therefore, TCK scholarship has frequently focused on themes such as marginality, reverse culture shock, and disconnection from stable social networks (Fail et al., 2004; Van Reken & Bethel, 2005).

This research challenges the view of identity as singular, stable, or inherited, instead framing it as fluid and shaped through lived experience and repeated encounters with difference (Muvumba, 2025). Meanwhile, TCK literature also shows that mobility alone does not determine identity. Earlier work suggests that family values, home life, and relational continuity remain central to how young people define themselves. Downie (1976), for example, argues that internationally mobile children may lose familiarity with what is considered their "own" culture when they lack sustained relational anchors. Similarly, Shepard (1976) emphasizes the formative role of family-transmitted values. More recent scholarships likewise note that parental support can help cross-cultural adolescents avoid alienation and interpret their complex experiences more coherently as extension of previous studies (Peterson & Plamondon, 2009; Moore & Barker, 2011). Thus, even within TCK literature, family remains a central site of identity construction.

However, the current TCK scholarship is also limited by the populations on which it has conventionally focused. Much of literature centers on children from missionary, military, diplomatic, or business families who move physically across national borders with their parents (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Fail et al., 2004; Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2018). Even studies involving Asian adolescents often address those growing up in foreign environments rather than those remaining within their home country while studying in internationalized institutions (Wan, 2001; Fry, 2009). This creates a primary inquiry for this study. Students in China's Type-C international schools may experience hybridity, negotiation, and partial belonging, but they do so through a different structural arrangement: internationalized schooling without the same pattern of family mobility. As Long (2016) argues, such students cannot be assumed to fit traditional TCK models; thus, while TCK literature is useful for understanding belonging and cross-cultural identity, it should be applied cautiously in the Chinese Type-C school context.

International Schools as Identity-Forming Institutions

Research on international schools extends this discussion by emphasizing that schools themselves are important sites of identity formation. International schools are often described as spaces that cultivate multicultural awareness, international-mindedness, and forms of global citizenship (Nagrath, 2011; Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2018). Through curriculum, instructional language, staffing patterns, extracurricular culture, and school discourse, they communicate values associated with cosmopolitanism, intercultural openness, and transnational aspiration, where students socialize themselves to form an identity (Nagrath, 2011).

Lijadi and Van Schalkwyk (2018) argue that international schools are central to the formation of TCK identity because they provide a setting in which students may belong in a transcultural "third culture" rather than in a single national framework. Similarly, studies of students from highly mobile international families have shown how school environments shape selfhood through repeated transition, peer diversity, and adaptation to unfamiliar settings (Tanu, 2008; Greenholtz & Kim, 2009; Kwon, 2019). These studies position the school not merely as a backdrop to identity development, but as an important environment through which belonging and aspiration are interpreted (Huff, 2021).

Yet, current studies have still focused on students from conventionally mobile families. In many studies, the international school is analyzed as part of a broader expatriate lifestyle in which both school and home are already shaped by transnational movement (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2018). By contrast, less attention has been given to students who are not geographically mobile but are still educated in culturally internationalized schools. This gap is significant in the case of China's Type-C international schools. Unlike Type-A and Type-B schools, which generally enroll foreign passport holders, Type-C schools often enroll local Chinese students while offering international curricula, English-medium instruction, and pathways oriented toward overseas higher education (Hayden & Thompson, 2013; Poole, 2018; Cao, 2022). Their students are therefore locally rooted but internationally schooled.

This distinction matters because it produces a different condition of identity development. For Type-C students, "international" identity is not necessarily formed through relocation abroad, but through sustained participation in a school culture that may differ markedly from the values and expectations of home life within the same national setting (Long, 2016). Research on schooling in China further suggests that international schools can shape students' understandings of citizenship, identity, and spatial belonging differently from mainstream public schools, often promoting more global orientations (Kong, 2013; Woods &
Kong, 2020). More broadly, schools have been theorized as sites where youth encounter social, cultural, ethnic, and economic differences while being socialized into particular cognitive and behavioral norms (Fielding, 2000; Holloway et al., 2010; Holloway et al., 2011). Thus, Type-C schools may be particularly consequential for identity formation because they expose local Chinese students to international discourses and futures without removing them from their local family and social environments.

Family Expectations and Contextual Divergence

The role of family complicates this picture further. Research on parental motivation suggests that local families often choose international schools to improve English proficiency, and prepare children for overseas higher education as a perceived better life pathway (Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2018; Tan et al., 2021). However, these motivations do not necessarily indicate that parents wish their children to detach from Chinese cultural identity or family-based values. Rather, international schooling may be pursued pragmatically while families continue to uphold expectations rooted in cultural continuity, familial responsibility, and local social norms (Evans et al., 2022). As a result, families may not simply reinforce the international orientation promoted by the school.

While broader scholarship consistently identifies family and school as the two major institutions through which adolescents develop identity, families are perceived to shape adolescents through parenting practices, emotional support, expectations, and the transmission of values, while schools shape and reinforce identity through peer interaction, institutional discipline, curriculum, and social positioning (Merten, 2005; Kwong, 2011). As such, these institutions form the everyday contexts through which young people interpret who they are and where they belong. While scholars acknowledge that family and school co-form identity, this literature often overlooks what happens when they are rooted in partly different cultural contexts.

Additionally, school and family operate within a relatively shared dominant cultural framework according to the mainstream studies of Chinese adolescents (Kwong, 2011; Li & Xia, 2025). Even when tensions exist between generations or between personal aspiration and institutional pressure, both contexts may still reflect overlapping assumptions about achievement, citizenship, acceptable behavior, and social belonging, suggesting a hegemony of culture (Crabb, 2010). A different pattern emerges, however, in research on migrant youth and ethnic minority adolescents. In those contexts, home and school may represent different cultural systems, requiring young people to move between distinct norms, values, and expectations (Kwong, 2011; Yuen & Wu, 2011; Lai & Chui, 2024). Such divergence can complicate belonging and contribute to layered, negotiated, or conflicted forms of self-understanding.

This shows that identity development in China is not always culturally unified. Garros and Kilkenny (2007) suggest that adolescents whose family backgrounds and values differ from those of a dominant institutional environment may face greater challenges in forming a coherent identity. Hoersting and Jenkins (2011) similarly argue that cross-cultural tension can contribute to uncertainty or confusion in self-definition. Although students in Type-C international schools are not necessarily migrants or members of ethnic minority groups, they may still experience a form of cultural divergence. Their school environment may encourage international-mindedness, multicultural openness, English-speaking participation, and transnational aspiration, while their home environment may continue to emphasize Chinese family obligation, local norms, and domestic expectations (Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2018).

Their identities may therefore be shaped not simply by school influence or family influence alone, but by the tension between the two.

Research Gap

This tension questions current TCK literature. At the first blush, it may be possible to categorize students in China's Type-C international schools straightforwardly as TCKs because they appear to navigate multiple cultural worlds. However, such a move risks imposing a label more readily associated with high-mobility children than with local Chinese students educated in internationalized institutions. With this regard, Long's (2016) study is particularly important here because it addresses local Chinese students in westernized-curricular schools and argues that cross-cultural identities can develop through school language, curricular messages, and institutional values even without family mobility. This is a valuable contribution because it shows that TCK-like experiences may arise in domestic contexts.

Meanwhile, Long's study also demonstrates why further inquiry is necessary. His account treats international schools as naturally westernized, which oversimplified international school culture. More recent scholarship has questioned whether international schools are uniformly "international," especially in the context of China's privatized Type-C schools, which may remain shaped by exam-oriented pressures, family demand, and customized curricular arrangements (Poole, 2018; Poole, 2020). In other words, the "difference" students experience at school cannot simply be assumed 'westernized' in advance; it must be examined through their own lived perceptions. Moreover, Long's phenomenological focus centers school experience more than familial influence, even though family remains central to adolescent identity development and may be a key site of tension when parental expectations do not fully align with students' school-based experiences, as indicated in his limitation section.

Therefore, TCK literature is most useful here as a conceptual resource rather than as a definitive category. It provides language for discussing belonging, hybridity, and negotiation across multiple cultural contexts, but the central question is not merely whether Type-C students "are" TCKs. More importantly, it is how they interpret their own identities while moving between international school experiences and local family expectations.

Overall, the existing literature suggests that students in China's Type-C international schools occupy a position not fully explained either by traditional TCK models or by studies of identity formation in culturally aligned family-school contexts (Fail et al., 2004; Long, 2016; Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2018). There remains limited research in the case of how local Chinese adolescents in Type-C international schools interpret their identities through the intersection of internationalized schooling and local family life. This study therefore addresses that gap by examining how family expectations and school experiences together shape students' identity development.

Therefore, the present study asks:

- How do family expectations and international school experiences shape the identity development of students in Type-C international schools in China from their own lived experiences?

Methodology and Method

Methodology and Method

To investigate how family expectations and international school experiences shape students' identity development, this study adopted a narrative inquiry to understand Chinese Type-C international school students' lived experiences. Narrative inquiry is appropriate for research that examines how individuals interpret lived experience through storytelling, especially when the topic concerns identity, belonging, and personal meaning-making (Cortazzi & Jin, 2006; Moen, 2006; Carless & Douglas, 2017). Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to examine how participants organize events, relationships, and emotions into meaningful accounts of their own identity (Walters, 2006). Previous studies have used narrative methods to examine adolescent identity formation and the experiences of culturally mobile youth, including Third Culture Kids, because stories make visible how broader social and cultural forces are interpreted in individual lives (i.e. Walters, 2006; Maclean & Jennings, 2012; Taft, 2017; Martín, 2024). In this study, narrative inquiry therefore enabled an examination of both participants' personal experiences and the larger sociocultural contexts that shaped their identity perceptions.

Data collection

This study employed purposive sampling to recruit participants who could provide rich and relevant accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. Purposive sampling is commonly adopted in qualitative research because it enables the researcher to select participants who are able to articulate their experiences in relation to the research question (Rai & Thapa, 2015). Participants were students aged above 18 who had attended an international school for at least five years, ensuring sufficient maturity for identity reflection and substantial international school experience. Five students from a Type-C international school in China were recruited. The small sample suits narrative inquiry, which prioritizes depth and interpretive richness over breadth, aiming for a nuanced understanding of how students narrate identity development across school and family contexts.

Data were collected through narrative interviews conducted online. Narrative interviewing is consistent with narrative inquiry because it encourages participants to tell extended stories about their experiences while allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions that clarify and deepen the account (MacLeod, 1998; Carless & Douglas, 2017). Before interviews, participants received a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form outlining the study, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. (see appendix). All interviews were conducted in the interviewees' first language, Mandarin Chinese, which ensured the clarity of conversation and established rapport that helped the participants to share their experiences comfortably, particularly when the addressing topic is sensitive (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016). Participants were also informed that the interviews would be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis, and that pseudonyms would be used in the final write-up to protect confidentiality.

Each interview began with broad, open-ended prompts about participants' schooling, family environment, and growing-up experiences. These opening questions were designed to

encourage storytelling rather than short factual responses (Anderson, 2016). Follow-up questions were then used to explore participants' experiences in international school settings, the values and expectations emphasized by their families, and moments in which they perceived tension, overlap, or contrast between these two environments. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the participants' first language, to support clarity, comfort, and rapport. This was especially important because the topic involved self-reflection and potentially sensitive discussions about identity, family expectations, and belonging. Each interview included approximately thirty minutes of uninterrupted narrative sharing, followed by additional time for elaboration and clarification.

Data Analysis

After data collection, all interviews were transcribed and read multiple times to build familiarity with each participant's story as a whole before moving into closer analysis. The study then analyzed the data using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) framework of story constellation in terms of broadening, burrowing, and restorying, which aims to identify the relationships between personal experiences and external factors that construct their lived experiences (2000):

Broadening: The researcher focused on the larger social, institutional, and cultural contexts reflected by participant's experience. This included identifying how students described the values of their international school, the expectations communicated by family, and the wider cultural meanings attached to language, achievement, belonging, and future plans. At this stage, the researcher asked what external forces seemed to structure the participant's story.

Burrowing: The analysis moved inward to situate personal narratives into the identified external factors. This involved identifying moments in which participants expressed uncertainty, comfort, conflict, belonging, distance, or change in relation to those factors. Particular attention was paid to how participants described themselves across different contexts, such as school and home, and whether they narrated those contexts as harmonious, separate, or conflicting. This stage was important because the study did not aim only to document what participants experienced, but also how they interpreted those experiences in relation to who they were becoming.

Restorying: the researcher conducted a cross-narrative analysis that put participants' accounts into collective narratives that highlighted how local Chinese students' identity developed over time through interaction with both school and family contexts. The researcher compared the narratives across participants to identify recurring patterns as well as important differences to represent the unique landscape of identity development at Type-C international school. The analysis balanced within-case depth and cross-case comparison. Shared themes (e.g., belonging, cultural tension, school–family negotiation) were identified, while each participant's narrative coherence remained central.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher used member checking. After initial analysis, participants received their interpreted narratives to review for accuracy, clarification, and misinterpretation, ensuring the reconstructions remained

faithful to their intended meanings. Additionally, the researcher preserved the original Chinese phrasing during early analysis before translating key excerpts into English, which helped reduce loss of meaning across languages. The researcher kept a reflexivity journal to note down self-reflection of data analysis to keep track of how subjective interpretation might influence analysis (see appendix).

Finding and Discussion

Five participants' individual narrations are presented in the graphs below:

Participant A

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Foreign Culture	Overseas experience	1a) *"If I remember correctly, it was in fourth grade that I went to Australia for an exchange program, which lasted for about two months. From that time on, how should I put it, after experiencing this kind of educational environment abroad, I came back as a different person, that's about it."* 1b) *"Since returning from Australia, I've become more cheerful and confident, and I've started to have my own thoughts."*
	School	1c) *It's like my vision used to be focused on China, on what was happening in China and what was happening in other countries. That was what I focused on. But suddenly, international education was thrown in my face and told me that I could do whatever I wanted, or that there are different countries in the world and they have their own affairs. It told me about the origins of World War I and World War II, and what Latin American culture is like. There was a shock of open-mindedness here. Before, I was probably not so much closed off, but my vision was not that broad. Now that my vision has suddenly broadened, has my identity wavered? It seems not. My perception has changed after the vision broadened."*
	Parents	1d) *"My dad's classic saying is, "We only have the right to advise, but you have the right to decide." They can only advise, but that's all they say; "You are the one who makes the final decision." I am the one who makes the final decision, so what they really have of me is more of their so-called expectations and opinions."*

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Local Culture	Parents	1e)*"My identity hasn't changed to this day. I've always considered myself Chinese, and that's who I am. My roots are in China. Even though I studied abroad, ultimately, as my father often told me, we should radiate outwards from China as the core, rather than radiating outwards back to China."*

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Certainty of identity	Growing Environment	1f) "*At the time* [When I was younger], *I didn't really say anything, I wasn't that firmly convinced that I was, or rather, I shouldn't say that, I am still Chinese; I can't say that. But it's not that I wasn't firmly convinced that I wasn't Chinese either, it's just that in terms of identity, I wasn't as certain as I am now. I wasn't absolutely certain, it's just that the line was drawn back then, and for me, it was more about wanting to go out and see the world."* 1g) *"I have never felt that I am not Chinese. This fundamental question of my identity has never wavered."* 1h) *"I have never felt that I am not Chinese. This fundamental question of my identity has never wavered*

Participant B

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Local Culture	Parents	2a) *"He* [my dad] *feels that this is my root. Even if I study abroad, no matter where I go or how far I fly, my roots are still in my hometown, which is Jiangsu. And my closest relatives are there too. So what he means is that I can't forget my roots, which is why he has asked me many times to go back to my hometown to see my relatives and friends, to see my grandfather, and so on. I think my dad really cares about this."* 2b) *"I naturally want to visit the people I consider close, but I don't really agree*

		with my dad insisting that I go back to meet them—those distant relatives I don't know at all."

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Certainty of identity	Multiple Growing Environment	2c) *"My own identity is actually quite vague. Hmm. I think it's a very abstract concept for me. Because, although I grew up and was born in Hong Kong, I attended school across the border from Hong Kong, so most of the time I actually live in mainland China, specifically in Shenzhen."*

Participant C

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Foreign Culture	School	3a) *"But after entering an international school, I came into contact with classmates from all over the country and even from abroad. Even within China, each region has its own distinct dialects, accents, food customs, and traditions for celebrating festivals. This blending of different cultures has made me realize that my identity doesn't have to be so generalized or focused on a single aspect. I can also change and develop my own identity."*

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Local Culture	Parents	3b) *"Actually, I was a bit traditional when I was little. Back then, the festive atmosphere in my family was very grand. For example, during Chinese New Year, you absolutely had to visit so-and-so on the first day, so-and-so on the second,*
		and the entire Spring Festival holiday was governed by a very strict schedule. This included rules about what you could and couldn't say at home. My mom is quite traditional; she pays a lot of attention to etiquette and traditional Chinese customs."
	School	3c) *"Let's start with the people around me. First, I think the people who influenced me the most were my classmates. When I was in elementary school, since it was a public school, everyone was from mainland China, and many of them were from Guangzhou. They lived very close to the school, so everyone's lifestyle, personality, and upbringing were quite similar. So that group of people were basically like one big, unchanging group, just like a group of hardworking Guangzhou students."*

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Certainty of identity	Sense of Belonging	3d) *"Once you get to an international school, there's no fixed curriculum you're required to learn. Every teacher has a different teaching style and way of speaking, and they come from different countries with different accents. You'll encounter many different people and cultures. In this environment, you might encounter some positive figures, like a very gentle teacher or someone with a pleasant accent, and you might want to emulate them. This can influence your sense of identity."* 3e) "[When I was in a Chinese local school,] *everyone else was from Guangzhou, and at that time I felt a little different from them, but since everyone else was in the same group, I tried to align myself with them."* 3f) *"The surrounding environment changes my identity. Like I mentioned earlier, when I was in a public school, because they were all from Guangzhou, I didn't want to be an outsider. Even though I was young, being an outsider makes it easy*

		to be ostracized. So I didn't want to be that outsider. 3g) *"When I arrive in a new environment, I naturally feel a sense of unfamiliarity and unease. The different people around me come from different cultures and backgrounds, and their identities are also different. This can make my identity, which I previously thought was particularly good and which I had already integrated into, seem very different from theirs. I feel like I'm not connected to them and can't fit into the group. In this situation, I have some issues with my sense of belonging and I want to go back to my comfort zone. However, after a certain period of adaptation and change, it gets much better."*

Participant D

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Foreign Culture	Overseas Experience	4a) *"When I came to an international school, I had a lot of time and space to explore freely, and my parents respected that. The best education my parents gave me was to respect my choices and allow me to explore who I truly am. They sent me to the United States for summer school, exchange programs, and to interact with people there."*
	Parents	4b) *"When I came to an international school, I had a lot of time and space to explore freely, and my parents respected that. The best education my parents gave me was to respect my choices and allow me to explore who I truly am. They sent me to the United States for summer school, exchange programs, and to interact with people there."*

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Local Culture	School	4c) *"I don't think my identity was shaped by any particular school or family education. Because during junior high school, I felt suppressed, so much so that I often didn't identify with myself as a Chinese person."*

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Certainty of identity	Overseas Experience	4d) *"Then I realized that my understanding of the American vibe, or American identity, wasn't quite what I initially thought. There were many aspects of it that I didn't like. So, it's hard for me to define myself as either Chinese or a foreigner."*

Participant E

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Foreign Culture	Overseas Experience	5a) *"I think I won't say that* [I belong to the global village]. *I would like to say that I would be happy to experience the cultures and customs of other countries and to experience their societies. I would be very happy to do so. But in terms of my identity, I will always be, broadly speaking, Asian. I will always be Japanese or Chinese. If you want to be even more specific, I will always be Chinese because I grew up here and my education system is like that."*

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Local Culture	Parents	5b) *"When I was little, my mother often told me stories. She started teaching me to read the Book of Songs when I was very young, explaining its meaning to me. She also told me a lot of Chinese myths and legends, as well as a great deal of history."*

Themes	Factors	Quotes
Certainty of identity	Sense of Belonging	5c) *"I feel that not fitting in doesn't really affect my mindset or my sense of identity."* 5d) *"I think the mindset of "because everyone around me is Chinese, I have to be Chinese too" is wrong. It's not about following the crowd or thinking everyone else is Chinese, but because the people around me are Chinese, my mother is Chinese, and I received a Chinese education, I definitely identify as Chinese. My friends are all Chinese, I grew up in a Chinese circle, immersed in Chinese culture, so I definitely identify as Chinese. This includes my social circle. Although in the past, my social circle was mostly foreigners, as I've grown up—after spending three years at NCPA—and my close friends, like my childhood friends, are mostly Chinese, I definitely identify as Chinese."* 5a) *"In Japan, people call me Chinese; in China, people call me Japanese."* 5f) *"But it is true that I am not a member of the group. For example, I am not part of their group, I do not belong to this group, I do not belong to that group. This is true because, in terms of language and how others perceive me, I am a Japanese person* [to them]*."* 5g)*"Well, when I was little, many kids were immature and said some really harsh things. This caused a lot of conflict with my Japanese identity when I was young. But, how should I put it? I've never wavered in my identity. However, they, like with your question, are implying that I'm a bit of an outsider. I think that's inevitable, I think it's inevitable. Even at school now, many people see me and say, "Hey, Japanese." Just from those words, they've essentially excluded me from their local group."*

First Constellation: International Schooling and Education Experiences

The first constellation suggests that international schooling functioned as a major site of cultural exposure and identity negotiation, although its influence was not uniform across participants. It becomes noticeable that international schooling experiences, including overseas programs and broader exposure to foreign cultures, widened students' views of the world and introduced them to new ways of understanding identity. Several participants described these experiences as supporting identity exploration by making them more aware of cultural differences and of their own position in relation to others *(A., 1a, 1b; D., 4a, 4d; E., 5a)*. In this sense, the findings support earlier scholarship suggesting that international school environments can broaden students' perspectives and encourage intercultural awareness. At the same time, broadened exposure did not necessarily lead to the same identity outcome for all students. Participant A described international schooling as expanding his worldview without substantially changing how he perceived his identity *(A., 1c)*, whereas Participant C suggested that school experiences contributed to a more unstable sense of self *(C., 3a)*.

Participant D offered an especially important complication to earlier TCK literature. Although her international and overseas experiences exposed her to multiple cultural identities, she did not describe this as a crisis of belonging. Instead, she expressed a reflective distance from fixed identity categories, explaining:

"I can only say that I have a connection to Chinese culture, that I have the blood of this land, and that I share in its culture. But that doesn't mean that I, at this moment, must necessarily have the same identity as other legally defined Chinese people".

This suggests that exposure to multiple cultures may produce not only instability, but also a possible deliberate refusal of singular identity labels. This partly aligns with earlier scholarship suggesting that TCKs may develop strong cross-cultural abilities while struggling to feel complete belonging in any one cultural community (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Berry, 2008; Jeon, 2022). However, Participant D's account also complicates that pattern because her broadened worldview did not appear to weaken her sense of self.

The role of schooling was also shaped by school type and by social interaction within school. Participants' accounts indicate that peers and teachers were important mediators of identity development. In some cases, local school environments strengthened identification with local culture through peer interaction, while in others they created distance from it. Participant C described classmates as shaping her identity in ways that drew her closer to local culture *(C., 3c)*, while Participant D identified local school as one factor that contributed to her reluctance to identify with it *(D., 4c)*. These findings align with earlier scholarship suggesting that students' identities are shaped through interactions with peers, institutional norms, and the social roles encouraged by school environments (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006; Shifflet-Chila et al., 2016). They also support research indicating that local schools and international schools influence students differently (Kong, 2013; Woods & Kong, 2020). Overall, the findings suggest that schools did not simply provide broadened exposure. Rather, they created environments in which students encountered new cultural systems and had to negotiate their own identities in response to them.

Second Constellation: Family Influence

Family also played a significant role in identity development, but not in a single or uniform way. Parents influenced students' identity perceptions through the values they transmitted, the attitudes they expressed toward foreign cultures, and the degree to which they emphasized rootedness in local culture. Some participants described parents who supported their openness to foreign cultures *(A., 1d; D., 4b)*, while others described parents who stressed the importance of maintaining local cultural identity *(A., 1e; B., 2a; C., 3b; E., 5b)*. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that adolescents' identities are shaped by emotional bonds and parental value transmission (Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006; Shifflet-Chila et al., 2016). However, the results also suggest that family influence should not be understood as simple value transmission, because students respond to parental beliefs in different ways. Some accepted these messages strongly, while others negotiated or resisted them. Participant B, for example, did not fully agree with his parents' emphasis on local rootedness

(B., 2b), suggesting that family may function not only as a source of cultural continuity, but also as a site of identity negotiation.

Participant D provides a contrast: rather than promoting a single identity, her parents fostered reflexivity and openness, discouraging fixed or extreme identification. As she explained:

> *"Actually, it's also due to my parents' influence that I'm so grateful to them. Whenever I'm about to form a fixed idea of a certain identity, or feel that I belong to a certain group, they make me think, pull me up, and say, 'Think about this. Why are you thinking too extremely, too biasedly, and ignoring how other parts of life are?"*

This may help explain why she did not present her more fluid identity as alienating or distressing. Instead, her narrative suggests that family support can make identity openness feel stable rather than disorienting. This extends research suggesting parental support helps cross-cultural adolescents avoid alienation and interpret experiences more coherently (Peterson & Plamondon, 2009; Moore & Barker, 2011). It also connects with Evans' argument that parents may choose international schooling for pragmatic reasons while still maintaining expectations rooted in cultural continuity, family responsibility, and local social norms (Evans et al., 2022). In this study, family often acted as both an anchor and a counterpoint to school experience, shaping how students understood their exposure to different cultures rather than opposing it.

Third Constellation: Certainty of Identity and Belonging

The findings further suggest that certainty of identity emerged from the interaction of school experience, family influence, and belonging across contexts. Importantly, certainty did not always mean strong identification with a single culture. Instead, participants demonstrated different forms of certainty and uncertainty depending on the consistency of their environments, the stability of their relationships, and the meanings they attached to belonging. For some students, more consistent environments appeared to support stronger identity certainty. Participant A, for example, described a relatively stable sense of self despite broader cultural exposure *(A., 1f, 1g, 1h)*, whereas Participant B associated multiple growing environments with greater uncertainty *(B., 2c)*. Participant C's narrative similarly suggests that shifting environments and weaker belonging contributed to a more inconsistent identity *(C., 3d, 3e, 3f, 3g)*. Her sense of self appeared to move with the contexts around her, indicating that belonging played a major role in shaping identity stability.

Meanwhile, the findings indicate that belonging and certainty are related but different. Participant C and Participant E both experienced challenges in belonging *(C., 3e, 3g; E., 5e, 5f, 5g)*, yet their identity outcomes differed. Participant E still reported a stronger sense of certainty *(E., 5c, 5d, 5g)*, while Participant C remained more unstable in her self-perception. This suggests that reduced belonging does not automatically produce uncertainty in the same way for all

students. Rather, certainty appears to depend on how students interpret and negotiate their experiences. Participant D again challenges a simplified reading of TCK identity. Rather than expressing certainty in one cultural identity, she expressed certainty in not belonging fully to any single group. As she noted,

> *"I realized that my understanding of the American vibe, or American identity, wasn't quite what I initially thought. There were many aspects of it that I didn't like. So, it's hard for me to define myself as either Chinese or a foreigner" (D., 4d).*

This is an important finding because it suggests that certainty can take the form of stable non-affiliation rather than stable attachment. Her account partly aligns with earlier scholarship on cross-cultural adaptability, but it also complicates the assumption that multiple cultural exposures necessarily produce confusion, instability, or distress (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Berry, 2008; Jeon, 2022). Overall, the findings suggest that students in Type-C international schools may arrive at different identity outcomes: stronger rootedness, ongoing uncertainty, or a confident refusal of fixed identity categories. Identity development in this context is therefore best understood as an ongoing negotiation among school experiences, family expectations, and personal interpretations of belonging.

Constellation Synthesis

Taken together, the three constellations suggest that identity development among students in China's Type-C international schools is shaped not by international schooling or family influence alone, but by their own ongoing negotiation between these two contexts.
This directly supports the literature review's central argument that adolescent identity is co-constructed through school and family, while also extending it by showing what happens when those two sites are not culturally aligned as previous research suggests (Merten, 2005; Kwong, 2011; Li & Xia, 2025). Earlier scholarship generally frames family and school as the major environments through which adolescents develop a sense of self, yet much of that research assumes relative continuity between the two (Branje, 2022; Lannegrand-Willems & Bosma, 2006; Shifflet-Chila et al., 2016). In contrast, the present findings show that for students in Type-C international schools, school and family often represent partially divergent cultural systems. International schooling exposed participants to new languages, values, and worldviews, and in some cases encouraged them to explore beyond locally defined identities, which is consistent with previous research on international schools as sites of multicultural awareness, international-mindedness, and identity formation (Nagrath, 2011; Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2018). At the same time, families remained key sources of rootedness, cultural continuity, and moral interpretation, even when supporting international education for pragmatic reasons. This aligns with research showing parents may pursue international schooling for opportunity while maintaining expectations grounded in local norms and cultural continuity (Evans et al., 2022).

However, the findings also complicate any simple assumption that school necessarily internationalizes students or that family simply preserves local identity. Instead, both contexts functioned as interpretive forces, and students responded to them differently depending on their experiences, relationships, and sense of belonging, which echoes research suggesting that identity emerges through everyday interactions with institutions, people, and cultural expectations (Verhoeven et al., 2019; Branje, 2022). This current finding also complicates traditional TCK literature. Classic TCK scholarship often emphasizes incomplete rootedness, marginality, and difficulty belonging fully to one cultural community (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001; Berry, 2008; Jeon, 2022), and some of the present findings do align with that pattern.

