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## ***The Dimensions of Co-Authorship in a Playthrough Experience of Guild Wars 2***

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### **Abstract**

*Guild Wars 2* is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) with a playerbase of 11 million as of April 2019. The game has been critically acclaimed and has garnered many awards for its graphics, hypertextual story, and dynamic gameplay. This fantasy MMORPG developed by ArenaNet allows players to experience the game as individuals or while interacting with or teaming up with online players whenever they login and play the game. *Let's Plays* and playthroughs have grown significantly throughout the past decade yet are still relatively unexplored. This study adds to the existing literature by focusing on WoodenPotatoes, a medium sized *Guild Wars 2* YouTuber, and his playthroughs of the *Guild Wars 2: Path of Fire* expansion. The study examined how WoodenPotatoes related gameplay, design, and narrative in his videos and how he commented on his playthroughs. The findings of this study showed how YouTube gamers such as WoodenPotatoes have dimensions of co-authorship. This co-authorship operates on three levels: as a gamer, as a fan, and as a YouTuber. As *Guild Wars 2* is a theme park type of MMORPG with a branching hypertextual story, the research also explored a player's mental schema through WoodenPotatoes commentary. Due to both in-game and external influences, the mental schema of WoodenPotatoes was affected and thus contributed to influencing his playthrough experience and commentary as a co-author. Finally, the findings of this study show that player values and experience are affected by the levels of co-authorship and vice-versa.

Keywords: Let's Play, MMORPG, Playthrough Experience, Commentary, Gamer Schema

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## Introduction

In recent years, Let's Play videos have become a global phenomenon. Let's Plays, a subgenre of playthroughs, are online videos of people playing video games with humorous commentaries that aim to entertain an audience; with gamers poking fun at the game or task (Dawson, 2016; Finniss, 2009; Zariko, 2016).

Games such *Guild Wars 2 (GW2)* have a program where players with Twitch or YouTube channels help promote the game ("ArenaNet Partner Program", n.d.; Ortiz, 2015; "Partner Program", 2015) as small and medium channels help bring in players and build game communities (Hudson, 2017). Players are brought to star status within the community and through ArenaNet's partner program, they are incentivized for promoting the game. Thus, this study explores how WoodenPotatoes, a significant figure in the *GW2* community, comments on his playthroughs and relates gameplay, design, and narrative.

The following are research questions this paper seeks to address:

**RQ1:** How does WoodenPotatoes in his playthroughs relate gameplay, design, and narrative?

**RQ2:** How does WoodenPotatoes comment on his playthroughs?

## Review of Related Literature

The history of video games and its development have only been quite recent. It was only in the 1970s where video games started to take shape as a medium as game developers took heavy inspiration from TV and film (Lee, 2013; Wolf, 2008). The linear narrative has long dominated the narrative style of games as it is easy to apply, but it creates a natural barrier between the story and game mechanics (Grip, 2012; Lee, 2013; Schreiber, 2009). Lee (2013) argues that other media forms have figured out a form that works for narrative, but games fall short causing "dissonance" or conflict in the player's mind. Thus, narrative has become a major contention for game scholars (Lindley, 2005; Simons, 2007).

Ludologists and narratologists debate if narratives have a place in games and if a player's experience can be considered as a narrative (Frasca, 2003; Juul, 2001; Rapatan, 2017; Simons, 2007; Zagal, 2010). However, scholars have concluded that their disagreements are due to the way narrative is defined and that they are both tackling specific areas within "game theory" (Lindley, 2005; Simons, 2007, p.12). This is ironic since MMORPGs can find their origins derived from role-playing games which have hypernarrative features (Machinima, 2011). Hypernarratives can leeway for interactivity, "self-reflection", and can be read from a "reader's perspective" (Lindley, 2005, p.7-9; Myers, 2010, p.76,82). This is because players form "inner narrative models" (Lindley, 2005, p.21-23) known as schemas which pertain "to how the mind acquires, represents, and transforms knowledge" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p.2-3). Shinkle (2005) and Zariko (2016) discovered that games are not just simulations but are lived experiences. These lived experiences are considered by narratologists as part of the game's narrative (Simons, 2007) and in the case of hypernarratives, it can be considered as a form of authorship due to the "readers interpretive process" and "perspective" (Myers, 2010, p.76).

Lindley (2005) argues that by utilizing hypertexts in game design, this would satisfy both inherent requirements of narrative and gaming. Branching options provide a player with the ability to choose and allows their choices to have an effect on the story and gameplay (Schreiber, 2009). These structures help in creating a message and elevating the theme of the hypertext as they provide the balance between the narrative and gameplay (Bernstein, 1998; Cicconi, 2000; Rapatan, 2017). Utilizing this in a conversation system can effectively be used as a means of storytelling, which is why many propose that game developers move towards environmental oriented storytelling (Jenkins, 2004; Schreiber, 2009).

Fabricatore's (2007) studies show that players put their focus on "playability" and "context" which include the goal of the game, design, appearance, narrative, and gameplay. This is the reason why game developers focus on the "game's world", "narrative goal", "narrative background", and the player's "mental model" (Grip, 2014) while encouraging "discovery" and "exploration" (Cook, 2006). Internal and external factors come into play when it comes to motivation as "contexts supportive of autonomy, competence, and relatedness were found to foster greater internalization and integration than contexts that thwart satisfaction of these needs" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68, 76).

Players choose "appropriate games to fit their specific play styles and preferences" (Glas, 2015, p.83) as they desire different "experiences from a game" (Lindley, 2005, p.2). Bartle grouped players into four key categories (as cited in Lindley, 2005). Since then researchers have expanded this with Lindley (2005) refining the taxonomy to cater to story structured games. "Players may cross over" from one category to another but "one play style tends to dominate the preferences of any given player" (Lindley, 2005, p.2).

YouTube gamers are "sometimes called 'professional fans'" due to their "love [for] video games" and since they provide "their thoughts and commentary" (May, 2018, p.94). Fans are individuals who have an "intense emotional investment in media text" and "who engages with the larger fandom" (Jenkins, 2006c, par.8). Developers have acknowledged that fans know the work even better than developers do (Daneva, 2017; Jenkins, 2006b). Players in *World of Warcraft* have spent a collective "5.93 million years" in the game and compiled thousands of *Wikipedia* pages on the MMORPG (McGonigal, 2010). Pierre Levy called this the "collective intelligence" where individuals volunteer their knowledge in order to benefit their community who have "shared mutual interests" (as cited in Jenkins, 2006a, p.4, 20). Terranova (2000) "identif[ies]"(p.54) the collective intelligence as "immaterial labor" (p.39-42) where "our social actions are captured and monetized" (Postigo, 2016, p.334). This can be viewed as a form of "exploitation" where companies "channel the user's own activity" to further the company's goals - unpaid and from the users "free choice" - where players "give up some rights concerning the products of their playing hours" (Andrejevic, 2009, p.416-421). However, Jenkins (2006b) provides a more positive view of the collective intelligence which he termed "participatory culture". Participatory culture through new media provides fans access to produce, create, and have a voice in various online platforms which were formerly exclusive to gate keepers (Jenkins, 2006b). Fans of a game are able to promote it and show their approval or displeasure at what traditional media producers are doing with it. But "participatory culture[']s inner workings are

subject to the rational of capital accumulation, commodification, and profit” (Postigo, 2014, p.215).

Researchers who discuss participatory culture and the collective intelligence acknowledge that fans understand their participation is free labor and that corporations have this tendency to exploit them (Banks & Deuze, 2009). However, “co-creative relationships... cannot be reduced to one simple manipulation at the hands of corporations and firms” (Banks & Deuze, 2009). Instead they credit “co-creation... [as] a disruptive agent of change that sits uncomfortably with our current understandings and theories of work and labor” (Banks & Deuze, 2009). This is why researchers such as Sotamaa (2007) are clamoring for a different model of ownership for games as the current structure of copyright might not work due to the “conflict between ‘corporate’ ownership and ‘common’ practice” (Coleman & Dyer-Witheford, 2007, p.945).

“The games industry... has been eager to broaden consumer participation” as the shape of an MMORPG does not only require the input of designers but also players (Jenkins, 2006b). This involvement occurs within and even outside the game’s boundaries as the needs of an MMORPG differs in terms of design and processes compared to traditional approaches to games in famous design books (Daneva, 2017; Jenkins, 2006b). Game designers must have intimate knowledge of the game as players themselves and would view this as a “process... between game creators and players” (Daneva, 2017, p.61-64). MMORPGs are known for their highly supportive communities who are focused on helping people learn more about the game (O’Connor, Longman, White, & Obst, 2015; Hopp, Barker, & Weiss, 2015), inspire new ideas, and “come up with unimaginable approaches to in-game situations” that even “challenge” the people who developed the game (Daneva, 2017, p.64). These players “affect the development of game features that happens after the release of the game” (Daneva, 2017, p.64).

As it is important for researchers to understand both the community behind the game and the people playing the game (Nascimento et al., 2014), it is crucial to understand how YouTube and Twitch operate. Twitch is a live streaming site which allows streamers and users to interact with each other constantly (Anderson, 2017). While Twitch streamers post every day with content lasting roughly 2 hours long, YouTube gamers would typically post only a few videos per day (Nascimento et al., 2014). It was YouTube that first helped popularize gamers and their playthroughs allowing Internet users to upload and view pre-recorded gameplay (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017). “Game companies seek partnerships with the best-known [YouTube] commentators” (Postigo, 2014, p.211) providing early access or financial incentives. Big YouTubers can bring the attention of millions of people towards an obscure game. But according to developers, “creating communities of broader support” is what makes games successful (Hudson, 2017). Thus, they turn to small to medium-sized YouTubers in order to help cultivate communities and develop a loyal following for these games (Hudson, 2017).

The “architectural affordances” (Postigo, 2016, p.335, 337-340) of YouTube allow YouTubers to be producers by mixing “on-demand”, “crowdsourcing”, and “old-media” models of media production and sustainability (Postigo, 2014, p.214). YouTubers are incentivized to create videos and post them on the platform as they earn a percentage from ads that are placed alongside their content in the platform (Postigo, 2014). In YouTube, the subscriber is the most common social currency” as the secret advertising and ranking system is dependent on them (Postigo, 2016, p.338-339).

Although content creators can be financially independent and produce their own videos, they are also subject to the “tastes of the audience”, YouTube, and game corporations (Postigo, 2014, p.213) due to the system that favors “commercial content” and YouTube’s goal as a company (Andrejevic, 2009, p.421).

A full-time professional gamer must satisfy his audience, cultivate patrons, and create a spectacle that is worthy of being watched by millions of viewers (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017, p.17). “Humor, swearing and gossip” are elements that are used to engage the audience while making moral choices throughout the game (Piittinen, 2018, p.14). These YouTube gamers engage their audiences in such a way that viewers feel involved in the video through their “commentary”, “reactions”, “persona”, “role”, “spectacle”, and “performance” (Anderson, 2017; Glas, 2015, p.83-84; Johnson & Woodcock, 2017; May, 2018 p.17; Pietruszka, 2016, p.68; Zariko, 2016, p.28); thus, live vicariously through the YouTuber (Glas, 2015). YouTubers may not always follow the “intended design of a game” and may show “divergent and deviant forms of play” (Glas, 2015, p.84). The way YouTubers entertain their fans “vary from one vlogger to another” (Pietruszka, 2016, p.68). Players who do live streams of their gameplay would utilize a “first person” view instead of a “third person” view (Anderson, 2017). YouTube gamers would provide their “status in the game”, voice their “player expectations”, and even discuss issues regarding “usability”, “accessibility”, and “design” (May, 2018, p.99-101). While Johnson and Woodcock (2017) discuss the aspect of performance in Let’s Plays, Zariko (2016) focuses particularly on the concepts of “affect”, “embodiment”, and does not limit it to just “performance” (p.28). She states that a Let’s Play shows players as the “writer of their own narrative content... that is unique to them” instead of just the game’s narrative dragging players along (Zariko, 2016, p.158). “The nature of games and the designs implemented by the video game developers must be taken into consideration when the videos are analyzed” (Zariko, 2016, p.158).

In the literature, there are three issues that occur: the debate between ludologists and narratologists regarding game narrative, participatory culture viewed as exploitative unpaid labor (Andrejevic, 2009; Banks & Deuze, 2009; Sotamaa, 2007; Terranova, 2000) versus an agent of decentralizing power (Banks & Deuze, 2009; Coleman & Dyer-Witford, 2007; Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b), and the idea of being an independent content creator versus being bound by the system of YouTube (Andrejevic, 2009; Postigo, 2014, 2016).

For the first issue, I am in no way rekindling the debate between ludologists and narratologists. As established by previous scholars (Lindley, 2005; Simons, 2007; Zariko, 2016), these debates tackle different areas within game theory and can shift based on how narrative is defined. In this paper, I will consider the player narrative or mental schema as a form of narrative since the structure provided by a hypertext game is narrative based, thus, the structure implies that there is a narrative to be engaged with and a player narrative can develop and form. In this context, I am not in any way disregarding player experience but will refer to player experience as the result of interacting with the game. “There is no such thing as a universal narrative” (Lemmens, Bouzouita, Caracciolo, & Schelstraete, 2016, p.18), “play is self-reflective and represents its own form and own play” (Myers, 2010, p.82), and the idea of the reader being a co-author has existed since hypertext (Machinima, 2011; Myers, 2010, p.76; Zariko, 2016). This struggle usually occurs between gamers, producers, and content

creators making their own videos (Clark, 2018; Rigney, 2017; Wilde, 2017). Players are no longer consumers but “co-authors” as the nature of Let’s Play videos allow for a conceptualization of the play experience as a singular, unique story, as told by, not navigated through the player” (Zariko, 2016, p.141). Let’s Plays place its focus on the player in the moment, not what a “player can do within the game” (Zariko, 2016, p.161). Therefore, the study builds on the idea that players are co-authors (Myers, 2010; Simons, 2007; Zariko, 2016) as they experience the game and develop a narrative schema (Lee, 2013). In this study, I define co-authorship as the collaborative interactions between different entities resulting in the co-creation of a product. As the player narrative is the result of the co-authorship between the player and the game, the study explores the flexibility of the player’s narrative schema, how a player reacts to “dissonance” (Lee, 2013), how in-game and external elements affect the schema, and how player type and player values affect the commentary.

In the second issue, researchers view the collective intelligence as “immaterial labor” (Terranova, 2000) favoring corporations (Banks & Deuze, 2009; Coleman & Dyer-Witford, 2007; Sotamaa, 2007; Terranova, 2000) since the fans work for “free” (Andrejevic, 2009) or as participatory culture where fans have access to power formerly exclusive to gate keepers (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 160, 2006b; Postigo, 2016). Thus, the study explores how a dedicated fan discusses *GW2* in relationship to the greater community and the game’s development.

In the third issue, content creators have been observed to show both independence (Postigo, 2016) and dependence on the system provided (Postigo, 2014). YouTubers have been observed to author their own story (Zariko, 2016), cater to their niche market (Pietruszka, 2016; Johnson & Woodcock, 2017), take on roles that are ‘expected’ of them by the audience (Johnson & Woodcock, 2017), diffuse different moral choices they make in game (Piittinen, 2018) while engaging and building their audience (Anderson, 2017; Glas, 2015; Johnson & Woodcock, 2017). Therefore, the study explores how WoodenPotatoes presents himself in relationship to his audience and affiliations.

## Scope

The study focused on WoodenPotatoes’ main channel on a specific time period and topic in order to have better data consistency as MMORPGs constantly update and patch the game. Although *GW2* is a multiplayer game, it is just a part of the experience that WoodenPotatoes has. This paper did not explore the topic on multiplayer experiences as it is too expansive to fully cover in this paper. The study did not include thumbnails or title of the video and the comments that fans and players put in the comment section of YouTube as the focus was on WoodenPotatoes’ commentary and his playthrough experience. This study did not cover dungeons, fractals, raids, monthly activities, guild missions, special items, Player versus Player, and World versus World.

## Limitations

The study was done on a single individual who is an avid fan of *GW2*. Videos were created and curated after the events were experienced with most videos being spoiler free. This limited WoodenPotatoes’ footage and his ability to create juxtaposing text. Another limitation of this study was that the samples selected were his first experiences



produced during the release week of Path of Fire. Being an ArenaNet partner, he may have held back on commenting considering that there might be repercussions to his account, his channel, and the popularity of the game.

### Methodology

I utilized the qualitative method of thematic analysis as this method helps “manage large volumes of data without losing the context, for getting close to or immersing oneself in the data” (Lapadat, 2010, p.926). I used Braun and Clark’s (2006) “six-phase guide” as a “framework” to ensure data accuracy and credibility (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p.3354). The codes that were initially generated came from the player and his background, as well as gameplay, design, and narrative. This was based on Fabricatore’s (2007) and Grip’s (2014) research regarding the focus of players in a game.

|  |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| <p><b>Theme:</b> Player values</p> <p><b>Codes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concerned with incentive and payoff</li> <li>Concerned with gameplay and exploration</li> <li>Concerned with agency, organic learning, and immersion</li> <li>Concerned with narrative, lore, in-game world morals and values, and thematic design of the narrative.</li> <li>Highlights content and experiences based on values</li> </ul> | <p><b>Theme:</b> Player narrative</p> <p><b>Codes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Sub-theme:</b> Encountering elements that broke immersion                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encountering elements that did not make logical sense</li> <li>Gameplay experience did not match narrative</li> <li>Dialogue did not fit scenario</li> <li>Dialogue made in a can</li> <li>Elements not in their proper place</li> <li>Improperly used cutscenes</li> <li>Lack of consistency with canon</li> <li>Lack of believability</li> </ul> </li> <li><b>Sub-theme:</b> Encountering elements that resulted in immersion                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In-game elements that were related to lore and that were narratively connected</li> <li>Logical</li> <li>Believable</li> <li>Connected by theme</li> </ul> </li> <li><b>Sub-theme:</b> Schema flexibility                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elements included by the schema</li> <li>Elements excluded by the schema</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <p><b>Theme:</b> Suggestions to better the game</p> <p><b>Codes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discusses and addresses community concerns</li> <li>Suggests what the game should address</li> <li>Checks what the game has addressed</li> <li>Provides feedback regarding the game</li> <li>Uses expertise to provide suggestions that will benefit the game and community</li> <li><b>Sub-theme:</b> Has a sense of ownership                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defending the game</li> <li>Critiques game</li> <li>Concern regarding keeping a healthy player base</li> <li>More play time for fans and players</li> <li>Concerned with the status of the game and how other players feel about it</li> <li>Concerned regarding how the developers handle the game</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <p><b>Theme:</b> Sharing personal thoughts on the game</p> <p><b>Codes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adds his own analysis to the game                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Injecting ideas</li> <li>Provides speculation</li> <li>Provides theories</li> </ul> </li> <li>Wants to share his experience and opinion with others</li> <li><b>Sub-theme:</b> Engages online discussions                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Speculation and assumptions</li> <li>Based on forums and feedback</li> <li>Checks data mined info on the game to check for updates and accuracy</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <p><b>Theme:</b> Building the audience</p> <p><b>Codes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage viewers to subscribe to his channels</li> <li>Cultivates patrons and subscribers</li> <li>Encourages viewers to watch him and support him</li> <li>Engages audience</li> <li>Presentation style</li> <li>Focused on niche market</li> <li>Plays roles</li> </ul> |
| <p>Themes<br/>Sub-themes<br/>&amp; Codes</p>   |   | <p><b>Theme:</b> Feedback on the game</p> <p><b>Codes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Careful regarding criticism</li> <li>Self-reflective</li> <li>Provides feedback constructively</li> <li>Protects game’s integrity</li> <li>Defends developers</li> <li>Generous when giving praise</li> </ul>   |   |   |

Figure 1: Themes and Codes

### Sampling

I utilized a purposeful sampling strategy for the study.

The qualities that were needed for the subject of study as indicated by the literature were the following:

- An experienced gamer with significant dedication to the game
- Able to discuss gameplay, design, narrative, and relay a player narrative
- A dedicated fan of the game
- The game played must have hypernarrative affordances

- The game played must be an MMORPG due to the nature of MMORPG players and their relationship with developers
- Must have a small to medium sized YouTube channel
- Had a significant role or contribution in the game's community

Due to the criteria above, I selected nine videos from WoodenPotatoes' YouTube channel on the Guild Wars 2: Path of Fire expansion.










|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
|    | Guild Wars 2 Path of Fire Gameplay - Day 1   Unlocking Weaver, Raptors, Adventure & Brand NO SPOILZ<br>33K views · 3 years ago<br>WoodenPotatoes<br>The new Path of Fire expansion just launched! Check/Play it from here: <a href="http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S">http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S</a> To play for free: ...  | Published on: Sep 23, 2017<br>YouTube Link:<br><a href="https://youtu.be/FE8PbG8KN8w">https://youtu.be/FE8PbG8KN8w</a> |
|    | Guild Wars 2 Path of Fire Gameplay - Day 2   Riding A BUNNY, Dwarvern Mines & Tomb of Primeval Kings<br>39K views · 3 years ago<br>WoodenPotatoes<br>The new Path of Fire expansion just launched! Check/Play it from here: <a href="http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S">http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S</a> To play for free: ... | Published on: Sep 24, 2017<br>YouTube Link:<br><a href="https://youtu.be/LTt0Ad3h7E8">https://youtu.be/LTt0Ad3h7E8</a> |
|    | Guild Wars 2 Path of Fire - Day 3   [Open World Spoilers] Augury Rock, Community Update, & Skimmer!<br>28K views · 3 years ago<br>WoodenPotatoes<br>The new Path of Fire expansion just launched! Check/Play it from here: <a href="http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S">http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S</a> To play for free: ...  | Published on: Sep 25, 2017<br>YouTube Link:<br><a href="https://youtu.be/QJm2frqRepe">https://youtu.be/QJm2frqRepe</a> |
|   | Guild Wars 2 Path of Fire - Day 4   Exploring the Desolation(), Riding a JACKAL & The Riverlands<br>77K views · 3 years ago<br>WoodenPotatoes<br>The new Path of Fire expansion just launched! Check/Play it from here: <a href="http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S">http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S</a> To play for free: ...     | Published on: Sep 26, 2017<br>YouTube Link:<br><a href="https://youtu.be/uQbDxpJLIo">https://youtu.be/uQbDxpJLIo</a>   |
|  | Guild Wars 2 Path of Fire - Day 5   Palawa Joko's Harem, The Forgotten Lair & Mouth of Torment!<br>29K views · 3 years ago<br>WoodenPotatoes<br>The new Path of Fire expansion just launched! Check/Play it from here: <a href="http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S">http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S</a> To play for free: ...      | Published on: Sep 27, 2017<br>YouTube Link:<br><a href="https://youtu.be/5RVSTvshRLc">https://youtu.be/5RVSTvshRLc</a> |
|  | Guild Wars 2 Path of Fire Gameplay - Day 6   Exploring Vabbi, Completing the Story [No Spoilers]<br>22K views · 3 years ago<br>WoodenPotatoes<br>The new Path of Fire expansion just launched! Check/Play it from here: <a href="http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S">http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S</a> To play for free: ...     | Published on: Sep 28, 2017<br>YouTube Link:<br><a href="https://youtu.be/d5raL-325wY">https://youtu.be/d5raL-325wY</a> |
|  | Guild Wars 2 Path of Fire Gameplay - Day 7   100% Map Exploration, Zomorros & Palawa Kills Zhaitan<br>26K views · 3 years ago<br>WoodenPotatoes<br>The new Path of Fire expansion just launched! Check/Play it from here: <a href="http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S">http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S</a> To play for free: ...   | Published on: Sep 29, 2017<br>YouTube Link:<br><a href="https://youtu.be/eSyPrZMDt4">https://youtu.be/eSyPrZMDt4</a>   |
|  | Holy Crap I Finished the Story   Path of Fire Lore, Reactions & Initial Thoughts [ HEAVY SPOILERS ]<br>67K views · 3 years ago<br>WoodenPotatoes<br>The new Path of Fire expansion just launched! Check/Play it from here: <a href="http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S">http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S</a> To play for free: ...  | Published on: Sep 29, 2017<br>YouTube Link:<br><a href="https://youtu.be/dxVC9j_2UaA">https://youtu.be/dxVC9j_2UaA</a> |
|  | Guild Wars 2 - The Lore Behind Acquiring the Griffon Mount   Secret Mount and Extra Story Steps<br>44K views · 3 years ago<br>WoodenPotatoes<br>The new Path of Fire expansion just launched! Check/Play it from here: <a href="http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S">http://guildwars2.go2cloud.org/SH5S</a> To play for free: ...      | Published on: Oct 31, 2017<br>YouTube Link:<br><a href="https://youtu.be/mKlzNjgVDAk">https://youtu.be/mKlzNjgVDAk</a> |

Figure 2: Videos Studied

*GW2* was chosen due to the game's hypertextual affordance, the theme park structure of the MMORPG, and the release of new elements in the expansion.