However, the findings also show that TCK-like experience does not always produce the same outcome. Some participants developed stronger rootedness, some developed uncertainty, and some developed certainty precisely by refusing fixed cultural labels. This supports the literature review's argument that TCK should be used here more as a conceptual lens than as a definitive category (Fail et al., 2004; Long, 2016; Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2018). Rather than proving that students in Type-C schools are straightforwardly Third Culture Kids, the findings suggest that they resemble TCKs in some respects while also occupying a distinct position: they are locally situated, internationally schooled, and shaped by the interaction of family expectations, school values, and personal interpretations of belonging. The study therefore extends previous research by showing that the key issue is not simply whether these students "are" TCKs, but how they make sense of themselves while moving across partially different cultural environments. Overall, identity development in Type-C international schools is context-dependent and negotiated: students did not passively absorb school or family influences but accepted, resisted, reinterpreted, or combined them. As a result, identity certainty in this context did not always mean strong attachment to a single culture, but could also emerge as layered belonging, selective rootedness, or a confident refusal of singular identity categories.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that the identity development of students in China's C-level international schools is a complex negotiation process, influenced by both international education and family factors. These two factors are not independent or opposed to each other; instead, they jointly create an environment that enables students to actively interpret and position their identities within a multicultural framework. International education broadens students' horizons and introduces new ways of understanding identity, while the family provides continuity, values, and interpretive guidance. However, students do not passively accept these influences; instead, they respond in different ways, thereby resulting in different identity development outcomes.

The research results emphasize that the certainty of identity does not necessarily equate to a fixed cultural affiliation. For some students, certainty stems from a stable identification with a specific culture; while for others, certainty comes from the mixture, fluidity, or even deliberate rejection of a single label. This challenges the traditional assumption in the literature on third

culture children (TCK) that instability or marginalization is the main outcome. Instead, this study proposes a more nuanced understanding that even if identity is not exclusive or constantly evolving, it can still remain stable. Fundamentally, identity formation in this context is a continuous, context-dependent negotiation shaped by individuals' meaning-making within an interwoven cultural environment.

Limitation

Several limitations should be acknowledged, including the use of convenience sampling and the small sample size. This study employed both convenience and purposive sampling, with participants intentionally selected by the researcher. However, as all participants were drawn from the same international school, the findings may not be representative of a broader population. Additionally, participants' responses and narratives may have been influenced by their shared school context. Furthermore, the small sample size may have constrained the achievement of data saturation. Previous studies suggest that while 16 or fewer interviews can be sufficient to identify common themes in relatively homogeneous groups, larger samples of around 20 to 40 participants are often needed to fully reach saturation (Aguboshim, 2021; Hagaman & Wutich, 2016).

Implication

These findings suggest that identity development in Type-C international schools should be understood as a dynamic, negotiated process rather than a predictable outcome of cultural exposure. For educators, this highlights the importance of creating school environments that do not assume uniform identity trajectories but instead support diverse forms of belonging, including stability, exploration, and non-affiliation. Schools could integrate structured reflection opportunities, intercultural dialogue, and pastoral support to help students process their experiences. For families, the results indicate that influence lies not only in transmitting values but also in fostering critical thinking and openness, which may buffer against identity instability. At a theoretical level, the study challenges simplified interpretations of Third Culture Kid frameworks by demonstrating multiple possible identity outcomes (Van Reken & Bethel, 2005). Future research should therefore move beyond categorical labels and focus on how individuals actively interpret cultural experiences. Overall, policy and practice should prioritize flexibility, recognizing that identity certainty may take plural and non-traditional forms.

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Perception of Difficulty Changes in Sign Language: The Influence of Middle School Students' Sign Language Cognition and Basic Linguistic Knowledge

By Zilin Sun

Abstract

This study examines changes in secondary school students' perception of the difficulty of Chinese Sign Language (CSL), and analyzes the suggestions proposed by participants. Through a questionnaire survey, data on sign language awareness were collected from 184 secondary school students. The results indicate that although most students had been exposed to sign language through online platforms, public welfare activities, and other channels, their perception of its difficulty shifted noticeably after exposure to basic sign language linguistics. Notably, students commonly reported that their unfamiliarity with sign language stemmed primarily from a lack of formal learning platforms.

Keywords: Sign Language Linguistics、Perception of Difficulty、Language Cognition、Survey Research 、Sign Formation Mechanisms、Language Acquisition

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Chinese Sign Language (CSL) serves as the primary means of communication for the hearing-impaired community and is recognized as a natural language with an independent vocabulary and grammatical system. In September 2025, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress deliberated the draft revision of the National Common Language and Script Law, during which multiple committee members proposed the inclusion of National Common Sign Language and Braille under legal protection. Concurrently, the National Occupational Standards for Sign Language Interpreters (2025 Edition) were formally promulgated. Despite these policy advancements, the popularization of sign language continues to face considerable challenges, particularly among adolescent populations, whose understanding and awareness of sign language remain limited.

Secondary school students are at a critical stage of cognitive development, during which their language attitudes and learning dispositions exert a significant influence on the broader sociolinguistic landscape. However, most secondary school students' exposure to sign language remains confined to fragmented and often trivialized content—such as a handful of commonly known lexical items (e.g., "thank you") encountered through short videos, films, or television programs—while their understanding of the everyday vocabulary essential to sign language users remains vague and underdeveloped.

Although a substantial body of research has examined language acquisition and social inclusion among the hearing-impaired population, relatively few studies have investigated how knowledge of sign language linguistics shapes the perceptions and attitudes of hearing secondary

school students toward sign language. Existing sign language promotion efforts have largely focused on policy advocacy and public welfare campaigns, with insufficient attention devoted to cognitive-level interventions. In other words, it remains unclear whether—after being introduced to the fundamental principles of sign language word formation—secondary school students can infer the meanings of unfamiliar signed expressions, and thereby offer basic assistance to sign language users in real-world contexts.

To address this research gap, the present study departs from grand narratives and focuses specifically on an empirical analysis of Chinese secondary school students' awareness of Chinese Sign Language, with participants drawn primarily from the middle and high school divisions of Shijiazhuang Foreign Language School.

The study aims to investigate two core questions: (1) How does the perceived difficulty of sign language among secondary school students change after exposure to basic linguistic knowledge of sign language? and (2) Building on the linguistic features found to be most intuitively accessible, how can this knowledge be leveraged to enhance students' understanding of sign language? This research aspires to contribute to the broader field of communication between sign language users and non-signers, and its findings may serve as a foundational reference for future investigations. Like other studies in this domain, this work seeks to add valuable empirical insights to the existing literature.

CHAPTER 2 Literature Review

2.1 What is Sign Language Linguistics?

Sign Language Linguistics is an important branch of linguistics that emerged in the 1960s. Drawing on natural sign language as its primary data source, and operating within the theoretical framework of linguistics, it systematically examines the universals and particulars of sign language across multiple levels, including phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics (Deng, 2003).

The foundational premise of sign language linguistics is that sign language, like spoken language, is a natural language with a complete linguistic system. Sign language is not merely a collection of "gestures" or "motions," but rather a visual language with its own independent vocabulary, grammatical rules, and syntactic structures. As articulated in The Linguistic Status of Chinese Sign Language (I) (2009), Chinese Sign Language is an independent visual language that constitutes a linguistic system distinct from Chinese. For deaf individuals, sign language is acquired as their "first language" in the most natural settings, whereas spoken and written language require specialized training. This assertion affirms, from a linguistic perspective, the legitimate status of Chinese Sign Language as a natural language, and provides a theoretical foundation for subsequent sign language instruction, popularization, and linguistic research.

With respect to the internal structure of sign language, Chinese Sign Language adheres to the general principles of linguistics. Research has indicated that the morphological units of Chinese Sign Language are composed of meaningless features, which function analogously to

"phonemes" in spoken language—that is, the smallest units capable of distinguishing meaning. Like other human languages, Chinese Sign Language exhibits both arbitrariness and iconicity in its form-meaning relationships (Phonological Studies of Chinese Sign Language, 2010). This finding suggests that although sign language differs from spoken language in its modality of expression, it remains highly consistent with human language in its organizational principles.

Regarding the specific manifestations of "similarity" (i.e., iconicity) in sign language, A Corpus-Based Study of Iconicity in Chinese Sign Language (2010) further summarizes seven types of iconic devices employed in Chinese Sign Language. These include: direct representation, using the hand to represent the shape of the referent, using the hand to represent the action of the referent, using the body to represent the action of the referent, borrowing from other linguistic systems (such as Chinese characters or Pinyin), and using speech-associated gestures. This classification directly corresponds to the types of sign language word formation examined in the questionnaire of the present study—namely, imitation (iconicity), deixis (pointing), and borrowing— thereby providing theoretical support for the study's questionnaire design.

In recent years, Chinese scholars have begun to investigate the influence of iconicity on sign language learning among hearing populations. The findings suggest that iconicity, as a linguistic feature, plays a facilitative role in the sign language learning process of hearing individuals and provide important theoretical context and empirical grounding for the central question of the present study: whether linguistic knowledge can influence secondary school students' perception and perceived difficulty of sign language.

In summary, research in sign language linguistics has provided substantial evidence for the status of sign language as an independent natural language, and the facilitative role of iconic features and linguistic knowledge in sign language learning has increasingly attracted empirical attention. However, existing studies have predominantly focused on university student populations, leaving the sign language awareness of secondary school students—a critical age group—systematically under-investigated. The present study is situated precisely within this research gap.

2.2 The role of online platforms in the dissemination of sign language

Since the advent of the internet era, online platforms have gradually emerged as pivotal arenas for the dissemination of sign language. In the realm of online education, Bai and Xu (2026) took sign language courses on the Chinese University MOOC platform as a case study, noting that while online open courses have promoted the sharing of educational resources and enabled broader public access to systematic learning, they also revealed a practical challenge: despite extensive course coverage, learner completion rates remain suboptimal. From the perspective of platform construction, Zhang et al. (2016) investigated how "Internet Plus" sign language teaching platforms can dismantle communication barriers between deaf and hearing individuals. Collectively, these studies indicate that while online platforms have effectively expanded the reach of sign language, there is still significant room for improvement regarding

learning depth and systematic instruction.

Concurrently, the lag in the informatization of sign language itself constitutes a more profound constraint. Ren et al. (2023) pointed out that the informatization of Chinese Sign Language significantly trails behind spoken language, manifesting as a lack of theoretical frameworks, practical models, and application software, as well as inadequate sign language datasets and corpora. Although Zhao and Han (2020) proposed new media promotion pathways, such as establishing sign language databases and launching open online courses, a gap remains between these macro-level conceptualizations and the practical dilemma faced by high school students, who often struggle to access reliable learning pathways.

In recent years, the proliferation of short-video and live-streaming platforms has opened new avenues for sign language dissemination. Shen and Guo (2025) found that individuals with disabilities have achieved three levels of digital practice through short video platforms: "access—connection—output." Other studies have analyzed the media 7 participation of deaf individuals in Taobao's sign language live-streaming. While these emerging platforms offer new possibilities for dissemination, their content is predominantly characterized by individualized, daily sharing. Lacking pedagogical systematicity and standardization, these platforms create a tension with high school students' need to transition from fragmented exposure to systematic learning.

In conclusion, although online platforms have succeeded in making sign language "visible," the core issue hindering high school students' understanding of sign language is not a lack of visibility, but rather the difficulty in accessing reliable learning pathways that provide substantive support. Further exploration is warranted on how to transition online platforms from merely "expanding reach" to "providing systematic learning pathways."

2.3 Research evidence on the cognitive impacts of linguistic on students

Investigating the cognitive interface between sign and spoken languages, Cao and Li (2021) employed a lexical decision task under priming conditions to examine how iconicity and sign language experience influence cross-modal semantic priming effects between Chinese Sign Language (CSL) and Mandarin Chinese. In their experiment, two groups of participants—fluent signers (CSL-Chinese bilinguals) and hearing non-signers (Chinese monolinguals)—were first presented with video clips of CSL signs, followed immediately by a task to judge whether the subsequent string of Chinese characters constituted a real word.

The study yielded distinct findings based on the nature of the signs. In the iconic condition, both groups demonstrated significant semantic priming effects. However, in the non-iconic condition, significant priming effects were observed exclusively among fluent signers, while hearing non-signers showed no significant effect. These results indicate that while a cross-modal semantic priming effect exists between CSL and Chinese, its emergence is dually modulated by the iconicity of the sign vocabulary and the individual's sign language learning experience (Cao & Li, 2021)

CHAPTER 3 Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

This study investigates secondary school students' perceptions of sign language and their views on learning it. Through four hand sign recognition tasks grounded in basic linguistic knowledge, the study aims to address two core research questions:

1. How does the perceived difficulty of sign language among secondary school students change after exposure to basic linguistic knowledge of sign language?

2. Building on the linguistic features found to be most intuitively accessible, how can this knowledge be leveraged to enhance students' understanding of sign language?

3.2 Method of Data Collection

This study employed a self-designed online questionnaire as the primary instrument for data collection. The questionnaire was developed and administered through Wenjuanxing (问卷星), a widely used online survey platform in China. It consisted of 10 items and was organized into four sections, each addressing a distinct dimension of the research questions.

Section 1 (Items 1–2) collected demographic information and participants' prior exposure to sign language, including their grade level and the channels through which they had encountered sign language (e.g., online platforms, public welfare activities, school curricula).

Section 2 (Items 3–4) measured participants' perceived difficulty of learning sign language and their attributions of that difficulty. Item 3 asked participants to identify the primary obstacles to learning sign language (e.g., lack of formal channels, limited practical use, perceived complexity), while Item 4 required them to rate the overall difficulty of sign language on a five-point scale (ranging from "very easy" to "very difficult").

Section 3 (Items 5–8) assessed participants' ability to recognize sign language words that exemplify three fundamental types of sign formation: iconicity (mimetic representation), deixis (pointing), and borrowing (from written Chinese or Pinyin). The four items corresponded to the following sign words:

Figure 1

Item	Sign Word	Formation Type	Description
5	Thank you	Iconicity	Mimicking a bowing gesture
6	Train	Iconicity	Simulating a train on the track
7	Ear	Deixis	Pointing directly to the body part
8	Toilet	Borrowing	Borrowed from “W.C.”

(Prior to Item 8, participants were provided with a Chinese Sign Language fingerspelling chart to ensure they possessed the basic information necessary for identifying a borrowing-based sign.)

Section 4 (Items 9–10) repeated the difficulty perception measure from Item 4 to capture any change in perceived difficulty after participants had engaged with the four sign recognition tasks. Item 10 was an open-ended question inviting participants to 10 share their suggestions, reflections, or additional thoughts regarding sign language learning. This item was optional and served to collect qualitative data to complement the quantitative findings.

The questionnaire was distributed online through multiple channels, including WeChat Moments and the school's confession wall (a student-run social media platform for announcements and peer interaction), between August 15,2026 and August 18, 2026. All items except Item 10 were mandatory, and answers were automatically recorded by the survey platform.

3.3 Research Participants

The participants in this study were 184 Chinese secondary school students, the majority of whom were recruited from Shijiazhuang Foreign Language School. The sample consisted of 58 middle school students, 112 high school students, and a negligible number of 14 participants from other educational backgrounds. Over 98% of the participants reported having had no prior exposure to formal linguistic knowledge. This background characteristic made it possible to examine the influence of basic linguistic knowledge on secondary school students' understanding of sign language without the confounding effect of prior training.

3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis in this study consisted of the following steps.

First, all closed-ended responses were exported from Wenjuanxing to Microsoft Excel, where the distribution of responses for each item was calculated and tabulated. This step provided an overview of participants' demographic information, prior exposure to sign language, perceived difficulty, and performance on the four sign recognition tasks. Second, a pre-post comparison was conducted between Item 4 (pre-test, measuring participants' perceived difficulty before the sign-recognition tasks) and Item 9 (posttest, measuring the same construct after the tasks). This step was critical for examining whether exposure to basic linguistic knowledge of sign language influenced participants' perception of its difficulty.In addition, cross-tabulations were performed to examine whether participants' prior exposure to sign language or their perception of sign language was associated with their performance on the sign-recognition tasks.

Third, correct rates across the four sign-recognition items (Items 5–8) were compared to identify which of the three sign formation types—iconicity (Items 5 and 6), deixis (Item 7), or borrowing (Item 8)—was most accurately recognized by participants. This step allowed the researcher to determine whether certain types of linguistic knowledge were more intuitively accessible to secondary school students than others.

Finally, responses to the open-ended question (Item 10) were coded thematically. Recurring patterns and representative comments were extracted to complement the quantitative findings.

No advanced statistical software was used; all analyses were conducted using the built-in analytical functions of the survey platform and Microsoft Excel, which were sufficient for the descriptive and comparative purposes of this study.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All participants took part in this study voluntarily. Prior to participation, they were informed of the purpose of the research, the anonymous nature of the data collection, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Appropriate measures were taken to protect participants' privacy throughout the research process. To ensure anonymity, participants' real names were replaced with numerical codes ranging from 1 to 184 (assigned in the order in which the questionnaires were submitted). No personal identifiable information—such as names, student ID numbers, or class affiliations—was collected or disclosed in any form. All data were 12 used solely for academic purposes and were accessible only to the researcher.

All data were stored securely on the researcher's password-protected device and will be retained for future academic use, with access restricted to the researcher.

CHAPTER 4 Findings

4.1 Online Platforms Proved Least Effective for Sign Language Dissemination

Figure 2 below presents a comparison between participants who had encountered sign language exclusively through digital media (n=85) and those who had encountered it exclusively through public welfare activities (n=6), in terms of their perceived difficulty and performance on the four sign-recognition tasks.

Figure 2 Comparison of Sign Recognition Performance by Exposure Channel

Channel	N	"Thank You"	"Train"	"Ear"	"Toilet (W.C.)"	Perceived Difficulty (%Moderate + Difficult)
Digital Media Only	85	82%	49%	100%	49%	83%
Public Welfare Only	6	83%	33%	100%	100%	83%

As shown in figure 2, the channel of exposure appeared to have little impact on participants' overall perceived difficulty of sign language. In both groups, 83% rated sign language as either "moderate" or "difficult." This suggests that mere exposure— whether through digital media or public welfare activities—does not necessarily reduce the perceived difficulty of learning sign language.

However, notable differences emerged in participants' actual performance on the sign recognition tasks. The sign "thank you," a basic and highly frequent sign in everyday social interaction, was recognized at similarly high rates across both groups (82% in the digital-media-only group and 83% in the public-welfare-only group). This indicates that the most fundamental and socially visible signs have achieved a relatively high level of popularization

among secondary school students, regardless of their primary exposure channel.

The most striking difference lies in the sign "toilet," which is formed through borrowing from the "W.C." While all six participants in the public-welfare-only group correctly identified this sign (100%), fewer than half of the digital-media-only participants (49%) did so. This disparity is particularly significant when considering the practical context: in real-world scenarios where a non-signer might encounter a sign language user in need of assistance, the word "toilet" is far more likely to be relevant than a greeting such as "thank you." The fact that a sign of high practical utility remains unrecognized by over half of digitally-exposed participants points to a critical limitation of current digital media dissemination: while online platforms are effective at popularizing visually intuitive or socially visible signs, they are far less capable of conveying signs that require even a minimal level of linguistic explanation, such as borrowing from “W.C.”.

Why not try something more creative—like incorporating current memes into Douyin videos? Lots of people would probably watch them. Or shoot some short skits. If possible, organize a themed class meeting, or use a self-study period to come into class and explain things.（*Participant 167*）

I hope there can be more promotion encouraging everyone to learn more about sign language—for example, by posting promotional videos on online platforms, so that the lives of people with disabilities can be made more convenient.（*Participant 156*）

4.2 Deictic Signs Were Acquired More Readily by Hearing Learners

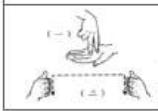
Figure 3

Q5 Options	Number of Responses	Percentage
(Correct Answer: “Thank you”) (1)	155	84.24%
(2)	5	2.72%
(3)	4	2.17%
(4)	20	10.87%

In the sign recognition task for "thank you," 84.24% of secondary school students

answered correctly. Among the three distractors, Option 4 ("oil") received a significantly higher selection rate than Options 2 and 3. This is likely because the gesture visually resembles everyday body language expressing "like" or "love," leading participants to misassociate it with "thank you." This finding reflects that, without formal training, most students can still perform semantic associations based on visual similarity and social context—they are actively linking unfamiliar gestures to possible meanings, a spontaneous display of what can be described as iconicity reasoning in language cognition.

Figure 4

Q6 Options	Number of Responses	Percentage
(1)	18	9.78%
(2)	50	27.17%
(3) (Correct Answer: "Train")	96	52.17%
 (4)	20	10.87%

In the sign recognition task for "train," 52.17% of secondary school students selected the correct answer. Among the distractors, Option 1 ("tram") was chosen less frequently than Option 2 ("underground"). This pattern suggests that most students understood the hand movement as mimicking the motion of train wheels on tracks. Notably, the stronger interference from semantically related options such as "tram" and "subway"—both within the rail transport category—compared to the visually distinct "platform" indicates that students relied more on semantic relevance than on purely visual similarity. This finding reflects an early manifestation of sign language comprehension from the perspective of embodied cognition.

Figure 5

Q7 Options	Number of Responses	Percentage
(1) (Correct Answer: "ear")	178	96.74%
(2)	0	0.00%
(3)	5	2.72%
(4)	1	0.54%

In the sign recognition task for "ear," 97% of students answered correctly. This typical deictic sign, formed by pointing to the body part, relies on fundamental spatial cognition and body schema. It is intelligible without prior linguistic knowledge. The near-perfect accuracy is therefore not coincidental. This finding underscores that deixis provides a shared bodily-based cognitive foundation between signers and non-signers, facilitating natural cross-group communication.

Figure 6

Q8 Options	Number of Responses	Percentage
(1)	29	15.76%
(2) (Correct Answer: "toilet")	98	53.26%

(3)	39	21.20%
(4)	18	9.78%

In the sign recognition task for "toilet," 53% of students selected the correct answer after reviewing the reference information (see Appendix B). Among the distractors, Option 1 ("name/cat") was chosen by 29 participants, likely due to its hand-shape similarity to the correct sign; Option 3 ("small") had a selection rate of 21.20%, possibly because the inward finger movement was associated with the concept of "urgency" and thus contextually linked to "toilet." Overall, with fingerspelling cues provided beforehand, a considerable proportion of students recognized that the sign for "toilet" is formed through a borrowing mechanism from "W.C." This suggests that even for borrowing-based signs lacking direct visual iconicity, secondary school students can grasp their word-formation logic when given appropriate linguistic prompts.

Sign language is a very warm language. I hope schools can offer simple mini-classes on sign language, so that we can learn basic gestures, better understand our hearing-impaired friends, and bridge the gap between us.（*Participant 142*）

Sign language is very important—it is a means of communication for the hearing-impaired community. I believe we should respect sign language and respect hearing-impaired people, and regard it as a language just like Chinese and English. I think schools or public venues could increase their promotion of sign language, so that everyone can show more respect for sign language and more kindness and understanding toward hearing-impaired people.（*Participant 182*）

4.3 An Overall Increase in Students' Acceptance of Sign Language Following the Acquisition of Foundational Linguistic Knowledge

Prior to completing the four sign-recognition tasks, participants reported their perceived difficulty of sign language through Item 4 (see Figure 7). After being exposed to basic linguistic knowledge of sign language through the four tasks, participants answered Item 9, which was identical in wording to Item 4 (see Figure 8).

Figure 7

Option	Number of Responses	Percentage
Very difficult — overwhelming at first sight	17	9.24%
Difficult, but manageable for basic greetings	74	40.22%
Moderate — similar to learning a foreign language	71	38.59%
Easy — even interesting	21 1	11.41%
Very easy — I would like to try incorporating it into daily conversations as a gesture supplement	1	0.54%

Figure 8

Option	Number of Responses	Percentage
Very difficult — overwhelming at first sight	20	10.87%
Difficult, but manageable for basic greetings	60	32.61%
Moderate — similar to learning a foreign language	72	39.13%
Easy — even interesting	27	14.67%
Very easy — I would like to try incorporating it into daily conversations as a gesture supplement	5	2.72%

After completing the four sign-recognition tasks, participants' perceived difficulty of sign language was reassessed using the same five-point scale as in Item 4 (see Figures 1 and 2). As shown in Figure 8 , the proportion of participants who selected "Very difficult — overwhelming at first sight" remained largely unchanged. The "Difficult, but manageable for basic greetings" category decreased by 14 participants. The "Moderate — similar to learning a foreign language" category showed little change. Meanwhile, the "Easy — even interesting" and "Very easy — I would like to try incorporating it into daily conversations as a gesture supplement" categories together increased by 10 participants.

Overall, after engaging with authentic sign language content, participants demonstrated a noticeable reduction in unfamiliarity and perceived difficulty, accompanied by a moderate increase in interest and confidence in learning sign language.

I suggest that primary and secondary schools as well as universities establish sign language interest clubs, and organize activities in the form of games and sign language 21 performances to songs, with a focus on experiencing sign language as a means of communication. Popularization should not only involve hearing people learning sign language, but also encourage hearing-impaired individuals to learn about mainstream social practices. Offline interactive activities could be created to reduce the gap between the two communities.（*Participant 153*）

4.4 The Demand for Credible and Formalized Learning Channels Among NonSigners

Participants' responses indicate that the core challenge in sign language popularization has shifted from raising public awareness of its existence and users to providing non-signers with a publicly accessible, credible, and formalized learning pathway. This recurring demand reflects a broader transition in public expectations— from cognitive awareness to actionable practice. Participants not only wish to be informed about sign language; more fundamentally, they seek systematic learning opportunities that would enable them to acquire basic communicative competence in sign language.

A deaf-mute vendor used to set up a stall near my community. After getting to know him, I learned a few basic signs—"thank you," "hello," "goodbye"—and seeing his smile made it all worthwhile. Recently, I have also been learning sign language dance performances and try to make my gestures as accurate as possible before posting them online. It feels very meaningful.（*Participant151*）

Hello senior. If you are promoting sign language, I have a suggestion: create a set of sign language emojis using frequently used words, with each sign accompanied by corresponding text explanations. Emojis spread easily and could have a strong impact. (Participant 179)

High schools could offer sign language clubs and seek guidance from professionals while also researching market demand. For middle school social practice programs, consideration could be given to helping students from special education schools integrate into mainstream society. (Participant 171)

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

This study aims to explore an effective pathway enabling non-signers to comprehend basic information expressed by signers in specific contexts. The findings reveal that after acquiring foundational word-formation knowledge in sign language linguistics, high school students exhibited a significant reduction in apprehension toward sign language, accompanied by an overall enhancement in their learning confidence. Furthermore, the results indicate that among the three word-formation mechanisms—deixis, imitation, and borrowing—deictic signs are the most intuitive and comprehensible for non-signers.

The conclusions of this study provide a valuable supplement to the existing literature. First, it reveals that non-signers possess an intuitive capacity for sign language comprehension. This finding offers practical implications for daily communication between signers and non-signers, underscoring the critical role of deictic vocabulary in cross-group interactions. Second, the study gathered innovative suggestions from high school students regarding sign language dissemination, providing a youth-oriented perspective for optimizing the promotion pathways of sign language.

Despite these contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the majority of participants were recruited from a single school and generally demonstrated strong English

proficiency. This may introduce a bias toward higher language cognitive abilities within the sample, potentially affecting the generalizability of the results. Second, the study included only four sign language recognition items. The limited number of test items may be insufficient to conclusively guarantee that the accuracy rates were entirely attributable to participants' understanding of the three word formation mechanisms (deixis, imitation, and borrowing).

Future research could further explore innovative formats for promoting sign language among younger demographics, such as sign language emojis and sign language gesture dances. Integrating systematic sign language linguistics into fragmented, bite-sized science communication content holds the potential to stimulate broader interest and cognitive awareness of sign language across wider populations.

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Predictability Beyond Harmonic Complexity: **A Comparative Markov Chain Analysis of Oscar Peterson's Improvisation in Three Recordings: Georgia On My Mind, C Jam Blues, and Night Train By Shaurya Gupta**

Abstract

Two earlier studies analysed Oscar Peterson's improvisation using first-order Markov chains, but reached opposite trade-offs: a single-piece study achieved mathematical depth (eigenvalues, spectral gaps, second-order chains) at the cost of breadth, while a four-piece study achieved breadth in name only, since three of its four pieces were never actually transcribed and their conclusions were speculative. This paper takes a middle path. Three separate 16-bar extracts of Peterson's playing — Georgia On My Mind (a harmonically rich ballad), C Jam Blues (a 12-bar blues), and Night Train (a riff-based shuffle) — are each hand-transcribed as an ordered sequence of (Chord, Note) states and modelled as first-order Markov chains. For each piece I build the transition matrix, solve for the stationary distribution, and compute Shannon entropy per state. The headline result could not have been reached by listening or by description alone: raw mean entropy makes Georgia On My Mind look far more 'predictable' than the two blues-idiom pieces (0.82 bits versus 1.48 and 1.14 bits), but this is largely an artefact of state-space size — Georgia's 55-state chain is sampled at only 2.6 observations per state, compared to roughly 6 for the smaller-vocabulary blues pieces. Once entropy is normalised by its theoretical maximum, $\log_2$(number of states), the ranking reverses: Georgia turns out to be the most structured piece per decision point (14.2% of its maximum entropy), while C Jam Blues is the least (32.7%). This shows that harmonic complexity and improvisational predictability are not the same quantity, and that only a normalised, formula-driven comparison can separate the two.

1. Introduction

1.1 Two Prior Studies, Two Different Trade-offs

Oscar Peterson (1925–2007) is one of the most technically accomplished improvisers in jazz history, and his playing has already been the subject of two Markov-chain studies by this author. The first (Gupta, 2025) built a single harmonic-contextual Markov chain — encoding each melody note as a (Chord, Note) pair — from a 16-bar transcription of Georgia On My Mind, and used it to argue that Peterson's improvisation is 'predictably unpredictable'. It then extended the discussion to three further pieces (C Jam Blues, Night Train, and Hymn to Freedom), but candidly admitted these extensions were 'reserved for future empirical analysis': no transcription was made, and every numerical claim about those three pieces was a stylistic prediction rather than a measured result.

The second study (Gupta, 2026) went the opposite way. It stayed with the same Georgia On My Mind extract but analysed it three times over — as a harmonic-contextual chain, a note-only chain, and a directed-interval chain — and added a full eigenvalue treatment of the

stationary distribution, including the Perron–Frobenius theorem and a spectral-gap estimate of the chain's mixing time. This is mathematically the more advanced of the two papers, but it analyses only one piece, so it cannot say whether the patterns it finds are peculiar to Georgia On My Mind or general to Peterson's playing.

This paper sits between the two. Rather than analysing one piece three ways, or four pieces with only one actually transcribed, it analyses three different pieces once each, using a single consistent first-order Markov chain model, and compares them using formulas within reach of A-Level Further Mathematics: the maximum-likelihood transition probability, the stationary distribution obtained by solving simultaneous equations, and Shannon entropy. No eigenvalues or Perron–Frobenius arguments are required.

1.2 Why Three Pieces, and Why These Three

Georgia On My Mind, C Jam Blues, and Night Train were chosen because they represent three genuinely different idioms in Peterson's repertoire. Georgia On My Mind is a harmonically dense ballad with ten distinct chords across the extract analysed here. C Jam Blues is a 12-bar blues in a single key, built from just three chords (C7, F7, G7), and is associated with Peterson's celebrated command of blues vocabulary. Night Train is a riff-based shuffle, also a three-chord blues (G7, C7, D7), whose head is built almost entirely from a short repeated melodic cell. If Markov-chain modelling is to be musically useful rather than a mathematical curiosity, it should be able to tell these three apart — and, as Section 5 shows, it tells them apart in a way that a purely descriptive account would get wrong.

1.3 Research Questions

This paper addresses two questions:

RQ1: When a first-order (Chord, Note) Markov chain is fitted separately to three different Peterson recordings, how does the resulting state space, transition structure, and stationary distribution differ across pieces?

RQ2: Is raw mean Shannon entropy a fair basis for comparing 'predictability' across pieces whose chains have very different numbers of states, or does it need to be corrected for state-space size?

2. Mathematical Framework

2.1 Markov Chains and the Transition Matrix

Each transcribed piece is treated as a sequence of states $X_0, X_1, X_2, \ldots$, where each state is a (Chord, Note) pair — for example (C7, Eb) means 'the melody note Eb, played while the underlying harmony is C7'. The sequence is modelled as a first-order Markov chain, meaning the next state depends only on the current state:

$$P(X_{n+1} = s_j \mid X_n = s_i, X_{n-1}, \ldots, X_0) = P(X_{n+1} = s_j \mid X_n = s_i) \equiv p_{ij}$$

Collecting every $p_{i\square}$ into an n × n transition matrix P gives a row-stochastic matrix: every entry is non-negative, and every row sums to 1, since the melody must go somewhere next. Each row of P is a full probability distribution over 'what Peterson plays next, given he has just played this'.

2.2 Estimating Transition Probabilities from Data

The true transition probabilities are not directly observable; they are estimated from the transcribed sequence. If $C_{i\square}$ is the number of times state s_i is immediately followed by state $s_{\square}$ in the transcription, the maximum-likelihood estimate of the transition probability is:

$$p_{i\square} = C_{i\square} / \Sigma_{\square} C_{i\square}$$

This is simply 'the number of times this transition happened, divided by the total number of times we left this state'. It is only reliable when the denominator $\Sigma_{\square} C_{i\square}$ is reasonably large; Section 5.1 shows that this condition fails badly for many states in the Georgia On My Mind chain.

2.3 The Stationary Distribution

A stationary (or equilibrium) distribution π is a row vector of probabilities, one per state, satisfying:

$$\pi P = \pi, \quad \Sigma_i \pi_i = 1$$

Intuitively, π is the long-run proportion of time the chain spends in each state if it were run forever. This is the Markov chain content of A-Level Further Mathematics (Decision Mathematics): π can be found by writing πP = π out as a set of simultaneous linear equations, one per state, together with the normalisation condition $\Sigma_i \pi_i = 1$, and solving them directly. For a small number of states this is practical by hand (Section 3.4). For the full state spaces of each piece (22 to 55 states), which are too large to solve this way, π is instead found by repeatedly multiplying a starting distribution by P until the result stops changing — the same equations, solved mechanically rather than by hand.

2.4 Shannon Entropy as a Predictability Measure

For a given state s_i with outgoing transition probabilities $\{p_{i1}, p_{i2}, \ldots, p_{i\square}\}$, the Shannon entropy of that state is:

$$H(s_i) = -\Sigma_{\square} p_{i\square} \log_2 p_{i\square} \quad \text{(bits)}$$

$H(s_i)$ is 0 when the next state is certain (one transition has probability 1), and reaches its maximum, $\log_2(k)$, when all k possible next states are equally likely. Averaging over all n states in a chain gives the mean state entropy:

$$\bar{H} = (1/n) \Sigma_i H(s_i)$$

$\bar{H}$ has been used in both prior studies as a single-number summary of how 'predictable' a musician's note choices are. Section 2.5 shows why, on its own, it is not a fair way to compare two pieces whose chains have different numbers of states.

2.5 Normalised Entropy: A Fair Basis for Comparison

A chain with n states has a maximum possible entropy of $H_{max} = \log_2(n)$, reached only if every transition were equally likely. This maximum is different for every piece, because each piece produces a different number of unique (Chord, Note) states. Comparing raw $\bar{H}$ values across pieces with different n therefore compares numbers measured on different scales — rather like comparing two test scores out of different totals without converting to percentages. This paper instead reports the normalised entropy ratio:

$$\bar{H} / H_{max} = \bar{H} / \log_2(n)$$

which expresses each piece's mean entropy as a percentage of what that piece's own state space could in principle produce, and is the quantity actually used to compare 'predictability' across the three pieces in Section 5.2. As Section 5.1 shows, this correction changes the ranking of the three pieces — the paper's central formula-driven finding, and one that raw entropy, or a purely descriptive account of the music, could not have revealed.

3. Methodology

3.1 Piece Selection and Transcription

Bars 9–24 of Georgia On My Mind are reused unchanged from the two prior studies (146 melody events, 145 transitions), so that this paper's results for that piece can be checked directly against the earlier ones. For C Jam Blues, a 16-bar extract was hand-transcribed spanning one 12-bar blues chorus in C plus the first four bars of the following chorus (chords C7–C7–C7–C7–F7–F7–C7–C7–G7–F7–C7–C7–C7–C7–C7–C7), yielding 144 events. For Night Train, a 16-bar extract of the riff-based head and first improvised chorus was transcribed over its G7–C7–G7–G7–D7–C7–G7–G7 shuffle-blues changes, yielding 128 events. Every event is encoded, as in both prior studies, as a (Chord, Note) tuple, with the note recorded by pitch class only, and left-hand comping excluded.

3.2 Why a Single Encoding Scheme

The 2026 study found that three different encodings of the same piece revealed complementary aspects of Peterson's style, but at the cost of tripling the analysis for a single piece. Since this paper's purpose is breadth across pieces rather than depth within one, a single encoding — the harmonic-contextual (Chord, Note) scheme — is used throughout, applied consistently to all three pieces so that cross-piece comparison is on equal footing.

3.3 Construction of Transition Matrices

For each piece, the transcribed sequence was converted into a transition count table C_i and then normalised row-by-row using the formula in Section 2.2 to produce a transition matrix. Table 1 summarises the resulting state spaces.

Table 1: State-Space Summary for the Three Pieces

Piece	Chords used	Melody events	Transitions	Unique states	Avg. observations / state
Georgia On My Mind	10	146	145	55	2.64
C Jam Blues	3	144	143	23	6.22
Night Train	3	128	127	22	5.77

3.4 Worked Example: Solving a Stationary Distribution by Hand

Before scaling up to the full 22-state Night Train chain by computer, it is worth solving a small piece of it by hand, in the way an A-Level Further Mathematics Decision Mathematics question would. Night Train's signature riff moves repeatedly between three states over the G7 chord: (G7, G), (G7, Bb), and (G7, C). Restricting attention to just these three states and renormalising the observed transitions between them (ignoring, for this illustration only, the small proportion of the time the melody leaves this trio) gives the sub-chain transition matrix:

Table: Restricted 3-state Transition Matrix (rows = current state, columns = next state)

	To G	To Bb	To C
From G	1/3	2/3	0
From Bb	11/21	2/21	8/21
From C	0	1	0

Writing $\pi = (\pi(G), \pi(Bb), \pi(C))$ and using $\pi P = \pi$ gives three equations (any one is redundant, since the rows of P each sum to 1), plus the normalisation condition:

$$\pi(G) = (1/3)\pi(G) + (11/21)\pi(Bb)$$
$$\pi(Bb) = (2/3)\pi(G) + (2/21)\pi(Bb) + \pi(C)$$
$$\pi(G) + \pi(Bb) + \pi(C) = 1$$

Solving this system by substitution — exactly as in an FP2/Decision Mathematics simultaneous-equations question — gives the exact stationary distribution of the restricted sub-chain:

$$\pi(G) = 33/91 \approx 0.363 \quad \pi(Bb) = 6/13 \approx 0.462 \quad \pi(C) = 16/91 \approx 0.176$$

This tells us that, within Peterson's G7 riff cell taken in isolation, he spends the plurality of his time — just over 46% — resting on Bb (the flattened seventh of G7, a classic blues colour tone), with G (the root) and C (the eleventh/fourth) sharing the remainder. The same method,

applied by computer to the full 22-state chain rather than this restricted 3-state sub-system, is what produces the complete stationary distributions reported in Section 4.

4. Results

4.1 Georgia On My Mind

The Georgia On My Mind chain reproduces the headline figures of the 2026 study, as it should, since it is the same transcription: mean state entropy $\bar{H} = 0.819$ bits against a theoretical maximum of $\log_2(55) = 5.781$ bits, and a stationary distribution whose single largest entry is only $\pi = 0.0542$, at the state (Ebmaj7, Ab). Twenty of the 55 states (36%) are zero-entropy — meaning every time Peterson reaches that (Chord, Note) pair in this extract, he resolves it the same way — but, as Table 2 shows, most of these 'certain' states were only ever observed once or twice.

Table 2: Georgia On My Mind — Sample Deterministic States and Their Sample Size

State	H (bits)	n (observations)	Always leads to
(Cmin7, C)	0.000	3	(Cmin7, Eb)
(Fmin7, E)	0.000	2	(Fmin7, F)
(Ebmaj7, D)	0.000	2	(Ebmaj7, Db)
(Ebmin7, Eb)	0.000	2	(Ebmin7, C)

4.2 C Jam Blues

With only three chords in play, C Jam Blues collapses to a 23-state chain, but because 144 melody events are spread across far fewer states, each state is observed roughly 6 times on average — more than double Georgia's rate. Mean state entropy is $\bar{H} = 1.477$ bits (maximum $\log_2(23) = 4.524$ bits), and no state in the chain is fully deterministic once states with only a single observation are excluded: the lowest-entropy well-sampled states still show 1.0 bit of genuine branching (Table 3). The stationary distribution is dominated by the tonic pentatonic anchor (C7, C), at $\pi = 0.2473$ — by some margin the single most concentrated state found in any of the three chains.

Table 3: C Jam Blues — Highest- and Lowest-Entropy Well-Sampled States

State	H (bits)	n	Note
(F7, C)	2.585	6	highest entropy: 6 near-equally likely successors
(C7, A)	2.522	7	highest entropy: wide branching
(G7, Bb)	1.000	2	lowest entropy among n≥2 states
(G7, F)	1.000	2	lowest entropy among n≥2 states

4.3 Night Train

Night Train produces the smallest chain (22 states) from the smallest number of events (128), with mean state entropy $\bar{H} = 1.136$ bits against a maximum of $\log_2(22) = 4.459$ bits. Three G7 states associated with the piece's signature riff — (G7, Bb), (G7, G), and (G7, C) — together account for $\pi = 0.479$, close to half of all long-run probability.

Table 4: Night Train — Top Stationary-Distribution States

State	π (stationary probability)	Musical role
(G7, Bb)	0.1773	flattened 7th of G7; the riff's melodic centre
(G7, G)	0.1666	root of G7; riff starting note
(G7, C)	0.1357	11th/4th of G7; riff turning point
(G7, D)	0.0910	5th of G7; riff's upper neighbour

4.4 Cross-Piece Comparison

Table 5: Summary Statistics Across the Three Pieces

Metric	Georgia On My Mind	C Jam Blues	Night Train
Unique states, n	55	23	22
Mean entropy $\bar{H}$ (bits)	0.819	1.477	1.136
Max. possible entropy, $\log_2(n)$	5.781	4.524	4.459
Normalised entropy $\bar{H}/H_{max}$	14.2%	32.7%	25.5%
Well-sampled states ($n \geq 5$)	12.7%	43.5%	36.4%
Largest single π value	0.0542	0.2473	0.1773

5. Discussion

5.1 Why Raw Entropy Comparison Is Misleading Here

Read naively, Table 5's mean entropy row would suggest that Georgia On My Mind is Peterson's most 'predictable' improvisation of the three, by a wide margin (0.819 bits versus 1.477 and 1.136). This conclusion does not survive scrutiny of how those entropy values were produced. Georgia On My Mind's 55-state chain is built from the same 145 transitions as the other two pieces' much smaller chains, so each Georgia state is observed, on average, only 2.64 times. A state observed once necessarily has zero measured entropy, not because Peterson is being deterministic there, but because there is no second observation with which he could have done anything different. By contrast, C Jam Blues and Night Train's smaller three-chord vocabularies concentrate the same amount of playing onto far fewer states, so each one is much

better sampled, and their entropy values are correspondingly more trustworthy. Table 3 makes this concrete: C Jam Blues and Night Train have no fully deterministic states at all once single-observation states are excluded, whereas 20 of Georgia's 55 states are recorded as perfectly deterministic — a pattern much more consistent with data sparsity than with an unusually rigid melodic grammar.

5.2 The Normalised Ranking, and Why It Reverses

This is precisely the problem the normalised entropy ratio in Section 2.5 is designed to correct for. Dividing each piece's $\bar{H}$ by its own $\log_2(n)$ expresses entropy as a fraction of what that specific state space could produce, removing the confound of state-space size. Under this corrected measure, the ranking inverts: Georgia On My Mind, at 14.2% of its maximum, is the most structured piece per decision point; Night Train sits in the middle at 25.5%; and C Jam Blues, at 32.7%, is the least structured of the three per decision point — the opposite of what raw entropy suggested. This is the paper's central formula-driven result: it could not have been reached by ear, or by any purely descriptive account of the music, because it depends on comparing two numbers — $\bar{H}$ and $\log_2(n)$ — that are themselves only obtainable by constructing and analysing the transition matrix. A listener would have no way to know that Peterson's celebrated command of blues vocabulary in C Jam Blues corresponds, once fairly measured, to more decision-point variety than his more harmonically adventurous ballad playing on Georgia On My Mind, not less.

5.3 Synthesis

Bringing Sections 4 and 5.2 together gives three distinct quantitative profiles from a single, consistently applied model. Georgia On My Mind: many chords, many states, and — once properly normalised — the most structured decision-making per note of the three, consistent with a player choosing carefully among many harmonically valid options. C Jam Blues: few chords, but the least structured decision-making per note, consistent with genuinely wide-ranging blues-scale exploration once past the fewer harmonic choice points. Night Train: few chords, intermediate normalised entropy, and a stationary distribution concentrated on the three notes of its signature riff. None of these three profiles could have been produced, or compared with one another, without the formulas in Section 2 — which is the central claim this paper set out to demonstrate.

6. Limitations

The sampling-density problem identified in Section 5.1 is not fully solved by normalisation — it is only made comparable across pieces, not eliminated within any one of them. A larger transcription of each piece (multiple choruses, or several recordings of the same tune) would shrink the number of once-only states and give more reliable estimates of both $\bar{H}$ and π, and would be the natural next step. The C Jam Blues and Night Train transcriptions used here, while constructed to be idiomatically faithful to Peterson's known style on these pieces, are

the author's own transcriptions rather than notation cross-checked against a published lead sheet, unlike the Georgia On My Mind extract, which is shared with and consistent across both prior studies.

7. Conclusions

This paper set out to occupy a middle ground between a mathematically deep single-piece analysis and a broad but largely speculative four-piece survey, by applying one consistent first-order Markov chain model — transition matrix, stationary distribution, and Shannon entropy — to three genuinely transcribed Peterson extracts. The results justify the approach. Comparing raw entropy across the three pieces would have produced a musically misleading conclusion (Georgia On My Mind as the most predictable piece by a wide margin); only by deriving and applying the normalised entropy ratio $\bar{H}/\log_2(n)$ was it possible to show that this ranking is substantially a sampling artefact, and that the corrected ranking (Georgia most structured, then Night Train, then C Jam Blues) is closer to the truth. This finding depended entirely on the mathematics; it could not have been reached by description or by ear. The natural next step, as in both prior studies, is corpus expansion: applying the same three-piece, single-encoding framework to longer extracts, or to further pieces, to test whether the normalised-entropy ranking identified here persists across a wider sample of Peterson's recorded output.

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The Defense of Private Property: How Much Force is Justified?
By Aleya Bailey

Most cases involving the defense of private property involve the use of some physical force to defend the property in question ("Protection of Property"). Cases involving the defense of private property are often seen in countries like the United States of America, a federal republic with laws in each constituent state, leading to differing court decisions in the defense of private property cases. Southern US are generally more conservative and rural, leading to the implementation of laws such as the Stand Your Ground and The Castle Doctrine, while Northern states tend to be more liberal and urbanized, leading to the implementation of laws such as Duty to Retreat. It is notable that these laws correlate to availability and ease of access of guns: in the south, it is more common and easier to obtain licensed firearms than in the north. The Stand Your Ground and Castle Doctrine laws, commonly enacted in southern states including Texas and Florida, both state that one has the right to be able to use lethal force freely in defense of property ("Understanding North Carolina's Castle Doctrine"). The main distinction between them is the Castle Doctrine's direct application in the defense of home or vehicle (even the workplace in some states), while Stand your Ground acts as an extension to other areas ("Understanding North Carolina's Castle Doctrine"). In contrast, laws in states such as New York include Duty to Retreat, requiring a person to seek a path to safety rather than resorting to force ("What Is a Duty to Retreat Law?"). However, when fleeing with complete safety is impossible (no harm can be done to the person in any way while escaping or once left the scene), then reasonable force is permitted (Walsh). Additionally, a non-aggressor in one's own home does not have the duty to retreat (Walsh). The threshold of reasonable force lies below the point of permanent damage including death ("Protection of Property"). Supported by the following reasons, an argument forms that in the defense of private property, one should be able to harm another with reasonable or proportional force, rather than lethal force:

- When a person reacts with lethal force in defense of private property, the Castle Doctrine automatically assumes that the person felt intimidated; however, that assumption can be erroneous.
- For certain cases, lethal force is too extreme, as many times in the past, the defense of private property exceeded the initial perceived threat.
- Human life is considered to be more valuable over an object or real estate that could be recovered; ending someone's life leads to bigger consequences.

The Castle Doctrine, a law allowing the right to defend one's home, vehicle, or workplace with lethal force, assuming that you are fearing for your life, dates back to medieval English common law, and was given the moniker "Castle Doctrine" by Sir Edward Coke in 1604 ("Sir Edward Coke Declares"). The law revolves around the idea that a man's house is his castle, and that it should be protected at all cost by any means of force, including lethal force. (Castle

Doctrine States 2025) For example, in the Guyger vs. Texas case, former police officer Amber Guyger shot Botham Jean, after mistaking him as an intruder in her apartment, when, in fact, Guyger had mistakenly entered his apartment. Because Guyger claimed to be afraid–and according to the castle doctrine, the fear for your life was assumed during the circumstance of the crime–she already had a reason for using lethal force. Thus, Guyger's defense argued the Castle Doctrine law and Mistake of Fact, which is a law acknowledging the possibility of mistakenly committing a crime, as long as the reasoning for it makes sense. ("Amber Renee Guyger v. Texas") She claimed to be scared when she heard footsteps inside Jean's apartment, and immediately shot Jean's silhouette from the doorway once she had opened the door and propped it open with her police vest and gloves. In this case, Guyger claimed to never realize that she was at the wrong apartment, and was just defending her home from an intruder that she believed would hurt her. However, Jean was not armed, and before he was shot, he was rising from the couch after eating a bowl of ice cream. Thus, the jury deemed her defense of mistake-of-fact unreasonable since Jean was not threatening her in any way through the entire course of events; she had no reason to use lethal force against him.("Amber Renee Guyger v. Texas")

We tend to be irrational when concerned for our personal safety and the protection of our personal property. When feeling threatened, our body triggers its fight or flight responses, which typically hinders cognitive function, leading to decisions made on a whim ("The Impact of Fight or Flight Response"). This could cause poor decisions in the fight response, especially when the fighter is armed ("The Impact of Fight or Flight Response"). This is the main reasoning for some cases including lethal or permanent damaged force used on another person; however, there are cases involving unarmed teenagers who were proved to have little to no interaction with the person who used force against them, such as the George Zimmerman case, where Zimmerman shot a 17-year-old Trayvon Martin for inadvertently crossing his yard. Martin was returning from a local 7/11 in his neighborhood and Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch person spotted him and deemed him suspicious. Zimmerman called the police, who instructed him to remain where he was and not approach Martin; however, Zimmerman did not follow through with the dispatcher's request. Instead he approached Martin, and an altercation ensued, leading to Martin's death due to Zimmerman's use of lethal force. Zimmerman was arrested but claimed that he shot Martin in defense. He was released from police custody 5 hours after the incident as there was no evidence to refute the claim of self defense, and the SYG law enabled his use of lethal force. The case became widely reported in the media, and Zimmerman was charged with second degree murder, but he was acquitted of the charges despite Martin's lack of weapon or ill-intention ("Shooting of Trayvon Martin").

Life is considered one of a person's most valuable possessions, as it is a right, which makes most killing, a usurpation of the killed person's right to live and potential future contributions to society, illegal. Human life has been considered precious since the initial formation of society and has been protected by law in the Western world since at least English common law as expressed in Sir Edward Coke's words, "although the life of man is precious and

favoured in law" ("Sir Edward Coke Declares"). Life is more valuable than property in someone's possession, since human life is irreplaceable whereas property typically has a set value and can be recovered. While a human life doesn't have an explicitly set value in the US law, certain factors such as preventable, accidental nature of a death raises the price of the life ("Sir Edward Coke Declares"). Most of the value of life is used for compensation, which can range from 3 million to 9 million for the average person, despite the impossibility of recovering a life. Property, whether it is an object or real property, can most likely be recovered, and values are easily calculable. The object's value often affects the owner's reaction to its potential peril. For example, if one was protecting a million dollar jewel, then their reaction will likely be more defensive when protecting a 30 dollar vase. The reaction to a home invasion would likely be very strong due to one's life in danger as well. When a person is in danger (i.e. being actively threatened by a lethal weapon), the person is allowed to use lethal force. However, use of lethal force to defend oneself would not be justified in those instances wherein threat of great bodily harm or death. Most cases involving the protection of property also involve self defense as well, so while solely protecting property using lethal force in the absence of threat (i.e., no weapon) is prohibited, if one's life is actively threatened, use of lethal force is allowed.

The use of excessive force, meaning that more force than necessary is used for the level of the threat presented on or in possession of said person's property, is generally prohibited. In the United States, lethal force cannot be used while defending property only, as there must be more behind the story in order for it to be justifiable ("Other Use-of-Force Defenses"). For example, in Virginia at Menchville high school, a shooting occurred in the parking lot of the school after a basketball game. Demari Batten, an 18 year old, who was sitting in the passenger seat of his friend's car with a gun that was visibly resting on the dashboard, was approached and attacked while a group of teens tried to grab his gun ("Shooting at Virginia Highschool Parking Lot"). He had shot 17-year-old Justice Dunham, who, wearing a ski mask, opened the driver's side door and went after Batten,who fired and killed at Dunham in response. Before the altercation, texts aiming to target Batten had been exchanged between Dunham and the other teens. In this example, Batten's defense against his property, which was lawfully given to him for protection by his friend, who was not present in the car at the time, is technically valid, as Batten is protected under the Castle Defense Law ("Protection of Property"). In addition, the attack was actively occurring, meaning that he is technically allowed to use the force that is deemed necessary, leading him to be considered not guilty ("Other Use-of-Force Defenses"). However, if he were to attack while Justice and the other teens were planning to threaten him, he would be culpable as no crime had yet been committed, and firearm discharge wasn't necessary to neutralize the threat ("Other Use-of-Force Defenses").

When a person claims they felt intimidated in a moment where they decide to use lethal force, the assumption that they are telling the truth can be incorrect. Many times, people use lethal force without the other person being armed or acknowledging their presence in the first place, meaning that they have no reason to be intimidated, or feared for their life, without the presence of a lethal weapon ("Other Use-of-Force Defenses"). However, for a justifiable

application of castle doctrine to a case, the rightful occupant who commits homicide in the name of protecting one's home and self has to fear for life.

The defense of private property tends to require the property owner's involvement; therefore, it is categorized as self defense as well as property defense (Walsh). This is the leading reason for the use of lethal force in the protection of private property, including illegal instances. While one is protecting her possessions and herself, she is typically irrational and doesn't think to use minimum violence to neutralize the present threat ("Protection of Property"). Even so, in consideration of the long-standing agreement that human life has a greater value than that of any objects, unjustified use of lethal force, especially in the absence of the threat of a lethal weapon, is prohibited.

Use of excessive force when protecting private property by exceeding the initial threat is seen in many cases ("Protection of Property"). Use of lethal force in excessive force cases is seen when the initial threat didn't rise to the level of reaction, for reasons including the lack of rigorous firearm training for the civilian owners and overreaction in fight-or-flight response. However, in the case of private property, the legality of lethal force depends on the circumstances of the case.

This leads to the argument that in the defense of private property, one should be able to harm another with reasonable or proportional force, rather than lethal force, for the following reasons: when a person reacts with lethal force in defense of private property, the Castle Doctrine automatically assumes that the person felt intimidated; however, that assumption can be erroneous as lethal force is extreme and without recourse; the defense of private property exceeded the initial perceived threat; human life is more valuable than an object or land that could be recovered; ending someone's life could lead to larger consequences. Lethal force should not be involved in the protection of property.

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Hidden Behind the Aggregate: The Model Minority Stereotype, Ethnic Heterogeneity, and High School Students' Identity, Stress, and Self-Perception By Maxwell Qi

Abstract

The "model minority" stereotype casts Asian American students as uniformly successful. Scholars have argued that the label works comparatively: praising Asian Americans in order to discipline other minority groups while hiding the Asian students who struggle. This paper examines that argument with a literature review and an original survey of high school students (N = 53 after data cleaning, 43 of Asian descent). Asian respondents reported significantly more stereotype-based academic expectations than their non-Asian peers ($d = 1.41$, $p = .004$). Those expectations did not differ across East Asian, Southeast Asian, and South Asian subgroups ($p = .94$). Southeast Asian respondents, most of them Cambodian American, reported the lowest academic self-perception ($p = .001$ across subgroups) and far lower coping and support ($p < .001$; $d = 2.21$) than East Asian peers. The association between stereotype-based expectations and felt academic pressure was directionally positive but weak ($r = .18$) and should be regarded as suggestive. The pattern supports a specific account of harm: the stereotype applies one expectation to students whose circumstances vary widely, so the students least resourced to meet it disappear inside the average. Disaggregating the "Asian" category is necessary, but it does not dislodge the comparison the category was built to serve.

Introduction

In January 1966, the demographer William Petersen praised Japanese Americans in the New York Times Magazine for succeeding "by their own almost totally unaided effort," and he made the comparison explicit by contrasting them with African Americans (Petersen, 1966). It arrived in the middle of the Civil Rights era, and it carried the argument that if one minority could make it without help, structural racism was a weak excuse for the others (Osajima, 1988; Zia, as cited in Sun, Miezan, & Liberman, 2009). Sixty years later, the stereotype remains the default frame through which Asian American students are seen in school. They post the highest average test scores of any racial group, and the average is read as evidence that they need little support (Kao, 1995; Wing, 2007).

The average, however, conceals substantial variation. When researchers separate the "Asian" category into ethnic subgroups, postsecondary enrollment ranges from roughly 20% to 84%, and refugee-origin groups such as Cambodian and Hmong students show far lower attainment than many East and South Asian groups (Kim, Bryan, Griffin, & Sharma, 2022; Kao, 1995). Post-1965 immigration law selected highly educated professionals from some countries while refugee resettlement brought families with interrupted schooling from others, and children of these two streams entered American schools on very different terms (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Lee & Zhou, 2014; Postel, 2026). Claire Jean Kim (1999) gives the stereotype a strong theoretical frame: Asian Americans are "racially triangulated," valorized relative to Black

Americans while being cast as permanently foreign, and the praise itself is a tool for managing the racial order.

Most research on the stereotype studies either its rhetoric or its aggregate statistics. Less is known about how it lands on actual high school students across ethnic subgroups, in ordinary schools, in their own words and self-reports. This paper asks: how does the model minority stereotype affect the academic self-perception, stress, and cultural identity of high school students, both across Asian ethnic subgroups and in comparison to their non-Asian peers? I argue, following the literature, that the stereotype's most important work is relational. It sets one expectation for a category of students whose circumstances differ enormously, and the students least equipped to meet the expectation become invisible inside the group average. A literature review develops this argument, and an original survey of 53 high school students provides an empirical check on its smallest moving part: whether the expectation really is uniform, and whether the resources behind it really are unequal.

Stereotype experiences intensify across adolescence. Thompson, Kiang, and Witkow (2016) followed Asian American students annually and found that encounters with the model minority stereotype increased over the high school years, and that those encounters shaped how students came to understand their own ethnicity. Adolescence is also when academic self-concept hardens and when the college-going decisions that produce the adult attainment gaps get made (Kim et al., 2022). If the stereotype sorts students, high school is where the sorting happens, and a survey of high school students catches it rather than reconstructing it from adult outcomes.

Literature Review

Origins of a comparative stereotype

The model minority image was manufactured in the press before it was measured by social science. Petersen's 1966 essay and a U.S. News and World Report story later that year praised Japanese and Chinese Americans in nearly identical terms, and both articles used African Americans as the implicit or explicit contrast (Petersen, 1966; Sun et al., 2009). Osajima (1988) tracked the image across two decades of coverage and found that the 1960s version compared Asian Americans to other minorities while the 1980s version compared them to whites, in softer and more individual language. This comparison is the structure of the stereotype. Kim (1999) formalizes this as racial triangulation: relative valorization of Asian Americans over Black Americans, joined to civic ostracism that marks Asians as never fully American. Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, and Lin (1998) showed the image had measurable purchase on real perceptions. In their survey, Asian American undergraduates rated themselves as more prepared and more likely to succeed than white peers rated themselves, and other groups largely shared the image.