WoodenPotatoes was selected during the time that this research was conducted as his videos dominated the YouTube search results on "Guild Wars 2 Path of Fire". He has over 10,000 hours of playtime as of 2017. His channel had over 47 million views and

131,000 subscribers during the time of the study. He actively promoted the expansion during its release. His natural progression through the narrative and his relationship with the developers and the community made him an ideal subject in this study due to his expertise.

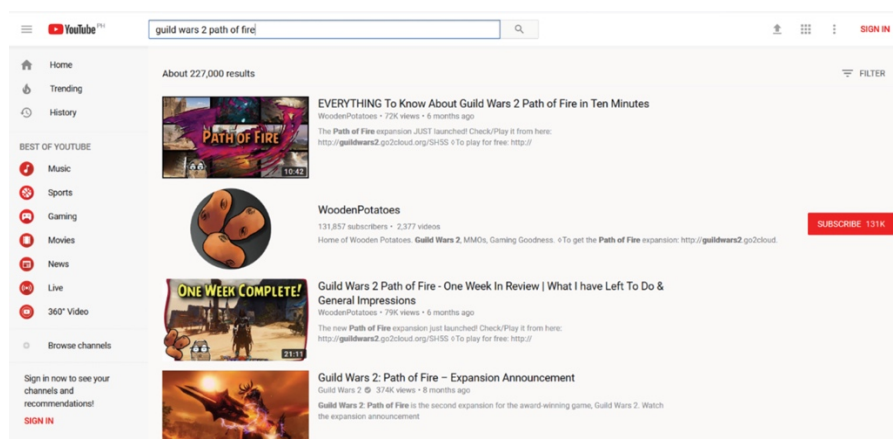


Figure 3: Guild Wars 2 YouTube search results during the time of the study

During this series, WoodenPotatoes had a play time ranging from six to ten hours per day with the exception of the video on the Griffon (WoodenPotatoes, 2017d). After his playthrough, he would produce his commentary regarding the expansion and upload it online.

## Findings

The findings show that WoodenPotatoes engaged in three dimensions of co-authorship during the playthrough. The dimensions of co-authorship are as a gamer, as a fan, and as YouTuber based on the findings of the thematic analysis. In this framework, the term gamer specifically refers to the gamer as the player of the game. It must be noted that the term gamer will be used interchangeably with the word player throughout the paper.

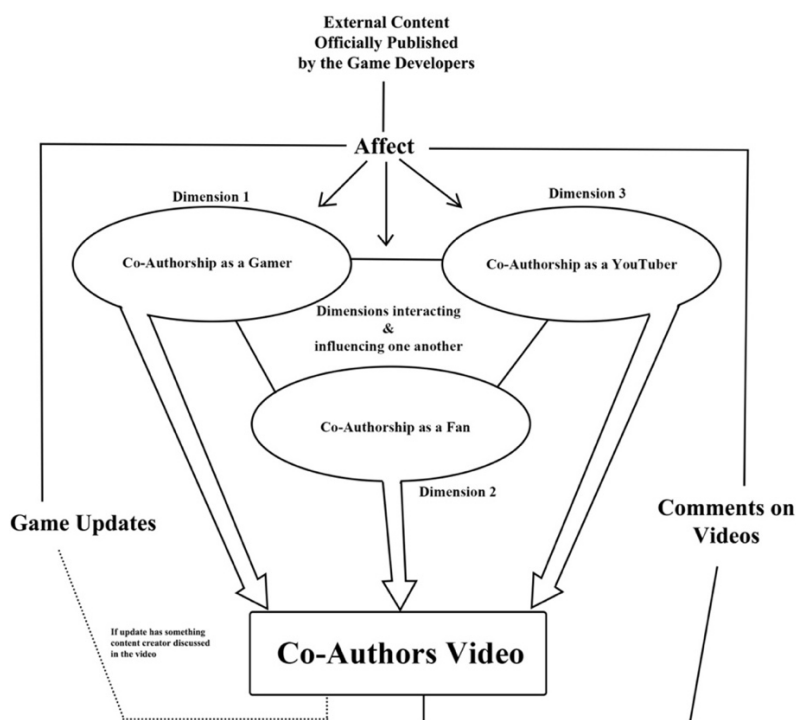


Figure 4: Conceptual Framework

Dimension 1: Co-authorship as Gamer includes the influence of player type, player motive, player narrative, and player values. This also includes the player schema in relationship to gameplay, the in-game world, theme, and narrative.

Dimension 2: Co-authorship as fan shows how WoodenPotatoes as a fan of the game engages with the greater community of players and takes on a role as a developer because of his sense of ownership for the game.

Dimension 3: Co-Authorship as YouTuber shows how the affordances of YouTube as a platform and WoodenPotatoes' affiliations affect the commentary, his behavior, presentation, critiques of the game, and structure of the video.

All of these dimensions affect and interact with the elements of the game and each other even prior to the creation of the video. The interactions of each dimension experienced as a gamer, fan, and YouTuber results in the production of a video in which each dimension then co-authors the final product. Once the content creator experiences feedback from the affordances provided by YouTube or sees an update in the game (whether or not what was discussed was featured in the update), this affects the dimensions and the next video that is produced. These three dimensions help answer the research questions below.

**RQ1: How does WoodenPotatoes in his playthroughs relate gameplay, design, and narrative?**

The findings of the study show that WoodenPotatoes relates gameplay, design, and narrative as a gamer and as a fan.

Dimension 1 answers this as WoodenPotatoes discusses these elements in relation to his player values and player type. Utilizing the player taxonomy schemes of Bartle (as cited in Lindley, 2005) and Lindley (2005), WoodenPotatoes fell under these four player types: “explorer”, “achiever”, “audience style”, and “immersionist” (Lindley, 2005) as he showed motivations, interests, and actions that fit with each taxonomy’s descriptions. As an explorer, he stated that he wanted to play “comprehensively” (WoodenPotatoes, 2017a, 00:46) as he wanted to know more about the game.

Even if MMORPGs try to cater to a wide variety of player types, the discussion revolved around WoodenPotatoes’ player values as an individual.

The traits of his player type affected WoodenPotatoes’ player values and commentary in the following ways:

- Emphasized instances revolving incentives and payoff because of his achiever traits.
- Focused on gameplay and exploration as an explorer.
- Concerned with the tone of the narrative, morals, and values of the in-game world, the lore, and the thematic design of the game and narrative which align with audience style values.
- Highlighted instances in the game revolving agency, organic learning, and immersion as an immersionist.

Ultimately, his concerns shaped and affected the video and commentary that was produced. All these values were discussed under the dimension of co-authorship as a gamer.

Dimension 2 answers how WoodenPotatoes as a fan of *GW2* takes on the role of a developer. He discusses these elements as if he were developing the game despite not being an employee of ArenaNet because he has a sense of ownership over the game.

WoodenPotatoes exhibited the following characteristics:

- Understands the game and its playerbase
- Keeps tracks of developer’s progress, understands how they think, and how it applies to the game
- Keeps track of the game’s progress
- Shows concern for the game while providing critiques, suggestions, and solutions
- Showed concern regarding the health of the player base

By taking ownership of the game, WoodenPotatoes discusses parts that can be enhanced and improved. He provides solutions and features that are not currently available in game as well as suggestions that can better cater to the community. These findings align with studies done by Daneva (2017) and Jenkins (2006b). Thus, his commentary addresses the needs within the game. This is how co-authorship occurs as a fan.

## **RQ2: How does WoodenPotatoes comment on his playthroughs?**

The findings of the study show that WoodenPotatoes comments on his playthrough as a gamer, as a fan, and as a YouTuber.

Dimension 1 shows that as a gamer, he related his experience as if he lived through it. The narrative and hypertextual structure of *GW2* served as a guide to his mental schema which cultivated his player narrative. The schema was an important aspect in formulating his perception of the game as this heavily affected his playthrough and commentary. Interestingly, WoodenPotatoes did not just depend on in-game elements but also included external elements as part of his schema. This was seen in his commentary as he reflected on the game and his experiences and expectations.

The following items affect the schema:

- In-game narrative, content, and game play experiences
- Officially published content by the game company
- “Dissonance” (Lee, 2013)

His schema also adjusted based on his personal context of play which is why he found certain facets of the game acceptable or unacceptable. The schema did not adjust to logical leaps, continuity issues, and failure to meet narrative expectations which led to player disappointment. WoodenPotatoes (2017b) would point these instances out:

“Now I am a bit disappointed... despite all of the world building and map story and stuff you get everywhere. I was talking about this being the serious fortification that people shouldn't be able to travel through!” (18:31)

However, when narrative expectations were met and continuity was present, it led to an immersive experience for WoodenPotatoes. Interestingly, personal player context allowed WoodenPotatoes to reflect and adjust his player narrative to adapt to elements in-game. With a recap scene, he felt the developers “made the right call” (WoodenPotatoes, 2017c, 24:25).

Dimension 2 shows that WoodenPotatoes comments on his playthroughs as a fan in order to engage with the greater community of players. As a member of the *GW2* fandom, he discusses his thoughts, theories, and findings with the greater *GW2* community which aligns with the studies done by Jenkins (2006a, 2006b, 2006c). He engages with the community and tries to answer their concerns and issues by using his expertise or by providing a theory that is based on his knowledge of the game.

In this example, WoodenPotatoes (2017b) discusses and explains the community's concern about metas in *Path of Fire*:

“Now, yesterday, we talked about a few things that spurred quite a lot of discussion... I think when people say *Path of Fire* has no metas what they actually mean is there's no farm potential behind the meta events. Like, why do people really like Auric Basin in Tahrir? Well, yes, it's incredibly well built and it's beautiful... but why do people play it really? Why do they do it so much over two years? Well, because it was attached to a farm...” (00:40)

This is how he comments on his playthrough as a fan which helps co-author the video.

Dimension 3 shows how the affordances of YouTube causes WoodenPotatoes to take on a particular style of presentation, balance his interests as a fan, and his financial

interests as a YouTuber. As a YouTuber, it is necessary for WoodenPotatoes to engage the audience as it is how channels are ranked and how YouTubers earn money.

The following are the strategies he used to engage his audience:

- Direct audience engagement
- Provides context
- Uses in-game terms
- Uses first, second, and third person to relay player experiences
- Features content that adds value to player experience
- Places focus on the game by using only his voice and game clips
- Plays roles as a teacher, mentor, and experienced fan in order to establish credibility
- Provides a buffer to negative criticism and comments

This aligns with the studies done by Anderson (2017), Glas (2015), Johnson and Woodcock (2017), Pietruszka (2016), Piittinen (2018), and Postigo (2014, 2016). YouTube allows content creators to become financially independent, yet the system causes content creators to be subject to the tastes of their subscribers, corporate partners, and affiliates. As a person cultivating patrons, he must balance his own interests as well as the interests of the *GW2* community and ArenaNet. Thus, we see how the dimensions influence each other and co-author the video and commentary.

### **Analysis**

The study adds to the literature of game studies, fan studies, and new media studies by showing how these three dimensions affect each other and are affected by each other. These dimensions interact because of the affordances of YouTube as a platform because individuals can upload their content online. Thus, these dimensions interact and influence each other through the co-authorship of the playthrough video, and it is not solely dependent on the game or its context. Dimensions co-author the playthrough on two levels: the first level of co-authorship occurs between the dimensions and the game while the second is inter-dimensional co-authorship. Although the game is engaged by the player in all dimensions, what is featured, highlighted, and discussed comes from the content creator as an individual. This is because a playthrough video includes factors that go beyond the scope of the game such as the mental schema of the player, the interests, knowledge, and engagement of the player as a fan, and the structural affordances provided by YouTube. Through this, the study also adds to the literature of game studies by showing how the mental schema requires continuity, how dissonance affects the mental schema and the player's perception, and the flexibility of the schema.

### **Conclusion**

Playthrough is a site of both production and consumption as the player is not only playing a designed game but takes on the role of a gamer, fan, and a YouTuber. Gamers are co-authors of a game's narrative. Their mental schema or player narrative is guided by the structure provided by the game and is influenced by factors such as a player type, items they read or see from official sources, and the elements of the game itself to create their own story.

As fans, these gamers act as developers for the sake of the game's betterment by providing suggestions to improve the game's gameplay, narrative, and in-game world. Their expertise allows them to analyze the progress of the narrative, changes that were made in the game, and its need for improvement. They also engage with the larger community by sharing theory, speculation, and possible solutions to in-game problems. In this particular instance, YouTube gamers who are affiliated with companies must strike a balance between sharing their interests, cultivating their audience, and manage the interest and perception of patrons. They must play the roles assigned to them by catering to their niche market and thus manage how people view them.

### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

As this study was done on a single YouTuber, there is a need to test the theory through other qualitative and quantitative methods. Researchers can also explore if other dimensions exist and if these affect the legal rights of content creators.

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## ***Gathering the Story: Documentary Film Research and Data Collection***

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### **Abstract**

The documentary film genre is a powerful and influential information and communication medium that educates, “embraces difference,” inspires, and motivates its audience. Its increasing utilization in education timely coincides with technological advances in film and video production today. What has historically been a prohibitive undertaking is now a progressively egalitarian vocation using inexpensive equipment and software. Yet the literature on the research and collection aspect of documentary filmmaking, which is crucial to the production process, is still limited. This qualitative study explores professional documentary filmmakers’ experiences with research and data collection. A motivational model served as the framework to develop and design the instrument, as well as data analysis. The questions were reviewed by three researchers, and a pilot test was conducted with a veteran filmmaker. Eleven professional documentary filmmakers in the Asia-Pacific region were interviewed using a purposive sampling. Journaling, field notes, and observations were used in addition to the in-depth interviews. After analysis and interpretation were completed, five major themes emerged on how the filmmakers approached research and data collection for documentary film: 1) do the research, 2) tell the story visually, 3) find strong characters, 4) support universal themes, and 5) relate to your audience. This research uniquely summarized the knowledge and experiences of professional filmmakers acquired from the actual filmmaking process. These significant results provide relevant and important information and recommendations for beginner and student filmmakers learning about and exploring documentary film. This study was designed to contribute to the practice and literature of documentary film research and studies, data collection and education.

Keywords: Documentary Film, Documentary Film Research and Data Collection, Documentary Filmmakers’ Experiences, Documentary Filmmaking Recommendations, Motivational Design

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## Introduction

The film documentary is a genre in the motion picture, film and video media field. It is a nonfictional documentation of fact-based reality, and its purpose can be to provide information, increase understanding, or preserve historical records. Aufderheide (2007) defines a documentary as a film or video that “tells a story about real life, with claims to truthfulness” (p. 2). Documentary film’s grounding in reality and facts, rather than fiction, makes it an extremely powerful medium, providing images, narratives, sounds and experiences that educates, “embraces difference,” inspires, and motivates its viewer audience (Loustaunau & Shaw, 2018). The documentary film’s accessibility and relevance to broad and diverse audiences can increase engagement in a technology-connected world (Friend & Caruthers, 2016; Loustaunau & Shaw, 2018). It is an extremely popular and well-received medium for information, communication, training and education for all audiences (Bugis, 2018; Goldman, Pea, Barron, & Derry, 2007; Loustaunau & Shaw, 2018; West, Hoffman, & Costello, 2017).

Historically, documentary filmmaking was a very expensive and prohibitive undertaking. However, increased accessibility to the necessary technology, inexpensive equipment, software applications and smartphones (Loustaunau & Shaw, 2018; Winston, Vanstone & Chi, 2017) is helping the genre to become a progressively egalitarian vocation. Despite the fact that technology has evolved and nearly everyone in the industry uses digital video recording methods rather than photographic film stock, the terms “film,” “filmmaking,” and “filmmaker” are still used today and will be used in this study to define traditional film stock or digital video and the person who controls and communicates perceptions, ideas, stories, and feelings using moving images and sound (AMC Filmsite, 2020; Studio Binder, 2020).

Democratizing the industry from restrictive costs allows more people, young and old, from diverse populations, to actively participate in telling meaningful stories globally via documentary film. The people making documentary films vary widely, from high-profile celebrities to relatively unfamiliar, perhaps beginner and student filmmakers. While one end of the documentary film spectrum lists significant, successful filmmakers such as Michael Moore, whose *Fahrenheit 9/11* earned over \$221 million in U.S. and international box office revenues in 2015 (IndieWire, 2014), and 33 million Americans watched Ken Burns’ *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History* (Burns, 2014), the other end is no less important.

Although information about the overall filmmaking process is available, scholarly and popular literature on the research and collection step of documentary filmmaking, is still limited. An academic search resulted in a list of significant scholarship about the extensive and diverse world of documentary research and analysis studies, and popular sources may address it briefly; however, there is a lack in both about *how* to conduct this important step in the documentary film process. This step is essential because it determines the content of the film (Aufderheide, 2007; Bell, 2011; Frank 2013; Winston et al., 2017). According to sources (Adorama Learning Center, 2018; Desktop Documentaries, 2018; IndieWire, 2014), this second step after deciding upon the subject of the film encourages the filmmaker to search out material, gather facts, follow leads and recommendations on sources, and conduct interviews.



With documentary filmmaking becoming an increasingly democratic pursuit (Loustaunau & Shaw, 2018; Winston et al., 2017) with increased applications in education (West, et al., 2017; Winston et al., 2017), there should be a corresponding amount of information and educational resources on how to conduct subject research and data collection for documentary film, a crucial step in the documentary film process. This lack of information and educational resources is a problem because many beginners and students exploring documentary film production might not know how to begin subject research and data collection for documentary film.

Therefore, this study explores professional documentary filmmakers' experiences with subject research and data collection for documentary film. The discovery, analysis and interpretation of the wisdom and knowledge of professional filmmakers from the actual filmmaking process would add a relevant and valuable educational resource to the limited body of knowledge in this area. This information is intended to help guide and assist beginner and student filmmakers learning about and exploring documentary film production so they can share their valuable stories with the world using the increasingly accessible and effective medium of documentary film (Loustaunau & Shaw, 2018). This contribution to the literature and field of documentary film research and data collection, as well as film studies and education, was the overall goal of this article. As far as the researcher's knowledge, no previous research has explored and examined this topic in this manner before.

## **Literature Review**

### **Documentary Film Production**

For the most part, producing a traditional documentary film takes a highly subjective approach; the filmmaker directs the entire process, from subject selection, research, and data collection, to creative approaches (Bell, 2011; Friend & Caruthers, 2016). Filmmakers declare that making a documentary can be one of the most enjoyable and satisfying creative projects, yet acknowledge that it is indeed an extremely challenging pursuit with many obstacles. (Adorama Learning Center, 2018). A thrilling artistic adventure, but difficult; one with often no definitive rules or methodical procedures, and that a filmmaker usually learns by simply and intuitively doing (Desktop Documentaries, 2018). Paradoxically, filmmaker Michael Moore (IndieWire, 2014) insists that the first step to documentary filmmaking is to not make a documentary. Instead, he emphasizes, one should make a movie. "Stop making documentaries. Start making movies. You've chosen this art form – the cinema, this incredible, wonderful art form, to tell your story. You didn't have to do that." (para. 1).

The first step towards creating a documentary film is to find a subject or topic that is important to the filmmaker and is of interest to others. Since the documentary film journey is often formidable and arduous, the subject needs to invigorate and animate the filmmaker, while also being reinforcing for the extended work towards completion. The filmmaker needs to also feel resolutely determined to share the story with others through the medium of film (Adorama Learning Center, 2018; Desktop Documentaries, 2018).

Generally, the second step on the documentary film creation journey is to search out material, gather facts, follow leads and recommendations on sources, and conduct interviews. This is the important “research and data collection,” stage of the process (Studio Binder, 2018) which is essential to any documentary film because it drives the content of the film (Aufderheide, 2007; Bell, 2011; Frank 2013; Winston et al., 2017). Subject research and data collection include learning about the background, history and context of the subject using physical, digital and human sources, as well as the interesting, credible, emotional and inspiring material featuring the pivotal points that will connect and resonate with the audience (Adorama Learning Center, 2018).

Table 1 features steps 1 and 2 and the next five suggested steps in creating a documentary film from several sources. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list and does not include all the elements of the filmmaking process, including funding and budgets (Adorama Learning Center, 2018; Desktop Documentaries, 2018; IndieWire, 2014).

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| Step 1: Identify a “worthy” story.  |
| Step 2: Conduct research and data collection.   |
| Step 3: Create an outline of how the story will be told; its core points and characters.                              |
| Step 4: Design a detailed production plan to record interviews, supplemental footage, and reenactments if applicable. |
| Step 5: Write a script based on the most compelling elements of the story.  |
| Step 6: Edit the footage according to the script to create a meaningful and dynamic story.                            |
| Step 7: Distribute the film using applicable approaches.  |

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Table 1: Steps to a Documentary

### **Documentary Film Application in Education**

Documentary film is widely recognized and utilized successfully in education in many ways, including increasing awareness and knowledge for learners through information and instruction, and educational research and scholarship (Aufderheide, 2007; Bell, 2011; Frank, 2013; Winston et al., 2017). Completed, existing products are usually used as educational resources and material, and the act of documentary filmmaking production is often utilized as a research instrument. The increasing use of both methods in educational environments timely coincides with technological advances in film and video production today (Loustaunau & Shaw; 2018; Winston et al., 2017). With Internet accessibility, digital technologies, and lower production costs, documentary film production has escalated and their use in research and instruction across the disciplines has correspondingly increased (Leavy, 2015; Winston, et al., 2017).

Social science research (Frank, 2013; Goldman et al., 2007) including anthropology, often utilizes documentary film using terms such as ethnographic film and ethnocinema (Leavy, 2015). *Video Research in the Learning Sciences* provides a comprehensive exploration of key theoretical and methodological use of documentary film in studies (Goldman et al., 2007). *New Documentary Ecologies: emerging platforms, practices and discourses* reports on the research applications of the powerful and relevant medium and its recent surge in digital platforms (Nash, Hight,

& Summerhayes, 2014). Bell (2011) emphasized the importance of the genre in historiographical research and scholarship.

Frank (2013) sought to expand awareness of the vast and significant instructional opportunities that documentary films provide to students, and Whiteman (2004) examined their political impact upon learners and audiences. Fonda (2014) discussed the benefits of art therapy and filmmaking in a maximum security forensic psychiatric facility. Documentary film is now used in many different research and instructional contexts using a wide range of styles and approaches. They can range from loosely planned, informal short projects to fully storyboarded, scripted and rehearsed professional productions that require hiring a cinematographer, crew and staff, as well as a cast for reenactments. Some may also feature the researcher(s), participants, and other sources (Leavy, 2015; Leavy & Chilton, 2014).

Documentary film has proven to be a popular medium for researchers and educators hoping to inspire and promote knowledge and awareness of diverse, global issues (Aufderheide, 2007; Frank, 2013; Rashid, 2014). For example, social justice and climate change to various audiences (Friend & Caruthers, 2016; Hanley, Noblit, Sheppard, & Barone, 2013); migration and immigration from Central and South America (Loustaunau & Shaw, 2018); to the environmental and worldwide health concerns of agricultural chemicals (The Monsanto Papers, 2018).

### **The Current Study**

The purpose of this study was to address the lack of information and inadequate educational resources about the methods and procedures of subject research and data collection for documentary film in either popular or scholarly sources. Veteran documentary filmmakers might know how to address the central question: where does one begin to tell a meaningful story after deciding upon the subject? However, beginners and students exploring documentary film production may not know where to start and there are no easy-to-use resources for them. With documentary filmmaking becoming an increasingly democratized industry due to inexpensive equipment and software applications (Loustaunau & Shaw, 2018; Winston et al., 2017) with unlimited informational and educational possibilities, there should be a comparable amount of resources about this important step.

The researcher sought to address this problem by generating an original educational resource about documentary film subject research and data collection. The researcher felt the best way to accomplish this was to conduct in-depth interviews with professional documentary filmmakers to find out how they go about conducting research and data collection once they have established their subject or topic of a documentary film. The actual real-world experiences and knowledge of a group of professional documentary filmmakers would be extremely valuable and useful because it is a compilation of experience, wisdom, and insight. This expert guidance about this important step in the documentary film production process would benefit beginner and student filmmakers by providing a head start in the long and complex filmmaking process. It would also be advantageous for a global society as audiences would gain broadened learning opportunities with an increased availability to timely documentaries from filmmakers.

The exploration and discovery of professional filmmakers' experiences in documentary film subject research and data collection, and the analysis and interpretation of that data would create a significant output: a highly relevant and useful educational resource for beginner and student filmmakers learning about and exploring documentary film production. Thus, this study answers the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are documentary filmmakers' experiences with documentary film subject research and data collection?

RQ 2: How can these experiences be analyzed, interpreted and categorized?

## **Methodology**

A qualitative interpretive inductive research approach (Creswell, 2007, 2009, 2018; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Yin, 2016) was used in this study to answer the first research question to seek greater understanding and perspectives of the participants. The researcher will also use the ARCS motivational model concepts (Keller, 1983, 2010, 2017) as the framework to develop and design the data collection instrument for RQ 1 as well as for the analysis, interpretation and categorization of the data to answer RQ 2. In addition to the qualitative instrument, journaling, field notes and observations were recorded during all phases of this study and will be used to apply triangulation to strengthen and increase credibility and validity (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Yin, 2016).

## **Participants**

A purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2016) of 11 professional documentary filmmakers out of a pool of 14 in the Asia-Pacific region participated in this study. Two experienced, respected professionals in the field of documentary film, with many accomplished products, provided suggestions on filmmakers, and reviewed and approved the completed list. An exempt status IRB approval was secured for the study and consent protocol was followed for the voluntary interviews. To improve the instrument and determine if the questions would appropriately collect the information needed to answer RQ 1, a pilot face-to-face, semi-structured interview was conducted with a professional filmmaker actively producing documentary films in the Asia-Pacific region for many years. She is also the executive director of a nonprofit organization committed to achieving intersectional gender equity in filmmaking and is a filmmaking instructor. The pilot data was used to make minor adjustments to refine the interview questions. The researcher then proceeded with semi-structured interviews with 11 professional filmmakers with the requirements:

- Minimum of three years actively working in the field of documentary film production.
- Completed a minimum of one to two films (minimum of 30 minutes) with public distribution.
- Primary purpose of the completed documentary films and falls under the definition and interpretation of the genre.
- Asia-Pacific connection - completed a minimum of one documentary film with a topic that is relevant or related to the Asia-Pacific region.

Along with the requirements, a list of assumptions was identified to establish guidelines regarding the documentary filmmakers' experiences with documentary film subject research and data collection:

- Subject/topic of documentary film established.
- Educational purpose established.
- Themes relating to subject established.
- Budget limits and considerations established.
- Project time boundaries established.

## Research Design

**ARCS Model of Motivational Design.** This study sought to address the problem of a lack of information and inadequate educational resources about how to conduct subject research and data collection for documentary film. To increase the likelihood that the final summary of data, the educational resource, will resonate with the target audience, beginner and student filmmakers, Keller's well-established ARCS motivational model for instructional design (Keller, 1983, 2010, 2017; Pappas, 2015) served as the framework to inform and guide the study. The ARCS motivational factors of attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction (Gagne, Wager, Golas, & Keller, 2005) are strongly applicable to the field of documentary film with similar motivational goals for documentary filmmakers, whether they are veterans or students (educators/instructional designers), and their audience (learners/students) (Astleitner & Hufnagl, 2003; Bugis, 2018; Hodges & Kim, 2013; Keller & Suzuki, 2004; West et al., 2017). While the goals for documentary filmmakers, both experienced veterans and beginners, may not be referred to as "instructional design," their educational goals are very similar, and they are using relevant, motivational methods of film and video production (Frank, 2013; Nash et al., 2014; Winston et al., 2017).

The researcher was able to leverage the ARCS model in the design and development of the instrument, the professional filmmakers' interview questions, as well as with the analysis and interpretation of the collected data. With the end goal of creating an educational resource for beginners and students exploring documentary film, the ARCS model helped the researcher align the interview questions with the ARCS motivational factors (Gagne, et al., 2005; Keller & Suzuki, 2014; Kim & Keller, 2008) as the educational categories.

## Instrumentation

Instruments for the study's data collection were derived from relevant literature and designed and developed by the researcher. Triangulation, application of different valid data collection methods, was applied to strengthen the study and increase credibility and validity (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Yin, 2016):

- 1) Semi-structured interview questions, 20 in total.
- 2) Journaling, field notes and observations.
- 3) Audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with the professional filmmakers, followed by transcripts of participants.

The ARCS model (Keller, 1983, 2010, 2017; Pappas, 2015) guided the design and development of the interview questions to ensure they addressed the topic of subject research and data collection from the four ARCS perspectives: attention, relevance,

confidence and satisfaction (Gagne, et al., 2005). To ensure the interview questions obtained useful data necessary to answer the research question, including drawing out the rich and thick descriptions of qualitative data, three researchers familiar with the topic reviewed the questions and they were revised before implementation. This provided an inter-rater reliability check, contributing to pilot data. A pilot test of the interview questions was also conducted with one filmmaker in a face-to-face interview to evaluate the usability of the questions. The pilot data was used to make minor adjustments to refine the interview questions. Examples of the interview questions and their relationship to the ARCS concepts are shown in Table 2 in the Results section. There were a total of 20 questions.

Qualitative research often includes journaling, field notes and observation – part of the triangulation method of data collection (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2016). The journaling, field notes and observations for this study were conducted and documented by the researcher during all phases of the study. As the data collection researcher of the study, the researcher also assumed the role of “participant observer” when conducting observations and taking field notes during field work (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2016).

### **Procedure**

In addition to the pilot test interview, 14 professional filmmakers were selected through purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2016) and were invited to voluntarily participate in the research via a recruitment email that explained the purpose of the study. Eleven participants responded with interest and availability. They were emailed a consent form following the UH Mānoa Institutional Review Board (IRB) research protocol that provided a basic outline of the study, its objectives, and included an agreement to an audio recording of the interview. It also covered participants’ rights, risks, benefits, confidentiality and privacy concerns. Participants were asked to read, sign and return the form by email. Interviews (phone, online and face-to-face) were scheduled and the researcher was able to complete 11 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The study was designed to have minimal impact on the participants.

### **Rigor**

The data, observations, interpretations and findings of this study were trustworthy, reliable, authentic and, as much as possible, documented and validated (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Yin, 2016). The following four research assessments were applied to the study: 1) triangulation of data: audio-recorded interviews, transcripts, observations, journaling and field notes, 2) inter-rater reliability, 3) respondent validation and member check, and 4) trustworthiness and authenticity of data sources.

Two experienced, respected professionals in the field of documentary film provided suggestions on filmmakers to minimize bias. They also reviewed and verified the completed list of filmmakers (Ifenthaler & Schumacher, 2016), providing inter-rater reliability checks (Bryman, 2012).

To ensure the interview questions obtained useful data necessary to answer the research question, three researchers familiar with the topic reviewed the questions and

provided constructive feedback. The questions were revised before implementation. This provided another inter-rater reliability check that contributed to the pilot data. A pilot test of the interview questions was also conducted with one filmmaker in a face-to-face semi-structured interview to evaluate feasibility of the questions. The pilot data was used to make minor adjustments to refine the interview questions.

Completed transcripts were emailed to the participants, who approved and validated their accuracy and intent of answers, providing respondent validation, or member checks, adding to the credibility of the study.

## Results

This study focused on collecting the knowledge, experiences and insight on research and data collection for documentary film, and related information, from professional filmmakers through in-depth interviews. The researcher conducted 45 to 60-minute semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. This enabled the researcher and participants the freedom to pursue other related ideas and points that were relevant to the interview and the data collection process. (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Yin, 2016). The researcher audio-recorded the interviews with a digital recorder and also used an iPhone as a backup. Many of the interview questions were purposely designed to be open-ended to allow for expansion, emergent or additional information from participants and to collect information the researcher might not have anticipated.

The researcher conducted the interviews to encourage thick and rich narrative responses, along with the specific questions necessary for the study, while using probes and follow-up questions. During the interview, the researcher was cognizant of any signs from the participants of stress or uncomfortableness, and was prepared to stop. (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Yin, 2016). The researcher observed that all the filmmakers were comfortable with the interview, openly and freely sharing and discussing their work and knowledge. It is clear that they are familiar and accustomed to this type of dialogue, likely participating at screenings, discussion panels and presentations.

## Interviews with Participants

The researcher transcribed the interviews and then analyzed and interpreted the data, including the journaling, field notes and observations, by applying the Five Phases of Analysis and their Interactions framework (Yin, 2016). An inductive approach was implemented and emergent categories and themes were grouped according to their relationship with the concepts of the ARCS model: attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction (Keller, 1983, 2010, 2017; Pappas, 2015). This data answered the first research question: What are documentary filmmakers' experiences with documentary film subject research and data collection? Table 2 features examples of the interview questions and participant answers and their alignment with the ARCS "Attention and Relevance" concepts.

| ARCS Concepts and Definitions            | Interview Question                    | Participant Answers  |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|
| ● <b>Attention</b><br>Capturing interest | How do you approach research and data | "I try to find stories and data that may be eye-opening to |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● and curiosity</li> <li>● Perception and by inquiry</li> <li>● Connection and participation</li> <li>● Specific, relatable examples; conflict and variety</li> </ul>        | <p>collection to try and capture the attention or curiosity of your audience and maintain interest?</p>   | <p>audiences and will capture their attention through emotion and human interest.” – Participant #8</p> <p>“Casting is critical. I consider casting as research and development. We try to find a charismatic key character. It’s more about how our key characters will resonate with the audience through their stories.” – Participant #9</p>  |
| <p><b>Relevance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Immediate application</li> <li>● Set example through experience</li> <li>● Set example through role models</li> <li>● Future usefulness</li> </ul> | <p>How do you incorporate research and data collection so that the film will be a valuable learning experience, or provide a benefit, for the audience?</p> | <p>“The key characters are passionate about the issue and we knew they would resonate with our audience. But they don’t have PhDs or other credentials that some audiences might judge them on, so we did research to find the top scientists and medical doctors in the field and we interviewed them to bolster the credibility of our activist key characters. We incorporated many peer reviewed academic articles into the film to bolster credibility even more. Then we had everything fact checked by our researchers and vetted by our attorneys. When the audiences see that our key characters are credible, it has a greater impact and the audience benefits from the story.” – Participant #4</p> |

Table 2: Examples of the interview questions and participant answers and their alignment with the ARCS “Attention and Relevance” concepts.

Using Table 2 as an example, the ARCS model of motivation concepts were used to code the filmmakers’ data on how they approached research and data collection for documentary film. Analysis and interpretation were completed in phases using Yin’s Five Phases of Analysis and their Interactions Framework (2016) and the developing results were categorized into dominant themes. Subsequently, five major themes emerged from the analysis (See Table 3). This iterative approach and process



consequently answered the second research question: How can these experiences be analyzed, interpreted and categorized?

Since the overall goal of this study was to generate an original educational resource that would help beginner and student filmmakers with subject research and data collection for documentary film, the information was then organized and arranged into five sections of beneficial suggestions intended to guide and assist beginner and student filmmakers.

## Review

In order to assure the information was presented using instructional best practices, the researcher conducted a review of the text with four experienced, qualified researcher/educators familiar with the topic and a student filmmaker. Overall, the feedback from the reviewers were positive and they felt the content was very informative and useful for student filmmakers; however, they also provided helpful, constructive feedback on the text. For example, they felt the main ideas for each of the five suggestions were overwhelming because they were too dense and text heavy and needed to be edited and revised for clarity and conciseness, adding that bullet points could be added to break up the text and highlight information. They noted parallel phrasing should be applied, and that each of the five suggestions should begin with a verb. The constructive feedback and comments from the reviewers were applied and resulted in the content and information featured in Table 3 below that presents the five major themes in short, concise, bullet point information that would be relevant and useful to beginner and student filmmakers.

|   |
|---|
| <b>Tell the Story Visually (Attention)</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Collect interesting interviews, historical documents, material, photos, videos and supplemental footage.</li> <li>● Answer why this story needs to be presented visually.</li> <li>● Determine if the sources and materials are accessible.</li> <li>● Establish an organized system for all of the data.</li> <li>● “Show” the audience, not just tell the audience.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Find Strong “Characters” (Attention)</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Focus on the strength of your interview sources.</li> <li>● Feature genuine interview characters who are engaging, fascinating, vulnerable, revealing, and who feel true.</li> <li>● Create an emotional and impactful audience connection.</li> <li>● Generate affinity and empathy with the audience.</li> <li>● Guide the audience on a storytelling journey.</li> </ul>      |
| <b>Support Universal Themes (Relevance)</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Focus on all-embracing topics such as love, joy, peace, family, survival, pain, suffering, equity, or the striving and struggling one takes to reach a goal.</li> <li>● Unravel the universal human stories and relationships.</li> <li>● Shed light on the shared and collective human experience.</li> <li>● Select topics that entertain and move audiences.</li> </ul>       |

|   |
|---|
| <b>Do the Research (Confidence)</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Complete an exhaustive resource search.</li> <li>● Collect existing material about your subject.</li> <li>● Identify key characters who can tell the story.</li> <li>● Determine experts who can add legitimacy.</li> <li>● Pinpoint a gap in the story, or a lack of the story.</li> <li>● Fill that void with your documentary film</li> </ul>                     |
| <b>Relate to your audience (Relevance and Satisfaction)</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Create a meaningful, relevant story that resonates, informs, educates, inspires and empowers audiences to action.</li> <li>● Help the audience apply the story to the real world, current issues, and to their own lives and circumstances.</li> <li>● Encourage viewers to insert their own stories, experiences and struggles into what they're seeing.</li> </ul> |

Table 3: Five major recommendations/categories from the data collected from the professional filmmakers and their relationship to the ARCS model concepts.

## Discussion

While subject research and data collection is an essential part of the production of documentary films, a literature review revealed that information and educational resources about *how* to conduct this important step in the documentary film process were lacking. The overall goal of this study was to address this problem by collecting, analyzing, interpreting and presenting relevant information about the methods and procedures of subject research and data collection for documentary film. This information is intended to assist and guide beginner and student filmmakers learning about and exploring documentary film production.

This study accomplished this objective by using a qualitative interpretive approach to gather information, knowledge and experiences from professional documentary filmmakers on how they go about conducting research and gathering information once they have established the subject or topic of a documentary film. Keller's ARCS motivational model (1983, 2010, 2017; Pappas, 2015) was used to inform and guide the development of the data collection instrument and interviews were successfully completed with 11 professional filmmakers. Thus, RQ 1 was successfully answered in this study: What are documentary filmmakers' experiences with documentary film subject research and data collection?

The researcher found the interviews with the professional filmmakers to be extremely insightful and valuable because it documented their expertise and wisdom about subject research and data collection for their documentary film projects. The interviews also helped explain why information on this step of the documentary film process is lacking in existing literature. Since producing documentary films can be such a subjective, creative and intuitive process, it can be difficult to document a methodical, direct process; and each filmmaker seems to develop their own method and procedure that works well for them. Often, it is a more iterative and fluid practice that is quite challenging to specify and label. The findings from the study generally agreed with the ambiguous and indefinite nature of the existing literature.

However, after interviews with the professional filmmakers were completed, the researcher analyzed and interpreted the data through an inductive process, using Keller's ARCS (1983, 2010, 2017) concepts as a framework and was able to successfully extract themes and categories. Thus, the academic research, approach, and findings in this original study in the field of documentary film research and collection were significant. The researcher was able to effectively answer RQ 2: How can these experiences be analyzed, interpreted and categorized?

Five dominant themes emerged from the professional filmmakers' data on how they approached research and data collection for documentary film after analysis and interpretation were completed in phases: 1) do the research, 2) tell the story visually, 3) find strong characters, 4) support universal themes, and 5) relate to your audience. This research uniquely summarized the knowledge and experiences of professional filmmakers with research and data collection for documentary film by featuring their wisdom, experience, and insights acquired from the actual filmmaking process.

Since the overall goal of this study was to provide an educational resource that would help guide and assist beginner and student filmmakers learning about and exploring documentary film production, the results were presented in the form of beneficial recommendations and suggestions. The findings of this study adds valuable information and an important educational resource to the limited body of knowledge on the subject which was the overall goal of this research study.

This beneficial information is intended to help beginner and student filmmakers share their valuable stories with the world using the increasingly accessible and effective medium of documentary film (Loustanaou & Shaw, 2018). This study makes a major contribution to the field and literature of documentary film research, data collection and studies, as well as film studies and education.

## **Conclusion and Future Research**

This study used a qualitative interpretive approach to address the problem issue: a lack of information and educational resources on subject research and data collection, an important step in the documentary film process. The research explored and collected data about professional documentary filmmakers' experiences with subject research and data collection through in-depth interviews. Keller's ARCS motivational model served as the framework to develop and design the instrument, the interview questions to the filmmakers (Keller, 1983, 2010, 2017; Pappas, 2015). Eleven professional documentary filmmakers in the Asia-Pacific region were interviewed, including a pilot test interview, and data was analyzed. Journaling, field notes, and observations were used in addition to the interviews for triangulation of data (Bryman, 2012; Yin, 2016).

After analysis of the data was completed, the researcher agreed with the existing literature that since producing documentary films can be a subjective, creative and intuitive process, it can be challenging to document a methodical, specific process. However, the researcher analyzed and interpreted the data through an inductive process, using Keller's ARCS concepts as a guide and framework, and was successfully able to extract themes and categories and organize them in the form of constructive suggestions and recommendations.

The results summarized professional filmmakers' valuable experiences, knowledge and insight acquired from the actual process of filmmaking and was presented in a helpful, practical, usable, easy-to-understand format. The information from this original study provides important and useful information about *how* to conduct subject research and data collection for documentary film, an essential step to any documentary film because it determines the content of the film. These results are noteworthy as they provide relevant information that may guide and assist beginner and student filmmakers learning about and exploring documentary film production. The findings of this study are significant as it adds valuable information and an important, original and new educational resource to the limited knowledge on the subject. This study makes a major contribution to the practice and literature of documentary film research and studies, data collection and education.

The overall goal of this study was to address the lack of information and inadequate educational resources about the methods and procedures of documentary film research and data collection by contributing information and an educational resource that would help beginner and student filmmakers. Thus, it would be a natural next step to investigate how this beneficial information could be presented to that target audience. Future research could develop these findings into an informative, easy-to-use, helpful educational resource that could be utilized by beginner and student filmmakers.

This future research might lead to the design and development of an educational resource or module for documentary film subject research and data collection. After this module is completed, further studies could investigate the impact of this educational module upon the target audience. Looking forward, future research could prove quite beneficial to the informational and educational resources in the field of documentary film research and data collection, film studies and education.

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*A Comparative Study of Chinese and Japanese Female Characters Portrayed in in Hirokazu Koreeda's and Ang Lee's Family Films*

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**Abstract**

China and Japan are both in the circle of Confucian culture. Under the influence of Confucian culture, the basic unit of Chinese and Japanese society was the family rather than the individual. At the same time, the patriarchal-dominated social structure was derived. With the modernization process and the influx of western thoughts, the tolerant image of traditional women under the oppression of "patriarchal culture" has been broken. With the absence of father's role and the decline of "patriarchy", the consciousness of women's identity has begun to awaken, and the new family pattern has been reconstructed. This paper takes the family theme films directed by Hirokazu Koreeda and Ang Lee as the main research object, and deeply analyzes the similarities and differences of the female characters in the two directors' works, and conducts multi-modal discourse analysis on women in the films. With the combination of the visual, auditory and evaluation resources, the paper re-examines the construction of women's gender image in Chinese and Japanese society and the cultural and psychological phenomenon in Chinese and Japanese society. At the same time, on this basis, the article also discusses how the positive female images are shaped to help women to break the stereotype and create a diversified female image.

Keywords: Confucianism, Female Characters, Feminism, Hirokazu Koreeda, Ang Lee, Family Films

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## Introduction

In the cultural context of the patriarchy of Chinese feudal society, women have always been in a state of dominated and ruled property rights. They have always been oppressed and discriminated genders and have been marginalized as "second sex" (Wang Shuqin, 2014). Women are insulated from any public political activities, and they have no opportunity to hold public positions on the same level as men. The backward concept of "male superiority and female inferiority" left over from feudal society and the basic content of "three principles and five permanence" and "three obediences and four virtues" as the basic content of feudal ideas have long confined women's consciousness and internalized into female psychology in the process of "unconsciously" acceptance by women. The social division of labor between males and females has caused serious absence of women in the public sphere (Shen Yifei, 2013).

Under the influence of Confucian culture, both China and Japan compiled women's precepts to admonish women's behavior. The concept of yin and Yang was first created in Chinese culture. Ban Zhao's "women's commandments" said: "Yin and yang are different, men and women have different behaviors. The masculine is the virtue, the Yin can be soft, the strong is the most valuable for the male, and the weak is the beauty for the female. " In order to maintain the order of men's society, women use men's standards to cater to men's needs in an almost servile way of self-discipline. The purpose of women's training is to warn women to better adapt to men's society (Li Yinhe, 2018).

In the traditional Chinese ethical system, women's self-values are submerged in family affairs. Women regard their husbands and children as their inborn vocations, and women themselves regard "wife is honored by husband, mother is precious by son". As the highest realization of self-worth, self-consciousness is weak, and self-worth cannot be reflected.

With the birth of New China, Chinese women ushered in opportunities for their own liberation and development. For thousands of years, in feudal society, the concept of the distinction between men and women and the inferiority of men and women has been deeply rooted. The influence of this gender essentialism cannot be eliminated within a short period of time. The traditional gender concept of "male dominates female follower" has not been fundamentally challenged. To a large extent, women's own value is still measured by means of the status and value of husband and son.

The Japanese have extremely strict regulations on order and hierarchy. Different people in society or different countries in the world should have their own positions. The people below the pyramid should not challenge higher-ranking figures, and their behavior must comply with appropriate established etiquette or rules. Therefore, Japanese people are straightforward in their behavior, and the rules are not chaotic. They are especially concerned about what others think of themselves, especially when they are in a crowd. They must quickly adapt and integrate into the mainstream atmosphere of the audience to guide their behavior language mode (Ruth Benedict, 2020).

In Japanese history, women have always had a high social status until the formation of the samurai society. However, the emergence of private ownership requires women to maintain chastity and give birth to pure and pure property heirs for their husbands. With the development of productivity, women are gradually excluded from productive labor, which has led to a fundamental change in the status of women. A male-centered private ownership society deprived women of their political participation rights, economic independence, cultural education, and marriage autonomy. Today's Japanese society is still a patriarchal society. Men occupies a core position in society and the family. Women must absolutely obey men. Even though the social status of women is rapidly improving, the current Japanese society still follows the patriarchal culture (Li Yinhe, 2018).

Japanese traditional women have always been inseparable from the word "Yamato nadeshiko," which refers to women who are quiet and reserved, gentle and considerate and have noble virtue temperament. For a time, it was regarded as a symbol of the traditional Japanese women who advocated patriarchal ideology, obeyed three obedience and four virtues, and taught their husband and son.

In the traditional gender norms of "men are superior to women" and "men are strong and women are weak", men and women have completely different responsibilities and roles in marriage and family. Under the traditional gender norms, the family's social capital is mainly generated through the husband's social activities and social network. The family's social status depends on the male's career achievements, the wife's social status depends on the husband's generation, and the family's role playing appears. Complementary characteristics (Tai Lin, Li Junfeng, 2002).

In modern times, with the changes in society and family life, the ideal woman is no longer a good wife who is ignorant and ignorant and only knows to obey her husband, but a "good wife and virtuous mother" who has knowledge and respect for women. With the popularization of education, a large number of "new women" have emerged in pursuit of freedom. Masaru Nakamura pointed out that "children's mental skills are roughly similar to their mothers, and even their later hobbies and habits are more like mothers. The people must change their moods and customs to enter the enlightened realm. They must create kind mothers. Only a perfect mother can have a perfect one. "Children", and "the kind mother must teach women (Yuzawa Yasuhiko, 1976)." In the eyes of Enlightenment thinkers, good wives and virtuous mothers are not women who are dominated by men and subject to the norms of Confucian feminism, but wives with equal personality with their husbands and mothers who are able to educate their children like those in Western Europe.

With the continuous improvement of women's status, people pay more and more attention to the status and image of women in movies. The image changes of women in video works not only deeply reflect historical changes and the development of family civilization, but also reflect the changes in women's social status. Chinese and Japanese women are a group of mixed images that have both traditional factors and contemporary awareness. From the analysis of their images, we can see the image characteristics of Chinese and Japanese women and the evolution of their self-awareness.

This article is based on text analysis. This article takes the images of Chinese and Japanese women in Ang Lee and Hirokazu Koreeda's films as the research object, selects representative film cases for targeted analysis, and strives to examine China and Japan from the development of Chinese and Japanese culture and society. The ecological pattern of female image creation, in-depth exploration of the cultural connotation behind the female images in Ang Lee and Hirokazu Koreeda's family-themed movies, and discussing the interactive relationship between female images and the real society, causing more film and television creators and researchers to pay more attention to female images. More attention and thinking will promote the generation of a film and television discourse system for gender equality dialogue.