The achievement pattern

Any honest account has to start from the fact that the aggregate achievement pattern exists. Kao (1995), using the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, found that Asian eighth graders outscored white peers in math, but she also found the advantage was concentrated in specific subgroups and largely explained by family background. Hsin and Xie (2014) traced the advantage to academic effort rather than tested ability or socioeconomic status, and rooted the effort in immigrant optimism. Lee and Zhou (2014) supplied the structural explanation for where that optimism comes from: hyper-selectivity. United States immigration policy after 1965 admitted Chinese, Korean, and Indian immigrants who were far more educated than their home-country averages, and their children inherited both resources and a narrow "success frame" in which an A-minus can count as failure. Refugee families from Cambodia and Laos entered through a different door, with none of those inherited advantages (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Segmented assimilation theory predicts exactly the divergence the data show: children of hyper-selected professionals and children of refugees assimilate into different segments of American life, whatever shared racial label schools assign them.

What the stereotype does in schools

Ethnographic work shows the label operating as a sorting device inside buildings. Lee (1994) spent a year inside a high school whose Asian-identified students had organized themselves into distinct groups, including self-described "Asians," "Koreans," "Asian new wavers," and "Asian Americans," each with a different orientation toward schooling and a different relationship to the stereotype. Her central finding was that the label damaged students at both ends of the achievement distribution: high achievers carried an expectation they could not safely fail, while low achievers concluded that their struggles were personal defects, since the stereotype told them Asian students do not struggle. Wing (2007) documented the same dynamic at institutional scale. At Berkeley High School, a racially integrated school of roughly three thousand students, Asian students were the population the achievement-gap conversation never reached: assumed to be fine, left out of reform planning, and internally divided between higher-scoring South Asian students and lower-scoring Southeast Asian students whom the aggregate concealed. One of her student informants objected, in effect, that the school could not tell its Asian students apart, and her data showed the school had little occasion to try, because nothing in its reporting distinguished them.

Museus and Kiang (2009) reviewed higher education scholarship and found Asian Americans largely absent from research on race and educational inequality, an absence they attribute to the presumption of success; the myth removes a population from the research agenda, which in turn removes the evidence that would correct the myth. Suzuki (2002), writing twenty-five years after his own early critique, concluded that the institutional consequences had barely changed: counseling, outreach, and support services continue to flow away from students presumed self-sufficient. Kim and colleagues (2022) quantified what the presumption hides, using a national dataset to show college enrollment differences across Asian ethnic subgroups that exceed sixty percentage points, patterned by income and by parents' capacity to engage

schools. Walton and Truong (2023), synthesizing 97 empirical studies, concluded that the myth operates as a structural phenomenon tied to whiteness and anti-Blackness, with documented costs across education, health, and social life, including a psychological division they describe as internalized dominance toward other minority groups and internalized oppression relative to whites. Across these literatures, the Asian category absorbs its most vulnerable members, and institutions rely on it to determine where help is needed across racial groups.

What the stereotype does to students

The psychological record is more mixed than the critical literature sometimes implies: the strongest causal evidence concerns performance under expectation. Cheryan and Bodenhausen (2000) randomly assigned Asian American women to conditions that made their ethnic identity, their gender identity, or their individual identity salient before a mathematics test. Women in the ethnicity-salient condition, the group facing the positive stereotype most directly, showed reduced ability to concentrate and significantly lower performance. The design matters as much as the result: because assignment was random, the study can attribute the performance drop to the salient expectation itself rather than to background differences, something no survey can do. It established that a favorable stereotype can function as a cognitive load, a conclusion often summarized under the label of positive stereotype threat.

Longitudinal survey research with adolescents fills in how the stereotype operates outside the laboratory, and its findings run in more than one direction. Thompson, Kiang, and Witkow (2016), following 159 Asian American adolescents across the high school years, found that stereotype experiences were not constant background noise but increased year over year, and that both the experiences and students' appraisals of them predicted ethnic identity development. Kiang, Witkow, and Thompson (2016), using the same multiwave design, reported the finding that most complicates a simple harm narrative: model minority stereotyping was generally associated with better academic and socioemotional adjustment, and it buffered part of the damage done by overt discrimination, which remained the reliably harmful experience. Their 2020 study extended the analysis to peer relationships among 175 adolescents from Hmong, other East and Southeast Asian, and South Asian backgrounds, finding that stereotyping was associated with peer support while discrimination predicted rising peer criticism, and that the two experiences interacted. Yoo, Burrola, and Steger (2010) identified the condition under which the apparently benign version turns costly. Their Internalization of the Model Minority Myth Measure separates two beliefs, that Asian success reflects superior effort (achievement orientation) and that effort overcomes structural barriers (unrestricted mobility), and links internalization, particularly of the second belief, to poorer psychological outcomes. Media scholarship adds a gendered layer: the same image that codes Asian students as competent codes Asian American men as passive and sexless, a pairing Sun and colleagues (2009, 2015) call the model minority and honorable eunuch, and audience studies show both halves reproduced in everyday perception. Read together, these literatures do not support the conclusion that a positive stereotype is uniformly harmful. They support a conditional account: the stereotype is a fixed

expectation whose consequences depend on what stands behind each student, including family resources, school support, and the capacity to absorb pressure, and on whether the student internalizes the expectation as a personal standard.

Why the stereotype persists

If the stereotype misdescribes so many students, why does it survive? Part of the answer is structural incentive. Sun and colleagues (2015) ran focus groups with college students in 2002 and again in 2011 and found that students across racial groups could criticize Asian American media stereotypes fluently, yet accepted that profit-driven media would keep producing them. The internet complicated but did not solve the problem: alternative images of Asian Americans existed online by 2011, but only Asian American respondents, the group most motivated to search, ever encountered them; other students did not know the images existed. Media criticism alone, the authors conclude, does not dislodge a stereotype that an entire industry finds convenient, which is one more reason to expect the expectation documented below to be widely shared rather than idiosyncratic (Sun et al., 2015). Snead's observation, quoted in that literature, is apt: stereotypes insulate themselves from counter-examples.

The Present Study

That reading yields two testable expectations at the level of a single high school population. First, stereotype-based academic expectations should attach to Asian students generally, at higher rates than for non-Asian students, because the expectation follows the racial label. Second, the label should be poorly matched to what stands behind it: subgroups should differ in self-perception, pressure, and coping even while the expectation applied to them stays constant. A survey cannot establish causation, and this one does not try. It asks whether the fingerprint the theory predicts actually appears in students' self-reports.

Stated formally, the survey tests three hypotheses. Hypothesis 1: Asian respondents will report higher levels of stereotype-based academic expectations. Hypothesis 2: For Asians, stereotype-based academic expectations are not correlated with identity, belonging, or self-perception. Hypothesis 3: Stereotype-based expectations will not differ across Asian ethnic subgroups, while academic self-perception, pressure, and coping will. The first and second hypotheses follow from triangulation theory, in which the expectation attaches to the racial position rather than the person (Kim, 1999). The third follows from segmented assimilation, in which subgroups occupy the same racial position with very different material and institutional support behind them (Portes & Zhou, 1993). A fourth, softer expectation, drawn from the stereotype-threat tradition, is that perceived expectations and felt pressure should be positively related among Asian students (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000).

Method

Participants

Fifty-nine high school students opened the survey. Six were removed during data cleaning, described under Analysis, leaving an analytic sample of 53. Respondents spanned grades 9 through 13, with twelfth graders the largest group (n = 16); two respondents reported a thirteenth or postgraduate year and were retained. Twenty-nine identified as male and 24 as female. Forty-three respondents (81%) identified as Asian or Asian American, including 20 Chinese, 8 Korean, 8 Cambodian, 5 Indian, and 1 Taiwanese-identified student, with one identifying as mixed Chinese and Indian. For analysis I grouped these into East Asian (n = 29), Southeast Asian (n = 8, predominantly Cambodian), and South Asian (n = 5) categories. Ten respondents identified as white, Black, Hispanic or Latino, or Middle Eastern or North African, and were grouped as non-Asian peers for comparison. Fifty of the 53 were born in the United States, while 37 reported that neither parent was; this is largely a second-generation sample. Among those who answered the optional home-language item, most reported speaking a language other than English at home, most often Chinese.

Procedure

The survey was administered online through Google Forms in July 2026 and distributed through school and community channels. It opened with a consent statement describing the study as research on school experiences, identity, and everyday stress. The stereotype was never named, and no question suggested a desired answer. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, every item after consent could be skipped, and respondents could enter an optional drawing for one of two $100 gift cards. The instrument took roughly ten to fifteen minutes.

Measures

All attitude items used a five-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and several items were reverse-worded. Reverse-worded items were recoded before scoring so that a higher score always indicates more of the construct. The items making up each scale are given below as they appeared to respondents.

Ethnic identity was measured with six items adapted from the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure–Revised (Phinney & Ong, 2007; $\alpha = .88$). The items were: I have spent time trying to learn more about my ethnic or cultural background, such as its history and traditions; I have a clear sense of what my ethnic or cultural background means to me; I feel a strong attachment to my ethnic or cultural group; I have often talked with other people to learn more about my background; I feel good about my ethnic or cultural background; and I understand well what my background means for my life.

School belonging used five items adapted from the Psychological Sense of School Membership scale (Goodenow, 1993; $\alpha = .70$). The items were: I feel like I belong at my school; I can be myself at my school; People at my school notice when I do something well; It is hard for someone like me to be accepted at my school, which was reverse-worded; and There is at least one adult at my school I could talk to if I had a problem.

Academic self-perception used four items on confidence and expectations (α = .91). The items were: I am confident in my ability to do well in school; I expect to do well in my classes this year; I think of myself as a good student; and I expect to continue my education after high school.

Academic pressure used three items on grades, family, and stress (α = .84). The items were: I feel a lot of pressure to get good grades; I worry about disappointing my family with my grades; and I often feel stressed about school.

Two positively worded items measured coping and support (α = .82). The items were: Most of the time, I feel able to manage my schoolwork; and I have enough support to handle the demands of school. These two items were worded positively so that the section on stress was not one-sided.

Stereotype-based expectations used items describing others' race-based academic assumptions. The scale was written with six items, one of them reverse-worded. That reverse-worded item correlated only .16 with the sum of the remaining items, and dropping it raised reliability from α = .66 to α = .70, so the scale is scored from the remaining five items and every expected result below uses that five-item version. The six-item figures appear in Appendix D for comparison; the substantive pattern is the same under either version. The five retained items were: People assume I am good at certain subjects because of my racial or ethnic background; Teachers expect me to do well because of my racial or ethnic background; I feel pressure to match an image that people have of my racial or ethnic group; When I struggle in school, people seem surprised because of my background; and Other students make assumptions about me based on my background. The item dropped from the scale read: My racial or ethnic background has no effect on what teachers expect of me.

Two optional open-ended items closed the survey. They read: Is there anything about how your background affects your experience at school that you would like to share? and Anything else you would like us to know?

Analysis

Scale scores were computed as item means. Asian and non-Asian respondents were compared with Welch t tests, subgroups with one-way analysis of variance and pairwise follow-ups, and associations with Pearson correlations. Given the sample size, and especially the small subgroup cells, all tests are exploratory. Effect sizes are reported so that the magnitude of differences can be judged separately from significance. Data cleaning followed two written rules, both of which were specified and applied before any comparison or correlation was examined, so that no case was removed once its effect on a result could be known. First, respondents were excluded for fabricated entries or bad-faith responding, such as an invented gender label or open-ended text joking about the gift-card incentive, and for declining consent; four respondents met this rule. Second, respondents were excluded for straight-lining, defined as giving the identical answer to all 26 attitude items; two additional respondents met this rule, and a third straight-liner had already been excluded for bad faith. Because the instrument contains

reverse-worded items, an identical answer to every item produces internally contradictory content and is treated as unreliable rather than as a genuine response pattern. Respondents reporting a thirteenth grade were retained, since a postgraduate year is a legitimate enrollment status. Fifty-three respondents remained.

How to read the numbers

A mean (M) is an average: respondents' scale scores summed and divided by the number of respondents. Every scale here runs from 1 to 5, where 1 strongly disagrees, 3 is the neutral midpoint, and 5 strongly agrees. A mean of 3.50 therefore sits halfway between neutral and agreement. A standard deviation (SD) describes spread around that average. A small SD means respondents answered much alike; a large SD means they scattered. When Southeast Asian respondents show a belonging SD of 0.13, they answered that section almost identically; the East Asian identity SD of 0.50 reflects a wider range of experience. Cronbach's alpha (α) asks whether the items in a scale belong together, that is, whether someone who agrees with one item tends to agree with the others. Alpha runs from 0 to 1, and .70 is the usual floor for acceptable reliability. The identity scale's α of .91 indicates a tightly coherent measure; the expectations scale's .66 falls short of the convention, which is one reason the tests here are labeled exploratory.

The comparison statistics work as follows. A t test asks whether two group averages differ by more than chance alone would produce; the Welch version used here does not assume the groups are equally sized or equally varied, which suits a comparison of 43 respondents against 10. The p value that accompanies each test is the probability of observing a difference this large if no true difference existed. A p of .003 means roughly a .3 in 100 chance, and values below .05 are conventionally called statistically significant. Size is the job of Cohen's d, which expresses a gap between two groups in standard-deviation units; by convention 0.2 is small, 0.5 is medium, and 0.8 is large. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) extends the t test to three or more groups. Its F statistic is the ratio of variation between groups to variation within them, so a large F with a small p means group membership genuinely predicts scores. Finally, a Pearson correlation (r) measures how two variables move together, from -1 to +1. Squaring r gives the share of variation the two measures hold in common. None of these numbers, alone or together, establishes cause; they describe patterns in one sample at one moment.

Results

Table 1 reports means and standard deviations for each scale by group. Belonging averaged just under 4 across groups, self-perception was high, and coping sat near 4 for most groups. That baseline matters for interpretation: the group differences documented below run through an otherwise healthy-looking population, which is precisely the condition under which averages are least informative about the students they summarize.

Table 1 Scale Means (Standard Deviations) by Group

Scale	Asian (n = 43)	Non-Asian (n = 10)	East Asian (n = 29)	Southeast Asian (n = 8)	South Asian (n = 5)
Ethnic identity	3.67 (0.64)	3.12 (1.23)	3.81 (0.50)	3.12 (0.95)	3.77 (0.53)
School belonging	3.86 (0.56)	3.76 (0.86)	3.94 (0.62)	3.82 (0.13)	3.48 (0.54)
Academic self-perception	4.06 (0.71)	3.60 (1.22)	4.19 (0.43)	3.28 (1.11)	4.60 (0.45)
Academic pressure	3.66 (0.89)	3.33 (1.19)	3.86 (0.79)	3.00 (0.56)	3.27 (1.26)
Coping and support	3.81 (0.72)	3.10 (1.10)	4.12 (0.55)	2.88 (0.58)	3.60 (0.42)
Stereotype-based expectations	3.66 (0.50)	2.80 (0.70)	3.64 (0.55)	3.70 (0.35)	3.60 (0.51)

Note. All scales range 1–5. Subgroup columns include Asian respondents only.

The expectation follows the label

Asian respondents reported substantially more stereotype-based academic expectations than non-Asian respondents (M = 3.66 versus 2.80), a difference that was statistically significant despite the small comparison group and large in practical terms, $t = 3.68$, $p = .004$, $d = 1.41$.

This means if one Asian and one non-Asian respondent were drawn at random from this sample, the Asian student would report the higher expectation score more than four times out of five. The Asian group's mean indicates that the typical Asian respondent agreed, on balance, that others hold race-based academic assumptions about them, while the non-Asian mean sits just below the neutral point. No other scale differed significantly between Asian and non-Asian respondents, although the coping difference approached significance ($d = 0.77$, $p = .077$). Asian and non-Asian students in this sample reported similar belonging, similar identity strength, and similar pressure. What set the Asian respondents apart was not how they felt about school. It was what they believed others assumed about them.

The open-ended responses put language on the pattern. One respondent wrote that "people expect me to be obedient and smart." Another: "I think people assume I'm good at math." A third: "I think my pressure mainly comes from my parents and those around me." None of these students had been told the survey concerned a stereotype.

The expectation is uniform

Across East Asian, Southeast Asian, and South Asian respondents, stereotype-based expectations did not differ, $F = 0.07$, $p = .94$. The subgroup means sat within a tenth of a point of one another (3.64, 3.70, 3.60). Whatever else divides these subgroups, the assumption aimed at them does not.

Nearly everything else did divide them. Academic self-perception differed across subgroups, $F = 9.09$, $p = .001$, with Southeast Asian respondents lowest (M = 3.28) and East and South Asian respondents high (4.19 and 4.60). A mean of 3.28 hovers just above neutral: the average Southeast Asian respondent in this sample is uncertain whether to call themselves a good student, while East and South Asian classmates, averaging above 4, report confidence. Coping and support showed the largest contrast in the study, $F = 17.12$, $p < .001$, meaning the differences

between subgroups were roughly seventeen times larger than the ordinary variation within them. East Asian respondents averaged 4.12; Southeast Asian respondents averaged 2.88, more than a full point lower on a four-point-wide scale and the only subgroup mean in the study below the neutral line, with a very large pairwise difference, $d = 2.21$, $p < .001$. A gap of that size means the two distributions barely overlap; a randomly chosen East Asian respondent would report more coping and support than a randomly chosen Southeast Asian respondent roughly nine times out of ten. Southeast Asian respondents also trailed South Asian respondents on coping ($p = .025$). Academic pressure differed as well, $F = 4.05$, $p = .025$, and in an instructive direction: East Asian respondents reported the most pressure (3.86), Southeast Asian respondents the least (3.00). Ethnic identity followed the same ordering ($F = 4.04$, $p = .025$), with the Southeast Asian mean (3.12) lowest in the Asian sample. The Southeast Asian pattern is therefore not high pressure: it is comparatively low pressure combined with the weakest support and the lowest academic self-image, under the same external expectation reported by every other subgroup. One plausible interpretation is disengagement from the standard rather than strain against it, occurring among students whom a school guided by the aggregate would not identify as needing support.

The expectations-pressure association is weak

Among Asian respondents, stereotype-based expectations showed a positive but weak association with felt academic pressure, $r = .18$, $p = .25$. The direction matches the prediction of the stereotype-threat literature, in which perceived race-based assumptions function as a load (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000), but the association is not statistically reliable in a sample of 43 and should be treated as suggestive. It is worth recording that in the dataset before cleaning this correlation appeared stronger ($r = .32$) and reached significance; removing unreliable respondents weakened it. The honest conclusion is that the association is fragile and sensitive to a small number of cases. Ethnic identity, by contrast, showed no relationship with pressure ($r = .03$, $p = .85$), which argues against the idea that strong cultural attachment is itself a source of academic strain. All of these associations are cross-sectional, and none can establish direction: students who feel pressure may become more alert to others' assumptions rather than the reverse.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that stereotype-based expectations would not be associated with identity, belonging, or self-perception among Asian respondents, and the data support that prediction. Expectations showed no significant relationship with ethnic identity ($r = -.19$, $p = .234$), school belonging ($r = -.08$, $p = .610$), or academic self-perception ($r = -.05$, $p = .746$), and the same held for coping and support ($r = -.15$, $p = .326$). Reading alongside the weak expectations-pressure association reported above, these results indicate that perceived expectations operate largely independently of how students evaluate themselves and their standing at school, which is consistent with the argument that the expectation is imposed from outside rather than generated by a student's own sense of identity or belonging.

Discussion

The survey was built to examine the smallest empirical claim inside a large theoretical argument, and the data are consistent with that claim. The expectation attached to the "Asian" label is real, and in this sample it lands on Cambodian American students at the same strength as on Chinese American students. What differs is how East Asian respondents, most from established immigrant communities, reported high pressure but also the resources to manage it: the highest coping scores in the study and strong academic self-images. Southeast Asian respondents reported the opposite configuration: less felt pressure, far less support, and the weakest academic self-perception and ethnic identity. This pattern reproduces, at small scale and in students' own self-reports, the institutional invisibility Wing (2007) documented.

The findings line up with the structural literature as well. Hyper-selectivity predicts exactly the East Asian pattern of high expectation, high pressure, and high inherited resources (Lee & Zhou, 2014). Segmented assimilation predicts exactly the Southeast Asian pattern, in which refugee-origin students carry the same racial label with a fraction of the material and institutional support (Portes & Zhou, 1993). And racial triangulation explains why the expectation is uniform in the first place: it attaches to the racial position, not to the person (Kim, 1999). The one finding that complicates a simple harm narrative is the East Asian result. Consistent with Kiang, Witkow, and Thompson (2016), students who report high stereotype expectations do not necessarily report distress; where support is deep, the stereotype may be experienced as affirmation rather than burden. Identifying that conditional pattern in students' own reports is the study's main contribution.

Read against the policy debate, the results support disaggregation while marking its limit. Massachusetts' 2023 data equity law, which requires state agencies to separate Asian subgroups, would make the Southeast Asian pattern visible in official statistics, and this paper's data suggest that is worth doing. Better categories change what administrators can see. They do not change what teachers, peers, and students assume, because the assumption follows the racial label rather than the data table. A Cambodian American student in this sample faces the same "good at math" presumption whether or not the state's spreadsheet has a Cambodian row.

The results also carry practical weight for schools. The instinct behind most academic support systems is to follow visible distress: the student who fails, acts out, or asks for help. This study's most vulnerable group does none of those things. Suzuki (2002) documented where that logic leads at the institutional level, with services and outreach flowing away from students presumed not to need them. Counselors and teachers can treat the "Asian" label as a starting question rather than an answer, ask which communities a student actually comes from, and read disaggregated data where the state provides it. For East Asian students the need runs the other way: their coping scores are high, but so is their pressure, and Lee and Zhou's (2014) success-frame research suggests the cost of that pressure falls on the students who cannot meet the frame. The same label therefore calls for two different responses, pressure management in one profile and resource building in the other.

Future research can extend the design in three directions. Larger samples with deliberate recruitment of Southeast Asian, South Asian, and non-Asian students would stabilize the

subgroup estimates and allow the cross-racial comparison this study could only sketch. Validated adolescent instruments, including an age-adapted Internalization of the Model Minority Myth Measure (Yoo et al., 2010), would repair the reliability weakness in the expectations scale. And longitudinal designs of the kind Kiang and colleagues have run, following students across the high school years, could establish direction: whether perceived expectations produce pressure, attract it, or both. Massachusetts' disaggregation rollout offers a natural setting for all three, since the state will soon publish exactly the subgroup categories this study had to construct by hand.

Limitations

This is a small convenience sample recruited partly through personal networks, with subgroup cells of five to eight respondents; the subgroup estimates are unstable and the tests exploratory. The gift-card drawing may have attracted some low-effort responding, and the data bear this out: six respondents were removed for fabricated entries, bad-faith text, or straight-lined answers, under the rules described in the Method. Cleaning also demonstrated that one secondary result, the expectations-pressure correlation, was sensitive to a small number of unreliable cases, which is a caution against over-reading any single coefficient at this sample size. The stereotype-expectations measure was written for this study rather than drawn whole from a validated instrument; in its original six-item form it fell short of conventional reliability ($\alpha = .66$) and reaches the threshold ($\alpha = .70$) only after one reverse-worded item is dropped. The design is cross-sectional and correlational, so nothing here establishes cause. The sample is heavily East Asian and second-generation, and ten non-Asian respondents cannot represent Black, Latino, and white high schoolers generally. Finally, self-report captures perceived expectations, not teachers' actual beliefs. Each limit points the same direction for future work: larger subgroup samples, validated adolescent measures, and designs that pair student reports with school-side data.

Conclusion

In this study, the model minority stereotype proved uniform across ethnic subgroups while the circumstances that determine a student's ability to live with it proved unequal. The students most exposed, Cambodian Americans reporting the least support and the lowest academic self-image, are precisely the students the aggregate obscures. Breaking up the category in official data would allow institutions to see them. Addressing the comparison the category was built to serve is the longer project, because the stereotype originated as an argument about other groups, and its comparative function persists in the assumptions students report today. The findings here are small, local, and provisional, as a first survey should be. They nonetheless place student-level evidence behind a claim the literature has mostly argued from theory and aggregate statistics: the model minority stereotype is one expectation applied to many circumstances, and schools that do not examine the circumstances will continue to misread the students who carry it.

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The Origins of Unified Anti-Establishment Politics in the United States By Olivia Lee

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the multi-dimensional catalysts behind the 2016 workforce rejection of the American establishment, a movement whose legacy continues to define the political scene of 2026. Across the fields of economics and psychology, this study argues that the populist shift was not merely a reaction to economic concerns, but a layered response to a broader crisis of social success. In economics, central concepts include policies that led to the outsourcing of manufacturing and the subsequent decay of domestic production. These structural shifts triggered a decline in subjective status. Furthermore, credentialism was meant to compound material struggle into perverse social shame. In the psychological analysis, insecurities intensified through processes like motivated skepticism, last place aversion, and epistemic echo chambers. Consequently, displaced voters developed a preference for authoritarian leaders with populist morals. This research concludes that the 2016 anti-establishment movement was not localized in time. Because of its multifaceted history and deep psychological ties, 2016 anti-establishment sentiment continues to be crucial in modern politics.

INTRODUCTION

A scroll on an American political platform in 2026 might reveal headlines announcing new tariffs on Canada, escalating trade disputes with dozens of trading partners, and renewed debates over globalization and industrial policy. To the casual observer, these articles appear to capture the erratic chaos of the modern political scene. However, this reality is not a sudden anomaly; rather, it is the continued result of a movement set in place exactly a decade prior.

The 2016 political cycle stands out because it represents a time when both far-left and far-right voters came together for an unexpected cause: anti-establishment politics. This shift began with the economic disruptions of the early 2000s. Policymakers expanded foreign industry, encouraged the outsourcing of blue-collar manufacturing jobs, and accelerated the financialization of the U.S. economy. Together, these changes dismantled domestic employment and forced the American workforce to face the sunk costs of globalization without the help of its political establishment.

Yet, the fallout was not strictly financial. In a culture deeply anchored by the promise of the “American Dream,” this systemic abandonment was internalized as personal inadequacy. When the middle classes realized that the traditional path to success had been structurally blocked, their marginalization morphed into collective psychological shame. Polarized echo chambers and the anti-intellectualism movement became ways for marginalized groups to vent economic and psychological grievances, reclaiming self-respect from the very institutions that neglected them.

Through this paper's synthesis of the 2016 multidisciplinary political cascade, it becomes clear that the 2016 election did not just temporarily disrupt the establishment. It institutionalized the anti-establishment framework that governs America today.

KEYWORDS

Anti-establishment; outsourcing; polarization; financialization; middle class; populism; American Dream; epistemic bubbles

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a mixed-methods narrative review with both quantitative data and thematic analysis. No original data was collected. The quantitative portion reviewed for this study involves data and concepts from peer-reviewed academic journal articles and institutional reports examining structural economic shifts, such as financialization and outsourcing. The thematic analysis draws from scholarly monographs in psychology and qualitative ethnographic research to provide insights into the emotional drivers of political behavior. While foundational cognitive research from 1990 is included, the majority of publications range from January 2010 to October 2024. Similarly, the sources used are primarily American-based, but terms from psychology journals in Europe are used to reference broader concepts that parallel the phenomenon seen in the American political scene. The literature selected specifically examined the real-world and psychological impacts of neoliberal policies across social hierarchy and workforce in 2016 America. Findings are discussed below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Policies That Led to Outsourcing the Middle Class

The rapid decline of U.S. manufacturing was not an inevitable evolution of the market but a direct consequence of deliberate neoliberal policies. One of the most notable catalysts of this downfall was the 2000/2001 granting of Permanent Normal Trade Relations to China (Pierce and Schott, 2016). Before the grant, Congress had to vote annually on whether to allow China low-tariff access to American markets. In this process, outsourcing was controlled because sectors could not guarantee stability in the event of a tariff spike; specifically, failing renewal could have seen tariffs jump from an average of 4% to a Smoot-Hawley rate of 37% (Pierce and Schott, 2016),. But with its passing, the PNTR effectively eliminated this "uncertainty" by locking in a permanently low tariff with no set expiration. The PNTR provided many companies with the confidence to shut down American factories and move entire supply chains to the comparatively stable China. In the aftermath of the movement, manufacturing employment – which had been stable for 35 years – plunged 18% in just six years (Pierce and Schott, 2016). In essence, the establishment signaled it could guarantee job safety abroad and left domestic labor to face the "sunk costs" of the dying industry. When an industry dies, the specialized skills of the workers and the physical infrastructure of the town become unrecoverable losses.