### **Chinese and Japanese family movies**

Family film is a film with the theme of society and family ethics. It depicts the process of deconstruction, transmutation and reconstruction of family members' functions and ethical relations through real and delicate stories, and arouses public attention and recognition with its strong secularity and popularity (Xu Nanming, Fu Lan, 2015). Taking the family as the basic object of expression, through the various events in the family, this paper discusses the ethical and moral problems such as love, marriage, filial piety and so on. Through the ethics and morality of individual family, it reflects the moral value of the national society, and causes the public to think about the society and the individual family view.

Because they coexist in the Confucian cultural circle, Japan and China have always attached great importance to ethics and morality. With Confucian ethics as the conceptual framework and patriarchal blood relationship as the social support, they guide people's moral values and daily behavior norms. Because of China's strong and deep-rooted cultural tradition of ethics, it pays great attention to the family, and the expression of family ethics has always been a traditional theme in Chinese and Japanese movies.

### **The evolution of women's "other" status in films**

In traditional films, male creators are keen on portraying angelic women in their works. Angel women are often beautiful, loyal, docile and full of sacrifice spirit. This expresses the expectation imagination of male visual threshold to female. Mothers are regarded as "angels in the family". They are "good mothers" wrapped by "traditional virtues", such as forbearance, diligence, selflessness and dedication. They are the carriers of men's emotion and desire expression, and the "object" to realize men's aesthetic desire.

The female roles in traditional films are the lovers, mothers, wives and daughters of male roles attached to male roles. The male role is in the absolute dominant role, and he can decide which kind of female role should be given as a foil. In traditional films, women are only in the perspective of "onlookers" or "being appreciated" in the whole plot laying and unfolding. When people limit the role of women with the virtues of sacrifice, dedication and selflessness, women fall into the siege of male chauvinism and become the "other" forever.

With the advent of the new century, women's roles are no longer just seen as objects, nor as the "other" mentioned by Beauvoir in the second sex. "She is a subordinate, a minor against the main. Women's other consciousness is manifested in their attachment to men (Simone de Beauvoir, 1949). After stepping into the modern development of the film industry, after the continuous improvement of women's status and the same social status as men, the film industry has gradually got rid of the portrayal of female stereotypes. In the film, women's emotional expression has become an important theme in the film.

In the films directed by Ang Lee and Hirokazu Koreeda, we can see that women and men are no longer dependent, and women are no longer in the perspective of "onlookers" or "being appreciated". Although there are compromises under the male power, their personality is independent. Women come out from the "other" status in the "male perspective" and become the main body in the "female perspective", and exist equally with men.

### **The female images in Ang Lee and Hirokazu Koreeda 's films**

#### **Forbearance and firmness**

In Ang Lee's film "wedding banquet", Gao Weitong's mother is a typical image of a good wife and a good mother. When she found out that the marriage between her son and his daughter-in-law was only a contractual marriage. Her son was gay. In order to satisfy Gao's parents' desire to let him have a family, Weiwei married Gao Wei in order to get a Permanent Resident Card in the United States. But Gao's mother didn't force her son to obey her will. She had to accept all this and choose to forgive. Like other Chinese and Japanese mothers, Gao Weitong's mother has become the patron saint of the family, defending the integrity of the family and taking responsibility with her own actions. When personal freedom and happiness conflict with family responsibilities, they tend to choose family and sacrifice themselves.



Figure 1: wedding banquet

There is another character Weiwei in "wedding banquet". Weiwei is a girl who has a sense of self independence and yearns for freedom and personal ideal. However, he was alone in the United States, because she could not live in the United States for a long time without a green card. In order to survive in the United States, Weiwei accepted Gao Weitong's suggestion and married him in a fake way. When she found

out that she was pregnant, she was determined to kill her baby for the future. However, Gao Wei and his parents begged, she finally left the child. In the end, everyone seemed happy, but Wei Wei became the biggest victim. Her emotional appeal has never been noticed. Under the strong traditional culture and male discourse, there is a woman's sorrow.

In the movie, "After the storm" by Hirokazu Koreeda, on the night of the typhoon, the divorced son and daughter-in-law had to live at home with their grandson. The mother happily took out the soup she had kept in the refrigerator and cooked a pot of noodles. The son was very happy and said that the dishes his mother cooked were delicious "Your father liked it when he was alive, so I kept a lot of it in the fridge." The son stopped the chopsticks in his hand and said, "isn't it half a year?" Mother side from the pot to get noodles, while turning back at her son: "you still mean this, anyway, has eaten into the stomach." From their mother and son's dialogue, we can see their mother's tenacious and humorous temperament and her open-minded attitude against the depression of life.



Figure 2: After the storm

### The awakening of self consciousness

Minko is a traditional Japanese mother in the film "still walking ". Her life is a full-time housewife. In the family relationship, Minzi not only undertakes the corresponding responsibility, but also shows a strong self-consciousness and discourse power. In family dinners, mother Minzi is busy and runs the family, but her husband seems to be of little help. When Minzi chats with her daughter and son-in-law, her husband becomes a "marginal person" and can't get into the conversation. It can be seen that at home, the wife often has the right to make decisions and speak on the basis of her ability and understanding of family members. Minzi not only inherits some good qualities of traditional women, but also shows different personality characteristics from traditional women, subverting the stereotype of traditional women in a weak position in the family.

In addition to the pain of her eldest son's death, the mother kept silent about her husband's affair many years ago. After dinner, the family listened to the record. The song in the record is exactly the music that was playing in the mistress's room when Minzi found her husband cheating years ago. While doing the work in her hand, Minzi inadvertently tells the story of her husband cheating years ago. Facing the fact

that her husband has a "third party", Minzi is not as vulnerable as the traditional female role. From the beginning to the end, she was very calm and calm, and seemed so indifferent. She did not yield to fate, but expressed her resistance to the real society in her own way.

### The arrogance and resistance under patriarchy

For a long time, men have controlled all the logic of film production and operation, satisfying their own needs and desires through the "peep" and "gaze" of film mirroring, regardless of the appeal and resistance of women. Women who are negatively affected by patriarchy and husband's power urgently need a cathartic outlet. The unequal learning accumulated over a long period of time does not help magnify women's desire to resist patriarchy. Women began to resist, subverting the fixed social rules and power relations.

In Ang Lee's films, the daughters appear in images that are not controlled by the family and have a sense of rebellion. They decide for themselves emotionally and professionally. If they do not get the permission of the family emotionally, they will choose to leave. In order to escape the fettered family under the control of the power. The female characters in the film have a sense of freedom bred from the suppression of patriarchy and husband's power, breaking through all kinds of self-restraints, other people's restraints, and social restraints to complete self-liberation. In Lee's film world, the beauty of female images starts from within the women. With the sure beauty of independence and freedom, women are no longer just objects of "gaze". Like men, they have equal and independent right to choose and think.

In " EAT MAN DRINK WOMAN", the three daughters of the Zhu's family, under the "contemporarity" of contemporary society, the orientation of the concept of marriage and love is autonomy and enlightenment. Jiazhen is a person who is constrained by traditional culture, but is in a contradiction between modern and traditional ethical concepts. She wears a veil of traditional ethical concepts and bears the self-warning of her father's traditional ethics. In fact, she desires to be free from it. . It wasn't until the appearance of the physical education teacher Zhou Mingdao that she broke free from the shackles of traditional ethics. She declared her separation from her native family by means of flash marriage, and also declared the collapse of the patriarchal family that Lao Zhu had worked so hard to maintain for many years. The second daughter, Jia Qian, bought her single apartment and planned to move away from the family's constraints. In the depths of Western thinking, marriage and sex are the products of two levels. She and her ex-boyfriend broke off the relationship, but still maintain the sexual relationship.

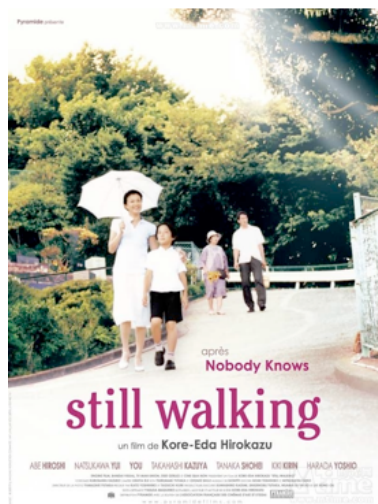


Figure 3: still walking



Figure 4: EAT MAN DRINK WOMAN

The third daughter, Jianing, grew up in the consciousness of the "new generation" since she was a child. Love is no longer a mutual attraction between men and women, but an active counterattack. Regardless of friendship, she robbed each other's boyfriend and had children. In a family dinner, he announced that he was unmarried and pregnant. Jianing is one of the most thorough breakthroughs from traditional family culture. She advocates freedom and has a personal mind and will. All imprisonment becomes an object that can be overridden and resisted. The etiquette constraints of five thousand years of Chinese culture have put many modern urbanites under different pressures, but Chinese women choose to break through the shackles of traditional patriarchy and patriarchy and begin to seek their own freedom and happiness. Jianing's awakening of consciousness is a direct expression of women's will to dominate their own destiny, seeking the beauty of balance and independence between the two sexes, quickly transcending superficial expressions, and interrogating deep spiritual pursuits.

#### Independence, self

In "still walking", Yukari brings her ten-year-old son and Yoshita to form a new family. Wearing a white professional shirt in the play appears very capable. When the parents-in-law talked about the former eldest daughter-in-law, the words "drag oil bottle (children from the preceding marriage)" between the words inadvertently hurt



Yukari. When the family was embarrassed and at a loss, Yukari was the first to laugh at herself. Because of the early death of her ex-husband, Yukari raised her son alone and life was very difficult. In the hard days, Yukari has long developed an independent and tough character.

Weiwei in " Wedding Banquet" emphasizes personality and economic independence, does not rely on men, but focuses on self-awareness and emotions. After the wedding banquet, Weiwei unexpectedly discovered that she was pregnant. When she realized that her efforts could not change Weitong's homosexuality, she insisted on destroying the child. The mother-in-law begged Weiwei to keep the child. The mother-in-law advised her: "Women are still the most important family and children, aren't they?" Wei Wei replied, "Not necessarily." From their dialogue, we can see that Weiwei does not accept that the female body is a tool for "passing on from generation to generation" in the family, but emphasizes the autonomous status of women. She pays more attention to her own feelings and her own development, and wins her dignity by pursuing her own independence.

### **Discussion**

In Ang Lee's films, besides the complete absence and departure of patriarchy, the image of father in the films is more represented by the dim and lost aura of patriarchy. With the disintegration of the traditional patriarchal system, women have assumed the family responsibilities that were assumed by men in the original society. The balance of power structure began to tilt towards women, and the image of women became more powerful and had more discourse power. The positioning of male and female roles in the family has changed. In Ang Lee's family films, there are the image of a middle-aged wife who protects the family and endures everywhere; there is an image of an old woman who is hard to enjoy the happiness of her family and sacrifice for the next generation; at the same time, Ang Lee also portrays the image of young women fighting for love and freedom.

Weiwei in wedding banquet has the characteristics of Chinese women's gentleness, filial piety and human feelings, as well as the characteristics of Western women's independence and self. However, Wei Wei's choice to give up his dream life temporarily and continue his descendants for Gao family reflects that Ang Lee, the creator of the film, created Wei Wei's female image from the male perspective under the influence of patriarchal culture.

In " EAT MAN DRINK WOMAN", it can be seen from the image of Jianing that the image of this character has completely faded away from the traditional Chinese thought of "from the father at home, from the husband after marriage". Jianing is out of the shackles of the feudal family system, she can abandon the family for love. In Ang Lee's films, the new generation of young women tend to have a weaker sense of family responsibility than the older generation. They pay more attention to personal emotional experience and freedom.

In Ang Lee's films, middle-aged women put responsibility and family above everything else. What they do is to protect their families and fulfill their responsibilities. Their character is often strong and tolerant, the responsibility of the family fetters them, and the family causes their pain. Some female characters in Ang

Lee's films express themselves in the process of resisting patriarchy and pursuing independent marriage. They are an important means to break the "Marginalization" and strive for social identity.

In Hirokazu Koreeda's films, the role of "mother" becomes the most important link in the family due to the father's absence or absence. Compared with women, the men in Shizhiyuhe's movies always seem weak and incompetent. In the movie "After the storm", although the mother often criticizes her husband and son, she is still proud of her son. The composition written by her son as a child is carefully kept by her mother. However, we can also see the director's persistent infatuation with Madonna motherhood. Although the mother has been criticizing her son, she is still proud of her son. The image of women in Shi zhiyuhe's films is still influenced by the patriarchal society, the life of "mother" is always closely intertwined with her husband, son and other family members. Hirokazu Koreeda's perspective as a "son" does not reach the level of mother's appeal desire, soul and spirit.

## **Conclusion**

Director Ang Lee and director Hirokazu Koreeda have created female images with different personality characteristics, showing their independent, strong and optimistic spirit. Through their external characteristics and identity characteristics, they show their amazing strength in conflicts with family and society. They gradually mature and independent consciousness guides themselves to get rid of the shackles of the family, seek themselves, and find their place in society.

Both of these directors showed the audience the survival and ethical dilemma of modern Chinese and Japanese women in the context of social, cultural and ethical changes with calm eyes, objective perspectives, and documentary techniques. Observing the female images in the film works of Hirokazu Koreeda and Ang Lee has important research significance for us to understand the living conditions of women in the social transformation period; their appearance creates a brand-new aesthetic experience for movie audiences.

In the real society, the relationship between men and women is moving towards equality, the power relationship of gender has changed, the order of social gender roles has also been shaken, and the separation of female media images from the world of male subjects has become inevitable. However, from the analysis of several films, it is found that Chinese and Japanese women still have not escaped the shackles of patriarchy. If there is pressure from the family, women may still return to the family. In the process of film and television creation in the future, it is necessary to continuously deconstruct the patriarchal consciousness and subvert the central idea of patriarchal ideology, so that the image of women can get rid of the status of "others". The existing predicaments and their courage and difficulty in pursuing independent personality are effectively expressed. Finally, in the process of creating and appreciating films and TV dramas, creators and audiences should use a broader perspective of both sexes to observe the fate of women, and strive to build a harmonious relationship between the sexes on the basis of acknowledging the differences between the sexes.

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## *Representation of Women in Premkumar's Films*

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### **Abstract**

In the wake of waves of feminism and feminist film theories there are more expectations from the film industries, as they are considered as the mirrors of the society and as the potent ones to reform the society in the eradication of the gender inequality all-prevalent in all the walks of life all over the world. Unfortunately, no one can deny the fact that there exists persistent underrepresentation of female characters in films. This study explores whether all the eight films directed by Gulab Premkumar, are able to pass the feminist film theories such as Bechdel Test, The Sexy Lamp Test, Make Mori Test and Critical Actor Theory and Critical Mass Theory with a self-made code sheet incorporating the tenets of these theories. The findings prove that in comparison to datas collected about gender discrimination in Hollywood and Bollywood films Gulab Premkumar's 20th C films are the most progressive past with on and off-screen representation of women and less stereotyped female characters and there's less gender inequality in his sole 21st C film.

Keywords: Gender-Equality, Premkumar, Films, Representation

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## Introduction

Rooted to ancient Greece Waves of Feminism flourished in the U.K. The first wave of feminism (1830s – early 1900s) was centered around the sufferings of women and women’s fight for equal contract and property rights, while the second wave(1960s-1980s) broadened the debate to women’s reproductive rights, workplace, family and sexuality. The third wave of feminism (1990s – early 2000s), which can be termed as the “micro-politics” of equality for women with its varied, complex branches of feminist outlooks such as the ego-cultural feminists, the radicals, the liberal/reforms, the electoral, academic, eco-feminists etc. The fourth wave of feminism has hit the air with the aid of social media networks: The #MeToo movement and the Time Up Movement. It also wages a war against sexual harassment besides the issues put forth by the previous waves of feminism. (Cavanaugh, 2018)

According to Kracauer 1965, Like Perseus who slayed Gorgon Medusa by looking at its reflection on the shield given by Athena, the silver screen shields us by providing us mere mirror reflections of dreadful encounters and situations with the artist’s imaginative rendering of unseen dreadful real ones. Thus, such a knowledge gained may guide people when they encounter them in real life.

Hence, In real life to cultivate the crops of Gender Equality the Cinemas should prepare grounds. How much responsibility is shouldered by Director G. Premkumar in empowering women characters through his films is the study.

Research Questions: The Research Questions are:

1. Do Premkumar’s films pass Bechdel Test, Mako Mori Test, The Sexy Lamp Test?
2. Are women under represented in Premkumar’s films?
3. How much is the Critical Mass Theory and the Critical Actor Theory is applicable to the studied films?

## Literature Review

Women are significantly underrepresented in film (Lauzen 2015; Murphy 2015; Shor et al. 2015). In previous research using the same data set used here, Lindner, Lindquist, and Arnold (2015) showed that films with an independent female presence earn less at the box office not because audiences dislike them but because they receive fewer resources in the production stage.

Nulman.E(2014) examined the top Box office films from the 1990s to 2014 and explore the characteristics women characters in the film and he also looked at the potential impact of that representation in the context of cultural globalization.

In their study Caradeux D and Salom L. (2013) examined fifty Spanish short films following the methodological framework proposed by Van Leeuwen (2008) about the representation of social actors and identified the latent ideological characteristics lay in discourse construction which reflect the major gender representations of the present day directors of short films.

Wright.A (2012) studied about the action women in films exploring Brown's claim (1996) that a heroine in an action role is a 'sheep in wolf's clothing' with a focus on the 1980s sword and sorcery cycle, specifically the often critically overlooked Conan the Destroyer (1984) and Red Sonja (1985). In their opinion in these films female roles are seemingly elevated from subsidiary roles to action heroines or formidable villainous roles.

Kapoor, Hansika, et al (2017) by using a qualitative approach to code dialogues, and quantifying subsequent frequencies found the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of female characters in contemporary Hindi cinema.

It's though looking like a low bar, most popular dollar winning films like Spider Man," "The Jungle Book," "Star Trek Beyond" and "The Hobbit" all fail by at least one of the criteria of the Mako Mori Test. Even a movie in which two women only speak to each other briefly in one scene, about anything trivial under the sun, gets a passing grade. And yet more than 40 percent of all U.S. films fail. Brittany (2010) in his blog listed 610 films which passed The Mako Mori test, out of which 87% passed Bechdel test too.

Fifty- Seven percent of the hundred most widely distributed films in the U.S. market between 2000 and 2009 do not pass the Bechdel Test. Movies passing the Bechdel Test earn less at the box office because they tend to have small production budgets, a key predictor of box office success (Lindner et al. 2015). Data-sharing site Silk analyzed 1,500 Films released between 2010 and 2014 using the Bechdel Test criteria. In 2014, just 55.4% of all films passed the Bechdel Test. This is down from 2013's 67.5% and 2012's 66.4%.

As every research cited above and thousands of similar studies prove women are under represented and mis represented in films. Also, many of the studies highlight the fact that many films fail the feminist film theories. But the researcher here would love to present a successful film maker's effort to produce women centred films.

## **Methodology**

Quantitative Method as well as Qualitative Method were followed to gauge whether women are under- represented in Premkumar's films.

Research Design: Quantitative Method was adhered to check whether the women were under represented in Premkumar's films. Erigha (2015:79) explains that there are three types of representation within the film industry: numerical representation, centrality of representation, and quality of representation A numerical approach to studying women's representation might establish, for example, the proportion of all characters who appear on screen in a set of films in a given year. That's why this study along with The Mako Mori Test, The Bechdel Test, The Sexy Lamp Test, it includes other aspects such as, empowerment, Deciding Authority, Freedom and Effort, Socio& Economic Independence and Intelligence to check the quality of the representation along with the quantity of the representation. A detailed analysis and multiple viewing of the films was helpful in analyzing the films quantitatively and qualitatively as well. As a sample the number of scenes the first two lead male

characters appear is compared to the number of scenes the first two lead female characters appear in five of Premkumar's films.

An Interview with the director to get the solution to the queries to know how the 1980's and 1990's film Industry regarded women's emancipation and how it helped him to represent women in his movies positively or negatively. The interview will also bring out whether there were any woman behind the scenes in 1980's and 1990's as to put to test the selected films to Critical Mass Theory and Critical Author Theory.

**Samples:** Out of the 13 films listed above, the first eight are taken for the study.

| S.No | Name of the Film        | Year of Release | Language | Production Company       | Director                                     |
|------|-------------------------|-----------------|----------|--------------------------|--|
| 1    | Sayoojyam               | 1979            | Malyalam | Aksharachithra           | G.Premkumar                                  |
| 2    | Lajjavathi              | 1979            | Malyalam | Chandrika Movies         | G.Premkumar                                  |
| 3    | Antharangam Oomayanathu | 1980            | Tamil    | Sri Lankal Films         | G.Premkumar                                  |
| 4    | Hridayam Padunnu        | 1980            | Malyalam | Sri Lankal Films         | G.Premkumar                                  |
| 5    | Pooviriyum Pulari       | 1982            | Malyalam | Cherry Enterprises       | G.Premkumar                                  |
| 6    | Pen Ullam               | 1982            | Tamil    | Cherry Enterprises       | G.Premkumar                                  |
| 7    | Kai Varisai             | 1983            | Tamil    | Sarala Agencies          | G.Premkumar                                  |
| 8    | Pirate's Blood          | 2010            | English  | Jayashree Internationals | Technical Director<br>G.Premkumar            |
| 9    | Al Boom                 | 2008            | Arabic   | Jayashree International  | Technical Director<br>G.Premkumar            |
| 10   | Bheeman                 | 1982            | Malyalam | Ariffa Enterprises       | 2nd Unit Director<br>G.Premkumar             |
| 11   | Hello Madras Girl       | 1983            | Malyalam | J.W International        | 2nd Unit Director<br>G.Premkumar             |
| 12   | Agni Nilavu             | 1991            | Malyalam | Chakravarthy Production  | 2nd Unit Director<br>G.Premkumar             |
| 13   | Vivahith Jeevan         | 2000            | Hindi    | TamilNadu Talkies        | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Unit Director<br>G.Premkumar |

Table 1. Premkumar's Films

**Self-Coded Sheet:** If and only the movie has: a.at least one female character b.who gets her own narrative arc c.that is not about supporting a man's story, the movie is proclaimed that it has passed the Mako Mori test. a) American cartoonist Alison Bechdel, in his attempt to identify gender bias in fiction work, created the Bechdel



Test. The test asks three questions: 1. Does the film have at least two women? 2. Do they talk to each other? 3. Do they converse anything other than men? The Sexy Lamp Test wants to test whether the woman is used as an object only. The researcher incorporated these theories besides other female feminist theories to prepare the coded sheet.

|  |                               |  |
|--|-------------------------------|--|
| Is there at least one female character? [The Mako Mori Test]                                 |                               |  |
| Does the female character get her own narrative? [The Mako Mori Test]                        |                               |  |
| Is female story is independent one or supporting a man's story ? [The Mako Mori Test]        |                               |  |
| How many female characters are relevant to the plot of the film? [The Sexy Lamp Test]        |                               |  |
| Does the movie have at least two women in it? [Bechdel–Wallace Test]                         |                               |  |
| Do Women talk to each other? [Bechdel–Wallace Test]  |                               |  |
| Do female characters talk about something other than a man? [Bechdel–Wallace Test]           |                               |  |
| Are the two women named characters? [Variation in Bechdel–Wallace Test]                      |                               |  |
| Is there at least a total of 60 seconds of conversation? [Variation In Bechdel–Wallace Test] |                               |  |
| Is there a female protagonist? Is she successful?  |                               |  |
| Is the female protagonist successful on her own?   |                               |  |
| Is the film a female-oriented one?   |                               |  |
|  | Empowerment                   |  |
| Are they originally portrayed in the same stereotypic ways?                                  |                               |  |
| Does the heroine become the heroic in the film?  |                               |  |
| Do the women express their ambition?   |                               |  |
|  | Social/ Economic Independence |  |
| Any sign of women's economic independence?   |                               |  |
| Do the female characters as skilled / professional ones?                                     |                               |  |
|  | Intelligence                  |  |
| Do the female express their thinking or feeling?   |                               |  |
| Are women portrayed as intelligent ones?   |                               |  |
|  | Freedom & effort              |  |
| Do the female characters have freedom?   |                               |  |
| Do the female characters change their lives on their own?                                    |                               |  |
| Do the female characters talk /fight against inequality?                                     |                               |  |
| Is the female protagonist's change not influenced by men?                                    |                               |  |
| Is there any action taken by the female characters not to be a victim?                       |                               |  |
|  | Deciding Authority            |  |
| Do the female characters take their own decisions?   |                               |  |
| Are her decision put some body in trouble and make her regard as foolish or novice?          |                               |  |

Table 2 Self-Coded Sheet

### Results and Discussion

The following is the data obtained on the detailed analysis of the eight films.

| Name of the Film | Andarangam OOmeyanthu | Hridyam Padunnu | Penn Ullam | Pooviryum Pulari | Lajjavathy | Pirate’s Blood | Kai Varisai | Sayoojyam |
|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|------------|------------------|------------|----------------|-------------|-----------|
| Points Obtained  | 27                    | 27              | 27         | 27               | 27         | 22.5           | 27          | 27        |

Table 3 Points Obtained By the Films

In 2017, the Geena Davis Institute and Google developed a tool to analyze video for “a character’s gender . . . how long each actor spoke, and were on-screen” (Google, 2017). In doing so, they found that women had only 36 percent of the screen time and only 35 percent of the speaking time in the 100 top-grossing films of 2014–2016. On the contrary all the eight films of G.Premkumar not only pass the tests. Other than the English film (75%), the other seven films come out successfully with 90% of points.