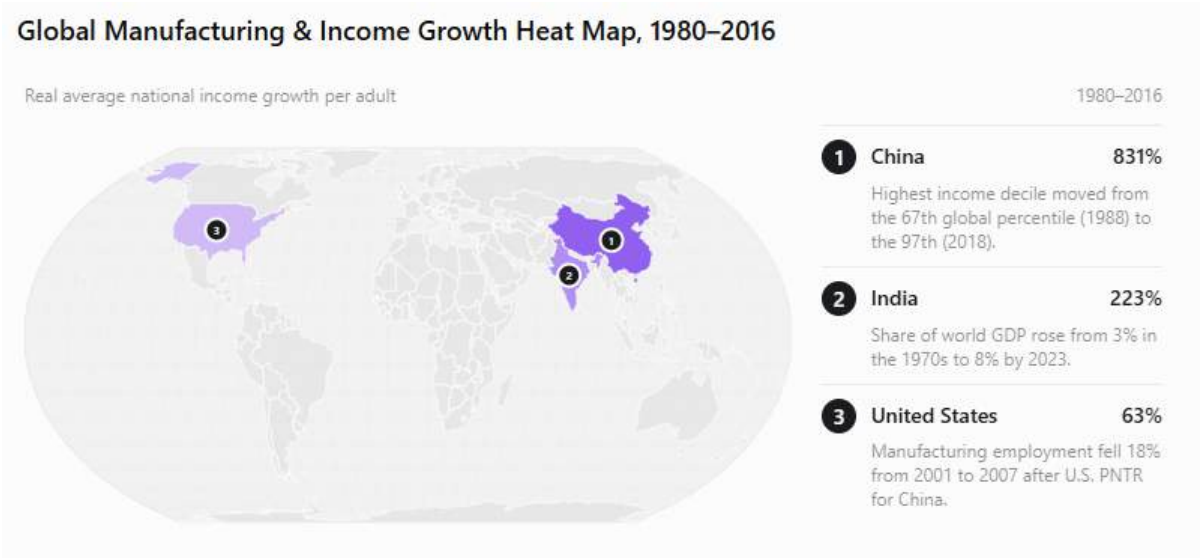

Figure 1: Global manufacturing and income growth heat map of China, India, and United States between 1980 and 2016; Figure generated by author

Moreover, the fallout from such policies was not evenly distributed, as the "mobility of capital" created an asymmetry where corporations (and capital) were free to relocate while human beings remained geographically and industrially "fixed" (Gidron and Hall, 2017). Scholars McLaren and Hakobyan describe these changes with the "Youngstown effect"—named after the 1977 "Black Monday" collapse of the steel industry in Youngstown, Ohio, where the loss of a primary industry triggered wage suppression that even bled into the non-traded service sector. In their 1990–2000 study of over 10 million workers, researchers found that in "vulnerable towns," even workers like those in a local diner saw wages drop by as much as 8 to 16 percentage points because displaced blue-collar workers flooded the service job market (McLaren and Hakobyan, 2010). The "Youngstown effect" meant that the establishment had not just moved a factory; it had affected the future of entire towns. The repercussions of the PNTR policy and subsequent "Youngstown effect" became prevalent to the reality of the working class, introducing both right- and left-leaning Americans to a system that appeared to favor the "mobility of capital" over domestic livelihood.

Death of Domestic Production

Eventually, the 2008 financial crisis finalized the anti-establishment consensus by nationalizing economic insecurity and exposing the failures of federal regulation. Unlike the trade-driven shocks of the earlier 2000s, which produced "wins" in the form of lower consumer prices, financial crises act as universal losses characterized by across-the-board income losses that leave virtually none of the population unharmed (Funke and Trebesch, 2017). This shift is illustrated by the "Elephant Curve," which shows that while the global top 1% and emerging Asian economies saw substantial income growth between 1988 and 2008, the Western middle class experienced "little to no growth" in wages (Alvaredo et al., 2018). Consequently, following

the crash, economic insecurity among "non-blue collar" workers increased by more than 8 percentage points (Guiso et al., 2024). This index—a 0 to 1 score blending unemployment history, financial distress, and industry-specific risk—even pulled the professional class into anxiety previously reserved for the outsourced worker. Furthermore, because these crises are perceived by voters as innate failures of regulation and policy rather than external accidents, the succession of 2008 marked a 35% drop in trust in political parties (Pew Research Center, 2025). This collapse in federal credibility synchronized the frustrations of different classes, as both the blue-collar and professional sectors realized the establishment had failed to protect them from systemic collapse.

Figure 2: The Elephant Curve; Each square represents one year from 1988 to 2008; Figure generated by author

The rise of "financialization"—the increasing dominance of finance, markets, and investment at the expense of the broader economy and domestic production—further validated the "rigged" system. By 2000, earnings generated through financial channels accounted for more than half of the total profits earned by U.S. manufacturing firms (Lin and Tomaskovic-Devey, 2013). This shift underpinned the economic principle of r>g—the inequality caused by the rate of return on capital (r) exceeding the rate of economic growth (g) (Piketty, 2015). Similarly, in the 2016 political environment, wealth generated through investments grew rapidly while the salaries of regular workers stagnated. Simultaneously, the new environment constituted a polarization of work, where technology substituted for "routine" middle-education tasks, hollowing out the middle of the wage distribution as employment expanded only in high-wage and low-wage work (Autor et al., 2008). With such systems, "middle class" work became ambiguous, low-yield, and scarce. Financialization alone accounted for more than half of the decline in labor's share of income between 1970 and 2008, cementing the narrative of "subsidized losses and privatized gains" (Lin and Tomaskovic-Devey, 2013). By 2016, the death

of middle class work and the subsequent unpopularity of the elites' financial markets triggered a 33% increase in the supply of populist parties (Guiso et al., 2024). With this shift, it became apparent American voters—regardless of their end on the political spectrum— sought stability that could not be ensured by the establishment.

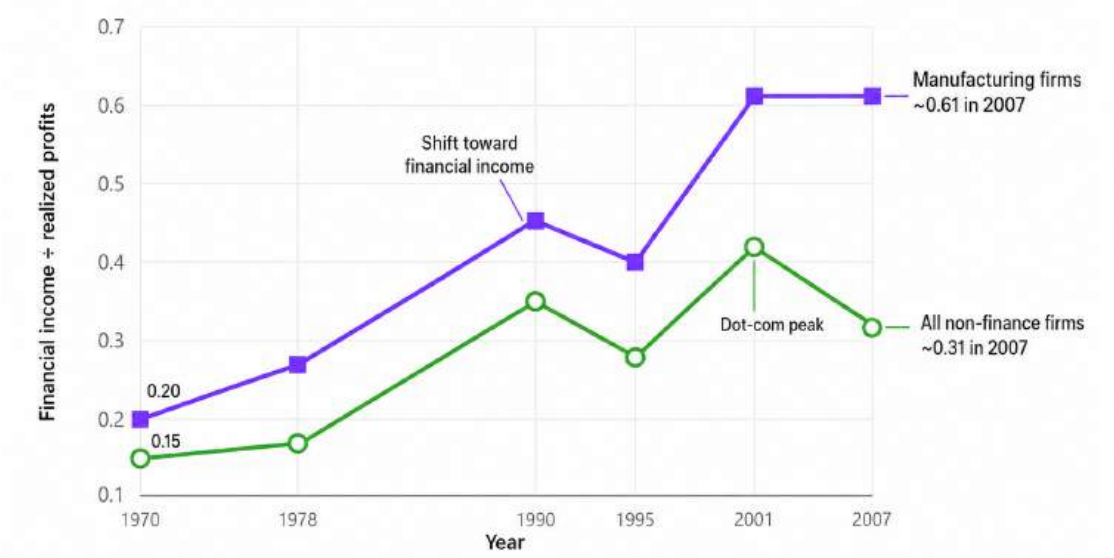

Figure 3: The impact of financialization on how U.S. corporations—especially manufacturers— made their incomes between 1970-2007; Figure generated by author

Internalized Frustrations and Feelings of Inadequacy

The transition from the economic devastation of outsourcing and financialization to the political upheaval of 2016 is rooted in the internalization of systemic failure. Central to this shift is the "American Dream"—the belief that the playing field is level and that socioeconomic success is purely the result of individual effort, talent, and values (Drissen, 2025). This narrative implies a psychological corollary: if wealth signifies talent and hard work, then the inability to be rich must indicate "idleness," "incompetence," or a lack of "inner talent." But in reality, the 2016 political situation revealed that outsourcing and financialization meant the "traditional" path to success was effectively blocked—with or without hard work. Still, despite the universal loss reality, for the millions of Americans who believed in the promise of effort, their struggle to succeed in a society that supposedly had every opportunity reflected a deeply personal shortcoming. Sociologists argue failure in the West was defined not just by a lack of money but by the "inability to appear in public without shame" (Gidron and Hall, 2017). Such shame was particularly severe for the uncredentialed working class, who faced what scholar Michael Sandel describes as "credentialism," or "the last acceptable prejudice" (Sandel). As the establishment and its elites held increasingly dismissive and demeaning attitudes towards those without college degrees, the working class was constantly reminded of its inferior value.

The disappearance of decent jobs in vulnerable towns meant that it was no longer enough to be a hard worker, and the social status once associated with stable blue-collar labor collapsed.

Workers found themselves waiting in line for an American ideal that was no longer accessible (Hochschild, 2016). The cultural environment transformed the lack of material wealth into a state of self-disappointment, where individuals felt they were no longer credible people in the eyes of their national community. By 2016, the working class's internalized frustration became external with the adoption of a "Deep Story," in which it was no longer the author of its failure, but the victim of an establishment that allowed "cheaters" to steal their share of the American Dream (Hochschild, 2016). Many workers felt the only way to level the playing field was to support anti-establishment leaders who promised to reestablish the "American" hierarchy of hard work and punish those seen as undeserving. In this way, the internalization of American injustices catalyzed the rejection of 2016's neoliberal workforce.

Polarization, Populism, and Information Landscapes

In addition to internalization, economic insecurity became increasingly externalized through political polarization, where partisanship became an identity used to reclaim the status lost from financialization and outsourcing. As domestic production and manufacturing declined, individuals demoted to the bottom began to view the establishment as fundamentally hypocritical. This division was reinforced by the cognitive process of "motivated skepticism." When individuals encountered information that aligned with their existing beliefs (such as evidence of establishment failure), they tended to accept it at face value without significant scrutiny. Conversely, when faced with differing information—like data suggesting globalization provides cheaper goods—they do not simply ignore it. Instead, they spend significant cognitive resources to find flaws in the methodology, source, or logic to justify dismissing it (Iyengar et al., 2019). Paradoxically, this bias was more pronounced among politically sophisticated voters, who possessed greater information and were therefore more capable of rationalizing away evidence that the system is failing with presumed logic. Experimental studies found that these individuals selected attitude-consistent evidence roughly 75% of the time and devoted substantially more cognitive effort to discrediting opposing information than evaluating it impartially (Taber and Lodge, 2006). This explains the volatility of the 2016 political scene: economic insecurity among even the professional classes (in addition to "blue collar" workers) motivated information-rich voters to use sophistication to entrench, rather than correct, existing biases.

Polarization provided the foundation for the anti-establishment logic of populism—a political approach that pits the "pure, forgotten people" against "a corrupt elite"—to those who felt socially marginalized (Cramer, 2016). Following the 2008 economic crisis, many middle class workers viewed society as a competition for limited resources and substantially overestimated the severity of social threats. This heightened perception of threat increased support for "hawkish" leaders who advocated collective punishment against perceived "line-cutters" who are seen as unfairly "usurping a share of the American Dream" (Laustsen and Petersen, 2017; Mutz, 2018). At the same time, the phenomenon of "last-place aversion"—where individuals near the bottom of the social hierarchy become preoccupied with preventing those below them from advancing—reinforced support for populism by framing others' status gains as

personal losses (Mutz, 2018; Jost and Hunyady, 2005) As politics came to be viewed through this lens, opposing viewpoints were increasingly perceived as threats rather than differences of opinion, narrowing civil discourse and reinforcing polarization. Together, these psychological processes contributed to the middle class's growing support for authoritarian-leaning leaders.

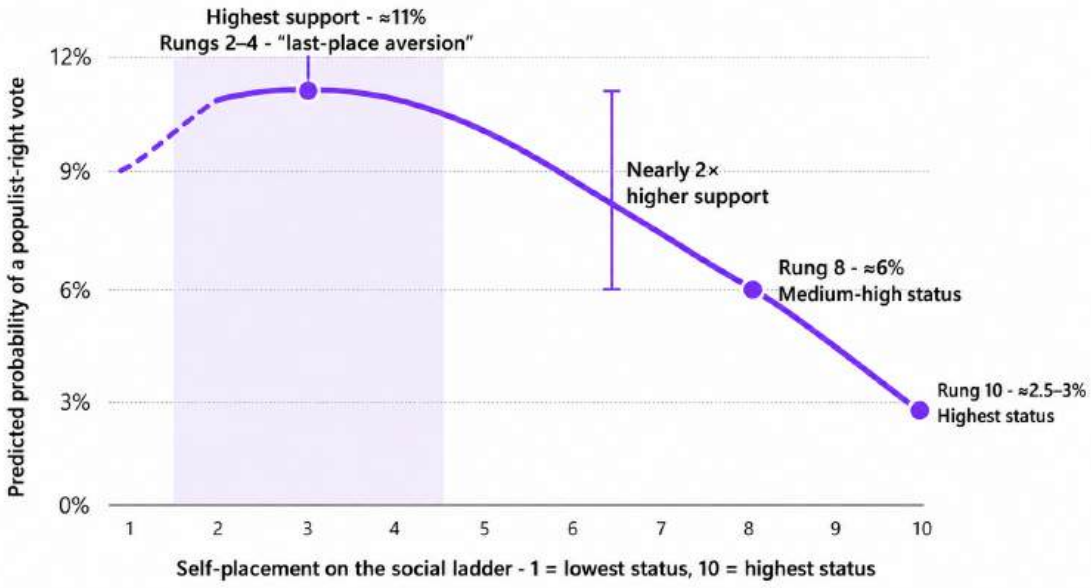

Figure 4: Self-assessed social statuses and their probability of supporting a populist vote—routine and low-skill services are predicted to be within rungs 3–6 and sociocultural professionals are between rungs 7–9 Figure generated by author

Finally, these decisions were finalized by information landscapes, such as echo chambers. In the political scene of the early 2010s, echo chambers made use of “evidential preemption” to actively discredit outside voices and trap individuals in epistemic bubbles, or limited spheres of knowledge (Begby, 2021). Through this strategy, inside authorities—such as media personalities or dominant political figures—"predict" that credentialed elites would attack the group’s beliefs. By pre-framing these outside criticisms as malicious, leaders ensured that future pushback actually served as corroboration of their own trustworthiness. Scholar Nguyen characterizes this mechanism as a "reverse-Mandevillian intelligence,” where individual virtues of being an engaged thinker are inverted into a society-wide vice (Nguyen, 2020). Within authoritarian echo chambers, reverse-Mandevillian intelligence gave rise to the movement of anti-intellectualism, where the active rejection of expertise is framed as intellectual independence. Anti-intellectualism provided the psychological motive for motivated skepticism. In this way, the movement became a defensive shield, allowing middle class groups to reclaim self-respect by discrediting the institutions they felt had discarded them. In turn, this strengthened authoritarian leaders, whose attacks on traditional institutions validated supporters' grievances while sheltering them from competing sources of information. The result was a cycle in which economic frustration evolved into political identity, political identity reshaped information processing, and

information processing deepened support for the anti-establishment movement that defined the 2016 election.

CONCLUSION

In short, the rise of the anti-establishment movement in 2016 cannot be attributed to a single policy, psychological bias, or political event. Rather, it emerged from the intersection of economic transformation, human vulnerabilities, and political leadership. While economics explains how outsourcing, financialization, and the 2008 financial crisis dismantled the stability of the American middle class, psychology explains how these structural changes were felt by ordinary individuals. The subsequent rise of credentialism and erosion of the American Dream transformed material hardships into internalized feelings of shame, status loss, and inadequacy. Additionally, these frustrations became increasingly externalized through political identity and authoritarian sentiments. From this foundation, mechanisms like motivated skepticism, last-place aversion, and populist echo chambers shaped how individuals interpreted both political information and social change.

As a whole, this research demonstrates that large-scale political movements are rarely driven by isolated decisions. Understanding the anti-establishment movement of 2016 therefore requires more than identifying a single catalyst. An understanding requires the recognition of the feedback loop through which negative economic change generated feelings of insecurity and loss, those psychological responses polarized political identity, and the new political behaviors increasingly undermined the institutional trust necessary to sustain effective economic policy. Essentially, the conditions that initially gave rise to anti-establishment politics were continually reproduced, forming a self-reinforcing cycle.

But perhaps the most important implication of the cycle extends well beyond 2016. As debates over global trade, industrial policy, and economic nationalism take over American politics ten years later in 2026, policymakers face a challenge that is not solely economic or political but rather interdisciplinary. Today, we debate a broader question: Can the United States afford to pursue a path of greater economic self-sufficiency without repeating the cycle of insecurity, polarization, and institutional distrust that accompanied earlier periods of structural change? The history examined in this paper suggests that answering this question requires more than mapping out trade balances or election outcomes—it necessitates a holistic approach across the bounds of multiple academic disciplines. Only through understanding these relationships as parts of one interconnected system can society hope to interrupt the cycle rather than simply respond to its trends.

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Pacific Theater of WWII: Ideology and Brutality in the Island-Hopping Campaign
By Vihaan Sulibhavi

Introduction

On the small island of Peleliu, amidst fierce firefights along the steep and rocky ridges of the Umurbrogol mountain, a platoon of marines lay waiting to be relieved from the front. After the torrential downpour of the previous night, the rain had collected in puddles all around them (Terkel 62). In one such puddle was the skull of a dead Japanese soldier who had been killed by Browning automatic rifle fire. The top of his skull had been shot clean off as he sat upright in front of his machine gun. One marine began to toss pieces of coral into the skull, like a child throwing pebbles into a puddle (Terkel 63). There was no malice in his actions; he was simply biding his time until he was to be rotated off the front lines. These sights of casual savagery were common occurrences in the Pacific war accounts of First Marine Division mortarman Eugene Sledge and serve as scarring reminders of the depravity of combat. This is just one man's testimony on one island in a war fought by millions of men on hundreds of islands.

The Pacific War was fought between the Allied Powers and Imperial Japan, as part of the larger conflict of World War Two (WWII). WWII was a global turning point in society, being a source for some of the very best and worst innovations devised by mankind (Margolin). Cultural changes occurred, like the incorporation of women in the industrial workforce (Myers). Technological advancements were numerous, including the jet engine, computers, and atomic weaponry (Gattie and Massey). Most of all, however, the war acted as a vessel for humanity to commit unimaginable atrocities like the systematic mass killings of millions in the Holocaust. The Pacific Theater, in particular, stands out as an example of the unchecked barbarity with which the war was fought. According to Navy Medical Department statistics, Marine and Navy forces suffered 1,460 casualties on Guadalcanal, 4,119 on Tarawa, 19,310 on the Marianas, 7,094 on the Palau Islands, 21,677 on Iwo Jima, and 24,928 on Okinawa (United States, Department of the Navy, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery 172-73). These battles were fought on and around specks of land which most Americans could not point out on a map. Japanese casualties were even higher, in most cases double and even triple that of American losses. This paper explains why the island-hopping campaign had such high casualties relative to the size of the locations where these battles were fought.

Historiography

The common narrative surrounding the Pacific Theater, stemming from mid-twentieth-century and Cold War thinkers including Samuel Eliot Morison and Herbert Feis, is that of a noble struggle of American forces against the malevolent threat of fascist Japan. They saw the resulting casualties as being a necessary sacrifice for the goal of Allied victory. This perspective is prevalent across America even today. Many Americans still see the war as a retaliatory effort against the treacherous surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and a war of liberation freeing much of Southeast Asia from Imperial Japan's grip. This idealist viewpoint, however,

fails to understand the nuances that made this theater of war so callous to the taking of human life. Race was a determining factor in the conflict. Skull trophies, teeth necklaces, and other forms of battlefield desecration were unheard of in the western European Theater of the war, yet they were common in the Pacific. Many firsthand accounts from the western European front cite that after a battle was deemed unwinnable, German forces would surrender and there was a certain level of respect between the two foes; in the Pacific, it was rare for the Japanese to surrender, with companies unable to capture double-digit prisoners of war (POWs) across full island campaigns (Terkel 59). With the looming threat of last-ditch suicidal efforts from captured Japanese soldiers, many marines secretly executed POWs, violating orders and the Geneva Convention (Terkel 61). The supposed sense of "western civility" was absent in the Pacific. Furthermore, the savagery exhibited by both sides was actually encouraged by ideals of racial superiority, propaganda, and hatred. This paper will illustrate how the institutionalized mutual hatred shaped the behavior and actions of both American and Japanese soldiers on the battlefield.

Decades after the war, there has been a resurgence of research and historiography surrounding the Pacific Theater and its shocking details of gruesome acts. A multitude of historians have written about this period of history, each offering differing insights on why this theater was so bloody, with themes of racial superiority, purity, wartime desperation, and cultural conflicts being common. As the years have passed since the war's end, distinct schools of thought have developed on this issue. This paper looks at three unique camps regarding the Pacific War. One, scholars with a critical view of the war's carnage; two, those who believe that the war's barbarity was justified; and three, veterans whose personal experiences led them to exhibit mixed feelings on the conflict.

The first group, involving scholars like John Dower in *War without Mercy* and Maruyama Masao in his essays "The Ideology and Dynamics of Japanese Fascism" and "Theory and Psychology of Ultra-Nationalism," felt a sense of deep regret for the war's cruelty. They largely characterized the entire era as a backwards time, often glossing over the innovations that occurred due to their contributions towards mass deaths and anguish. Contrastingly, the other scholarly camp, with the likes of Samuel Eliot Morison in *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, Herbert Feis in *The Road to Pearl Harbor* and *Japan Subdued*, and Henry L. Stimson in "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," believed that the war's barbarism was necessary to defeat Japan's militarist expansion. These scholars largely overlooked the United States' incorporation of racial tensions and the baseless internment of Japanese Americans to further certain anti-Japan agendas. The middle ground, as seen in the oral compilations "*The Good War"* (Terkel) and *Japan at War: An Oral History* (Cook and Cook), is offered by many veterans who actually fought in the Pacific. Many of them acknowledged the war's brutality that exacerbated racial tensions, societal collapse, and the death of millions, but they also understood the personal feelings of the soldiers undertaking these atrocities and the strenuous mental pressure and ideological conditioning that they faced. This humanist view highlights the multifaceted nature of the conflict where the loss of life was severe and unnecessary while also acknowledging the reasoning for why these instances occurred.

This paper closely aligns with the first and third schools of thought. With these scholars writing their works years after the conflict, they were able to examine the war in hindsight and acknowledge the war's true loss of life previously buried by propagandized rhetoric. Furthermore, having actually experienced the Pacific War at its worst, these veterans were able to analyze their memories in a meaningful manner that helps determine the reasoning for both sides' cruelty during the war. However, there are still crucial gaps that fail to account for the discrepancy between veterans' experiences in the Pacific and western European Theater, respectively. This paper seeks to contribute to this field by looking at a wider view of the conflict that incorporates the western European Theater alongside the racial ideologies of WWII-era United States and Japan. By utilizing scholarly works and firsthand battlefield accounts, a more nuanced understanding can be achieved. There can be a more complex view of the Pacific War as a conflict that fought fascism abroad while peddling inequalities at home in the United States. Additionally, this paper will highlight modern discourse on imperial Japan's remodeling of past cultural institutions that created a cohesive nationalist identity. By using both past and contemporary analyses as a foundation, this paper will contribute a new understanding of the racial angle of the Pacific Theater.

Brutality and Dehumanization of Island-Hopping Campaigns in WWII

Too often, mainstream discussion of the Pacific War has been centered on the surface-level viewpoint of the American military's gallant exploits against their Imperialist Japanese foes, disregarding the true reasoning behind the war's savagery. The Social Darwinist principles that fueled American racial superiority occurred concurrently with the Japanese beliefs of national supremacy and imperial devotion. This mutual hatred allowed for the bending of moral constraints, leading to heinous battlefield acts. These soldiers spent months on end in deplorable conditions, slowly beginning to feed into the hateful rhetoric, spewed from their respective nations. Their time in battle blurred the lines between honorable conduct and senseless cruelty as evidenced by the numerous instances of corpse desecration in this paper. This paper argues that the respective racial ideologies of the United States and Japan led soldiers on both sides of the island-hopping campaign to commit acts of brutality and dehumanize one another on the battlefield.

Methodology

The paper proceeds in two parts. First, it analyzes individual veterans' testimonies to construct an argument on the racial tensions present. Through a personal outlook of the war, this paper will develop an understanding on the war's escalating tensions that led to increased levels of atrocity later in the conflict. The paper then examines the Pacific Theater from a broader lens, investigating the ideological systems that the soldiers fought for and how they shaped their combat behavior. By assessing these racial superiority complexes, a greater grasp of why these soldiers committed such obscene acts can be achieved. Throughout both parts and the conclusion, this paper will compare the Pacific Theater with its western European counterpart to

understand why the soldiers acted in seemingly opposite fashions towards the enemy on their respective fronts.

Part I: Soldiers' Testimonies: Racial Tensions and Dehumanization in the Pacific Theater

For the soldiers themselves, the humid tropical climate of the islands, isolation from society, constant fear of death, and most of all the racial differences led to higher levels of battlefield carnage during WWII (Sledge). It did not help that Japanese soldiers often refused to surrender in the face of hopeless situations, often opting for suicide attacks to inflict as many American casualties as possible. From Guadalcanal to Okinawa, as American troops continued to gain territory, the Japanese did not relent, turning each battle into a slaughter. Seeing that they were winning battles yet still sustaining heavy casualties frustrated many American troops, leading to actions like skull trophies and prisoner executions. Japanese forces faced terrible odds, often being outmatched numerically and technologically, causing them to fight with heightened ferocity without regard for their own lives. Ultimately, soldiers on both sides were influenced by their respective racial ideologies and the stress of battle, which led to heightened levels of animosity and a relative lack of respect for the laws of war.

Methodology

This section will focus on the savage war experiences of soldiers by looking at veterans' oral testimonies. After initial background on the Pacific War as a whole, there will be examinations of American veterans' testimonies in Studs Terkel's *"The Good War"* followed by their Japanese counterparts in *Japan at War: An Oral History* by Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook; both of these pieces will set the foundation for this section and illustrate the feelings of these soldiers and marines as they fought in the Pacific, leading to a more nuanced understanding. These deeply personal experiences will provide reasoning behind the war's atrocities and help humanize both sides while also providing context on the greater racial war.

Background on the Pacific War

After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and its subsequent invasion of the Philippines, it was clear that the war would incur tremendous devastation. Before the December 7 attack, Japan sent a fourteen-part diplomatic message to the United States, but transcription delays at Japan's embassy in Washington meant it was not delivered until after the attack had begun (Hata 230). This further enraged the American people who saw the Japanese attack as dishonorable, which was exacerbated by President Roosevelt's speech the day after the raid (Doherty et al. 4-5).

However, the United States' oil embargo on Japan severely hurt its war effort, and as the American war machine ramped up, the Japanese military began to utilize more unorthodox tactics including suicide attacks (Reyna). In fact, before Pearl Harbor, Japanese Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku believed that this war would backfire against Japan, stating, "For a while we'll have everything our own way, stretching out in every direction like an octopus spreading its tentacles. But it'll last for a year and a half at the most" (Toll 273-74). This sentiment only

became more evident after the turning point of the Pacific War: the Battle of Midway, which occurred approximately six months after Pearl Harbor. American forces pivoted towards a more offensive approach after sinking four Japanese carriers, largely making up for the heavy losses during Pearl Harbor. The victory at Midway kickstarted the American island-hopping campaign with American marines and soldiers beginning to land on the island of Guadalcanal two months later (Mahnken). Now Japan's war effort was in peril, but due to sentiments of imperial filial piety (Spafford), they continued to fight.

As the Americans got closer to the Japanese mainland, combat veterans' accounts highlighted the drastic jump in animosity (Terkel; Cook and Cook). For instance, on islands like Peleliu, Iwo Jima, and Tarawa the Japanese remained dug into deep trench systems, inflicting heavy American casualties and leading to reciprocal acts of wartime atrocity. Civilians also became caught up in the vortex of violence. On Okinawa, Japanese forces used the native population as human shields, feeding them propaganda that the arriving American military were a force of bloodthirsty devils (Tzeng). On Saipan's suicide cliff, civilians chose to jump instead of surrendering due to fear of American mistreatment (Goldberg). From 1942 onwards, as American forces continued to win decisive battles, many Japanese units employed scorched earth tactics to postpone their inevitable loss.

American Experiences in the War

The Japanese victory in the Battle of Bataan in 1942 in the Philippines resulted in the surrender of 75,000 Allied troops (Huber 3) and the events that followed haunted the minds of American soldiers in the Pacific throughout the conflict. Maurice E. Wilson, who served in the 192nd Tank Battalion, reported the terrible sights he witnessed during the fall of the Philippines in 1942 (Terkel 68). When he was first captured by Japanese forces he had contracted dinky fever, a tropical mosquito-borne disease (Terkel 70). A few of his fellow POWs who attempted to escape were captured, tied to fence posts, and forced to squat down on their knees in the Philippines heat (Terkel 70). He describes the prisoners developing "blisters on their face big as goose eggs in that hot sun" (Terkel 70) and after three days they were executed by Japanese soldiers (Terkel 70).

Wilson also highlighted that he and a few POWs were forced to draw water from a creek serving as a toilet for a nearby Filipino village and needed to put copious amounts of chlorine in the water for it to be safe to drink (Terkel 71). Additionally, the random killings of POWs were a common affair. He recounts that the Japanese soldiers once selected around 18 muscular prisoners for a work assignment, later gunning them down during the night after heavy drinking (Terkel 71). Japanese guards also severely rationed food for these POWs (Terkel 73). In one instance, a group of American sailors had to kill and eat Wilson's pet stray cat (Terkel 73). For the rest of his time as a prisoner of war, Wilson was forced to work in deplorable conditions from Filipino sugar plantations to weapons factories in mainland Japan (Terkel 74-76).

Another example is of Anton Bilek, an Army Air Corps member stationed at Clark Field airbase in the Philippines, who was present during "the Bataan Death March" (Terkel 82). Bilek,

like many American servicemen in 1941, felt a sense of invincibility, and was truly shocked by the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor (Terkel 83). Bilek initially believed that the Japanese "all wore glasses and they didn't have a decent bombsight. And they didn't have any navy to amount to anything. They were usin' all our scrap metal, all our oil" (Terkel 84). To him, a Japanese attack on the United States was unfathomable. Before they could even process Pearl Harbor, American forces were quickly attacked by the Japanese and cornered at the mouth of Manila Bay at Corregidor and Bataan. Bilek also blamed the outdated equipment, like World War One (WWI) era Springfield rifles and Lewis machine guns, as a key reason for their defeat (Terkel 84).