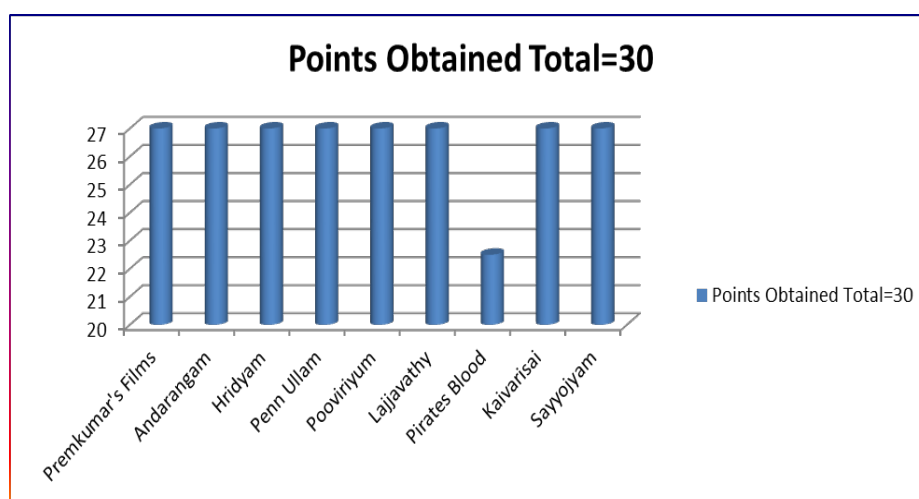


Figure 1 Points Obtained

The results obtained by Self-coded Scoring sheet proved Premkumar’s films passed Bachedel Test, Make Mori Test, Sexy Lamp Test as well as the women characters were empowered with adherence to self - dependent traits. It’s really commendable since while almost half of 2012’s top 100 grossing movies passed the Bechdel test, by only 23 passed the Mako Mori test. 21 passed both the tests. However, 47 films didn’t pass either tests. Premkumar’s films are better than Marvel films: Twenty of Marvel films released after Iron Man (2008) were analyzed by Alexis Reliford who found all of the Marvel films passed The Sexy Lamp Test, eleven of them passed Bechdel Test but only three of them passed Make Mori Test. Ant man and the Wasp and Avengers: Age of Ultron are the two films which passed all the three tests.

**No Question of Under-Representation:** In Sayoojyam men characters appear in 184 scenes whereas women are there in 85 scenes. Though not like the other six films the statistics isn’t that bad and more over the viewing of the film proves it’s a women

centric film. The heroines’s love, the betrayal by her father, her oscillation between her love for her second husband and her child born out of her first love is the second issue. So, women appear in less than 50% of scenes it’s a woman’s story, undoubtedly. In Kaivarisai the hero appears in 30% of the scenes whereas the heroine appears in 36% of the scenes. And there are three heroines. In Pirate’s Blood too there are three heroines. So there’s no question of inequality as far as the number of scenes women appear in these three. Besides these three films the quantitative data furnished below will be evident to ascertain that in the other five films too, there was almost equal representation of women roles in G.Premkumar’s films.

| Film                  | Total Scenes | Male Lead 1 | Male Lead 2 | Female Lead 1 | Female Lead 2 | Total% For Two Characters Male | Total% For Two Characters Female |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Pooviriyum Pulari     | 93           | 49          | 23          | 37            | 33            | 72                             | 66                               |
|                       | 100%         | 53%         | 25%         | 40%           | 35%           | 78%                            | 75%                              |
| Penn Ullam            | 93           | 49          | 23          | 37            | 33            | 72                             | 66                               |
|                       | 100%         | 53%         | 25%         | 40%           | 35%           | 78%                            | 75%                              |
| Hridyam Padunnu       | 101          | 56          | 25          | 51            | 34            | 81                             | 85                               |
|                       | 100%         | 55%         | 25%         | 50%           | 34%           | 80%                            | 84%                              |
| Andarangam Oomayanthu | 101          | 56          | 25          | 51            | 34            | 81                             | 85                               |
|                       | 100%         | 55%         | 25%         | 50%           | 34%           | 80%                            | 84%                              |
| Lajjavathy            | 116          | 87          | 20          | 63            | 23            | 107                            | 86                               |
|                       | 100%         | 75%         | 17%         | 54%           | 20%           | 92%                            | 74%                              |

Table 4. No. of Scene-wise Appearances

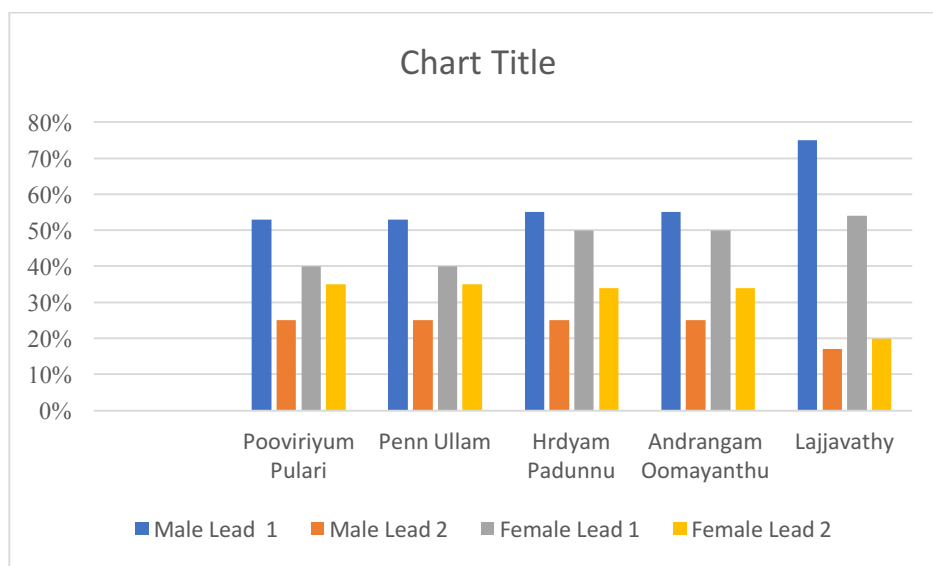


Figure 2 Number of Scene-wise Appearances

The above chart clearly indicates how the number of female characters appearances are in par with the number of male characters appearances scene-wise unlike what Lauzen’s (2025) findings that women are under- represented.

No doubt, all the credit goes to the Cinema for how the women are perceived, valued and treated in the 21st century. Cinema sees to that the perpetrators of mistreatment towards women are never glorified or normalized. A villain who does evil things to women is never be emulated. It's the hero's behaviour we have to watch. All the heroes of Premkumar's eight films studied are in support of women and talk and work for women's cause.

Moreover, Tinker and Bramsen (1976) points out the economic inequality is the root cause of gender -inequality in everyday-lives. So, the economic status of female lead roles was analyzed. None of the heroines of the films studied were economically of low status. So, the stories could flow smoothly to showcase women's emancipation.

Some of G.Premkumar's films like Kaivarisai, Pirate's Blood have three heroines.

Penn Ullam, Pooviriyum Pulari, Hridyam Padunnu, Andharangam Oomayanthu, Lajjavathi, Sayoojyam have two heroines. Sometimes it's difficult to say who plays the lead role; both the heroines in Penn ullaam, pooviriyu Pulari, Hridhyam Padunnu and Andharangam oomayanathu play very crucial roles. As there are as many female protagonists the representation is also more.

While G.Premkumar presents diverse female roles and explores gender as its major theme in his films, majority of Indian or Hollywood films fail to do so unfortunately; they assign only traditional gender roles to most of the female characters who display traditional behavior traits throughout the film. Not only Premkumar brought the actress Rajani Sharma from Bollywood as the heroine of his films: Andrangam oomayanthu and Hridyam Padunnu, he also brought Usha Khanna the Music Director to Malayalam Film Agni Nilavu as the 2nd Unit Director. Jayashree Premkumar (2020) found all the three slasher films released during pandemic times had better scintillating women characters,<sup>1</sup> she found that only female characters appeared only in 20, 44, 44, 55 percent of films<sup>2</sup> and she has also found that in Premkumar's Kaivarisai there was no gender discrimination. In Kaivarisai and Sayyujyam women appeared in 80 % and 50% of the scenes respectively.

Critical Author Theory Insists on women behind the screen to bring out the emotions and give a lion's share to women characters. But in spite being a male director and producer he gave much importance to women characters. Does the credit go to the state where he was born, Kerala or to the Konkani community he belonged to or to Tamilnadu, the state where he lived and shot most of the films? The director himself reasoned out thus:

In those days, there weren't many editors or directors who were fit or opted for such jobs.

Three films like Pirate's Blood, Al Boom and Hello Doctor were under female Production Company Name. that is Jayashree Internationals. Pooviryum Pulari and Penn Ullam were also under female Production company's name. Kaivarisai & Theepandangal Producers are also women. In films like Sayyoojyam, Puthira Punithama, there were always female dance masters like Girija and Lalitha besides Raghu Master. Many female singers were given chance, like S.Janaki, P.Suseela, Chitra, Vani Jayaram, L.R.Eswari. Moreover, it was he who booked the famous female music composer Ushakhanna for the film Agninilavu. he

was the second Unit Director of the film. Kerala had been a matriarchal society in the past. We can't ascertain the same now even in Kerala. Since everywhere in reality inequality towards womenfolk is on a steady increase, including in states like Kerala, probably due to wider exposure to other Indian cultures and floating population. Actually, in those days in Nair families of Kerala Matriarchal society was there. Moreover, in the southern states like Kerala and Tamandu the film industry gave much respect to actresses and almost all womenfolk. They have idols of women goddesses and the people gave much regards and worshipped female heroines.

Gulab Premkumar justifies his heroine in KaiVarisai being picturized as a brave lady, indulging in fighting in many scenes: What's wrong in women knowing the martial arts? A recent statistic reveals the bitter truth in every 15 minutes a woman is raped. That's why I always wanted the women characters to be heroic, save themselves, fight for other good causes too and be the role model for other women.

“Both men and women should feel free to be strong,” said Watson, a UN Women Goodwill Ambassador. “It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum, not as two opposing sets of ideals.”

What's Feminism? It's all about the ability, wisdom and freedom to make choices, decisions and be independent: whether one can choose to stay at home or go to work, to make choices about their studies, vocation, grooms, to have kids or not to have and have a hair-cut or not. Most of the choices we can make today, is because of progressive Directors like G.Premkumar.

Clearly, a film's quality has a lot to do with the people who are funding it. It's the producers and their concerns that decide a film's fate. G.Premkumar, the director himself is the producer of Pirate's Blood, Penn Ullam, Pooviriyum Pulari. So, it was easy for him to make his dream, imagination take the form in the media and could offer superior, edgier, women-centric films. Premkumar, the Director and Producer of 80's, 90's and also of this 21<sup>st</sup> C is an example to say filmmakers of the past had social awareness, especially, Gender Equality.

In Indian Context Cinema is the continuum where lyricists, music – composer, singers, Cinematographer, Art-Director, Choreographer, Director, Dialogue Writer, actors, dancers' special effects, dubbing artists meet. That's why the innumerable songs in Indian films where the heroine's feelings and struggles are finding the best medium in songs and certainly in all the eight films there are songs which proclaim that Premkumar is a feminist in every sense. Even in his Hollywood film one of the three heroines sings a song herself both in on and off screen.

**Limitations of the Study:** Besides scene-wise women representation the researcher wanted to gauge the women to women (FI) and Male to Male Interactions(MI), which couldn't be materialized due to the researcher's immobility to visit India where the films were shot due to lock-down restrictions.

**Reccomendations:** Future studies can be on different directors who work sincerely towards more representation of women off and on the screen.

## **Conclusion**

Eventually, this study helps to contribute to literatures on gender discrimination in films by offering an inquiry into the gender representations in Premkumar's films of all times. The results indicate that the representations of women are highly satisfactory in his movies. At the same time, gender bias is prevalent more in movies till today and this study insists on more representation of women in films. There should be many women centric films where they should be shown in very high positions and they can be set role models in taking very significant decisions in the emancipation of women.

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***Model Minority: Embarrassing Difference or Proud Identity?***

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**Abstract**

For over a century, Asians have been represented as “the other” on the American screen, which is very different from “I”. Nowadays, as the immigration situation and mainstream ideology are changing in the US, Asians have gradually become the so-called “model minority” on the recent American screen. But what are the new images, compared to those old, cliché-ridden ones? This paper examines this question by analyzing Crazy rich Asians from three aspects: the portrait of “Asian body”, the visualization of the “model minority” idea, and the popular narrative techniques of using stereotypes. The author argues that traditional clichés about Asian American people adapt themselves to today’s global capitalization context. As a result, new narrative techniques are employed by directors and scriptwriters, new images are shaped in which old stereotypes are represented in a mild way. But the basic logic of Asianization has never been changed.

Keywords: Asian American Stereotypes, Model Minority, Global Capitalization

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## Introduction

The “images of Asian Americans on the American screen” has been a conflict issue for over 120 years, literally as long as the history of film. Since 1897 when Thomas Edison made a short documentary named *Arrest in Chinatown*, Asian people have always been represented as “the other”, which means different from “I”, in the eyes of “I”. Their “otherness” is based on their “differences” in every respect. For all these years, this fact constantly provokes racial conflicts both on the screen and in society. A reshaping of images of Asian Americans has always been demanded. When it comes to our age, as the migration situation and the mainstream ideology are changing in the US, It is an opportune time to launch this reshaping. So it’s not surprising that on today’s screen, we see the visualization of the ‘Model Minority’ idea has become a vital issue. It’s a huge topic in a huge context, but today, we won’t go back to the XIXth century. We will mainly focus on one movie, *Crazy Rich Asians*. Because this movie allows us to observe all the key aspects of this important issue.

I guess all of us can recall the summer of 2018 when everybody was talking about this movie. Indeed, the movie has achieved extraordinary commercial success. It’s impressive that in the first week of the premiere, Asian Americans represent 40% of the total audience, whereas the percentage of the Asian American population is 5.8% in the US, according to 2017’s census data. What is even more surprising is that this movie has received plenty of good reviews from Asian American audiences. A typical one is the following:

...there was no obvious stereotyping . . . instead (it showed) the nuances of Asian women’s experiences across generations.<sup>1</sup>

By examining the reviews through Rotten tomatoes, we can find that a large number of the audience hold positive reviews saying there are no or few “traditional clichés” in this movie. But this is indeed, very questionable. What do they mean by “no obvious stereotyping”?

We can break this question down into three parts:

- What are those obvious stereotypes that have been removed?
- Are they really absent? Or are they still there but in another form?
- If those old obvious stereotypes are completely absent, are there new ones created?

With these questions in mind, we are going to re-examine the movie from three aspects, which are :

- The portrait of “Asian body” in this movie ;
- The representation of the idea of “Model Minority” in this movie ;
- The narrative techniques of using stereotypes.

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<sup>1</sup> Allyson Chiu, An All-Asian Cast and No Martial Arts: Why the “Crazy Rich Asians’ Movie Matters,” The Washington Post, April 26, 2018, URL:[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/04/26/an-all-asian-cast-and-no-martial-arts-why-the-crazy-rich-asians-movie-matters/?utm\\_term=.70f3584ec1db](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/04/26/an-all-asian-cast-and-no-martial-arts-why-the-crazy-rich-asians-movie-matters/?utm_term=.70f3584ec1db)

## Asian body

Needless to go back to the last century when the otherness of the Asian body has been shaped: Fu Manchu with his slanted eyes and long nails. Mr. Yunioshi with his bucktooth and a strong accent. Dragon lady with her fringe, peaked eyebrows, and sharp nails. We can easily find all typical characters given to the “Asian body” in more recent movies. As an example, Jackie Chan or Jet Li. Their small stature is always emphasized by comparing with their partners or opponents of other races. And they always look less mature than their female companions. There’s a clear teenagerness about them which is emphasized when they are with women. Scholars use the word “desexualization” of Asians to describe this process. As for Asian women, it’s the contrary, their bodies are always sexualized with exotic clothing. They are often portrayed as a combination of a little girl and a woman. Their sexiness is not visualized with the female curve, but with teenage girl's body and innocence of their faces.

Given this context, *Crazy Rich Asians* is truly different, we see the sculptured male body in the super handsome male lead, Nick Yang, as well as in other male roles. They are tall, muscular. Their bodies are presented as a part of the landscape of this movie. Of course, this is a love story movie, which means, not like an action movie, its main target audience is women. That’s why male bodies are represented in this way. But what we’re emphasizing here is the clear white gaze. Nick Yang is called “Asian bachelor”. This is a complete western point of view. Because no Asian would describe another Asian as an “Asian”. So when he is called “Asian bachelor”, he meets two criteria: wealthy enough and western enough, with his British accent, perfect suit, and British manners. Of course, the actor Henry Golding himself is British. But the casting of this actor is proper, for this corresponds perfectly to the general logic of this movie that I’ll prove in a little bit.

The white standard manifests itself violently in the female lead. Throughout the movie, Rachel Chu’s body is constantly judged by everybody. The first time is at her friend, Peik Lin’s house, Peik Lin’s father says: “She is a hottie... smart, beautiful. Not like those K-POP skanks with no brain, big eyes, and small backsides, she has an amazing backside. This is Gold Standard.” So we see that he praises her for her non-Asianness, for her body doesn’t meet the Korean standard. The second time is at Yangs’ house, Nick Yang’s grandmother says: “The shape of your nose is auspicious.” This is a typical Chinese comment. And grandmother presents a traditional Chinese point of view. At the same time, the camera focuses on Eleanor Yang’s disapproving face. The third time is before the wedding, Rachel asks her friends to help her dress up for the party. Her friends suggest her to make “eyebrow triage, root crimps, and eyelid tape... And they dress her with the plum Balenciaga, the peach Chloe, the Giambattista, all the Bottegas, and that Jason Wu with the deconstructed ruffles...” With the makeup and all these dazzling brands, they succeeded in making her body non-Asian enough in appearance, therefore, she finally got an admission ticket for this group of people.

After analyzing both male and female bodies in this movie, we see a general logic here, which is that: In this movie, all Asian bodies are judged by the white standard. And there is a pathway for Asian people to meet the white standard to some extent: consuming. For whiteness is purchasable. In other words, you can just buy whiteness by consuming certain brands, by speaking with a certain accent, which is also

purchasable, for Nick Yang got his accent by being educated in the British elite education system.

### Images of “Model Minority”

This leads us to the next topic, images of “Model Minority”. For Rachel Chu and Nick Yang, this couple interprets perfectly the idea of Model Minority. They are well educated, they have good jobs and good incomes. We can’t say that’s completely stereotyping of Asians Americans, for this is, to some extent, a reflection of reality. Here’s the proportion of college graduates age 25 and older of different racial groups in the US:

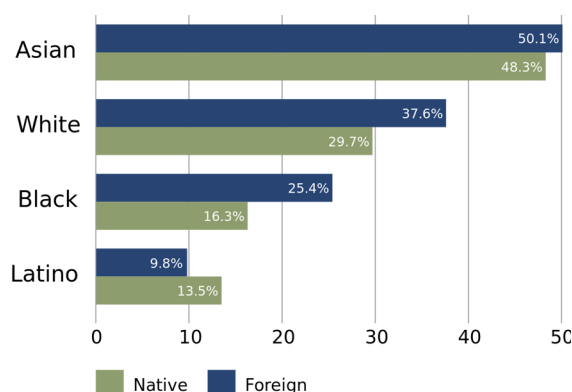


Figure1 : Proportion of college graduates age 25 and older of different racial groups in the US

Data Source: “US Census Bureau report on educational attainment in the United States”, 2003

And here’s the statistic showing the median household income of different racial groups:

| Race and Ethnicity                         | Population | Median household income(US\$) |
|--|------------|-------------------------------|
| Asian Ameicans                             | 18415198   | 87243                         |
| White Americans                            | 236173020  | 65902                         |
| Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific islander | 626054     | 61911                         |
| Some other race                            | 16253785   | 48983                         |
| American Indian and Alaska Native          | 2801587    | 44772                         |
| Black or African American                  | 41617764   | 41511                         |

Table1 : List of ethnic groups in the US by household income (without combination with other races)

Data Source: “American Community Survey 2018”, United States Census Bureau

In *Asian American Achievement Paradox*, Dr. Min Zhou and Dr. Jennifer Lee built a theoretical model. They found that compared to people in the sending country, most of the immigrants are positively selected in terms of the average level of education. But if we compare the proportion of college graduates of different immigrant groups with both the sending country and the host country, we can observe three categories. And many

Asian immigrant groups in the US, Chinese, Korean, Indian, Filipino belong to the “hyper selectivity” category, which means, in general, they have higher educational attainment than both their compatriots and native American people.

The question is how to explain this phenomenon. Of course from the social-cultural perspective, there are so many factors to take into consideration, including recent immigration policies of the US, the economic factors, cultural factors... But that’s not our topic of today. Here we are going to examine the explanation that the movie offers. How does the movie explain the success of the “Model Minority”?

The dramatic tension that leads the whole movie is the value conflict between Rachel Chu and Eleanor Yang. The movie keeps emphasizing Rachel’s Americanness. Rachel describes herself as a poor, immigrant nobody. Her mother said she was a “banana person” with yellow skin white heart. Eleanor commented on her, saying: “Pursuing one’s passion. How American.” Rachel is almost a perfect example of the American meritocracy. You come to this land as nobody, and as long as you follow your passion and work hard, you get success. After defining what is American, the movie puts everything that is not American in another box, and then puts a Chinese label on this box. You have traditions, collectivism... in this box. And all these, in this movie, are incarnated by Eleanor Yang. She describes herself just as, not Rachel, not American. And the end of the story shows that the American value is the ultimate winner, and the Chinese value loses. Here, we suddenly found ourselves in an old narrative, which is that: in a world of duality, the East represents tradition, an ancient, immobile empire, collectivism’s oppression of the individual, the West represents exploration, the pursuit of dreams, of personal values. This is the big narrative that we’re all familiar with, it has appeared since the Enlightenment and has been developed in the 19th century. As Hegel’s critics on China in *Lectures on the philosophy of history*:

...they have no sense of development in their mind, but only a culture that stabilizes within its principle...<sup>2</sup>

This story has been constantly recounted for centuries, as an indispensable part of the self-establishment of Western Modernity. This big narrative adapts itself to the current context and popular media, but the basic logic has never changed. It generates so many prototypes of characters in our era. Take the example of Eleanor Yang, we can easily recognize her as a typical tiger mother. And tiger mother is one explanation of the success of the Asian Model Minority. Why Asian students are always good in school? Because they have their tiger mothers who push them. This explains this phenomenon reassuringly. Because these kids are considered as intelligent but without leadership and creativity. So they are happy to contribute to society under the leadership of white people.

From this perspective, we can consider the Model Minority narrative as an episode of that big narrative in our age of global capitalization. As long as we are still in this big narrative, Asians are forever “the other”. Their otherness may not be the clothing or the body, but their value. As we’ve mentioned, body otherness can be dissolved by

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<sup>2</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the philosophy of history* (Lecture given by Hegel during the winter semester 1827-1828 in Berlin, included in French version *Leçon sur l’histoire de la philosophie*, Éditions Gallimard, 1954, p134 [our translation])

consuming. So we see the position of Asians in global capitalization has been confirmed: good labor and good consumer.

### **Narrative techniques of using stereotypes**

Lastly, we are going to see the strategy used by new American movies and TV series to make this narrative seem less offensive.

Simply put, it's about exaggerating stereotypes, thus, the common stereotypes are deconstructed. This montage sequence is a good example. In 30 seconds, we see all the common stereotypes here, Kung Fu, Asian nepotism, the language, and Asian people look so unnatural in front of a camera. These clichés that we're already familiar with, here are fragmented and represented in the way of collage. Thus, these clichés are removed from their original context, their critical meanings are deconstructed but the comic effects are produced. Also, this kind of joke works only in one case, that is, only Asian people can use these stereotypes to make jokes. Because otherwise, it would be racism.