Japanese forces eventually broke through the lines at Bataan and General Edward P. King Jr. was forced to surrender (Terkel 87). This is where the real horror began as American and Filipino troops were forced to march for 68 miles. Many of the men were malnourished and had contracted malaria and dysentery, with the Bataan peninsula being "the worst malaria-infected province of the Philippines" (Terkel 87). The hospital facilities were full of disease-ridden men, but the Japanese still forced anyone that could walk into the marching columns. The POWs were frequently shot or bayoneted and left to die if they fell out of line (Terkel 87-88). Bilek highlights that around 700 Americans and close to 10,000 Filipinos died during the four-day march (Terkel 87-88). He later spent time at Camp O'Donnell where an additional 2,000 Americans and close to 30,000 Filipinos died (Terkel 88-89). While there, he faced harsh work details repairing bridges, later contracting both beri-beri and amoebic dysentery (Terkel 88-89).

He was forced into a packed hospital with deplorable conditions and limited medical staff. And the Japanese, he noted, "stayed away from the hospital. They were afraid they'd catch it" (Terkel 88-89). After recovering, he spent the remainder of the war in Japan, working in factories and mines. While there he constantly suffered beatings by the guards, stating that "the majority of them [Japanese soldiers] could not see looking up at an American who was much taller than him. This they hated with a passion" (Terkel 90). After Japan's unconditional surrender, Bilek was transported to Okinawa, then back to the Philippines and then eventually back to the U.S. where he continued to live out his life (Terkel 92-94).

These horrific conditions became known to American soldiers across the Pacific front and acted as motivation to avenge their fallen comrades. In this next excerpt, Eugene Sledge, a marine mortarman in the Fifth Marine Regiment and veteran of Peleliu and Okinawa, chronicles his experiences after hearing about Bataan (Terkel 57). He felt a deep sense of brotherhood within the marines, seeing them as a second home instead of "just a lettered company in a numbered battalion in a numbered regiment in a numbered division" (Sledge 98). His unit's heavy casualties caused by fierce fighting with the Japanese made him feel an insatiable hatred towards them that could not be quelled even after the war (Sledge 34). Sledge remembers capturing a Japanese soldier on Okinawa who was a graduate of Yale and spoke perfect English. Sledge and his fellow marines, however, made no attempts to befriend or talk to him (Terkel 61). Sledge emphasized that the relative lack of publicity on Japan's treatment of their subjugated

populations compared to the global condemnation that Germany received for the Nazi Party's actions made him wary of developing relationships with Japanese POWs (Terkel 61).

Sledge believed that there was a strange sense of irony in the Japanese code of behavior: "flower arranging, music, striving for perfection. And the art of the warrior" (Terkel 61). Sledge noted that in the pictures of fallen Japanese soldiers, they would always be sitting in a calm pose near flowers (Terkel 61). To him, this refined etiquette did not correlate with the Japanese soldiers' cruelty on the battlefield. They fought to the last man and engaged in sly tactics, like hiding grenades in their garments after being captured (Terkel 57-58), to inflict as much damage as possible towards American forces (Terkel 64). Sledge remembered that his drill instructor in boot camp told him "don't hesitate to fight the Japs dirty… and war ain't a sport. Kick him in the balls before he kicks you in yours" (Terkel 62).

This sense of animosity was shared collectively by most American forces stationed in the Pacific and led to some obscene actions. American troops in the Pacific called the Japanese a variety of names to demean them, with marines stationed in the Marianas calling them "Japes," as a mix of the words Jap and ape (Dower 86); later, even crueler neologisms were also created like the term "monkeynip" (Dower 86). The racist name-calling was perpetuated in American popular media, whose role in the war will be highlighted later in the paper. The extraction of gold teeth off of Japanese corpses became commonplace in the Pacific. In fact, Sledge almost engaged in this cruel practice himself. On Peleliu he sat to extract a gold tooth from a dead Japanese soldier, but was dissuaded by the company's navy medic, Ken Castle, on the pretext of disease contraction (Terkel 59). Most soldiers were not so lucky; many fell to the allure of wartime savagery. On Okinawa, Sledge saw a fellow marine shoot off the private areas of a Japanese corpse and celebrate (Terkel 60). Prior to the war, Sledge knew the soldier as a normal man with no severe hatred towards others. This slow degradation of the psyche caused individuals to exhibit inhumane tendencies, turning each into a "twentieth-century savage" (Terkel 60) in the process.

Eugene Sledge served in the Battle of Okinawa until the war's end and later spent one year in Beijing, China, until he was discharged from the Marine Corps. To him, the sights that these marines saw slowly chipped away at their humanity. From the constant mortar fire, to the mud and corpses, to the surprise Japanese night raids, there was hardly ever a peaceful moment during the island-hopping campaign. Sledge was witness to casual acts of brutality from corpse mutilation and desecration to the killing of Okinawan civilians (Terkel 60-61).

Additionally, in recent years, many WWII-era skull trophies have been recovered. There have been numerous instances of American troops taking Japanese skulls back to their families to have them passed down through generations. One notable case occurred in June of 2003 in Pueblo, Colorado, where a skull bearing the inscription "This Is a Good Jap… Guadalcanal…11-Nov-42…Oscar…M.G. J. Papas U.S.M.C." (Harrison 817) was found. After forensic analysis by anthropologists at the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, it was confirmed that the skull originated from a Japanese soldier in WWII. The family insisted that it was a family heirloom passed down from Julius Papas, a marine who received the skull during

the Battle of Guadalcanal; however, the skull was returned to the Japanese authorities for interment (Harrison 817-18). Even today, new evidence is uncovered that finally offers closure to Japanese families on the whereabouts of their fallen relatives' corpses. To American troops, at the time, they were just doing their jobs against a hateful enemy in an era of animosity and racial tensions. These examples demonstrate the perceived cruelty of the Pacific from the American lens, as well as insight on why they acted this way.

Japanese Soldiers' Experiences in the War

On the Japanese side, there were similar sentiments of hatred. Tales of American mistreatment of Japanese POWs coupled with imperial propaganda led Japanese soldiers to fight Allied troops to the death. The Battle of Midway and the clear imprint of the U.S. embargo on oil left Japan in a precarious state. There was little to be done as the war looked unwinnable by the time of the island-hopping campaign. Yet, Japan kept fighting. Japanese forces were unwilling to accept terms requiring the emperor's capitulation. Values of honor and sacrifice, known as Bushido, that were previously reserved for the samurai class of Japanese society, began to be taught to the entire Japanese population. This led to "any means necessary" tactics including Banzai charges (Lamott 464) that were largely used to hurt the morale of Allied forces rather than to inflict any real military damage (Lamott 464). However, in certain cases, suicide attacks held some strategic value through the destruction of Allied equipment. The Divine Wind Special Attack Corps, more commonly known as Kamikazes, was first used on October 25, 1944, at the Battle of Leyte Gulf in the Philippines Campaign. These attacks struck fear in the crews of American navy vessels and ended up sinking anywhere from 19 to 116 warships, depending on either side's estimate, at the expense of 285 aircraft (Hattori 18-19). Japanese troops during the war suffered tremendously due to logistical issues, overwhelming enemy forces, outdated technology, resource depletion, and other failures, culminating in horrific casualty rates.

This paper will now examine the Japanese front through an analysis of veterans' accounts. In New Britain, Japanese soldiers, including army medic Ogawa Tamotsu, faced harsh conditions (Cook and Cook 276-77). Ogawa's unit suffered heavy casualties but lacked medical capabilities to heal the wounded. This forced Ogawa and other lower ranking medical personnel to kill their own men through a shot of a corrosive sublimate (mercuric chloride) rather than letting them meet worse fates at the hands of the natives or Allied troops (Cook and Cook 278-79). Lack of proper food and sanitation led to diseases like malaria and dysentery rapidly spreading. Ogawa noted that "dead bodies were everywhere. Somehow, the dead called to the dying" (Cook and Cook 278-79). Millions of worms covered these bodies as a ghastly reminder of their hopeless situation (Cook and Cook 278-79). Ogawa stated that to keep the soldiers fighting, they "were made to believe the enemy were demons. It was a kind of brainwashing" (Cook and Cook 278-79).

The plights of starvation and disease that the Japanese faced juxtaposed with the seemingly endless supplies and equipment of the Americans hurt the Japanese troops' morale. The Japanese soldiers truly believed that they were losing the war after smelling the scent of

coffee from the direction of the American encampment during the night (Cook and Cook 280). At night, some Japanese soldiers attempted to sneak into the American encampment to steal food (Cook and Cook 280). As they scouted the enemy positions, they saw how American forces built airstrips in a matter of days with bulldozers. Many Japanese soldiers had not even seen this type of equipment before. This demoralized the Japanese soldiers over the war's outcome, yet many fought anyway due to their faith in the emperor (Cook and Cook 280). After the war, Ogawa Tamotsu returned to Japan, where he let go of his hatred towards the Americans and continued to wrestle with the guilt of his wartime actions decades later.

Yamauchi Takeo, a soldier stationed on Saipan, experienced some of the worst fighting of the war. He was part of a reserve platoon and was quickly separated from his unit. He was never totally aligned with the Imperial Japanese agenda; instead he harbored Marxist-Leninist feelings (Cook and Cook 281). Yamauchi sought to escape the island of Saipan by any means necessary (Cook and Cook 283-89). He repeatedly engaged in action against American forces and noted that they fought with unexpected levels of ferocity. Being a non-commissioned officer, Yamauchi was seen as an authoritative figure to his men, most of whom had only received a primary school education (Cook and Cook 289). It would have been seen as dishonorable and weak for him to seek surrender. He feared that he would be shot in the back by his men if he even contemplated surrendering to the Americans (Cook and Cook 290).

After losing his comrades to American forces, he found his way to a cave filled with civilians. He saw many young mothers with babies in the cave, and as American forces approached their position, some of them felt compelled to kill their crying babies to avoid alerting the enemy (Cook and Cook 289). Eventually Yamauchi was able to surrender, becoming one of fewer than a thousand out of around 43,000 troops stationed on Saipan that surrendered (Cook and Cook 290). While fighting, Yamauchi remembered that "the American soldiers had been demons on the battlefield, ready to kill me in an instant" (Cook and Cook 291). But as a prisoner, he saw them interact with each other in a casual and lighthearted manner, starkly contrasting their battlefield ruthlessness. Yamauchi spent the rest of the war as a prisoner in La Crosse, Wisconsin, where he grew to deeply appreciate American culture (Cook and Cook 291).

The experiences of average soldiers on both sides shaped the war. Both sides were filled with young, impressionable souls who succumbed to the pressures of battle. The incessant bombardment, abhorrent heat, mud, and corpses littered across the battlefield led many soldiers to mentally break. While American forces saw the Japanese as evil "subhumans" that wanted nothing more than to inflict many American casualties, this was not the case. As exhibited by Ogawa and Yamauchi, many Japanese soldiers were thrust into a war that they wished no part in and were virtually coerced into following suicidal charges in the name of their emperor and archaic Bushido values. The Japanese viewpoint of Americans as soulless devils was also untrue: many were younger than 21 and lacked the maturity to process their actions. They became desensitized to the violence, but still largely retained their humanity. The cultural misunderstanding on both sides led to needless bloodshed and death.

The inhumane acts that these soldiers committed were indirectly engineered by the racial systems of both sides (Terkel; Dower). American forces would never collect skull trophies in Europe as it would have caused international outrage if German or Italian corpses were mutilated. And while there were outliers on both sides, the previous pages have illustrated a comprehensive understanding of the behavior of "boots on the ground" soldiers and their wartime conduct in relation to race.

Part II: Examining the Institutionalized Racial Ideologies of the Pacific War

An Introduction into Western Racial Ideologies during WWII

It is crucial to examine the structural racism inherent within both societies during this time to reveal why American and Japanese soldiers committed such acts. One modern view of the war, perpetuated by various Cold War-era and contemporary historians (Morison; Feis, *Japan Subdued*; Morton; Frank), presents Nazi Germany as the hub of bigoted racial philosophies. However, across the Allied Powers, racial hierarchies were also present. Britain imposed harsh legislation against freedom fighters in the British Raj through the Rowlatt Act, which gave British authorities the right to arrest Indians based on suspicion, rather than concrete evidence. They also orchestrated the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh Massacre when British troops fired at civilians peacefully protesting against the Rowlatt Act (Datta). They additionally turned a blind eye to the 1943 Bengal Famine in India where an estimated 800,000 to 3.8 million people died (Das). These early twentieth-century atrocities built upon earlier instances of Britain's criminal negligence towards its Indian colonial subjects during the late Victorian era (Davis).

Scientifically racist, nativist beliefs filled the minds of many Americans, leading to the preservation of Jim Crow laws in the South and the exclusion of Chinese and other Asian immigrant groups through the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act ("Chinese Exclusion Act") and other subsequent legislation. As historian John Dower writes, "At the same time, this critique of Nazi racism had a double edge, for it exposed the hypocrisy of the Western Allies" (4-5). It was ingrained within popular American society that the white race stood at a higher level than African Americans and other minority groups. This was reflected in military hierarchy as well: African American soldiers were largely relegated to performing logistical and support services away from the front lines (Reiss). Many believed that their fight was for a "double victory" against fascism abroad and segregation in America (Kersten). Conversely, the British mobilized their African and Indian colonial subjects to fight on the front lines for their cause, including in the Burmese Campaign (Roy 1256), with their service still largely unrecognized (Morrow).

Furthermore, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, composed of Japanese American soldiers, was deployed only in Europe due to fears of collusion with imperial Japanese forces in the Pacific. It became the most decorated American unit of WWII relative to its size and length of service (McNaughton 11-12). The most infamous act was the forced incarceration of approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans into internment camps under Executive Order 9066. Such discriminatory standards were not applied on the same level towards German and Italian

Americans as they largely shared the same European identity of the greater white American population. Despite disputes on the classification of Italian immigrants and other non-western European groups as white Americans (Jacobson), they were still kept in higher regard compared to non-Europeans. American society would have been furious if these groups were incarcerated, similar to how there would have been global outrage if the mutilation of corpses occurred in the western European Theater as well. The common feeling of white supremacy and racial prejudice on the home front was only exacerbated as soldiers' mental states deteriorated in a high-stress combat environment. Many white American troops believed that Japanese soldiers were beneath them due to the historical precedent of racial mistreatment towards minorities (Dower 65).

An Introduction into Japanese Racial Ideologies during WWII

On the opposite spectrum, Japan faced a similar racial conundrum. Following Commodore Matthew Perry's 1853 voyage (Keith) and the eventual Meiji Restoration, Japan began to transform from an isolationist state to a rising global power. Similar to the rise of European fascism, Japan incorporated core spiritual values to unite their people and further their global influence. The resurgence of Bushido and Neo-Confucian values within Japanese society, not just for the elite daimyo and samurai classes but for the common people as well, led to an increase of devotion for the imperial family. The ancient Shinto belief that the emperor of Japan was a descendant of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu shaped the minds of the Japanese people to come together and establish "Greater East Asia" (Fisher). This sense of cultural superiority, rapid industrialization, and victories in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 and WWI in 1918 led Japan to cement itself as a rising imperial power.

Japanese society began to see itself as the chosen Asian race and a beacon of prosperity to protect Asia from western imperialist nations (Maruyama, "Theory" 1). Thus, Japan quickly expanded into Manchuria in China, and across other parts of East and Southeast Asia. The Japanese military stationed in China and Korea committed numerous atrocities, such as the actions of Unit 731 (Pawlowicz and Grunden 272), the Nanjing Massacre (Chang), and the institution of comfort women (Hayashi 54). These soldiers exhibited great hostility towards Chinese and Korean civilians, often viewing them as obstacles or resources for the greater Japanese civilizing effort in Asia. Imperial Japanese rhetoric of the 1930s and 1940s centered upon ideals of Shinto revival, devotion to the emperor, and samurai "Bushido" values.

Core Argument

The past racial behaviors of the United States and Japan towards various minorities and imperialized groups reflect themes of discrimination present during the war. American racial institutions and Japanese ideals of cultural supremacy were taught from childhood. This led many soldiers to feel numb to their hateful actions because their enemies were simply believed to be inferior (Dower 70). The following pages argue that the supremacist rhetoric that manifested in American and Japanese society during WWII reflected itself on the battlefield through increased wartime malice. It does so by examining the works of the first school of thought

researched in this paper. The works of John Dower, Maruyama Masao, and others illustrate the largely critical lens while offering new insight on the conflict's racial undertones. These secondary accounts offer a view into the minds of the decision makers that constructed the racial dimensions of the war. Additionally, primary sources including caricatures and cartoons in popular media and propaganda films and pamphlets further convey how both sides contributed to the battlefield carnage. Examining these sources will allow for an analysis into the minds of individual soldiers and the reasoning behind their actions. While culturally different, both nations were inherently similar in their united distaste towards other groups they deemed "inferior."

An In-Depth Analysis of American Racial & Cultural Beliefs in the Pacific Theater

While the United States was much more discreet in its belief of racial hierarchy compared to Nazi Germany (Dower 4) and Imperial Japan, hate was nevertheless ingrained in the minds of many Americans. In his 1986 book *War without Mercy*, John Dower details the western sentiment towards imperial Japan's territorial growth during the 1930s. Dower noted that Japan's expansion threatened the very sanctity of western superiority, as "Japan's belated emergence as a dominant power in Asia, culminating in the devastating 'advance south' of 1941-42, challenged not just the Western presence but the entire mystique of white supremacism on which centuries of European and American expansion had rested" (5-6). For a large part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the West stood as a bastion of technological superiority, industrial output, and territorial expansion. The meteoric rise of Japan onto the world stage led some western powers to lose influence and power (Dower 5), which resulted in Yellow Peril sentiments and fear of greater territorial loss (Huang). Dower also details that much of the early Japanese territorial push centered on the encroachment of long-standing western colonial holdings, further threatening their power (5). In some cases, such as with Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army in Burma (Cohen), Japan allied with subjugated colonial militias to fight against western forces. They often installed puppet governments in their place, including in the Philippines and Burma (Dower 6). This Japanese effort to present itself as a beacon of Asian power strengthened the Allied Powers' resolve to defeat their new enemy (Dower 6).

Dower also highlighted the importance of the media's influence on the Pacific War (87-89). To preserve the racial order, the western allies presented the Japanese in a variety of ways. Cartoonists, social scientists, film makers, and war correspondents depicted the Japanese as subhuman apes, vermin, and childlike primitives, to a nation of highly disciplined and battle-hardened "superhumans" (Dower 86). As a result, a distinct ideation of Japanese society began to take hold. Stories from the Pacific like Pearl Harbor, the invasion of the Philippines, the Bataan Death March, and Guadalcanal fueled propaganda efforts against the seemingly sadistic Japanese people, furthering the racial divide between the two enemies (Dower 68). Dower believed that when defining the character of the Japanese, Americans saw them as "subhuman, inhuman, lesser human, superhuman—all that was lacking in the perception of the Japanese enemy was a human like oneself" (9). Evidence pointing towards the inhumanity of the Japanese, such as prisoner executions and other violations of the Geneva Conventions, substantiated the

belief that the Japanese were "a uniquely contemptible and formidable foe who deserved no mercy and virtually demanded extermination" (Dower 9). As the war carried on and Japanese defeat seemed inevitable, the "superhuman" myth diminished, but a new desperate and merciless Japanese foe emerged (Dower 89). The newfound Japanese hostility forced greater American animosity in retaliation (Dower 89). By this point, Japan was willing to contort their wartime rhetoric by any means necessary to fit their agenda and mobilize their remaining population to fight (Dower 205).

As casualties continued to rise for American forces against an unrelenting enemy, a stronger sense of bitterness took hold, both in popular media and in combat. One case is the U.S. Army propaganda film *Know Your Enemy: Japan*. The film was designed to fuel anti-Japanese sentiments for soldiers and civilians to prepare the American people for more years of grueling war. The film was released on August 9, 1945, but was quickly withdrawn after the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and the subsequent Japanese surrender. However, the film's public release did not create new hateful sentiments. It merely preyed upon the preexisting American distaste for their Japanese enemies (Dower 182). In many American cartoons targeted to the youth as both an entertainment and indoctrination tool, Japanese political figures were depicted in a racist manner (Dower 190). Highly revered Japanese figures like Emperor Hirohito, Prime Minister Tojo Hideki, and Admiral Yamamoto were shown with slanted eyes, freakishly buck teeth, and animalistic features akin to those of rodents (Dower 181-90). Theodor Geisel, known for his children's books under the pen name Dr. Seuss, was a prominent part of the American anti-Japanese propaganda machine. As an editorial cartoonist for the New York daily *PM*, Geisel produced numerous works portraying the Japanese as an evil force trying to take over America from within (Minear 104-10), going on to continue his works under the United States government later in the war. Other bastions of children's entertainment worked in similar ways. The Warner Bros. classic program *Looney Tunes* featured a seven-minute segment called *Tokio Jokio* directed by Norman McCabe (Brasch 11-16). The cartoon, framed as a captured Japanese wartime newsreel, satirically characterizes the Japanese people as largely incompetent, deceitful, and subhuman.

This artistic freedom to portray the Japanese as an inferior race was not present in propaganda directed towards America's European foes. In an article dedicated to analyzing WWII-era propaganda, author Cody Chun notes that Italy's Benito Mussolini and Germany's Adolf Hitler were not dehumanized or animalized in American media despite their unpopularity. Chun states, "Though they represented Axis forces, the whiteness of Hitler and Mussolini secured their humanity" (9). In fact, according to Chun, the Japanese were so ill-regarded by the United States that American leaders were willing to drop atomic bombs to end the war over a proposed land invasion despite significantly lower death projections in the latter option (1-2). Over the years, various scholars of different political ideologies, such as Barton Bernstein, Rufus Miles Jr., and John Ray Skates, have looked at American planning documents for the mainland Japan invasion. According to them, if the Americans invaded Kyushu in November of 1945, there would have been an estimated death toll of 20,000 to 26,000 people. And in the unlikely

scenario that a full-scale invasion would have happened in 1946, the maximum estimated loss of life would have been 46,000 (Chun 1). As Chun puts it, “46,000 deaths, though significant, pales in comparison to the estimated 105,000 deaths caused by the two bombings” (2).

Other contemporary analyses, however, have estimated that there would have been up to one million American (Giangreco 56) and ten million Japanese casualties (Giangreco 115) in a mainland invasion, dwarfing the losses incurred by the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings combined. These conflicting casualty estimates on a mainland Japanese invasion have led to fierce discourse on the morality of the bombings, leaving their necessity uncertain. Recent studies of post-war documents have revealed that one motive for the use of atomic bombs was the potential entry of the Soviet Union in the Pacific Theater. As a means to leverage their position against the Soviets, the U.S. dropped the bombs, which possibly killed more people than necessary to force a Japanese surrender (Chun 3-4). Nevertheless, the main American reason for the bombings was to end the war as quickly as possible.

This paper largely aligns with the conclusions of Cody Chun and John Dower that a reason for this miscalculation was the aspect of race. The need for American global influence seemed to take precedence over 105,000 Japanese lives. Although American soldiers’ accounts clearly illustrate that the Japanese were a strong foe, American popular media continued to belittle the Japanese as racially and culturally inferior (Dower 186). The American military was able to conduct operations callously in the Pacific in comparison to western Europe because of feelings of racial superiority within a large percentage of white American society.

After the atomic bombings, President Harry S. Truman wrote a private letter trying to justify the Japanese death toll. He claimed that “when you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast” (Bernstein 39). This inhumane sentiment echoes the beliefs held throughout the American chain of command from the president to the individual soldiers. In the American military’s eyes, the Japanese were an animalistic enemy to be trampled with extreme force with the use of unprecedented weaponry (Dower 86). The atomic bombing of Japan largely conveys the deep level of resentment towards non-white groups within white American society. In the years before WWII, America remained locked in tensions regarding race (Guffey). As this global conflict erupted, the American government began to utilize pre-existing racial prejudices as a tool to combat their new and racially different Japanese enemies. Through harsh legislation against minority American citizens, racially motivated propaganda in popular media, and a rising hatred for Japanese forces’ desperation as the conflict prolonged, the American war effort’s barbaric battlefield conduct grew exponentially.

An In-Depth Analysis of Japanese Racial & Cultural Beliefs in the Pacific Theater

While equally harmful, the Japanese sense of racial superiority differed from that of their American opponents. As previously mentioned, the Bushido samurai code reemerged during WWII; this mindset is admired by many for its discipline and illustrious history, yet it was responsible for many atrocities during the twentieth century. Historian and professor Karl F. Friday noted that despite the samurai code’s reverence in modern media, “The samurai tradition

is often cited as the source of both the mind-set that launched Japan's war against China, Southeast Asia and the United States and the norms and values of the soldiers and officers who fought it" (339). While the samurai caste had been officially abolished under the Haitōrei decree in 1876 as a part of the larger Meiji Restoration, the Bushido code remained within former warrior families and was subsequently taught to the officer corps of the Imperial Japanese Army (Friday 340). It was not incorporated within army regulations but sat on a superior plane as a creed and answer for life and death (Friday 340). Modern writers elevated medieval samurai to ultra-loyal vassals who prioritized self-sacrifice over abandoning their duties, yet this was completely false (Friday 342). In fact, as was the case with medieval warriors across the globe, the master-retainer relationship was largely contractual and there are many instances in Japanese history where key warriors defected in the middle of battles (Friday 342).

In the twentieth century, the Bushido code served mainly as a propaganda tool rather than a true reclamation of past Japanese glory. Bushido values acted as a piece of the larger puzzle of the new Japanese *kokutai* (or national essence) structure (Kitagawa). While on the surface, the Japanese military agreed to abide by the Geneva Conventions forbidding the harming of civilian populations, soldiers committed atrocities regardless, especially as they began losing the war. This was not attributed to Bushido values as most medieval samurai kept captured civilian and enemy combatant populations intact to cultivate the newly conquered land and be absorbed into their retainer's army, respectively (Friday 346-47). In the medieval era, killing these people would have been counterproductive; yet in the twentieth century, as exhibited by the 1937 Rape of Nanjing and the evidence of tortured Allied POWs, these killings existed due to ulterior reasons. As Japanese military conditions became depleted in numbers, morale, and supplies, they needed to make hard decisions to continue the fight. Japanese troops began to resent having to watch over and give their already minuscule supplies to keep POWs alive. This predicament led to the execution and use of prisoners to perform manual labor for Japanese public works and wartime projects (Friday 348). Coupled with the Japanese propagandized national identity, the newly shaped, yet historically unrepresentative, Bushido code helped Japanese society and troops unite to fight grueling battles in the Pacific.

Japanese fascism shaped the racial systems that fueled battlefield atrocity. Writer Maruyama Masao remains split on his classification of early twentieth-century Japan as strictly fascist in comparison to their European allies, yet he writes about the key distinctions of the Japanese political structure during that era. In an effort to incite nationalism, writers like Kita Ikki in his *General Outline of Measures for the Reconstruction of Japan* spoke of a uniting family system similar to that of Nazi Germany's *Volksgemeinschaft,* or people's community (Maruyama, "Ideology" 37). This helped radicalize the Japanese people to see themselves as a close-knit, superior Yamato race (Morris-Suzuki). It also resulted in apathetic behavior towards Japanese military atrocities that occurred in imperialized nations. Additionally, Maruyama believes that the ultra-nationalistic beliefs of WWII-era Japanese society were in some cases more potent than those of Nazi Germany, despite the latter being more authoritarian (Maruyama, "Theory" 1). Maruyama claims that "ultra-nationalism succeeded in spreading a many-layered,

though invisible, net over the Japanese people, and even today [Maruyama's works were published in 1946] they have not really freed themselves from its hold" (Maruyama, "Theory" 1). The progenitors of Japanese fascism created a system of precision and cultural homogeneity through a uniquely crafted imperial cult of personality. There was a lack of freedom of belief in Japanese society during this time as Maruyama explains; the actions of the Japanese people seemed dependent on approval from the nation's top brass. In a sense, "the definition of what was actually for the good of the country, was handed down by officials whose duty it was to give loyal service to His Majesty the Emperor and the Imperial Government" (Maruyama, "Theory" 6). Core values of morality, truth, beauty, art, and scholarship seemed to fall second to the national identity and actions were measured by their practical value for the nation.

According to Maruyama, the emperor became the literal embodiment of goodness and virtue and acted as the center for the national political agenda. In order for this virtue to manifest, the Japanese people had to spread it throughout the world, with this just cause invariably coexisting alongside the national conduct (Maruyama, "Theory" 9). This belief provides reasoning for Japanese conquest since the empire must grow in order to spread the emperor's virtue towards the rest of Asia. According to Japanese rhetoric, they were the utmost example of righteousness and "the culmination of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful" (Maruyama, "Theory" 9). Due to this belief, all wrongdoings could be absolved. National sovereignty began to act as the guidebook for ethics and power. Morality served second to national interests and did not present itself within the psyche of individual Japanese people; it instead manifested outward as a part of a highly cohesive ultra-nationalist "machine" ready to take down its foes (Maruyama, "Theory" 9).

Maruyama mentions how after the war, when Japanese soldiers who mistreated POWs were put on trial, many remained convinced that their actions were justified despite the overwhelming evidence that their conduct of beating and starving prisoners failed to meet the standards of the Geneva Conventions. It was as if they were blinded by their nationalist ideals and were incapable of wrongdoing because they were the embodiment of virtue. The individual soldiers, who in many cases lived simple and insignificant lives at home, were suddenly hoisted to a direct extension of the emperor's power and thus fell victim to false notions of superiority. Within twentieth-century Japanese society, the masses faced few opportunities for absolute power. And once they found it in the army, they quickly became driven by their impulses and were eager to transfer oppression onto innocent, but supposedly inferior, civilians of China, Korea, and the Philippines. This reflects some of the worst aspects of Japanese fascist ideologies: the feelings of moral immunity and absolution when fighting for the emperor as all actions conducted by imperial Japan were inherently virtuous (Maruyama, "Theory" 20).

Imperial Japan during WWII held the notion that they were innately superior and "a chosen people" under philosophies of ultra-nationalism (Dower 203). Despite the fact that Japanese forces began to take heavy losses as the war progressed, they maintained their ideological system and attempted to prolong the war at all costs to preserve the imperial family. There was such a level of imperial devotion that Japanese society put their moral obligations

aside to complete their duties. While in reality, Bushido was a largely contractual code for medieval samurai, it became a driving force for the Japanese war effort and fueled the Banzai charges and Kamikaze attacks that became increasingly common in the latter stages of the war. Japanese ultra-nationalism ultimately served as the driving ideological force that pushed Japanese soldiers to commit wartime barbarity and fight their enemies until their final breaths.

While the ideological systems of both nations differed, they influenced their wartime conduct. American forces cast aside the Japanese as an inferior race due to their non-whiteness and thus justified their grievous conduct. American media and government officials only amplified these beliefs held within the minds of the American people, leading to the viewpoint of the Japanese as subhuman targets instead of human beings. On the other hand, the Japanese held themselves in such high regard that they were willing to cast everyone else as second-class. This xenophobic idealism and imperial reverence fueled soldiers to fight without moral qualms. Their existence was enough for them to deem themselves an anti-imperialist nation supporting the growth of the Asian sphere. Both institutions were deeply flawed and helped perpetuate the battlefield hostilities of the Pacific Theater.

Conclusion

This paper argued that the brutal nature of the Pacific Theater is attributed to the racial ideologies of the United States and Japan. The lack of civility exhibited by American and Japanese soldiers towards each other was a result of institutionalized superiority complexes, such as Social Darwinism in the United States and the Japanese belief of cultural dominance, resulting in a higher scale of atrocity in comparison to the western European front. This has been illustrated by a study of various primary and secondary sources relating to the experiences of Pacific Theater veterans alongside post-war scholarly analyses. Three unique camps have been examined: those who acknowledged both nations' wartime cruelty and racism through a critical lens, those who believed the United States' harsh battlefield conduct during the war was necessary for the greater good, and those who experienced the fighting firsthand and understood the devastating loss of life of the conflict and the psychology of "the soldier behind the gun barrel." This paper aligns with the first and third viewpoints to provide an overview of the conflict's racial undertones and how they were experienced by the soldiers themselves. This paper builds on previous efforts in this field, namely authors in the first and third camps, to analyze the horrors of the Pacific War in comparison to the western European front through a modern lens. By connecting these works decades after most were written, a nuanced, contemporary understanding of this topic is seen. This paper has contributed to the discourse on this period of history by providing a comparative outlook of both countries' racial systems on the home front, and their influence on soldiers' behaviors during the war to provide a more complex view of the conflict.

Each section has also provided vital evidence towards the paper's overarching argument. By examining the views of veterans through oral compilations, the callous actions in the Pacific War can be understood through a layered lens. After all, those that committed these actions were

regular people prior to the conflict and were simply swept up by the larger systems of their countries, with these testimonies allowing readers to empathize with these soldiers and understand the deterioration of the psyche during combat. The scholarly perspective of thinkers like John Dower, Maruyama Masao, and Karl F. Friday provides a broader outlook of the war, incorporating historical developments that occurred before WWII to examine the conflict's racial dilemma. Together, this historiographical analysis has proved incredibly important in arguing that both nations' racial systems perpetuated greater battlefield carnage.

However, having analyzed this subject, larger issues present themselves outside the scope of just the Pacific Theater. The Nazi party committed genocide against numerous European groups, such as the Jewish, Romani, homosexual, and Slavic communities to name a few, but American forces did not engage their German enemies with the degree of savagery that they did towards the Japanese. While much of the Nazi party's crimes were uncovered towards the latter stages of the war, their racially superior western European rhetoric was known throughout. Additionally, Germany and Italy followed a uniquely un-American fascist political structure. Some pro-fascist movements linked to these nations, like the German American Bund (Remak) held rallies and supported political clubs in the United States. It needs to be explored why the United States chose to detain Japanese Americans due to fears of sedition while leaving most German and Italian Americans free despite the evidence of the latter two groups' participation in pro-fascist movements linked to Europe. There should be deeper study on why the United States chose to employ indiscriminate bombing campaigns against Japanese civilian populations while mostly focusing on military targets in Europe. These are important questions to consider when analyzing the varying tactics that the United States used against their enemies based on their respective racial identities.

Ultimately, these racial behaviors affected the lives of so many during this period, leading to needless bloodshed and emotional scars that would persist for decades after the war for veterans on both sides. Eugene Sledge, who fought on Peleliu and Okinawa, noted that the loss of life he witnessed on the battlefield took a toll on his psyche. Seeing such carnage, he believed that "the veneers of civilization wore pretty thin" (Terkel 58) during the fighting. These sights affected him and many other American veterans years after the war, especially regarding their pervasive hostile feelings towards the Japanese. Veterans on the opposite front, such as Yamauchi Takeo, who fought on Saipan, felt lucky to escape the war with their lives under overwhelming odds, but nevertheless also experienced post-traumatic stress. During the battle, "of the 43,682 military defenders, 41,244 died" (Cook and Cook 290) in a period of a little less than a month. These Japanese soldiers were willing to sacrifice their lives over surrendering to a foreign enemy, and the survivors of this perilous battle must sadly acknowledge the substantial and largely unnecessary loss of life during these unwinnable battles. This is the true cost of the Pacific War, not just the tremendous loss of life, but also the unhealable mental scars that remain with the survivors for years to come as a result of their nations' ideological wartime agendas.

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How Do Athletes Overcome Major Setbacks: Qualitative Study By Sawa Inohana

Abstract

Athletes frequently experience setbacks such as injuries and mental health challenges during their sporting careers. Although previous studies have documented the prevalence of such setbacks, limited research has explored how athletes psychologically cope with them and what factors contribute to their recovery. This study investigates how athletes overcome career-ending injuries or mental disorders and adapt to changes in their athletic and personal lives.
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three male track and field athletes who differed in age, event, and type of adversity. Data was analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Four themes were identified: negative emotional responses and helplessness, social support as a catalyst for recovery, reconsideration of career paths and discovery of new motivations, and meaning-making leading to post-traumatic growth. The findings suggest that support from family members, coaches, teammates, and healthcare professionals played a critical role in helping athletes process their experiences and move forward. Participants also reconstructed their identities by developing new goals and alternative career paths. Although all participants experienced significant psychological distress initially, they ultimately described their setbacks as opportunities for personal growth. These findings highlight the importance of psychological support, meaning-making, and identity reconstruction in athletes' recovery from major setbacks.

Introduction

For many athletes, sport has been a central part of their identity, daily life, and future aspirations. Participation in sport contributes not only to physical health but also to psychological development, social relationships, and a sense of motivation. Consequently, major setbacks such as injuries, chronic illnesses, and mental health challenges can affect athletes as a disruption to their performance, routines, goals, and perceptions of themselves.
These setbacks are common throughout athletic careers. A recent narrative review reported that approximately two-thirds of track and field athletes sustain at least one injury during a competitive season, with 100 injuries per 1,000 registered athletes at international championships (Edouard, Dandrieux, et al.). Although reducing injury risk remains an important priority, because of the intense training and harsh body movements, injuries continue to be an unavoidable event for athletes in competitive sports.

Previous research has also demonstrated that sports injuries are associated with a range of psychological consequences, including anxiety, frustration, reduced motivation, and emotional distress (Wiese‐Bjornstal). These psychological challenges may also influence how athletes perceive themselves and their future in sport.

While the psychological impact of injury has been widely recognized, athletes' responses to setbacks are far from uniform. Previous research identified multiple narrative typologies among elite track athletes, illustrating that injury experiences are interpreted in diverse ways depending on individual circumstances and personal meaning (Everard et al.). Furthermore,

social support from family members, teammates, coaches, and healthcare professionals has been identified as an important factor facilitating athletes' recovery and psychological adjustment (Daley and Reardon). Some researchers have also suggested that injury experiences may provide opportunities for personal development rather than representing solely negative events (Edouard, Bolling, et al.).

Despite these findings, existing research has focused on the psychological consequences of sports injuries or the effectiveness of physical rehabilitation. Comparatively less attention has been given to how athletes actively make sense of setbacks over time, reconstruct their identities, and discover new motivations throughout the recovery process. In particular, limited qualitative research has explored these experiences across different forms of setbacks, including mental health challenges, rather than sports injuries alone.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative approach using Reflexive Thematic Analysis to explore athletes' lived experiences of setbacks. This approach aims to understand how participants interpret their experiences and construct meaning throughout their recovery. By examining track and field athletes' narratives, this study explores how they psychologically respond to setbacks, what forms of support help recovery, and how new motivations and identities emerge through the process of adaptation. This study draws on the concept of post-traumatic growth, which describes positive psychological changes that can emerge through the struggle with highly challenging life events, to better understand how athletes reconstruct meaning following major setbacks (Tedeschi and Calhoun).

The research aimed to explore how athletes psychologically overcome major setbacks, and how they reconstruct meaning and identity throughout the recovery process. This study investigates how athletes experience significant psychological distress following major setbacks and how they gradually overcame these challenges through social support and the discovery of new motivations .

Method

Participants

Three male track and field athletes who differed in age (24 years old to 26 years old) and type of setbacks including physical injuries and mental health challenges participated in the study (Appendix 1). Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and were introduced to the researcher by school teachers and mental health support professionals. This recruitment strategy aimed to include athletes with diverse experiences of major setbacks and recovery.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant. The interviews focused on their experiences of adversity, emotional responses, coping processes, sources of support, and changes in motivation and identity following adversity. All interviews were audio-recorded using an iPad with participants’ consent and later transcribed by the

researcher. The recordings are stored in the researcher's macbook and iPad and are never shared. After anonymizing the transcription, it was translated in English from Japanese by the researcher. The main researcher first listened to the recordings and transcribed them by listening to each recording twice.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. To become familiar with the data, the researcher listened to each recording and reviewed the transcripts repeatedly. Each transcript was read three times, and meaningful excerpts were coded inductively. Similar codes were then grouped into candidate themes, which were further refined through comparison across cases (Appendix 2). Representative quotations were extracted to illustrate each final theme.

Researcher Reflexivity

The researcher has personal experience as an athlete who was forced to give up competitive sports due to a chronic illness. This experience shaped the researcher's interest in how athletes emotionally respond to setbacks and how they cope with adversity. Consequently, particular attention was given to participants' emotional changes, coping strategies, and processes of regaining motivation.

Results

Four themes were identified across the three participants' narratives: (1) negative emotional responses and helplessness, (2) social support as a catalyst for recovery, (3) reconsideration of the careers and discovery of new motivations, and (4) meaning making and post traumatic growth (Appendix 2).

Theme 1: Negative Emotional Responses and Helplessness

All participants described experiencing intense psychological distress following their setbacks. Feelings of hopelessness, isolation, and frustration often accompanied the loss of their previous athletic identities and coping mechanisms.

Participant 1, who had to begin using a wheelchair because of a bike accident, described losing the ability to compete and continue the career as well as several aspects of daily life that had previously given meaning and enjoyment: "I thought I couldn't continue farming, couldn't do physical work anymore, and couldn't even ride a motorcycle. I felt like there was nothing fun left." Similarly, Participant 2 reported feeling isolated from teammates and disconnected from the group after being unable to contribute to the team because of injury: "I felt like I was the only one being left behind. Gradually, I started to lose my sense of belonging." As Participant 2 didn't have a healthy coping mechanism, he repeated an intensive diet. Participant 3 also experienced frustration when returning to competition. The gap between his willingness to compete and inability to make expected physical movement led him to develop negative feelings toward the

sport itself: “When I came back to competition, my body didn’t match what I was thinking. That’s when I started to hate track.” These accounts suggest that setbacks significantly affected participants’ sense of identity, belonging, and emotional well-being.

Theme 2 : Social Support as a Catalyst for Recovery

Support from family members, friends, coaches, and professionals played an important role in helping all participants accept their circumstances and move forward. Importantly, support worked as a catalyst that encouraged participants to reconsider their situations and seek new possibilities as a motivation to move forward.

Participant 1 emphasized the support received from family members, friends, and even strangers: “My family and friends supported me, and sometimes even strangers helped when I was really stuck.” Participant 2 described communicating openly with his parents, who provided unconditional acceptance: “I talked to them every day on the phone and said everything I was feeling. They accepted it all.” Professional support was also beneficial. Participant 2 recalled that a sports counselor validated his emotions and helped him focus on practical steps toward recovery: “Your feelings are valid, so let’s think about what to do next.” These findings suggest that recovery involves facilitation by meaningful relationships and supportive interactions.

Theme 3: Reconsideration of the Careers and Discovery of New Motivations

Participants described gradually shifting their perspectives from what had been lost to what remained possible. Through interactions with others and changes in circumstances, they developed new motivations and alternative visions for the future. Participant 3 explained that conversations with his coaches reminded him of his original aspiration to become a teacher, which led him to shift his mind to pursue the path as an educator, not an athlete: “They reminded me why I originally wanted to become a teacher.” Participant 1 adopted a more positive perspective toward his circumstances: “Don’t count what you’ve lost. Make the most of what remains.” Likewise, advice from Participant 2’s mother encouraged him to continue moving forward without forcing himself to remain on the same path: “If I kept moving, I would eventually find something good. That made me realize that I don’t have to force myself to continue.” These quotes explain that participants were able to reinterpret adversity and discover new directions rather than remaining attached to their former identities and careers.

Theme 4: Meaning-making and Post-traumatic Growth

Ultimately, all participants described their setbacks as experiences that eventually contributed positively to their lives and growth. They reconstructed their identities and developed new meanings and values beyond athletic achievement. Participant 2 reported a shift from outcome-aiming motivation to intrinsic enjoyment: “Before, I liked running because I was getting results, but now I enjoy each practice itself.” Participant 3 perceived his experience as beneficial not only for his athletic career but also for his life in general: “Because I went through this myself, I can support others who are going through something similar.” Participant 1 also

found enjoyment in adapting to life with a wheelchair: “Handling each new experience one by one was actually enjoyable.” These findings suggest that setbacks may function as opportunities for identity reconstruction, meaning-making, and post-traumatic growth rather than simply as adversity.

Discussion

The study aimed to explore how athletes experienced significant psychological distress following major setbacks but gradually overcame these challenges through social support and the discovery of new motivations.

Participants initially described feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and loss of belonging following their setbacks. These findings are consistent with the previous research, which reported that sports injuries often lead to anxiety, emotional distress, and reduced motivation (Wiese‐Bjornstal). Similarly, another research found that injured athletes interpreted their experiences in different ways, often struggling with changes in identity (Everard et al.). In this research, many participants reported having few effective coping strategies immediately after their setbacks. Some relied on maladaptive coping behaviors, such as intensive eating, which they later believed worsened their psychological condition due to worsening availability of athletic movements. This suggests that the absence of effective coping mechanisms may intensify emotional distress during the early stages of recovery.

Social support functioned as the most important factors in participants' recovery. The finding is consistent with Parker, who emphasized that supportive interventions help athletes manage setbacks by encouraging help-seeking, psychological adjustment, and continued engagement during recovery (Parker et al.).These findings are also consistent with Watson, who emphasized that athletes' mental well-being depends on supportive environments rather than physical recovery alone (Watson). Moreover, this study suggests that support did more than provide emotional comfort. For all of the participants, conversations with others encouraged them to reconsider their future and discover new motivations. In some cases, supporters directly introduced alternative career paths or new opportunities. In others, simply talking about their experiences helped participants reflect on their emotions from a more objective perspective. For one participant, practical support from family and even strangers made everyday life more manageable after becoming a wheelchair user. These findings suggest that social support was valuable not only because of the advice it provided, but also because it reassured athletes that they were belonging in some communities, not alone. This finding is consistent with Parker, who emphasized that effective support systems help athletes manage setbacks by fostering connection and psychological well-being (Parker et al.). Importantly, these findings also suggest that recovery begins with the willingness to seek support. Participants who reached out to others were able to receive not only practical or emotional assistance but also opportunities to reinterpret their experiences and move forward. This highlights the importance of creating environments in which athletes feel comfortable asking for help without fear of being judged.

All participants reported that their setbacks eventually became turning points rather than just negative experiences. This finding supports Edouard, who suggested that injury experiences can create opportunities for personal development. (Edouard, Bolling, et al.) Participants in the present study described discovering new motivations, including coaching and supporting others, demonstrating that recovery involved psychological growth as well as physical adaptation. Although participants ultimately pursued different career paths, all reflected that confronting adversity had positively influenced who they had become. Some described gaining the courage to seek support, while others rediscovered their original aspirations through conversations with trusted individuals. Others reframed their setbacks as opportunities to appreciate what remained, rather than focusing solely on what had been lost. These findings suggest that participants engaged in a process of meaning-making, in which setbacks were gradually interpreted as experiences that contributed to personal growth rather than defining the end of their athletic or personal development. While their futures differed from what they had originally planned, participants described these new paths as meaningful and ultimately positive. These findings align with Tedeschi and Calhoun's concept of post-traumatic growth, which suggests that individuals can experience positive psychological change through struggling with highly challenging life events. (Tedeschi and Calhoun)In particular, participants demonstrated several characteristics of post-traumatic growth, including discovering new possibilities, developing a greater appreciation for what remained, and using their experiences to support others. Furthermore, the present study suggests that social support and meaning-making may play an important role in facilitating this process among athletes following major setbacks.

These findings suggest that successful recovery should not be understood solely as returning to sport. Instead, recovery involves reconstructing identity, developing new sources of meaning, and receiving appropriate social support. The findings also suggest that moving forward does not require forgetting adversity; rather, it involves integrating these experiences into one's identity and using them as a foundation for future growth. Coaches, families, and healthcare professionals should therefore recognize the importance of supporting athletes not only in returning to competition but also in finding meaning beyond it.

This study has several limitations. First, only three track and field athletes participated in the study, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Second, participants varied in age and type of setback, making direct comparisons difficult. Third, all participants were male athletes, so the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of female athletes or athletes of other genders. Additionally, the interviews were translated from Japanese into English by the researcher, which may have resulted in some loss of meaning during the translation process.

Future research should include larger and more diverse samples across different sports, genders, and types of setbacks to explore whether similar psychological processes emerge.

Conclusion

This study explored how athletes psychologically responded to major setbacks and how they reconstructed meaning and identity throughout the mental recovery process. Using

Reflexive Thematic Analysis, four main themes were identified: Negative emotional responses and helplessness, Social support as a catalyst for recovery, Reconsideration of careers and discovery of new motivations, and Meaning-making and post-traumatic growth. Overall, the findings suggested that although setbacks initially caused significant psychological distress, participants were able to adapt and move forward by utilizing support, reflecting on their emotions, and developing new purposes.

The findings also suggested that recovery should not be understood solely as returning to sport. Instead, recovery involved accepting adversity as part of one's life, reconstructing identity, and finding meaning beyond athletic performance. These findings highlight the importance of providing psychological as well as physical support for athletes experiencing setbacks.

Future research should examine whether similar processes occur among athletes from different sports, competitive levels, cultural backgrounds, and genders. Longitudinal studies following athletes over time may also provide a deeper understanding of how meaning-making and identity reconstruction develop throughout the recovery process.

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Artistic Authenticity & Fan Appeal in the Lyrics of Stray Kids By Caroline Lee

Introduction

K-Pop (Korean pop) is one of the biggest and fastest-growing industries in contemporary global music and culture. K-pop is best defined as an industry: it explores many different genres, and artists are expected to perform as singers, dancers, and charismatic stars at the same time. It also focuses heavily on fandom base, as fan interactions are central to the appeal and the practice of K-pop, a critical difference between the Korean and Western pop industries.

While k-pop fan behavior fundamentally resembles the fan behavior of western and American pop stans, there are notable differences in how fans relate to artists in the industry. Most notably, k-pop is drastically more fanservice-oriented than western pop is: fans use and subscribe to Weverse and other fan platforms in order to see exclusive content, DM idols, and post comments; K-pop idols are obligated to livestream in order to build and sustain fandom through interactions; and idols and groups hold fan-oriented events like fanmeets and fansigns, which are more focused on fan interaction than on performance. This produces a fan culture more driven by the desire to interact with and, at least parasocially, 'know' an idol: fans pay for subscription-style memberships on fan platforms to have access to exclusive lives and DM services on top of the free services that is provided for free; frequently attend multiple concerts on the same tour; and buy multiple albums in order to get a chance to win attendance to meetings with idols.

In recent years, the Korean pop industry has reached the global mainstream through the growing popularity of K-pop. Existing research has examined the rising fame of Korean pop and its cultural impacts (Kim; Oh and Lee; Yoon; Parc and Kim), but less attention has been paid to the specific ways that artists actively build fandom through their creative output, and what features of their artistry most pertain to this critical and somewhat unique feature of the K-pop industry and its fan appeal. This paper analyzes how the output of idols seeks to build fandom through a close analysis of the career and lyrics of the group Stray Kids.

Stray Kids on the Global Stage

Stray Kids is a boy group formed in 2017 by the JYP Entertainment Corporation consisting of eight members: Bang Chan, Lee Know, Changbin, Hyunjin, Han, Felix, Seungmin, and I.N. (an original 9th member, Woojin, left the group in 2019). As is increasingly common for K-pop groups, Stray Kids debuted through a survival competition show called *Stray Kids* ("JYP's 'Stray Kids' Revealed). All K-pop groups are different, but Stray Kids are a valuable group for studying artistic identity in K-pop because they are known for creative control over their music and careers. Idols are groups under entertainment companies, and as such they really don't have much control over their own songs. It is rare for idols to consistently make major contributions to the lyrics, composition, and production of the music they perform. Unlike these k-pop artists or idols, Stray Kids is an exception: they write their own music, and they have their own very upbeat "noisy" style which attracts fans based on the aesthetic appeal of their

consistent and loud musical style (de Guzman). Their artistic vision is at the forefront of their artistry, while other groups are typically ruled by management-dictated concepts.

Unlike most K-pop survival programs, which begin with a large pool of contestants who compete for a limited number of debut positions, *Stray Kids* (2017) centered on a pre-formed team that had already been assembled by trainee Bang Chan. As the oldest trainee and someone who had spent several years under JYP Entertainment, Bang Chan served as an intermediary between the company's management and the younger trainees. He acted as both a mentor and leader, teaching performance techniques, guiding practice sessions, and helping the members adapt to the expectations of the company. The survival program followed the nine trainees selected by Bang Chan as they attempted to prove that they were capable of debuting together as a single group.

Throughout the program, the trainees were evaluated by JYP Entertainment founder and producer Park Jin-young (J.Y. Park). Rather than determining who would join an entirely new group, Park assessed whether each member met the standard required to debut. He stated that members who did not demonstrate sufficient ability or growth could be eliminated, preventing the team from debuting as originally planned. This format created tension because the members' success depended not only on individual talent but also on their ability to function effectively as a cohesive team.

The *Stray Kids* survival show differed from many K-pop survival programs in several important ways. First, Bang Chan was given the unusual responsibility of selecting the members he wanted to debut together before the competition began. Most K-pop survival programs begin with dozens of contestants competing individually for a place in a newly formed group, whereas *Stray Kids* focused on an already established team. Second, the program emphasized collaboration, songwriting, and self-production alongside singing and dancing, building the group an identity as artists who actively participate in creating their own music. Finally, although survival shows have since become common within the K-pop industry, this format was still relatively uncommon when *Stray Kids* aired, making its focus on teamwork and artistic independence particularly distinctive.

When the show began, Christopher Chahn Bahng (Bang Chan) had been a trainee with JYP Entertainment for 7 years, since an audition in Australia at age 13. Before the group’s debut, Bang Chan and two of the other future members of the group, Seo Changbin (Changbin) and Han Jisung (Han), formed a production and performance group called 3RACHA. This unit continues to write almost all Stray Kids songs in addition to their solo releases. Bang Chan plays a key role in this arrangement because he not only composes music, but also arranges music, serving as a digital editor and sound engineer. As of August 2026, he has 244 song credits with the Korean Music Copyright Association (KOMCA). Over the course of their survival show, 3RACHA created 7 tracks in just a duration of 2 months.

Their status as “self-producing” idols (K-pop artists who write, compose, and/or produce their own songs) is important to the group’s identity and their fans’ perception. 3RACHA members write most of Stray Kids songs and if all their work is compiled, as of July 2026, Bang

chan has 239 song credits, Changbin has 203 and Han has 201 (Bell). Not only do 3RACHA compose their music, other members of Stray Kids also participate in making their own music. Other members of Stray Kids have as small as 18 to 31 song credits. For both fans and members of the group, Stray Kids are different because they write their own music about their own struggles; this conveys to fans that they are also writing stories which are authentically their own. In comparison to an outside composer selling them pre-written tracks—as is the case with most idol groups—this creates a situation where fans have more to relate to, as they see their authenticity as a part of their music. It has more perspective and consideration in its language.

Authenticity as a Lyrical Theme

Released in 2019 as the title track of the album *MIROH* and written by 3RACHA, Stray Kids' "Miroh" presents a powerful message of self-determination and perseverance in the face of adversity. The song portrays the K-pop industry as a metaphorical jungle—an environment that is competitive, unpredictable, and often hostile. Rather than expressing fear or regret, however, the members emphasize that they willingly chose this path and therefore accept the hardships that accompany it. This perspective is captured in the lyric, ″It's not hard, in this rough jungle / It was me who ran into it, I'm okay / We goin' higher in the next city / Looking down the buildings, fly all day.″These lines claim that although success requires enduring criticism and difficult circumstances, the group remains confident because they knowingly embraced these challenges in pursuit of their dreams. Another significant section declares, "There's no way because it's my first time / I was daring because it's my first time / That it was my first time became a weapon." Here, Stray Kids reframe inexperience as a source of strength rather than weakness, suggesting that their willingness to take risks and learn through experience empowers them to move forward without fear of failure. Finally, the repeated imagery of crossing mountains, rivers, and seas symbolizes the group's continuous progress despite increasingly difficult obstacles. Collectively, these lyrics reinforce the themes of ambition, resilience, and unwavering commitment to their artistic journey. For fans, the song serves as an inspiring declaration of authenticity, illustrating the determination and courage required for Stray Kids to pursue the career they deliberately chose despite the hardships they encounter.

The song "God's Menu" serves as a declaration of Stray Kids' artistic independence and creative identity. Its lyrics portray Stray Kids as artists who define success through originality, and present them as trendsetters who establish their own musical identity as a way of appealing to listeners and attracting fans. It was released in 2020 as the title track of the album *GO LIVE* and written by 3RACHA (Bang Chan, Changbin, and Han). Throughout the song, the group uses the metaphor of cooking, comparing themselves to Michelin-star chefs who prepare distinctive dishes that symbolize their music. Stray Kids emphasize their commitment to creating a unique musical style that reflects their own artistic vision: "Cooking a sauce, get all you want / Savor it, lick it, say it's bon appétit... Do research and cross boundaries / There's no limit, we create our sound." These lines highlight the group's dedication to experimentation and innovation,

portraying music production as a process of unrestricted creativity designed for consumption and enjoyment by fans.

Another significant lyric is: "Even if you leave for a while, you'll eventually come back... We'll engrave this menu into your taste." Stray Kids express confidence that their music has a lasting appeal that will continue to attract listeners despite changing trends or temporary criticism. The song's iconic line, "Cooking like a chef, I'm a five-star Michelin," reinforces the quality of their work by comparing their music to world-class cuisine. The final lines, "We just keep making and improving / Because we're one of a kind / No one can copy us, this is our own game," focus again on Stray Kids' uniqueness and authenticity.

Finally, the song "Stray Kids" was released in 2024 as part of the album *ATE*, and was written by 3RACHA in collaboration with Dallas Koehlke and Ronnie Icon as a retrospective reflection on the group's artistic journey. The song, named for the group, celebrates Stray Kids' growth from their pre-debut years to their current success and makes a clear statement about their artistic identity. It also references their pre-debut single "Hellevator," establishing a connection between the group's trials at their debut and their accomplishments afterwards. The members discuss how their experiences shaped their identity and push them to keep pursuing new goals.

The opening lines introduce this idea: "We're gonna go our way / To places still unknown / We're gonna show the way / We made it on our own." These lines show the group's commitment to forging their own path without relying on industry expectations. The statement "We do what we wanna do / The message through our music / It ain't even done" also emphasizes this point: their journey and their music both continue onwards into an unknown future.

The song focuses on their earlier conflicts in their youth, from trainee days to the survival show: "The conflicts that erupted from the crater of my younger self… Every part of me, the struggles of the days on which I had to manage / I endured; now I'm proud of the name." The members acknowledge the uncertainty and internal conflict they experienced during their predebut years while expressing pride in the identity they ultimately built. In the chorus, the group make a statement about their future: "Stray Kids still gonna rock / On the Hellevator, yeah, we head to the top… Know that this is who we are / There ain't no last step out, oh, we'll never stop." By referencing "Hellevator," the group links their first days with their current success, and say the best is yet to come as well. The declaration that they will "never stop" reinforces their consistent themes of persistence and growth.

The lyrics ask, "Between money and fame—which do you desire more?" before concluding that, despite ambition, "all that remained was my team." This part shows that their shared experiences ultimately outweigh material success or public recognition. The members "didn't sell" their youth but instead chose to pursue "a dream that money could never buy." Even while they reference "Lonely Street," they are confident in their path.

Conclusion

Stray Kids' rise to global popularity demonstrates how artistic identity and fandom can become closely connected within the K-pop industry. For those trying to understand the cultural impact of K-pop, a closer focus on specific themes and elements of fan appeal are useful tools for deeper understanding. It is common to see individual K-pop artists discussed as examples of the K-pop wave, but less common to see analysis of their musical output. But unlike idols who primarily perform music created by outside producers, groups like Stray Kids have significant control over their artistry and thus can be explored as whole artists.Their involvement in songwriting and production allows them to present their experiences, struggles, ambitions, and relationships through music that fans perceive as personally meaningful and authentic. Across these songs, the group repeatedly emphasizes choosing their own path, overcoming obstacles, and remaining true to who they are. By repeatedly presenting themselves as artists who create their own music, confront their struggles, and continue moving forward together, Stray Kids have turned their artistic identity into an important foundation of their global fanbase.

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Fidget Toys: Friend or Foe? By Jynna Wongswan

Abstract

Although generally regarded as distracting, fidget toys continue to be studied for their potentially positive and useful effects in maintaining on-task attention. Prior research has focused on stress balls and fidget spinners, with less attention to other types of fidget toys. The objective of the study was to test how fidget sticks affected students' scores on a worksheet with SSAT-style English comprehension questions targeted at both the age level and older. Both groups in the experiment were composed of international school students in Bangkok aged 11-12. The SSAT-style worksheet had 20 questions in total and included four passages, each with five corresponding multiple-choice English comprehension questions. The first, second, and last passages were targeted at the participants' age group, which was categorised as middle-level. The third passage was targeted at an older age group; this was referred to as upper-level. Experimental data were analysed using Microsoft Excel software. The t-test revealed that the difference in average scores on the SSAT upper-level section, which is targeted at an older age group, between the non-fidget toy and fidget toy groups was statistically significant (p-value = 0.0460). However, the differences in the average total score and middle-level scores on the worksheet were calculated to be statistically insignificant, with p-values of 0.155 and 0.330, respectively. The findings suggest that fidget sticks may aid with higher-level and more complex thinking, meaning their implementation may support students in maintaining attention and performing better on exams in subjects they find difficult.