This strategy is so commonly used that we can observe it in almost any recent film and TV series where there is an Asian role. For instance, the tiger mother role in *Fresh off the boat* played by Constance Wu who likes to force her kids to go to Asian weekends school, she always justifies herself by saying: I'm an Asian mom. Also, Han in *2 broke girls* prints his name on his T-shirt. And when Jian Yang in *Silicon Valley* exaggeratedly plays the language barrier.

Also, we may think of Andrew Yang's "Math". In a word, this kind of humor can create comedy in movies, in series, and sometimes it can ease conflict in real life. And that explains why the audience's review was that there was no obvious stereotyping in the movie, actually there are plenty, as we proved, but as they are represented in a mild way, audiences don't feel their aggressiveness.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, in this movie, we see the possibility of turning embarrassing differences into identity capital, at least it can be a source of humor that makes your movie popular all over the world. But at the same time, we must not be too optimistic. Because this humor is based on the idea of Asianness, this idea, and any of its interpretation are all part of the white supremacy narrative. We didn't mention it because it's not our topic, but the discriminative images against dark-skinned Asians are so violent in *Crazy Rich Asians*. It is good to have a movie like this to make us laugh about things we used to avoid mentioning, but we must be vigilant when laughing, because we still have a long way to go to reach a real understanding of differences.

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***The Changing Perception of the Chinese on American Policies in the Post  
COVID-19 Pandemic Era***

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**Abstract**

Chinese perception of humiliation threat has been deeply rooted in their mind because of China's early encounter with Western and Japanese imperialism. According to a number of studies (Chen & Garcia, 2016; Gries et al., 2011; He, 2018; Zhang, 2002), the century of humiliation starting from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century has greatly affected Chinese understanding of their self-identity and perception of behaviors from external world. Chinese perception of humiliation threat has contributed to their tendency of putting themselves in the place of victim when interacting with other countries and inclination to nationalism. However, has such perception changed with the accelerated rise of China's power in recent years? To explore the present perception of Chinese college students on U.S. policies on China, online questionnaires were distributed to undergraduates in United International College and semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summer of 2020. It is found out that while 68.5 percent of respondents still regard most American policies on China as provoking humiliation, they have been fully aware of their personal bias given by the history and tried to view it more objectively. Moreover, regarding Sino-American relationship, although most respondents perceive current American policies towards China as quite unfriendly, they consider the U.S. as an opportunity rather than an enemy and regard China as a competitor rather than a victim. This study also revealed that even in the post COVID-19 era – a special moment of deepening conflicts between these two nations, 90.5 percent of respondents actually have a friendly attitude towards the U.S. and are looking forward to more mutually beneficial cooperation. This study is expected to contribute to an updated American understanding towards Chinese college students' perception of foreign policies and identity as Chinese in the post COVID-19 era.

Keywords: National Image, Chinese College Students, American Foreign Policies

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## **Introduction**

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, although conflicts between China and the U.S. still exist due to historical, political, and cultural factors, in general, there is a tendency of increasing cooperation and friendliness. Starting from 1972 when the U.S. President Nixon made his first visit to China, followed by the establishment of formal Sino-American diplomatic relations in 1979, this relationship has been mutually beneficial in aspects of economic development and cultural communication.

However, with the accelerated rise in China's national power after more than three decades of deepening economic reform and "opening up", while the economic ties between China and America have become more closer, the competition behind it is also increasingly intensified. From the "Rebalancing of Asia and the Pacific" initiated by the Obama government, "Trade War" initiated by Trump administration to the U.S. government constant blame on China for the coronavirus pandemic, America's hostility and containment towards China have become increasingly apparent.

The reasons for the change in America's attitude can be deduced from the popular "China Threat" rhetoric, which has been subjected to diverse interpretations and explanations. In general, China threat mainly refer to its threat to the balance of the existing international power system (Halper, 2012), U.S. security (Whiting, 1996) and U.S. hegemonic position (Ravenhill, 2006). It is worth noting that as China's national strength grows, there also seems to be a change in China's attitude toward the U.S., which has gotten tougher. In the trade war, China had once imposed the same amount of tax on U.S. goods as the U.S imposed on China, regarding it as a counterattack. Moreover, the National People's Congress also passed the Law of the People's Republic of China on safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2020 May 21, despite the critique from Western Countries.

Therefore, the author believes that at this special moment of deepening conflicts, it is necessary to have a better understanding of the Chinese college students' perception of the U.S. policies, especially considering that there are not many articles focused on researching the views of Chinese younger generation towards Sino-U.S. relations. The author considering exploring the views of China's younger generation of vital importance because they are the future leaders of China and their attitude towards the U.S. could have key implications to the future Sino-U.S. relationship to a certain degree.

## **Literature Review**

To deepen and broaden my understanding of the research topic, the author endeavors to find articles that could give answer or provide valuable information to these three questions: how is perception defined? what is Chinese perception of the U.S.? what are the influential factors that formed such perception? The findings are summarized in the following in three sections.

### **The national image study**

Researches on people's perception of another country are normally named the

national image study. Study on the national image, as the name sounds, is research about the construction and perception of a country's national image. Starting from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the deepening of globalization, more and more countries' governments have become aware of the importance of national image construction, which also contributes to the popularity of national image study.

The current study on the perceived images of other nations is mainly from the social psychology perspective. Kunczik (1997) defined a perceived national image as "the cognitive representation that a person holds of a given country and what a person believes to be true about a nation and its people" (p.47). For Boulding (1956), the perceived images are the 'total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure of the behavior unit or its internal view of itself and the universe' (p.423).

How could the national image be examined? According to Herrmann (1985; 1997), national image can be categorized as imperialist, barbarian, enemy, rogue, degenerate, hegemon, neutral, child, patron, ally and protégé depending on the character of foreign policy towards one's own nation, capability compared to one's own nation and the cultural level compared to one's own nation (as cited in Zhang, 2002, p.23). Similarly, Alexander and Levin (2005), try to examine the image of a nation from three structural features of interstate relations including goal compatibility, relative power and relative culture status. There are also other methods used to conceptualize the national image. For example, Wang (2000) argued that one nation's image of another country are characterized by three S's including subjective, stable and selective, and they are related to stereotype of a nation or people affected by history, experience and self-image (as cited in Li & Chitty, 2009, p.2)

Li & Chitty (2009) conclude the mainstream study on the national image into two aspects, noting that "national image study should comprise private frames associated with perceived images of other nations, and public frames referring to projected media images of other nations by framing theory" (p.1).

The private frames of the perceived image of other nations are mainly about how people perceive another nation. The "perceivers" could be groups of people with different identity such as the general public, the political elites or scholars. Zhang (2002) concludes the perceivers in the national image into five groups including state as a unitary actor, predominant leader, decision-making elites, influential elites and the general public (p. 28). The "perceived" also varies, it could be about people's perception of a nation as a whole, or just its people, or one aspect of the country such as its economy or political system.

The projected media image of other nations is another main topic on the study of national image. In the media, a country's national image is usually portrayed from different aspects. As Li and Chitty (2009) stated, "the examination of portrayed media images of a given country needs to be cognizant of multi-dimensionality" (p.3). Generally, the projected media image are mainly perceived from the aspect of valence and salience, where salience mainly refers to the total amount of news stories appeared on one particular newspaper during a certain period and valence mainly referred to the tones, be it positive or negative when talking about one country.

## Chinese perception of the U.S.

The author found that Chinese perception of the U.S. is mainly focused on these three following aspects.

### 1) Chinese Perception of Sino-American relations

Chinese perception of the U.S. is a quite broad concept to explore. A great number of scholars (Deng, 2001; Gries et al., 2011; Kennedy, 2007; Nathan & Scobell, 2012; Zhang, 2015) focused on researching the Sino-American relationship in the eye of Chinese. Most of these researches (Deng, 2001; Kennedy, 2007; Zhang, 2015) are conducted by content analysis, examining articles or journals published by Chinese academics or political elites. Only Greis et al. (2011) used survey to explore the attitude of Chinese college students towards certain U.S. policies on China. This has shown a possible research gap, that is, the majority of the research on Chinese perception of Sino-American relationship are actually about the views of Chinese scholars studying this field but not that of the general public. This could be understandable considering scholar's words are of importance to government leaders and may affect a country's foreign policy. However, overwhelmingly using such an approach could also pose problems because different scholars may use different methods in selecting representative articles and thus the study of perception could become the author's subjective summary of the image portrayed by those selected articles.

Regarding the Sino-American relationship, most of the perceptions, no matter from Chinese college students or scholars, are predominantly negative. Descriptive words such as hegemony, threat, security, intervention are repeatedly mentioned. Deng (2001) and Kennedy (2007) both argued how the U.S. is regarded as a hegemonic superpower in the eye of Chinese academics and analysts. In the meanwhile, "threat" is another word that is frequently used to describe Chinese perception of Sino-U.S. relations. Greis et al (2011) categorized the threat that U.S. poses to China into humiliation and military threat and concluded that the "perceived humiliation threat had a much stronger impact on U.S. Policy preference than did perceived military threat"(p. 17). Besides, threat considering energy security, territorial integrity and influence in Southesat Asia is also mentioned(Nathan & Scobell, 2012, p.2; Zhang, 2015, pp. 187-188).

### 2) Perception of the China/U.S. National image

People's perception of a country's national image is another topic that is frequently explored by scholars(Chen & Garcia, 2016; Yang & Liu, 2015; Zhang 2002; Zhang, 2010). While the author only found a few articles examined how Chinese perceive the national image of the U.S., a great number of articles talked about how people around the world, especially Americans, perceive the National image of China.

Among them, the projected media image of a nation is the main topic explored by scholars. Yang and Liu (2015) examined China's official media perception of the U.S. by conducting a content analysis of the coverage of *People's Daily* and found that during the 11-year period from 2000 to 2011 the overall media portrayal of the U.S.

showed “a coexistence of two completely opposite images -- positive in economic-trade and other/non-critical issue areas but negative in political-ideological, military-strategic, and U.S. role in world affairs” (p. 399). The result agrees partly with the research of Zhang (2002), where he summarized that most Chinese authors have a positive perception of the performance of the U.S. economy and thought China should learn from it (pp. 235-238).

### 3) Chinese Perception of American people

According to the author’s research, a few academics (Lin, 2012; Luo, 2019, Ma, 2015) also try to explore the Chinese perception of American people. In their articles, Chinese “perceptions” of Americans are generally defined as “stereotypes”, which is a kind of “over-simplified, over-generalized, fixed, commonly shared and relatively homogeneous views of one social category of people held by another”(Ma, p. 7). The research by these three scholars generated similar results. As Ma (2015) stated, Chinese millennial college students generally hold positive stereotypes towards American, describing them as outgoing, untrammelled, enthusiastic and so on; however, the intensity of these positive stereotypes is not intense or strong and few negative stereotypes such as arrogant, rude and hypocritical also exist (pp. 40-42). Their study could be enlightening to my research, considering we have the same research object, that is, Chinese college students.

## **The influential factors of the formation of the perception/ national image**

### 1) The media

It is found by the author that the media is considered as the most impactful channel in the forming of people’s perceptions by a number of scholars (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009; Wang, 2014; Xie & Page, 2013; Zhang, 2010; Zhang, 2012). As McCombs and Reynolds (2009) concluded, “the news media exert significant influence on our perception of ... the most salient issues of the day,” (p. 1). Similarly, Xie and Page (2013) stated clearly in their article that in the age of omnipresent mass media, “peoples’ perception of other countries are undoubtedly influenced by how these countries are portrayed in local and international media,”(p. 855). In respect of the Chinese perception of Americans, media is also considered as the most influential one. As Wang (2014) stated, the data of a survey by *Global Times* in 2005 showed that 62.7% of Chinese urban residents learn about the U.S. through the mass media (p. 49).

### 2) Other factors

Some articles that looked at other factors that may influence people’s perception of a country. At a macro level, the possible factors include the strategic ties, the similarity of the political system between China and other countries and so on (Xie & Page, 2013, pp. 858-860). At a micro level, the influential sources can be family, peers, school and organized education (Ma, 2015, p. 46); Besides all these factors discussed above, Luo (2019) mentioned that people’s understanding of their own identity and their cultural background could also be factors that affect how they perceive foreigners (pp. 29-30).

## **Methodology**

The main objective of this article is to assess Chinese college students' perception of U.S. policies on China and explore the potentially influential factors that help to form their perception. Based on related study of national image, the author conceptualized Chinese college students' perception of U.S. policies on China into four aspects including salience, valence, characters of U.S. foreign policies and perceived capability of the U.S; based on which a survey is designed and semi-structured interviews followed.

## **Participants and Procedures**

A combination of survey and interviews is used for this research. The survey was conducted from July 15 to July 22 and generated 53 valid results. All the respondents are students from United International College (UIC), among which are 17 males and 36 females. Regarding their grade, 26 respondents are year-two, 12 students are year-three, and 12 students are year-four. There are only three year-one students.

To better understand the result of the survey, the author consequently conducted semi-structured interviews to have an explanatory analysis of the data provided by the survey. Five interviewees were selected randomly by the internet program Random Number Generator. All interviews last about 40 to 60 minutes and were conducted via WeChat voice call. The information of the five interviews are listed in the following: Qin Yao, year-two, majoring in Media Art and Design; Luo Feicheng, year-three student, majoring in International Journalism; Shen Xinyan, year-four, majoring in International Relations and Politics; Yang Mingsong, year-three, majoring in Human Resources and Yi Lanjing, year-four, majoring in Applied Economics.

## **Key Findings**

### **Salience, valence, and character of U.S. policies on China**

As shown in table I, seven questions were asked to examine the attention(salience), attitude(valence) and specific impression(character) Chinese college students have towards U.S. policies on China.

It is found that most of the respondents read news about U.S. foreign policies very frequently: 92.4% of the respondents have read such news within three days. It could be indicated that most respondents are in fact quite interested and concerned about U.S. policies on China. Besides, all of the interviewees recalled the most recent U.S. policies they see as the policy about overseas students studying in the United States. "I remember the most recent news I've seen about America's policies is their restriction on international students," said Qin Yao. "I consider it's somewhat unfair."

Moreover, the survey data also showed that most of the respondents regard U.S. policies on China as quite unfriendly. When asked about why they regard U.S. policies on China as unfriendly, three out of five interviewees compared the U.S. attitude in the past with that of the present and said America's attitude towards China actually changed a lot in this decade. Shen Xinyan, who scored U.S. policies on China as unfriendly (4) said "I remember the U.S. helped China a lot in the past... in fact,

China's entry into WTO was largely helped by the U.S. and then China's economy started to boom." She continued, "however, the recent policies such as tariff increase on China's exports and its blame on China for the Covid-19 pandemic can no way be seen as friendly policies."

Regarding their specific impression of U.S. policies on China, the survey has found that while a majority of respondents still regard most U.S. policies on China as provoking humiliation, intend to raise Chinese people's anger and being hegemonic, almost one-third of respondents stayed neutral or disagree on such discourse. Qin Yao, who stayed neutral on this question told the author that she thought such an impression is actually only prominent in the older generation but not including the Z generation. "My parents and grandparents always feel so angry when they see some U.S. policies that may hurt Chinese interest," Qin said, "but most of my friends do not think like this." The interview also gave the author some extra findings of the characters of U.S. foreign policies in the eye of Chinese college students. Words such as "aggressive", "attacking China", "changeable", and "unwise" were used.

Besides, an overwhelming amount of respondents think they have subjective views of U.S. policies on China, which contains their personal bias. This indicates that most of them actually think their perception of U.S. policies, such as provoke humiliation, intending to raise Chinese people's anger or being hegemonic may be somewhat biased. 2 out of 5 interviewees said their interaction with friends or families contributes to their bias, two said the bias comes from the media and one said it's from the history. Yi Lanjing thought that her bias mostly came from family and friends. "Although I got the most information of U.S. policies from the media, I have more direct contact and talks with people around me," she said, "when some of my friends complained about the unfair treatment they have had in the U.S., I could feel that I see the U.S. and its policies as much more unfavorable."

**TABLE I**  
**Chinese College Students Perception of U.S. Policies on China**

| Statements   | Answers              | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|----------------------|-----------|------------|
| When have you seen any news article about U.S. policies towards China recently?  | Within one day       | 35        | 66%        |
|  | Within three days    | 14        | 26.4%      |
|  | Within a week        | 1         | 1.9%       |
|  | Within fifteen days  | 3         | 5.7%       |
| What do you think of the overall attitude of U.S. policies towards China?  | Very friendly (5)    | 0         | 0%         |
|  | Friendly (4)         | 0         | 0%         |
|  | Neutral (3)          | 11        | 20.8%      |
|  | Unfriendly (2)       | 30        | 56.6%      |
|  | Very unfriendly (1)  | 12        | 22.6%      |
| How much do you agree with the following statement: "A majority of U.S. policies on China mean to humiliate/insult or raise the anger of Chinese." | Totally agree (5)    | 15        | 28.3%      |
|  | Agree (4)            | 22        | 41.5%      |
|  | Neutral (3)          | 10        | 18.9%      |
|  | Disagree (2)         | 6         | 11.3%      |
|  | Totally disagree (1) | 0         | 0%         |
|  |                      |           |            |
| How much do you agree with the following statement: "A majority of U.S. policies on China are hegemonic."  | Totally agree (5)    | 20        | 37.7%      |
|  | Agree (4)            | 18        | 34%        |
|  | Neutral (3)          | 9         | 17%        |
|  | Disagree (2)         | 6         | 11.3%      |
|  | Totally disagree (1) | 0         | 0%         |
| Do you think you have personal bias in your perception of U.S. policies on China?  | Very much (5)        | 1         | 1.9%       |
|  | A lot (4)            | 12        | 22.6%      |
|  | Some (3)             | 32        | 60.3%      |
|  | Little (2)           | 7         | 11.2%      |
|  | No (1)               | 1         | 1.9%       |
| How much do you agree with the following statement: "U.S. policies on China are reasonable policies made based on America national interest."      | Totally agree (5)    | 4         | 7.5%       |
|  | Agree (4)            | 7         | 13.2%      |
|  | Neutral (3)          | 20        | 37.7%      |
|  | Disagree (2)         | 16        | 30.2%      |
|  | Totally disagree (1) | 6         | 11.3%      |
| Do you think your perception of U.S. policies on China will affect your attitude towards the U.S. as a whole?                                      | Quite a lot(5)       | 5         | 9.4%       |
|  | A lot (4)            | 25        | 47.2%      |
|  | Some (3)             | 19        | 35.8%      |
|  | Little (2)           | 2         | 3.8%       |
|  | No (1)               | 2         | 3.8%       |

### **Influential Factors of Chinese College Students' Perception of U.S. Policies on China**

Regarding the factors that affect and form Chinese college students' perception of U.S. policies on China, it is found that news media is regarded as the most common and impactful way affecting Chinese college students' perception of the U.S., followed by their interaction with friends and families. According to the interview results, to get information about U.S. policies, instead of viewing articles from Chinese media outlets, 3 out of 5 interviewees actually favor looking at articles from international media outlets such as BBC, Financial Times, and Wall Street Journal. Shen Xinyan explained that such a reading habit may have something to do with the objectivity and informativeness of the news. "I think the news on policy issues from BBC and Financial Times was more objective than Chinese media," she said, "when I read news about the Trade war on Global Times, I felt the article just try to inflame me about the U.S. wrongdoing but in fact did not say objectively about how Chinese citizens could be affected." This echoes with the opinion of Taylor (1997) who observed that news coverage in media are packaged to be more entertaining or exciting rather than intrusive or informative (p.3). Other channels such as the articles from WeChat public accounts and videos from famous Youtubers and politics commentators that may affect their views of U.S. foreign policies were also mentioned. For example, Yang Mingsong told the author that instead of those famous news outlets, he mainly got information about U.S. policies from articles posted on North America Oversea Student Daily, a popular Wechat public accounts.



Lastly, regarding Chinese college students' perception of China's self-identity., the majority of respondents (69.8%) agree with the statement that "China will always love peace in the future and will not practice hegemonic acts". The interview result showed that respondents' belief in China's peace-loving character may be closely connected to China's traditional culture. 2 out of 5 interviewees mentioned the Chinese traditional ethical concepts such as "benevolence"(互惠 Hu Hui), "justice"(公正 Gong Zheng), "Confucius – win people by virtue"(孔子-以德服人 Yi De Fu Ren) and "philanthropism" (博爱 Bo Ai). For them, because Chinese political leaders have also been exposed to this kind of traditional culture so China will always be a peace-loving country. The author thought the survey and interview results indicated that Chinese college students understanding of China's identity is affecting their view of U.S. foreign policies a lot, especially considering the huge cultural difference between these two countries.

**Table II**  
**Influential Factors of Chinese College Students' Perception of U.S. Policies**

| Statements  | Answers                               | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Which of the following ways help you to learn about the U.S. policies on China? (multiple choice; no more than two)   | News media                            | 51        | 62.2%      |
|   | Films, books and documentaries        | 10        | 12.2%      |
|   | Textbook                              | 1         | 1.2%       |
|   | Travel                                | 1         | 1.2%       |
|   | Interaction with friends and families | 19        | 23.2%      |
| Which of the following ways has had the greatest impact on your perception of U.S. policies towards China?  | News media                            | 44        | 83%        |
|   | Films, books and documentaries        | 3         | 5.7%       |
|   | Textbook                              | 0         | 0          |
|   | Travel                                | 0         | 0          |
|   | Interaction with friends and families | 6         | 11.3%      |
| Do you think the U.S. policies on China has affected the interest of you or your family members?  | Very much (5)                         | 2         | 3.8%       |
|   | A lot (4)                             | 7         | 13.2%      |
|   | Some (3)                              | 22        | 41.5%      |
|   | Little (2)                            | 14        | 26.4%      |
|   | No (1)                                | 8         | 15.1%      |
| How much do you agree with the following statement: "China is a peace-loving country, a victim of foreign aggression, a socialist country, a bastion of revolution, a force against hegemony, a developing country, one of the major powers, a country that loves international cooperation and an autonomous country." | Totally agree (5)                     | 6         | 11.3%      |
|   | Agree (4)                             | 16        | 30.2%      |
|   | Neutral (3)                           | 20        | 37.7%      |
|   | Disagree (2)                          | 7         | 13.2%      |
|   | Totally disagree (1)                  | 4         | 7.5%       |
| How much do you agree with the following statement: "China will always love peace in the future and will not practice hegemonic acts"?"   | Totally agree (5)                     | 15        | 28.3%      |
|   | Agree (4)                             | 22        | 41.5%      |
|   | Neutral (3)                           | 12        | 22.6%      |
|   | Disagree (2)                          | 4         | 7.5%       |
|   | Totally disagree (1)                  | 0         | 0%         |

### Chinese College Students Perception of Sino-U.S. Relations

To explore how Chinese college students think of the respective role China and U.S. played in the Sino-U.S. relationship and its future development, three questions are asked.

It is found that while 43.4% of respondents regard the U.S. as a problem, 45.3% of them actually regard the U.S. as an opportunity. In the meanwhile, an overwhelming amount of respondents viewed China as a competitor (92.5%) for the U.S., rather than a victim (7.5%). The result showed an interesting contradiction among how Chinese college students define the role the U.S. played, which indicates an ambivalent attitude Chinese college students have towards the U.S. Luo Feicheng thought the U.S. is a problem for China and such problem may become bigger in the future. “ I think the conflicts between China and the U.S. cannot be resolved in the end because there is indeed some overlap between the core interests of both sides” said Luo Feicheng. Similarly, Shen Yanxing regards the U.S. as a problem, which is a blockage towards globalization. However, Yang Mingsong and Qin Yao disagree with this and regard the U.S. as a good opportunity. “although the gap between national power still exists, I think the U.S. is now showing a downward trend and many of the policies made by the government seem to be unwise.” said Yang Mingsong, “there is no doubt that the current situation provides an opportunity to China, a great opportunity for speedy development.”

Lastly, it’s quite surprising for the author to find that despite most respondents thought the Sino-U.S. relation may aggravate in the future, they still hope that China and U.S. can work together to shoulder the responsibility of a global major power in the post-COVID19 pandemic era. This has revealed the actual friendly attitude Chinese college students have towards the U.S. As Yang Mingsong once said during the interview, “actually a lot of my peers like the U.S. and they are also looking forward to went to study at U.S. universities.” He added, “However, the U.S. is becoming more and more hostile towards China.”

**Table III**  
**Attitude of Chinese College Students towards Sino-U.S Relationship**

| Statements  | Answers  | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|--|-----------|------------|
| Based on your perception of U.S. policies, do you think the U.S. is?  | Problem  | 23        | 43.4%      |
|   | Enemy  | 5         | 9.4%       |
|   | Friend   | 1         | 1.9%       |
|   | Opportunity                                    | 24        | 45.3%      |
| What role do you think China plays in Sino-U.S. relationship?   | Victim   | 4         | 7.5%       |
|   | Competitor                                     | 49        | 92.5%      |
| How do you think the U.S. attitude towards China will change in the post-COVID19 pandemic era?  | More friendly (5)                              | 1         | 1.9%       |
|   | A bit more friendly (4)                        | 4         | 7.5%       |
|   | Stay the same (3)                              | 11        | 20.8%      |
|   | A bit more unfriendly (2)                      | 24        | 26.4%      |
|   | More unfriendly (1)                            | 13        | 24.5%      |
| In the post-COVID19 era, when Sino-America relationship is filled with uncertainly, do you hope that China and the US can work together to shoulder the responsibility of a major global power in the future? | I hope, but I don't think this will happen     | 29        | 54.7%      |
|   | I hope and I think it is very likely to happen | 19        | 35.8%      |
|   | I Don't have such hope                         | 5         | 9.4%       |

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, the author set to explore the perception of Chinese college students on U.S. policies towards China in the post-pandemic era and the influential factors that help to form such perception. Using the national image theory as the theoretical framework, the author tried to evaluate such perception from the aspect of salience, valence, characters, and perceived capability through a survey and semi-structure interviews.

The research revealed that while the majority of respondents still regard U.S. policies on China as provoking humiliation and being hegemonic, most of them are fully aware of their bias that might be given by the shadow of history or thoughts that passed on from the older generation. The news media is recognized as the most impactful and common way for most respondents to know information about U.S. policies, followed by interaction with friends and families. Besides, internal factors such as Chinese traditional culture also affect their perception of U.S. foreign policies. The huge difference between Chinese and the U.S. culture: one promotes modesty and gentleness while one encourages competition and freedom may deepen some Chinese misunderstanding and dislike of U.S. foreign Policies.

Regarding Chinese college students' understanding of Sino-American relations, the number of respondents that regard the U.S. as a problem is similar to those that regard it as an opportunity, which revealed the ambivalent attitude Chinese students have towards the U.S. The author argued that this shows the Chinese younger generation is

struggling to define their new identity in the world arena after China's rapid development in recent years: while the history – the one-hundred-year humiliation are still casting a shadow on them, they are gradually gaining their confidence back. By viewing China as a formal competitor to the U.S. rather than a victim, they are putting themselves in an equal place with the U.S. instead of feeling inferior. It seems that Chinese college students is eager to prove themselves in front of people throughout the world, to announce to the world that China has become much stronger in these decades.

The research result also indicates that Chinese college students generally have a friendly attitude towards the U.S. even during the period of amounting conflicts and are looking forward to assuming more responsibilities as a global major power in the future. This possibly has something to do with Chinese traditional culture which promotes modesty and benevolence. In general, the author argues that instead of the past history, the cultural background which specifically referred to the traditional Chinese values and thoughts are much powerful in affecting their understanding of China's identity and the image of other countries. Future research considering how much the internal influential factors affected Chinese perception of China's identity and the images of other countries are needed.

In addition, the research result also provides a testing ground for the Power Transition theory, which predicted that as the power gap between an emerging power and hegemonic power narrows, the former's perception of the latter tends to become more contempt and discontent (Organski & Kugler, 1980; cited in Liu & Yang, 2015, p. 386). However, the result agrees little with such a theory. While some contempt emotion can be perceived from the words used by some interviewees, the result that a majority of respondents still have a friendly attitude towards the U.S. and are looking for more cooperation showed that the Chinese have not become contempt or discontent with the U.S. after the striking rise of China's national power.

Lastly, the research do have some limitations. Firstly, the survey samples are not large enough and thus the data might be not very representative of UIC students' perception of U.S. policies on China. Besides, the fact that the survey, as well as interviews, all targeted solely at UIC students without including other mainland colleges also means the data is very much not representative of Chinese college students as a whole. To have a better understanding and more accurate descriptive account of such a topic, replicable surveys are needed. Moreover, there have been some problems with the design of the survey questions: some of them seem vague and could confuse readers. One of my interviewer Shen Xinyan has once told me during the interview that regarding the question "what do you think of the overall attitude of U.S. policies towards China?", she felt confused about which period it is referring to, since during different period, the U.S. attitude is completely different. More clearly-defined questions with a specific time period are needed. Last but not least, the author also thought the research topic is somewhat broad which explored not only Chinese college student' perception but also its influential factors; this has resulted in the loose structure of this paper. For future research, the research topic should be narrowed down for deeper and more organized analysis.

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***How Cultures Matter on the Boundary between “Normality” and “Abnormality”:  
A Case Study for “Sharenting” in Taiwan***

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**Abstract**

With the recently controversial trend in “sharenting” on social media, the moral judgment of sharing their children online has been debated in Taiwan. This study argued that cultures influence the viewpoint of this moral issue in Taiwanese society. This paper begins with the original definitions of “normality” and “abnormality” in Chinese and then further discuss three main cultural perspectives (i.e., Confucianism, Christian theology of worldview, and the Lolita culture) on the moral judgment of “sharenting.” Based on the cultural perspective approach, this study revealed three cultural perspectives in “sharenting.” The first perspective is the Confucian, which views “children” as a possession owned by parents and further normalizes “sharenting” in social media. The second perspective is the Lolita culture, which is famous for an adorable clothing style, and thus justifies the “sharenting.” Conversely, under Christian theology of worldview, people who are abnormally interested in prepubescent children might be labeled “pedophilia.” These diverse cultures coexist in Taiwanese society, presenting that even when people living in the same society discuss the same issue, different cultural worldviews can mediate their thoughts. Comparative studies have widely examined different cultures from different countries, yet few have discussed different cultures within the same country. Therefore, this research emphasizes different cultural perspectives in the same society. It provides an exploratory discussion about the boundary between normality and abnormality germane to “sharenting.” Finally, implications and further directions are discussed herein.

Keywords: Culture, Cultural Perspective, Pedophilia, Lolita, Confucian

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## Introduction

“Sharenting” has gone viral on social media since 2017. “sharenting” refers to the phenomenon in which parents frequently post photos or videos about their children via social media (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). In 2017, the term “sharenting” became one of the most popular vocabulary words in the Collins Dictionary in the United Kingdom in 2017 (Castnet, December 3, 2017). With the prevalence of social media, “sharenting” has become collective behaviors around the globe. In the UK, each parent couple shares on average about 300 photos of their children online yearly, and each couple has posted 1,498 photos online by their child's fifth birthday (Nominet, 2016). Also, 71% of parents post their children's photos on social media at least five times a week (Parent Zone, 2017). In the Asian region, the Facebook fan page of Ciao-ciao, a Taiwanese child Internet celebrity, was created by her father when she was three years old. The page has up to 881,773 followers (The News Lens, September 6, 2017). Therefore, “sharenting” is a prevailing trend in Western countries and the Asian region.

Although “sharenting” has become popular on social media, some concerns for “sharenting” ensue. Previous studies have significantly focused on the risks, including children's privacy, safety, mental health, and other issues. Among these discussions, whether “sharenting” is an appropriate behavior is the core topic (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Siibak & Traks, 2019). Align with this research approach, research in cultural meanings of “sharenting” remains limited. However, this paper argues that examining cultural meanings helps us better understand “sharenting” for two reasons. First, the cultural perspective examines an issue in the long-term, and thus helps researchers to examine the evolution of “abnormality”. Second, the cultural perspective examines the interactions among technologies, society, and agents in a macrostructure level. Thus, it helps researchers consider multiple powers thoroughly (Kleinman, 1988 as translated in Chen, 1994; Radley, 1994). Therefore, this paper aims to examine the cultural meanings behind the social norms of “sharenting” based on the cultural perspective.

Adopted by the cultural perspective, this paper defined the social norms of “sharenting” as the boundary between “normality” and “abnormality” toward “sharenting” on social media. This paper firstly examined the literal definition of “normality” and “abnormality” in Chinese, and the definition of “abnormality” in three main medical approaches. Second, the study focuses on the cultural approach to discuss feeling attractions to children from perspectives of Confucianism, Christian theology of worldview, and the Lolita culture. The final section offers implications and other directions for further cultural research.

### **The Vague Boundary: The Original Meaning of “normality” and “abnormality” from English and Chinese**

The literal meanings of “abnormality” and “normality” are bound to each other. The word “normality” is defined as the opposite of “abnormality,” as is the definition of “abnormality” in Chinese. The term “normality” (i.e., 正常) was dated back in *Analects of Confucius*, a collection of conversations and ideas from Confucius and his pupils. The original meaning of “normality” referred to regular, usual, and not defective according to *Shuowen Jiezi*, the most reliable ancient Chinese dictionaries



around the second century (Ministry of Education, ROC, 2018; Sturgeon, 2018). Therefore, the original meanings of “normality” and “abnormality” do not only coexist but also in symbiosis. The relationship between the two is just like two poles of a magnet - neither one can exist without the other.

The definitions of “abnormality” and “normality” have constantly been changing throughout history. From the ancient Greek to the modern medical perspective, the meanings of “abnormality” and “normality” have evolved. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the theory of “Humorism” - suggesting that a human's body is composed of four “humors”, including Blood, Yellow bile, Black bile, and Phlegm - played a predominant role in Western medicine. This theory was first introduced by Hippocrates (460-370 BC) in medicine and then applied in mental health issues by Galen (129-201 AD). The definitions of “abnormality” and “normality” thus relied on the balance of these four “humors”, and the way of recovery was to make the four “humors” balanced again. However, with the development of bacteriology and anatomy, people began to focus on observational and countable diseases rather than perfect balance in contemporary medicine, with the measurement for abnormality relying on data (Frances, 2013). Recently, unsatisfied with merely taking data to depict the intriguing human mental world, other perspectives with different approaches arose.

### **Behavioral, Societal, and Cultural Perspectives on “Abnormality”**

Behavioral, societal, and cultural perspective are three prevalent approaches for the definition of “abnormality” in the modern medical field. The behavioral perspective derives from the biomedicine model, and its metatheory is “Descartian dualism”. This perspective has been widely applied in behavioral science field. This perspective mainly focuses on the overt symptoms, preventions, and treatments of physical diseases (Gentry, 1982; Radley, 1994). In this perspective, the “abnormality” is called as **disease**, which is a series of symptoms caused by a mental or physical abnormality in the biomedicine model (Radley, 1994). Because the behavioral perspective focuses on specific symptoms, “abnormality” is observable, measurable, and quantifiable as a diagnostic category in Western medicine.

Another prevalent approach is the societal perspective, which comes from the biopsychosocial model and medical sociology. The perspective focuses on how individuals’ experiences and feelings are affected by social factors, such as income, education, social class. This perspective refers to “abnormality” as **sickness**, which is a comprehensive assessment from both patients and doctors. Therefore, both the behavioral and the societal perspective examine “abnormality” based on the diagnosis from a doctor. However, the societal perspective also studies individual feelings and experiences to define “abnormality” (Engel, 1977; Radley, 1994).

The latest prevalent approach is the cultural perspective, which can be dated back to medical anthropology. Unlike previous two perspectives, the cultural perspective focuses on a complicate set of social practices (Radley, 1994), and examines collectively historical contexts, cultural meanings, and the cultural stigma in a macrostructure level (Kleinman, 1988 - translated by Chen, 1994; Radley, 1994). In a cultural perspective, “abnormality” is identified as a focus on **illness**, which is a cultural interaction among mental, psychological, and physical factors. Therefore,

“abnormality” in this approach is neither the diagnostic categories of symptoms nor the social impacts. It involves many different but related parts, especially cultures (Angel & Thoits, 1987; Wu & Hsu, 2011).

In conclusion, though different modern medical fields have strived for a clear definition of “abnormality”, the definition is inconsistent in different perspectives due to various metatheories. In behavioral perspective, the “abnormality” refers to **disease**, which is a series of symptoms caused by a mental or physical abnormality in the biomedicine model (Radley, 1994). In societal perspective, the “abnormality” refers to **sickness**, which is a comprehensive assessment from both patients and doctors. In cultural perspective, the “abnormality” refers to **illness**, which is a cultural interaction among mental, psychological, and physical factors. Therefore, the boundary between “normality” and “abnormality” is flexible. See **Table 1** for a summary of three prevalent perspectives in the modern medical fields.

| <b>Perspective</b>                   | <b>The behavioral perspective</b>                                     | <b>The societal perspective</b>                          | <b>The cultural perspective</b>   |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>Metatheory</b>                    | Biomedicine model   | Biopsychosocial model and medical sociology              | Medical anthropology  |
| <b>Domain of Medical Fields</b>      | Psychology  | Sociology  | Anthropology  |
| <b>Focus</b>                         | The overt symptoms, preventions, and treatments of physical diseases. | Social factors, such as income, education, social class. | Collectively historical contexts, cultural meanings, and the cultural stigma in a macrostructure level. |
| <b>Definition of the Abnormality</b> | Disease   | Sickness   | Illness   |

Table 1: A Summary of Three Prevalent Perspective in Modern Medical Fields.

To define such a flexible concept, the cultural perspective has two strengths for an examination of “abnormality”. First, the cultural perspective examines the long-term development of “abnormality” defended by cultural groups, and thus helps researchers to examine the evolution of “abnormality”. Second, the cultural perspective examines the interactions among technologies, society, and agents in a macrostructure level. Thus, it helps researchers consider multiple powers thoroughly (Kleinman, 1988 as translated in Chen, 1994; Radley, 1994). Therefore, this paper adopted a cultural perspective to examine how discourses shaped by different cultures discuss the “sharenting” in Taiwan.

### **Role of the Culture: Boundary for “Sharenting” in Taiwan**

Due to its colonial history governed by different cultural groups, Taiwan society roots in a hybrid of cultures (Harrell & Huang, 1994). Around the Ming Dynasty (roughly the 17<sup>th</sup> century), the Han people began to move from Mainland China to Taiwan, and eventually become the largest ethnic groups in Taiwan society. Subsequently, the

island was ruled by the Qing Dynasty in China. During these two Dynasties, traditional Confucian values were introduced to Taiwan society (Huang, 2005, March; Copper, 2014). In 1895, Taiwan was officially governed by the Japanese government. Soon after, the Japanese cultures were brought into Taiwan society (Wang, Wang & Liao, 2006). During the Second World War, the imperial government banned Taiwanese opera, and encouraged people to adopt Japanese names and learn the Japanese language (Grajdanzev, 1942; Chen & Zhen, 1984). These policies accelerate culture change from traditional Confucian to a blend of Japanese cultures.

In 1949, Chiang Kai-shek and his KMT party relocated to Taiwan, and their Confucian worldview was formally transformed into education systems (Roy, 2003). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Taiwan was supported by the United States as a buffer against China. As a result, during this period a lot of music, movies, and books were imported from the United States (Wu, 1988). Taiwanese young people of that generation absorbed American culture, and even studied abroad in the US (Wu, 1988). Therefore, traditional Chinese culture, Japanese culture, and Western values have all greatly influenced Taiwan society.

In a society with a hybrid blend of cultures, discourses about “sharenting” depends on which culture is more dominant. To examine how cultures have shaped the discussion of “sharenting”, this paper focuses on three dominant cultures, which are Confucian, Lolita cultures, and the Christian theology of worldview in Taiwan. The following paper was divided into three section. Each part of discussion began with an introduction of the cultural value of children. Then, a short historical overview of the cultural value was presented in each section. Finally, the “sharenting” under the culture was examined.

### ***Confucian social system: “Sharenting” as parents’ belongs***

In Confucian culture, social hierarchy is strongly embodied in families, and thus children have been commonly viewed as subordinates. The Confucian social hierarchy is represented by the “Filial piety,” also known as “Xiao” (孝) in Chinese. This concept refers to a virtue of individuals who respect their ancestors and parents. Since “filial piety” is a crucial virtue in the Confucian culture, younger people are asked to obey the elders (Wuang, 2010). As a result, they are subordinate to their parents.

To show respect for the elderly, youths are asked to obey and sometimes even make sacrifices for their parents. In one of Confucian classic literatures, “*Kongzi Jiayu*” (孔子家語) (206-220 BC), a man named Zeng Shen (曾參) was famous for the virtue of “filial piety”. He once was punished by his father harshly because he had intentionally hurt his father's plants. Worried about his father's feelings, Zeng Shen pretended that he was fine after the punishment though he was severely injured. Zeng Shen even apologized for wasting so much of his father's energy on punishing him (Sturgeon, 2018). Other examples for the relationship between elders and youths is in several old Chinese sayings. The “*Book of Change*”, known as “*Yijing*” (易經), stated that “the elder is respectful, while the youth is of a low social rank.” Also the “*Book of Rites*”, known as “*Liji*” (禮記) (475-221 BC) stated that “the elder is kindness, while the youth is obedient” (Li, 2010). These examples presented a Confucian value that the elders typically have more power than the youths.

In a particular historical period, buying children was allowed among the aristocracy, and sexual interest in children was acceptable for people in high social status. In the Three Kingdoms to the Six Dynasties (220-589 AD), aristocrats started to buy young girls as wives, as well as young boys as sexual objectives. This phenomenon was recorded in a historical collection, “*History of the Northern Dynasties*” (北史) (643-659 AD). Since then, buying young girls and boys has become a way to show off one’s social status. During the Ming Dynasty of the fifth emperor (1425 -1435 AD), keeping courtesans was banned in the palace. Some royal family replaced young boys with those courtesans (Zeng, 1993; Cheng, 2008). In a classic literature, *Fantastic Tales* (草堂筆記) by Ji Xiao Lan (1789-1798 AD), wealthy families used to buy young boys around ten years old (Lee, 2010), and once young boys were replaced by others once they had grown up (Cheng, 2008).

Throughout the Qing Dynasty, young boys had already become symbolic properties, representing their owners’ social status and wealth (Cheng, 2008; Lee, 2010). However, this did not happen among ordinary people, who had neither the chance to buy children nor dared to break the social hierarchy (Wuang, 2010). For example, before the Qing Dynasty, several imperial laws were written to rule peoples’ behaviors. Yet, these laws were only applicable to ordinary civilians rather than the aristocracy (Li, 1996). Therefore, when we define “normality” based on Confucian culture, it is necessary to consider hierarchy. See **Figure 1** for a summary of the “sharenting” under the Confucian culture.

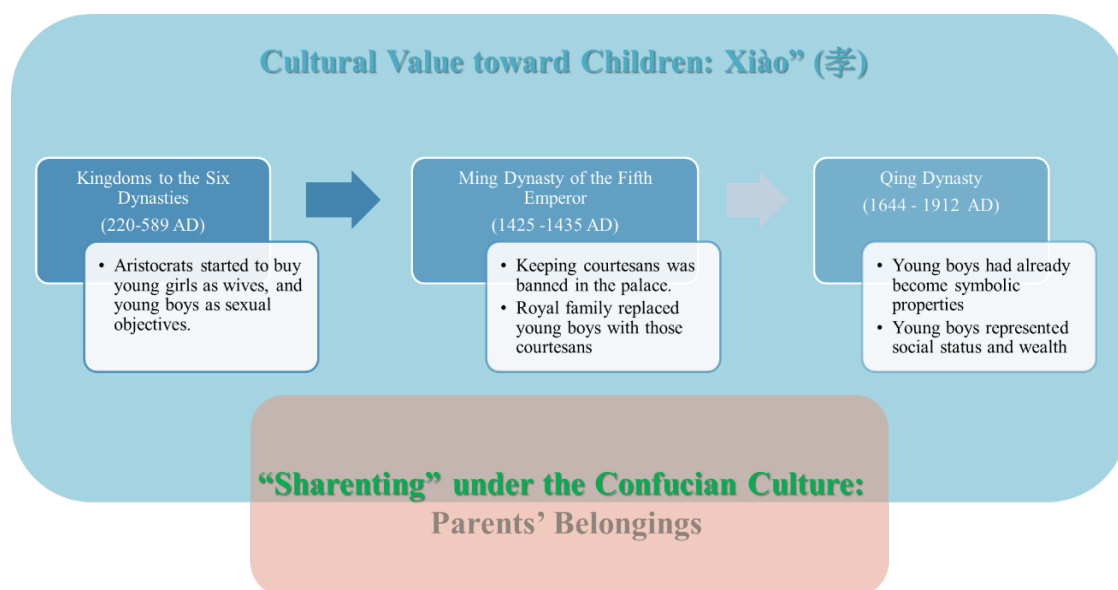


Figure 1: A Summary of the “Sharenting” under the Confucian Culture.

In sum, children may be valued as parents’ belongings under the Confucian social system. A Confucian classic collection, “*Xiao Jing*”(孝經) (475-221 BC) stated that individuals’ bodies - every hair and bit of skin - are from their parents, and so they must prevent any injury or wound on themselves as best as possible. Another Confucian classic collection, “*Student Rules*”, known as “*Di Zi Gui*” (弟子規) (1661-1722) stated that if one receives an injury to one’s body, then it will make the parents worries; if one cannot protect oneself well from being hurt by others, then this will shame the parents (Feng, 2009). This quotation implies that a child’s body belongs to the parents. Aside from the family system, the statement of “the elder is kind, while

the youth is obedient” is also common throughout Confucian society. Therefore, under this perspective, parents “sharenting” their own children's images are acceptable because it is just like sharing anyone who shares their own body on social media.

### ***Japanese Lolita culture: “Sharenting” as subculture and fashion***

Cuteness is an essential element in the Japanese Lolita culture, and thus sweet children are admired. In Japanese, Lolita can be used as a noun or an adjective. As a noun, the term Lolita (ロリータ) can be used as a noun to refer to a specific group. While Lolita refers to young girls under 15 years old in its narrow definition, it can also refer to young ladies with baby-face looks and a sweet appearance in its broader definition. As an adjective, the term Lolita is also used to describe a particular fashion style presented by dreams, gorgeousness, lacy apparel, and other adornments (Lin & Tu, 2012; Lin, 2014). Corresponding with the term “Lolita,” another term “Shotacon” (ショタ) is created to refer to young boys whose sex characteristics are still immature (Lin & Tu, 2012). Because both Lolita and “Shotacon” are embodied in the cuteness, children under the cultural value of the Japanese Lolita culture are presented as adorable objects for people to be admired.

The term Lolita originated from the controversial novel *Lolita Complex* by the Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov in 1955. Later, it was translated into Japanese (Chen, 2017). Then, the Lolita culture has been developed as a pop culture and influenced Japanese society. This culture originated from the “Kawaisa” culture covering from 1960 to 1973 when Japan experienced its first economic depression since the Second World War. Following the recovery of the economy and the reflection of their identities, the Japanese began to discuss the relationship between sociocultural structures and individuals. At the same time, the United States, like with Taiwan, had great power to affect Japan's economy, politics, and military through the “Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan” (日本国とアメリカ合衆国との間の相互協力及び安全保障条約). As a result, the Japanese viewed the United States as both a powerful country and an aggressor. Under this contradictory psychological effect, the “Kawaisa culture” was created in the 1970s (Takeuchi, 2010; Kuo, 2015).

Following the development of the “Kawaisa culture,” the Lolita culture soon emerged. In the 1980s, with the development of comics, film, and television using the theme of “Lolita,” the term “Lolita Complex” (ロリコン, roughly pronounced “lolicom”) became very popular in Japan. Ensuing the prevalence of “Lolita Complex,” a new term “Shotacon Complex,” is also created to refer those who are crazy about young boys (Lin & Tu, 2012; Lin, 2014). By the late 1980s, Lolita fashion had formed by a combination of the “Kawaisa” culture and various clothing style, including European Baroque, Rococo style, British Victorian court costumes, as well as the traditional Japanese princess story of Taisho Romanticism. Soon after, Lolita fashion has been introduced to other countries, including Taiwan, the United States and even its origination, Russian (Lin, 2014). As a result, Lolita fashion is now a unique style of clothing around the globe. See **Figure 2** for a summary of the “sharenting” under the Lolita culture.