Keywords: fidget toys, reading comprehension, education, attention in class, classroom intervention, neurotypical student, learning, language, understanding

Introduction

Over many decades, despite numerous technological advancements, the general structure of classrooms has remained largely unchanged (Byers and Imms), raising questions about their true effectiveness in improving students' functioning (Bergsmann et al.). Furthermore, the issue of maintaining attention during class remains a less-studied topic (Allison). Especially for those with ADHD, many interventions have been tried and tested in hopes of mitigating the issue; notably, tasks that involve active engagement and physical movement, and allowing students to work at their own pace, have proved to be particularly effective at increasing on-task attention (Brock et al.). Despite the testing of multiple different interventions, the effect of fidget toys, which are a tangible and physical solution, is often overlooked and not well-researched. Consequently, in an attempt to gain a better understanding, the focus has begun to shift onto school staff and the possible effect of a helpful partnership between them and students on attention in classroom settings (DuPaul et al.).

Generally, teachers concur that although fidget toys could be helpful, their roles as educational tools may not be suitable for students diagnosed with attention deficit disorders

(Mugavero et al.), with many being averse to utilising fidget toys in classroom settings (Rohrberger). On the other hand, some carers and parents view fidget spinners as beneficial to children diagnosed with autism compared to neurotypical children aged 3 to 16 (Roche et al.). This contradiction of opinions perpetuates the stigma, sometimes leading to the banning of fidget toys both in the classroom and during recess periods (Lui et al.). Even though there has been a considerable amount of research into the effect of fidget toys, there is still a significant lack on how these toys affect neurotypical children.

Overall, though, there is a lack of understanding and data to definitively conclude whether fidget toys are truly effective or not. This is often seen through the collection of contradictory data acquired through their addition to a classroom setting. On the one hand, researchers have found that the implementation of fidget toys reduced the attention of children with ADHD (Graziano et al.) and even lowered performance on a mathematics quiz (Hulac et al.). Conversely, other studies report that students exhibited an immediate and sustained increase in on-task behaviour when using fidget toys (Aspiranti and Hulac). Due to the highly divided views on the usefulness of fidget sticks, we aimed to test the attention of neurotypical children aged 11 to 12 whilst using them and see if it was suitable to use them in classes. In the present study, forty-five Year 7 students were separated into a control or experimental group, which received standardised fidget sticks. Both groups then had to complete a worksheet of English reading comprehension questions. We hypothesised that the implementation of fidget sticks whilst reading would increase average reading scores because their minds would remain more engaged, and their attention would stay more constant.

Materials and Methods

Forty-five students from Year 7 at Bangkok Patana School participated in this study. There were 23 boys and 22 girls with a median age of 12. We divided this study group into two groups: the experimental fidget toy group and the non-fidget toy control group. Participants were in the fidget toy group if they were the first Year 7 ICT class from 07:55 to 09:15 on Wednesdays with Mr David John Staley; participants were in the control group if they were in the second class from 09:35 to 10:55 on Wednesdays with Mr Staley. All students had received the same education and curricula preceding the study. We obtained informed consent via student information handouts signed by both the student participant and their parent or guardian.

The experimental group used a homemade fidget stick, all built by the principal investigator. This was constructed by threading 8 pony beads of various colours, approximately 1 cm apart, through a 30 cm piece of pipe cleaner. Then, the pipe cleaner was wrapped around a 15 cm wooden lollipop stick using approximately 30 cm of decorative tape. One completed fidget stick weighed around 4g, and there were a total of 25 fidget sticks made.

The test materials were accessed via https://www.ssatprep.com/free-practice, which provides open access and free-to-utilise resources. We believed these were valid because of how closely they mimic real SSAT reading comprehension passages and questions. The test material included four passages, each with five corresponding multiple-choice English comprehension

questions. The first, second, and last passages were targeted at the participants' age group, which was categorised as middle-level. The third passage was targeted at an older age group; this was referred to as upper-level. The maximum possible score was 20/20, and the scoring was performed by the principal investigator; a correct answer choice earned one mark, and an incorrect answer choice deducted one mark.

On the experiment day, students were seated in their usual seats and filled out a baseline demographic survey utilising Google Suite Survey, aimed at collecting demographic information about the participants. Following that, consent forms were handed in, and test papers were handed out. In the experimental group, fidget sticks were then handed out. After this, similar instructions were explained to both the control and experimental groups, detailing the nature and purpose of the study. The participants were given 35 minutes to complete the paper, and those who finished early were asked to remain silent. After the full 35 minutes were over, the test papers were taken back to be stored in a secure cupboard. A similar procedure was utilised for the control group without the fidget sticks.

Test scores were de-identified from the student's name; identifiable information was kept in an encrypted file that was only accessible by the principal investigator and Mr Staley. De-identified information was stored securely in a password-encrypted file and was able to be accessed by the research team, including the principal investigator, Mr Staley, and Crimson International.

Data Analysis

Each student's score was recorded as a raw score out of 20 and entered into Microsoft Excel software, where they were converted into a percentage. Additionally, scores were broken down into two separate sections: correct answers out of 15 in the middle-level questions and correct answers out of 5 in the upper-level questions. We first conducted univariate analysis for each of the groups. The mean and standard deviation of each group were calculated by Excel's =AVERAGE and =STDEV functions. We then conducted a bivariate comparison of the average means of total scores and individual section scores between each group. To test whether there was a statistically significant difference between control and fidget toy groups, we conducted an unpaired two-tailed t-test, assuming equal variances with Excel's Data Analysis Toolkit t-test function. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was used for all statistical comparisons.

Results

In the control group, 65.2% of participants spoke English as their first language (which was clarified as being the language they used the most frequently and fluently), but this was only true for 54.5% of participants in the experimental group; this gave a p-value of 0.550, which was deemed insignificant. 30.4% of control group participants spoke Chinese as their first language compared to 22.7% in the experimental group – this was, again, deemed insignificant. Additionally, 22.7% of experimental group participants spoke other languages as their first language, which none of the participants in the control group spoke; this was found to be

significant with a p-value of 0.0216. Lastly, regarding first language, 4.35% of control group participants did not state their first language.

4.35% of participants in the control group were left-handed compared to 4.55% in the experimental group. Also, 91.3% of participants in the control group were right-handed, whereas 95.5% of experimental group participants were right-handed. There were no ambidextrous participants in the experimental group, but 4.35% of the control group participants were ambidextrous. Table 1 demonstrates all further demographic information.

Characteristic	Control Group n = 23 (%)	Experimental Group n = 22 (%)	p-value
Total Participants	23	22	-
First Language ▽			
English	15 (65.2)	12 (54.5)	0.550
Chinese	7 (30.4)	5 (22.7)	0.738
Other*	0 (0)	5 (22.7)	0.0216
Missing	1 (4.35)	0 (0)	-
Dominant Hand ▽			
Left Hand	1 (4.35)	1 (4.55)	1.00
Right Hand	21 (91.3)	21 (95.5)	1.00
Ambidextrous	1 (4.35)	0 (0)	1.00
Attention in Class ▽			
Often Distracted	11 (47.8)	13 (59.1)	0.5544
Not Often Distracted	12 (52.2)	9 (40.9)	0.5544
Attention over an Extended Period of Time (> 1 Hour) ▽			
Have Difficulty Paying Attention	13 (56.5)	15 (68.2)	0.5420
Don't Have Difficulty Paying Attention	10 (43.5)	7 (31.8)	0.5420
Age ▼			
Median Age (IQR)	12 (0)	12 (0)	0.68
Gender ▽			
Female	11 (47.8)	11 (50.0)	1.00
Male	12 (52.2)	11 (50.0)	1.00
Preliminary Test Scores ▼			
Overall St. Score Average (SD)	119 ± 12.2	113 ± 10.9	0.0645
Vocabulary St. Score Average (SD)	115 ± 9.92	107 ± 12.4	0.0191

Table 1: Demographic information of participants. * = Korean, French, German, Thai. ▽ = Fisher's Exact Test used. ▼ = Unpaired t-test used. Statistical tests were performed on data collected through a survey that participants completed before the investigation to obtain a p-value.

The average total score on the test paper for the control group was 14.1, with a standard deviation of 4.38, compared to 12.5 with a standard deviation of 3.02 in the experimental group. This difference was not statistically significant (p-value = 0.155). The average middle-level score for the control group was 10.3 with a standard deviation of 3.11, whereas it was 9.50 with a standard deviation of 2.28 for the experimental group, which was not significant (p-value = 0.330). In the upper-level section, the average score for the control group was 3.87 with a standard deviation of 1.49, but it was 3.00 with a standard deviation of 1.35 for the experimental group, which was significant (p-value = 0.0460). Table 2 describes the mean score for the control group and experimental group.

Test Score	Control Group (n = 23)	Experimental Group (n = 22)	p-value ▼
Total Score Average ± SD	14.1 ± 4.38	12.5 ± 3.02	0.155
Middle-Level Score Average ± SD	10.3 ± 3.11	9.50 ± 2.28	0.330
Upper-Level Score Average ± SD	3.87 ± 1.49	3.00 ± 1.35	0.0460

Table 2: Participants' test scores on the SSAT-level reading comprehension questions in both the control and experimental groups. ▼ = Unpaired t-test used.

Individual scores were plotted on a scatter plot and separated between the control and experimental groups (Figure 1). Similarly, Figure 2 shows the individual scores in the upper-level section, and Figure 3 displays the standard deviation in the average percentage obtained.

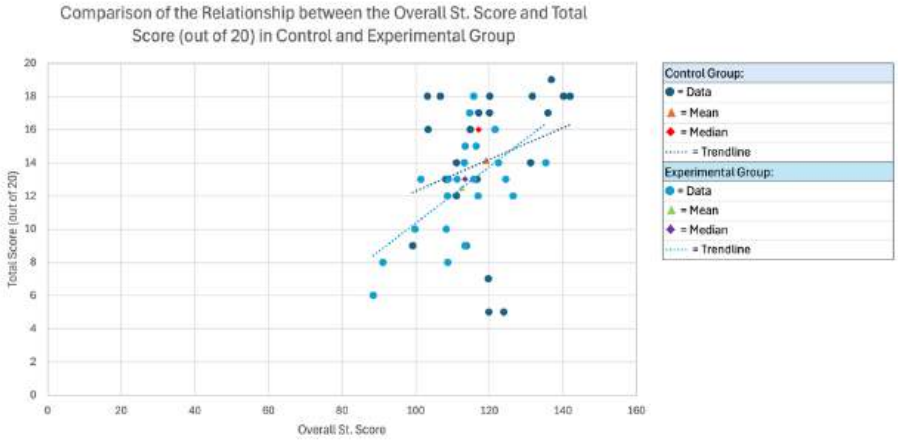

Figure 1: Comparison of the Relationship between the Overall St. Score and Total Score (out of 20) in Control and Experimental Groups. This figure depicts the overall trend of students' scores in the pre-experiment standardized test, which is the Overall St. Score, and in the experiment worksheet, which is the Total Score (out of 20). The Overall St. The score was calculated by combining the standardized scores from the vocabulary, math, non-verbal, and skills sections. A standardised score is calculated using a scale where 100 is the mean score and a standard deviation of 15.

Figure 2: Comparison of the Relationship Between Vocabulary St. Score and Upper-Level Score (out of 5) in the Control and Experimental Group. This figure depicts the overall trend of students' scores in the vocabulary section of the pre-experiment standardized test, which is the Vocabulary St. Score, and in the upper-level section of the experiment worksheet, which is the Upper-Level Score (out of 5). Through data analysis, we found the variance in the upper-level score to be statistically significant with a p-value of 0.0460.

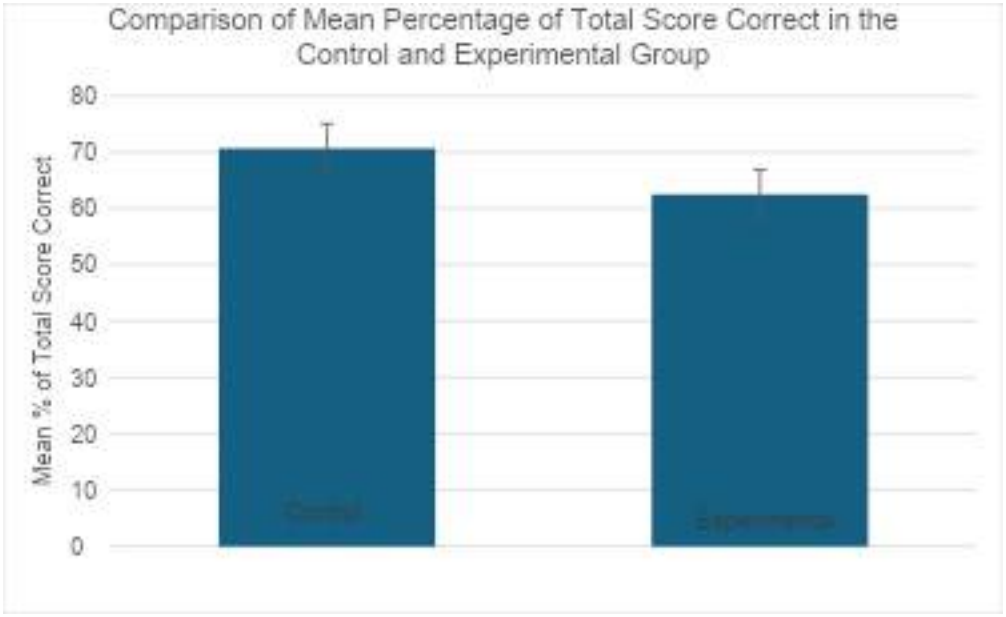

Figure 3: Comparison of Mean Percentage of Total Score Correct in the Control and Experimental Group. This figure depicts the mean percentages of the experimental worksheet correct in both the fidget toy and non-fidget toy groups. The error bars show the standard deviation of the control group, as that is a higher value than that of the experimental group.

Discussion

We hypothesised that the use of fidget sticks whilst reading would increase average reading scores, as their minds would be more engaged in remaining on the task at hand. However, not all students interacted with the fidget sticks they were given, tampering with the validity of the results in the experimental group. Overall, we could not conclusively rule the hypothesis right or wrong.

As seen from both figures, the standardized score (St. Score) was calculated by converting the student's raw score by setting an average mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. Therefore, a score of 100 means they are at a level that is exactly average compared to peers of the same age. A score of 115 is one standard deviation above the average, making them roughly in the top 16%; a score of 85 is one standard deviation below the average, meaning they are roughly in the bottom 16%. Also, the overall score is the combined standardised score from all four tests, which are vocabulary, math, non-verbal and skills.

On average, the non-fidget toy group obtained higher raw scores and percentages both overall and in each section breakdown; however, when compared to the experimental group, this difference was considered statistically insignificant. This may suggest that implementing fidget toys has neither a positive nor a negative effect. On the other hand, the St. Scores of the control and experimental groups were deemed statistically significant, perhaps suggesting that the difference in performance was not due to the implementation of fidget toys but rather due to the pre-existing variance in reading comprehension abilities of the two respective groups.

In the St. Score exam, the average overall score for the control group was 119 with a standard deviation of 12.2, whereas it was 113 with a standard deviation of 10.9 in the experimental group; this was deemed statistically insignificant with a p-value of 0.0645. Also, the average vocabulary score for the control group was 115 with a standard deviation of 9.92 compared to 107 with a standard deviation of 12.4 in the experimental group, which was deemed statistically significant (p-value = 0.0191).

However, this study was limited by the small sample size and convenience sampling, suggesting it may not have accurately represented all year seven students; this casts doubt on the external validity of the results. In the experimental group, not all participants in the experimental group interacted with their fidget toys, choosing to leave them at the top of their table and only play with them after they finished answering the questions. In the control group, many participants may have benefited from using their pens and pencils as makeshift fidget toys, fiddling with the different movable parts. Additionally, the students were given a surplus of time, meaning they were mostly done in 15 minutes, so it would have been beneficial to organise a preliminary run to ensure the time allotted for the questions was more suitable.

Since this study was an investigation into the efficacy of fidget sticks instead of their more well-researched counterparts, fidget spinners and stress balls, there were fewer past studies to utilise as a reference. Future research should explore other types of lesser-known fidget toys, like bracelets and cubes, as the results may be useful in deciding classroom interventions. There should also be more focus on how the various types of fidget toys affect neurotypical children

aged 13 and older, as this could lead to their implementation in school settings. Future studies should investigate how fidget toys affect on-task attention in each subject, as they all test different skills: problem-solving skills in mathematics, comprehension in languages, and critical thinking in the sciences, to name a few.

Conclusion

Although the upper-level score was found to be statistically significant, the actual use of them during the experiment was varied, meaning that it cannot be directly concluded that this finding is due to the presence of fidget sticks. Instead, it could be due to how the control group had class with Mr Staley after break time, allowing them the chance to eat and refuel before the quiz, which is likely to have decreased fatigue and could have improved their performance. Consequently, it is important not to over-interpret this finding, as the pre-existing higher Vocabulary St. Scores must also be considered as a factor in the statistically significant finding.

Another major limitation was the convenience sampling based on class scheduling, undermining internal validity; however, the constraints of school rules meant that experiments could only be conducted with the supervisor selected. In future studies, this could be overcome through a within-subjects design in which each student completes matched passages with and without the fidget stick in counterbalanced order.

Overall, we cannot decisively conclude whether or not fidget toys are fully effective at increasing and improving attention whilst reading. Whilst those in the non-fidget toy group may have performed higher on the SSAT English comprehension questions, the pre-existing variance in abilities may be the true cause for the difference in scores. Therefore, in the future, more research should be conducted to explore both the effect of fidget sticks and other less-researched classroom interventions, ensuring that the sample size is larger than in this study.

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The World We Disagree About: Political Polarization and the Crisis of Shared Reality
By Maddie Steinberg

Democracy does not require consensus. On the contrary, democratic institutions *depend* upon disagreement. Competing interpretations of social problems, conflicting policy priorities, and ongoing challenges to those in power find themselves among some of the most frequently debated issues. For disagreement to remain productive, however, citizens must share at least some common basis for determining what is true. Political conflict becomes qualitatively different when individuals no longer disagree merely about what *should* be done, but about what evidence is credible, which institutions are trustworthy, and whether a shared reality exists at all.

Modern political polarization increasingly reflects this latter form of conflict. Partisan divisions are often understood primarily as ideological disagreements between individuals with competing political values. While ideology remains central to political conflict, this explanation alone cannot account for the intensity or persistence of modern polarization. Americans frequently encounter the same events, statistics, and political claims yet arrive at fundamentally incompatible conclusions, in part because they evaluate evidence through different epistemic frameworks. This paper argues that contemporary political polarization is, in significant part, an epistemic crisis: as citizens increasingly diverge over the sources, standards, and institutions through which political knowledge is established, disagreements over policy are transformed into disagreements over the nature and objectivity of reality itself. These epistemic divisions are reinforced by partisan social norms and patterns of political trust, creating a self-perpetuating cycle in which productive democratic deliberation becomes increasingly difficult.

Political epistemology provides a useful framework for understanding this development because it shifts attention from *what* individuals believe to *how* they come to those conclusions. Polarization is not simply a matter of citizens holding different opinions. It can also emerge when individuals employ fundamentally different standards for evaluating evidence and determining which claims deserve acceptance. Cherwitz argues that contemporary political conflict increasingly involves disagreement over "what counts as knowledge," suggesting that political divisions extend beyond competing ideas to include competing methods of establishing truth (2019). If citizens cannot agree on the legitimacy of the evidence introduced into political debate, disagreement cannot easily be resolved through any amount of additional information or rational deliberation.

Robbennolt similarly demonstrates how political conflict can become entrenched by differences in the ways individuals perceive and interpret information (2022). This process is intensified when individuals encounter information primarily within ideological environments that reinforce existing assumptions. Echo chambers do not just strengthen particular political beliefs– they can also strengthen the epistemic standards used to justify those beliefs. Over time, individuals may become increasingly confident not only that their conclusions are correct, but that opposing sources of information are inherently illegitimate. The result is a political environment in which ideological disagreement is preceded by a more fundamental conflict over

which facts, sources, and forms of evidence deserve to be trusted. Political polarization, therefore, can't be understood solely through the content of partisan beliefs. It also must be understood through the processes by which political communities determine what qualifies as knowledge in the first place.

These epistemic processes are inseparable from social norms. Individuals do not evaluate political information in isolation; they do so within communities that establish expectations about which beliefs are acceptable and which sources are credible. Panizza et al. find that Democrats and Republicans often operate within distinct social norms and expectations, shaping the ways members of each group interpret political issues (2024). Such norms influence more than political preferences. They help determine which institutions, experts, and forms of evidence individuals recognize as legitimate and true.

The consequences of these divergent norms are evident in partisan perceptions of political opponents. A Pew Research Center study found that both Democrats and Republicans frequently attributed negative characteristics to members of the opposing party, including closed-mindedness, dishonesty, and unintelligence (2022). These perceptions matter epistemically as well as socially. When political opponents are assumed to be irrational or dishonest, their arguments can be dismissed before their evidence is meaningfully considered. Research published in the European Economic Review similarly suggests that political division can generate distinct group norms that reinforce existing beliefs and discourage engagement with opposing perspectives (2024). Polarization thus creates an environment in which epistemic isolation becomes socially reinforced. Political communities increasingly develop their own standards for determining whom to trust, what information to accept, and which interpretations of events appear plausible. As these standards diverge, the possibility of resolving differences through shared evidence becomes increasingly limited, and disagreement becomes destructive instead of productive.

The relationship between polarization and political epistemology is further complicated by the *role* of trust. Political knowledge depends upon trust because citizens cannot independently verify every scientific finding, economic statistic, or political claim they encounter. Democratic societies therefore rely upon institutions and information networks that allow individuals to accept knowledge produced by others. When trust becomes increasingly organized along partisan lines, however, evidence may be evaluated according to its source rather than its accuracy.

Rekker and Harteveld demonstrate that affective polarization and political trust can influence whether individuals accept factual information, even when that information is supported by evidence (2024). This finding suggests that the epistemic consequences of polarization extend beyond disagreement over isolated political issues. As partisan identity becomes increasingly intertwined with trust, individuals may become less willing to accept information associated with opposing political groups or institutions. Likewise, Lentini's discussion of political attitudes emphasizes the role that political identity and institutional trust play in shaping how individuals interpret political information and participate in public life

(2026). Together, these findings illustrate the self-reinforcing nature of epistemic polarization. Partisan identity influences which sources individuals trust, those sources shape the information individuals encounter, and the resulting beliefs further strengthen partisan identity, creating an endless cycle.

This cycle makes polarization particularly resistant to traditional solutions. If political disagreement were purely ideological, compromise might be achieved through negotiation between competing interests or the addition of new information. Epistemic disagreement presents a more fundamental obstacle. Citizens cannot easily compromise when they disagree about the basic conditions of the problem itself. A debate over the economy, for example, becomes difficult to resolve when participants cannot agree on what economic data is credible. Consequently, arguments over the legitimacy of the institutions presenting this information face the same epistemological misalignment. Under these conditions, additional facts may not reduce polarization because the conflict concerns the authority capable of establishing those facts, not the information itself.

Understanding political polarization as an epistemic problem does not suggest that ideological differences are unimportant or that democratic disagreement should be eliminated. Democratic societies require disagreement, and attempts to produce universal consensus would undermine the diversity of perspectives that democratic deliberation depends upon. The more pressing problem emerges when citizens lose the foundation necessary to disagree productively. When political communities develop incompatible standards for evaluating evidence, trust only information associated with their own group, and dismiss opposing perspectives as inherently illegitimate, disagreement ceases to function as a mechanism through which competing ideas can challenge one another, and instead deepens the partisan divide.

Political polarization is not merely a consequence of Americans wanting different political outcomes. It is sustained by disagreement over how political reality itself should be known. Divergent standards of evidence, partisan social norms, and increasingly selective patterns of trust can transform ordinary ideological conflict into a deeper epistemic divide. Recognizing this distinction changes the nature of the problem, and, consequently, the kinds of solutions democracy must pursue. Reducing polarization requires more than persuading citizens to adopt different political positions. It requires rebuilding the conditions that make disagreement possible. Shared standards of evidence, institutions capable of earning trust across political divisions, and social environments in which engagement with opposing perspectives is not treated as a betrayal of one's own political community become necessary. Democracy does not depend on the absence of disagreement. It depends on citizens retaining enough common ground to disagree about the same world.

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Governance by Other Means: Patronage, COVID-19 Response, and the Conditional Resilience of the CCP By Charlotte Liu

How does the CCP achieve effective governance and maintain resilience? Eric Li argues that the CCP's resilience stems from its competitive "centralized meritocracy" (39). Specifically, formal institutions—codified rules and procedures governing evaluation, promotion, and bureaucratic rotation—are designed to reward and promote competent governance. However, a growing body of literature finds that informal patronage networks—hierarchical relationships between officials that exchange loyalty for career opportunities—play an equally or more important role in promotion and governance (Shih et al. 182). By examining the CCP's COVID-19 response, this paper argues that the CCP's formal institutions alone cannot explain cadre promotion or effective governance. Rather, informal patron-client networks are a necessary complement because they give credibility to formal performance incentives and align bureaucratic priorities, thereby strengthening state capacity. This dynamic produces authoritarian resilience only as long as central priorities remain responsive to governance outcomes.

Formal institutions are insufficient to explain CCP promotion. If the formal rules intend for meritocratic criteria to primarily determine promotion, as Li asserts, crucial pillars for CCP legitimacy should be reliable predictors of advancement. Yet, economic growth is not the main determinant of advancement into the party's top echelons. Factional ties, along with education and, to a lesser extent, fiscal revenue collection, are stronger predictors of party rank than economic growth. For instance, Central Committee and Alternate Central Committee officials in Deng Xiaoping's faction and Hu Jintao's Communist Youth League faction consistently ranked up to 14 percentile points above the average member (Shih et al. 176). These informal ties shape advancement at lower levels of government as well (Jiang 983), indicating patronage is a constitutive feature of CCP promotion rather than, as Li claims, a residual one (37).

The limitations of formal institutions extend beyond promotion to governance, as COVID-19 demonstrates that codified rules and performance metrics cannot independently produce effective governance. At the outset of the pandemic, officials faced a direct conflict between bureaucratic goals and the new, urgent push for virus containment. Containment was achieved through Community Stringent Measures (CSMs), which "strictly limited business activities and transactions, reduced household incomes, and restricted personal freedoms" (Feng et al. 2). Li argues that formal institutions incentivize officials to govern competently. However, officials were initially reluctant to impose lockdowns at the expense of economic development and social stability, the metrics formal rules rewarded for career advancement (Chen et al. 2). Leaders unconnected to patronage networks, in an effort to balance competing bureaucratic priorities, continued to delay containment efforts and increase infection rates. Even after Xi Jinping made pandemic response "a de-facto 'one-time veto' task" for promotion—effectively rewriting the priorities of the formal institutions—prefectural leaders with stronger conventional career incentives (those with more time in office and more ranks left to climb) continued to minimize lockdowns (Chen et al. 2). The reluctant response to the public health crisis exposes

the limitations of formal institutions, as formal career incentives failed to coordinate bureaucratic behavior around the Party's new priority.

Patronage offsets the limitations of formal institutions by aligning bureaucratic objectives and increasing the credibility of formal incentives, ultimately enhancing state capacity. China's decentralized bureaucracy gives local governments considerable autonomy, creating a fragmented system that makes it difficult to ensure local compliance with central goals (He et al. 245), as reflected in the initially slow COVID-19 response. As Junyan Jiang argues, patron-client ties resolve this issue by fostering long-term mutual trust and reciprocal obligations. Patrons provide resources, leniency toward mistakes, and political protection, while clients demonstrate their loyalty by aligning their interests with their patrons (985, 987). Moreover, because loyal clients pose less of a political threat, higher-level officials promote connected provincial leaders more for strong performance than unconnected officials (Jia et al. 633), reinforcing confidence that compliance with central priorities will be rewarded. Together, these incentives reduced hesitance over the politically risky byproducts of CSMs, enabling officials to react faster to the top-down pressure and prioritize pandemic control. Two weeks after CSM adoption, connected leaders witnessed "an additional 21.9% decrease in daily average new infections," albeit at the cost of decreased human mobility and increased citizen discontent (Feng et al. 2). Patronage accelerated the push towards the CCP's central priority and mitigated the human cost of COVID-19.

However, greater state capacity as a result of patronage does not necessarily guarantee better governance outcomes, as patronage amplifies policies irrespective of governance quality. The same clientelistic channels that accelerated containment early in the pandemic also perpetuated Xi's zero-COVID policy past the point of public tolerance. This led to vitriolic, unprecedented public protests that "were the most widespread since the 1989 Tiananmen incident" (Zhai 882) amid severe economic strain and ultimately forced policy reversal in December 2022. Even though, as Jiang highlights, higher-level patrons are motivated to internalize broader public interest because they gain disproportionate performance legitimacy from good performance (Jiang 988), patron-client networks are not self-correcting. When priorities are misguided, these networks insulate officials from the growing political costs, which in turn hurt the CCP's resilience. Thus, informal patron-client ties and their dynamic with formal institutions are better understood as amplifiers of central priorities.

The COVID-19 case study illustrates how Li overstates the explanatory power of formal institutions for the CCP's promotion and governance. Political advancement is notably driven by factional ties, showing that patronage is a constitutive feature of the system. Patron-client relationships reinforce formal incentives and align bureaucratic priorities across a fragmented bureaucracy, but ultimately do not straightforwardly produce resilience; rather, they enhance state capacity. Future scholarship on authoritarian resilience in China should further explore the interaction between formal and informal institutions across various domains.

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