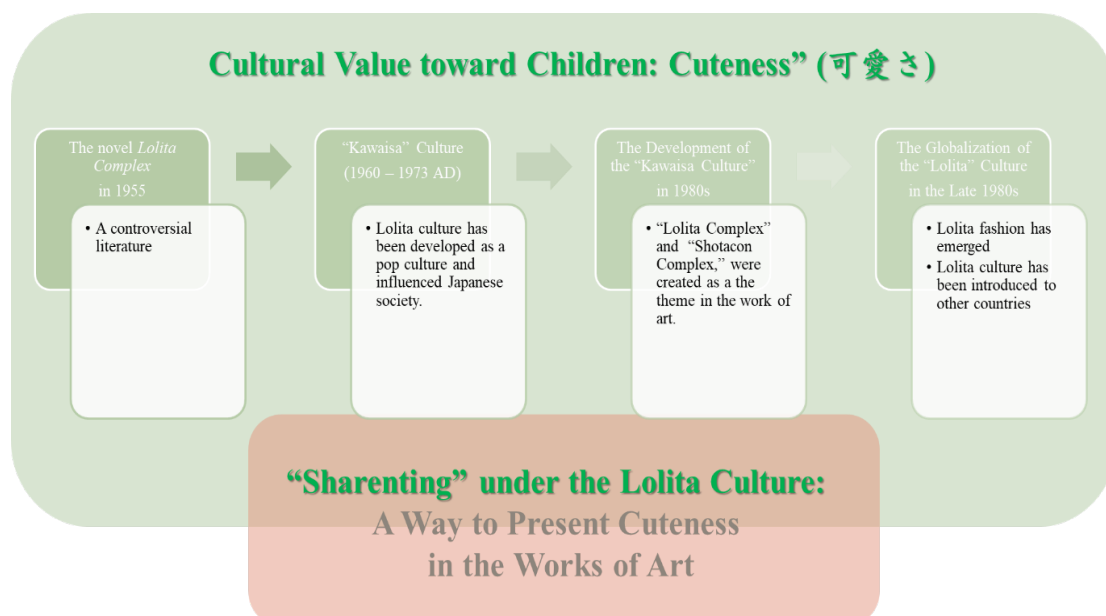


Figure 2: A Summary of the “Sharenting” under the Lolita Culture.

In the Lolita (girls) and Shotacon cultures, sharing children with a dreamy clothing style is acceptable. Because the Lolita culture has been introduced as a clothing style or other form of arts, a strong feeling of young children may be viewed as an inspiration of Lolita-themed works (Lin & Tu, 2012). Therefore, “sharenting” could be viewed as a way to present naivety, purity, and cuteness in the works of art (Lin, 2014).

### ***Christian theology of worldview: “Sharenting” as a risk for pedophilia***

In the Christian theology of worldview, children represent the purity of humans. For example, in the *Holy Bible*, a man once tried to stop little children from touching Jesus’ hands, yet Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:13-16 in New International Version). Another chapter stated that once Jesus asked people that “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He then called a little child unto him, set him in the midst of them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1-4 in New International Version). These quotations reflected a cultural value that children are humble, kind, and close to the kingdom of heaven.

In other Christian literatures, children were also portrayed as pure ones. In *The Sistine Madonna* (Madonna di San Sisto) by Raphael Sanzio, the image of Christ is shown as an innocent and pure baby (Lin, 2006). In *Christie's Old Organ*, also known as *Home Sweet Home*, one of the most famous Christian children's novels in China since the 19th century. In this story, a little girl is represented through the purity and innocence of Saint Mabel (Lai, 2012). The Christian theology of worldview might influence how western people perceive children (Chang & Li, 2010). Psychology studies found that American participants perceived a childlike face as a feeling of warmth and kindness (i.e., Berry & McArthur, 1985; Berry & Brownlow, 1989).

Under discourses rooted in Christian theology of worldview, pedophile is a complete opposite. Pedophile is a psychological term referring to an individual who is sexually obsessed with children. Throughout the Western history, pedophile is anything but new, and its cultural meaning has been changed. The English term “pederasty,” meaning loving, derives from the Greek word “παιδεραστία” (paiderastia), which consists of the words “παῖς” (boy) and “ἐραστής” (lover). The Latin term “pæderasta” is borrowed from “The Symposium,” an Ancient Greek philosophical text by Plato (Laws & O'Donohue, 2008). During the Renaissance era, the term “pederasty” was first introduced in English, written as “pæderastie,” meaning the sexual relationship between adult males and boys. Unlike the negative meaning in the current, the sexual relationship originated from a moral and educational institution during ancient Greece (Ueng, 1997). However, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, pedophilia have become a negative term, and is considered to be a form of mental illness. Since the 1980s, a substantial amount of research about pedophilia has been conducted (Laws & O'Donohue, 2008).

The cultural meaning of the pedophile might have been influenced by Christian theology of worldview considering its medical truing point from neutral to negative. The Western knowledge of psychology originated from the ancient Greek “Humorae theory,” systematically organized by Hippocrates (460-379 BC) and extended by Galen (130-201 AD). This theory proposed that a disease was attributed to the imbalance of four fluids in the human body. However, after the end of the Roman Empire, religious trials replaced systematic psychotherapy. As a result, during the people with an abnormal mental condition were viewed as being taken over by the devil and evil spirits, and they had to be forgiven and returned to normality after undergoing confession and punishment (Frances, 2013). The possession of evil spirits was equivalent to the labeling of “evil” on mental illness. Since then, mental illness has tightly linked to the cultural stigma.

Because pedophilia is one form of mental disorders in modern western psychology, it can be linked to the “evil” in Christian theology of worldview. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth (DSM-V), the “pedophilic disorder” is categorized as a paraphilic disorder, and pedophilia refers to people sexually fantasizing about prepubescent children (APA, 2018, p.685). DSM-V once officially changed the definition of the “pedophilic disorder,” and the change was harshly objected by Christian associations, such as American Family Association (Charisma News, November 1, 2013). As a result, the APA had to release a public statement.

The statement by the APA showed the negative cultural stigma on pedophilia. In the statement, the APA called the change as an “error,” and promised it will be revised soon. At the end of the statement, APA emphasized its great efforts to protect the young from sexual abuse and exploitation. Throughout the statement, the word “those” is used to refer to “people who sexually abuse and exploit children and adolescents” and “people with the pedophilic disorder.” Therefore, this statement seems to link pedophiles to “abnormality” (i.e., abuse, exploit, disorder). See **Figure 3** for a summary of the “sharenting” under the Christian theology of worldview.

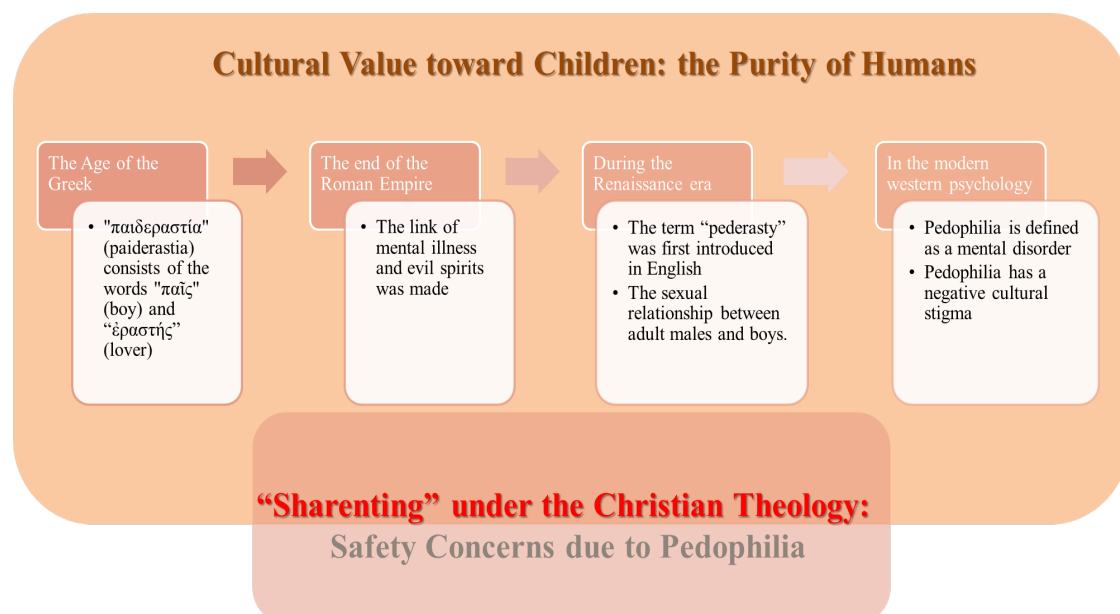


Figure 3: A Summary of the "Sharenting" under the Christian Theology of Worldview.

In Taiwan, the discussion of "sharenting" can be shaped by the negative viewpoint on pedophilia under Christian theology of worldview. That is, aligned with Christian theology of worldview, some people have safety concerns about "sharenting" because they are worried that images on social media may be exploited by strangers. A text analysis study may show a correlation between Christian theology of worldview and the discussion of "sharenting" in Taiwan. The study revealed that news coverages from Western countries mostly linked pedophiles to the negative and immoral concepts in Taiwan (Liao & Zhuang, 2005). The study didn't examine whether these western coverages were framed by Christian theology of worldview, and whether the readers' attitudes toward "sharenting" will be influenced by these coverages. However, if the cultural sigma of the pedophilia has been greatly introduced in Taiwan, then the discussion of "sharenting" might be shaped among Taiwanese readers. As a result, safety concerns about "sharenting" will be raised.

### How Cultures Matter on the Viewpoints of "Sharenting"

This study revealed three worldviews of cultures toward "sharenting" on Facebook in Taiwan based on the cultural perspective approach. Based on the Confucian worldview, children's bodies are viewed as a possession owned by parents. Under this perspective, sharing their own children's images is just like sharing their own body on social media. Therefore, "sharenting" is an acceptable social practice because parents, as any online user on social media, presenting themselves is nothing abnormal. In the Lolita culture, presenting adorable young children is acceptable because it can be viewed as arts, popular cultures, or identification. Accordingly, both of these cultures have an influence on people in terms of normalizing "sharenting." Conversely, under the discourse of Christian theology of worldview, people who fancy children might be viewed as pedophilia and be called for treatment. Thus, people abnormally interested in prepubescent children might be recognized as abnormal. These diverse cultures coexist in Taiwanese society, presenting that even when people living in the same society discuss the same issue, different cultural worldviews can mediate their thoughts.



From the case study of “sharenting,” the boundary between “normality” and “abnormality” in social media is a dynamic process of cultural hegemony. Gramsci (1992) pointed out that cultures constantly interact with each other, and this occurs neither naturally nor inevitably. For example, the meaning of Lolita has transformed from controversial romance into a popular culture since its first debut in 1955 (Chen, 2017; Lin, 2014). Through its development within Japan, the Lolita culture has added new elements, and then it was introduced to other countries even where the original novel first arrived. Although “Lolita Complex” has been given a brand new meaning, it has been dramatically challenged worldwide under pressure from anti-pedophilia movements. Gramsci (1992) proposed “culture hegemony” to explain that it is constant for dominance, competition, and powers' formation. For instance, debate among the “Lolita Complex” remains in Taiwan. Such as domestic companies and local authors, supporters viewed “Lolita Complex” as an art genre by exporting or creating works related to Lolita. Opponents consider the “Lolita Complex” as pedophiles and propose cuts in any form of Lolita works (Lin, 2014). It showed that cultures have kept interacting with others.

### **Limitations, Future Research Suggestions, and Conclusions**

There are several limitations that we should consider for interpreting the results. First, as an exploratory study, this paper lacked empirical evidence to support the presumption. Therefore, future studies should conduct empirical research to examine the cultural meanings of “sharenting” further. For in-depth interviews, future studies can further examine why and how different cultures play roles in interviewers' interpretations of the same themes in the same society. Qualitative text analysis could compare different self-reference terms with other terms. Terms such as “Lolita Complex,” “Pedophilia,” and “I/We” should be examined to see whether terms representing different cultural frameworks will affect people's attitudes toward the same theme in the same country.

Second, while this study revealed three cultural perspectives in “sharenting,” cultural perspectives are not limited to these three. Other “sharenting” issues include children's privacy, social pressures, and social media effects. Therefore, follow-up studies could further explore issues other than the three in this study to examine their cultural meanings further. Future research could also discuss contexts other than Taiwan to discuss the cultural meanings of “sharenting” among different societies.

The study contributes to an exploratory discussion about the boundary between normality and abnormality germane to “sharenting” by examining different cultures in the same country. This paper provided a cultural perspective to examine “sharenting” in-depth rather than the currently prevalent approach focusing on its concerns. Finally, this research argued that examining cultural meanings helps research to have a thorough understanding of social practices, especially in such a hybrid cultural discourse in social media. Therefore, future communication studies should examine not only micro-level but also sociocultural level of issues to fit in the constantly changing contexts in social media.

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*Viewers' Attribution of Criminal Acts in La Casa De Papel Series  
Presented on Netflix Digital Entertainment Platform*

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**Abstract**

In the last two years, there has been a huge investment in entertainment by the Saudi Government. In 2018, Netflix was launched in Saudi Arabia and soon become popular. This study examines Saudi viewers' perceptions of the Netflix Spanish series La Casa de Papel because this series went viral. The study focuses on Saudi viewers' motivation for watching the series and their justification of criminal behaviors. A sample of 400 Saudi students from the age range 18–35 answered the survey. The results indicated a significant correlation between viewing time, empathy with characters, and external attribution of criminal behaviors. The Robin Hood pattern of robbery implied in the series was acceptable to 62% of the sample. The role of the Professor as the mastermind of the operation was attributed to the necessity of having an outsider to assist the gang members by 85% of the respondents.

Keywords: Binge-Watching, La Casa De Papel, Saudi Arabia, Attribution, Netflix, Crime

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## Introduction

Netflix is an American entertainment company founded by Reed Hastings and Marc Randolph in 1997, originally specializing in the sale and rental of integrated DVDs (Jenner 2014). In 2013, the company became a producer of movies and TV programs, beginning with the first series of *House of Cards*. In 2014, Netflix offered a huge online library of films and TV shows, including original content produced by Netflix, in many countries including the United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, North and South America, the Netherlands, and the Caribbean (Jenner, 2014). Netflix was introduced in Spain in 2015 and become the second most viewed online streaming platform within a year (Fernández-Gómez & Quevedo 2018).

The original programs produced by Netflix now include movies, series, documentaries, and stand-up comedy shows (Wikipedia). In 2018, the number of subscribers worldwide had increased to 137 million. Netflix was introduced in Saudi Arabia in 2018. A number of motives for watching Netflix series were identified. For new viewers, these included relaxation, hedonism, and engagement. Binge viewers were motivated by aesthetics (program quality), the communal aspect, relaxation, and hedonism (Pittman & Sheehan 2015).

*La Casa de Papel* is a Spanish police series broadcast by Netflix. It is the story of a heist that begins with the kidnapping of students who are kept as hostages in the Spanish Royal Mint by eight criminals: Tokyo, Berlin, Moscow, Oslo, Nairobi, Rio, Denver, and Helsinki. The main character, known as the Professor, directs the operation remotely. The team printed about €2400m in banknotes. The *La Casa de Papel* was very popular with Spanish and international audiences, as 34.438 viewers rated the series at 8.8 out of 10 (Rosero, 2019). The series is also known as *Money Heist* and *The Professor*. This current study attempts to explore these two research questions (1) What attracted Saudi viewers to the *La Casa de Papel* Spanish series? (2) How do Saudi viewers explain/justify criminal behaviors and acts? The following section will explore studies of Netflix series, studies on binge-watching behaviors, and an illustration of attribution theory.

### *Studies on Netflix series*

Netflix series have been the focus of research in the area of media, film, cultural studies, and technology. For instance, Bridge et al. (2020) researched suicide rates after the release of the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*. Rosero's (2019) Spanish study presented a discourse analysis of *La Casa de Papel*. Smith's study (2015) focused on the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*. Cano (2015) conducted an audience study on the Netflix original series *Narcos*. Bates's thesis (2019) studied the Netflix series *You*. Darwish and Ab-Ain (2020) analyzed *Jinn*, the first original Jordanian Arabic-language supernatural Netflix.

Rosero (2019) conducted a discourse analysis in Spanish of *La Casa de Papel*. This study noted that the series represented a non-functional society and an oppressive state and legal system. In addition, throughout the dialog, the series made associations between a series of conceptual metaphors about crime and legal activities. These metaphors include: "crime is business, crime is work, and robbery is war." The message is that robbery is a legitimate way to make money. The author also pointed to how the



choice of music, the masks, the appearance, and the names of characters had significant meanings. The music, *Bella ciao*, was popular during the student protests of the late 1960s. This signifies a perception of robbers as revolutionaries acting against an oppressive system. Furthermore, the masks played a role in the deception of authority; robbers and hostages used the same masks resulting in the shooting of a hostage by the police. In short, the analysis of the study supports the idea that *La Casa de Papel* presented robbery from the state as a socially understandable action.

Also, a recent study reported a significant increase in the suicide rate in the 10 to 17 age group in the United States in the months following the release of the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* (Bridge et al 2020). The series is about a young girl who committed suicide after enduring thirteen incidents. The character left 13 audiotapes for the individuals blamed for her suicide. Unfortunately, the release of the first season of *13 Reasons Why* was associated with 195 suicides in 2017

*Narcos* is a series released in 2015 that narrates the story of Columbia's powerful and violent cartels. Cano's (2015) study, which compared Colombian and American audiences' perceptions of the *Narcos* series, revealed that Colombian viewers tended to refer to the national history and drug trafficking that affected their country.

### ***Netflix and binge-watching***

Binge-watching is one of the main concerns addressed by specialists due to its consequences and health effects (Jenner 2014; Davis 2016; Fernández-Manzano et al 2016). Binge-watching has been identified as the viewing of two to six episodes of the same show in a single sitting. Studies have outlined health and social effects resulting from binge-watching of online TV streaming services like Netflix (Davis 2016). The Netflix strategy of releasing the whole season instead of releasing episodes over time (Izquierdo-Castillo 2015) has succeeded in increasing the popularity of Netflix and, this policy has encouraged binge-watching (Fernández-Manzano et al 2016; Jenner 2014).

According to Pittman and Sheehan (2015), Netflix viewers can watch all their favorite series and shows in just one session. They define "the voracious viewer" as a person who watches two or more episodes of the same series in one session. About 25% of participants watched a full 13-hour season in two days. Furthermore, Davis's (2016) study, which focused on the effects of binge-watching, reported that high television use was found to be associated with a number of issues, including poor cognitive function, disrupted circadian rhythm, and elevated risk of serious illness. The study found that there were social effects of binge-watching on family relationships, feelings of isolation, loneliness, and sleep patterns.

## **Methods**

### ***Sample***

The study sample consisted of 400 participants. As illustrated in Table 1, the sample was 18.4% male and 12.9% female. The proportion of those aged 20 to 25 was 56.8%, and 16.3% of those aged 25 to 30 were between the ages of 25 and 30. Those over the age of 35 were 4.5%. In terms of employment status, 60.5% were students, of whom 65.1% were male, and 57.7% were female. The proportion of employees in the private

sector was 11%, while workers in the public sector made up 14.5%. Those who were unemployed formed 9.3% of the sample.

| Participants Information |                         | Female |     | Male |     | Total |     |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------|-----|------|-----|-------|-----|
|                          |                         | %      | N   | %    | N   | %     | N   |
| <b>Gender</b>            |                         | 62     | 248 | 38   | 152 | 100   | 400 |
| <b>Age</b>               | 15–20                   | 12.9   | 32  | 18.4 | 28  | 15    | 60  |
|                          | 20–25                   | 58.9   | 146 | 53.3 | 81  | 56.8  | 227 |
|                          | 25–30                   | 13.7   | 34  | 20.4 | 31  | 16.3  | 65  |
|                          | 30–35                   | 7.7    | 19  | 7.2  | 11  | 7.5   | 30  |
|                          | Above 35                | 6.9    | 17  | 0.7  | 1   | 4.5   | 18  |
|                          | total                   | 62     | 248 | 38   | 152 | 100   | 400 |
| <b>Employment status</b> | student                 | 57.7   | 143 | 65.1 | 99  | 60.5  | 242 |
|                          | Private sector employee | 12.5   | 31  | 8.6  | 13  | 11    | 44  |
|                          | Public sector employee  | 8.9    | 22  | 23.7 | 36  | 14.5  | 58  |
|                          | House wife              | 7.7    | 19  | 0    | 0   | 4.8   | 19  |
|                          | Unemployed              | 13.3   | 33  | 2.6  | 4   | 9.3   | 37  |
|                          | Total                   | 62     | 248 | 38   | 152 | 100   | 400 |

Table 1. Demographics of sample

### *Measure*

The study used electronic surveys as a data collection tool. The researcher designed a questionnaire through which she made sure to achieve all the objectives of the study.

The validity of the questionnaire was tested by conducting honesty and consistency tests.

The researcher applied a stability test to a sample representing 10% of the original sample after analyzing the questionnaire and then reapplied the test to a sample of 5% of the participants two weeks after the first test, resulting in 86.4% stability thereby confirming the stability of the form and its powers for the application and generalization of results.

### **Results**

The outcomes of the data are summarized in four main sections: frequency of viewing the series, motives for watching the series, external attributions, and significant correlations. The motives section answers the first research question, “What attracted Saudi viewers to the *La Casa de Papel* Spanish series?” The second research question, “How do Saudi viewers explain/justify criminal behaviors and acts?” is explored in the sections on external attributions and significant correlations.

### 1- The frequency of viewing *La Casa de Papel* series

The data revealed that a total of 93.4% of participants watched the online streaming series of *La Casa de Papel*, while only 3.6% of respondents said they were not familiar with the series. Among the viewers, 244 were female, and 142 were male.

The collected data indicated that a total of 333 participants had watched all three seasons (see Table 2), while 96 participants had watched season one. Season two was watched by 75 participants, while only 37 participants watched season three. All three seasons were watched by 88.2% of males and 80.2% of females. The proportion of males who watched the first season of the series was 28.9%, compared to 20.6% of females. For the second season, the proportion of viewers was male 28.3% and female 12.9%. The third season was the least-watched season. It was viewed by 9.1% of the male and 3.2% of the female participants.

| Seasons watched          | Female     |     | Male       |     | T          |     |
|--------------------------|------------|-----|------------|-----|------------|-----|
|                          | %          | N   | %          | N   | %          | N   |
| <b>All three seasons</b> | 80.2       | 199 | 88.2       | 134 | 83.3       | 333 |
| <b>Season 1</b>          | 20.6       | 51  | 28.9       | 44  | 23.8       | 95  |
| <b>Season 2</b>          | 12.9       | 32  | 28.3       | 43  | 18.8       | 75  |
| <b>Season 3</b>          | 3.2        | 8   | 19.1       | 29  | 9.3        | 37  |
| <b>Total</b>             | <b>248</b> |     | <b>152</b> |     | <b>400</b> |     |

Table 2. The seasons of the *Casa* series watched in the study sample.

### 2- Motives for viewing *La Casa de Papel*

The data indicated that Saudi viewers watched the *La Casa de Papel* series for the following motives: entertainment, to gain information about security, to learn about crime in Spain, curiosity, to become aware of crimes involving robbery (See Table 3). Entertainment as a motive was identified by 78.9% of males and 76.2% of females. Entertainment was the main motive for watching the online series for 77.3% of the sample. Gaining information about security was the reason given by 7% of the respondents. Curiosity as a motive was in third place, with only 5.8% of respondents reporting that they were motivated by curiosity. Only 4% of the participants indicated that they watched the series to learn about criminal incidents in Spain. The motive “to raise awareness and to avoid the dangers of crimes and robberies” was indicated by 1.8% of the respondents.

| Motives                                    | Female     |            | Male       |            | T          |            |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
|  | %          | N          | %          | N          | %          | N          |
| Entertainment                              | 76.2       | 189        | 78.9       | 120        | 77.3       | 309        |
| Gaining information about security         | 5.2        | 13         | 9.9        | 15         | 7          | 28         |
| Curiosity                                  | 5.6        | 14         | 5.9        | 9          | 5.8        | 23         |
| Other motives                              | 4.8        | 12         | 3.3        | 5          | 4.3        | 17         |
| To learn about criminal incidents in Spain | 5.6        | 14         | 1.3        | 2          | 4          | 16         |
| Awareness of criminal risks and acts       | 2.4        | 6          | 0.7        | 1          | 1.8        | 7          |
| <b>Total</b>                               | <b>100</b> | <b>248</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>152</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>400</b> |

Table 3. Motives for watching *La Casa de Papel* by the participants in the study

### 3- External attributions

Participants assigned criminal actions to external attributions as reported in a number of explanations: empathizing with the characters, identifying the influential character, justifying the first crime, feeling joyful when the aims of the robbery are achieved, justifying the absence of the Professor from the location of the heist, perceiving the criminal figures as heroes, and accepting the Robin Hood pattern of the robbery.

#### 3.1. *Empathy with characters*

The data reported that participants felt sympathetic to the characters in the series. When asked, “have you felt sympathy for one of the gang characters in *La Casa de Papel*?” 24.8% of the participants said “always,” while 24.5% replied “mostly.” The number of respondents who said that they “sometimes” felt sympathetic was 38.8%. Only 4.3% of the respondents said they “never” felt sympathetic, while 7.8% selected “neutral” for this question.

Not only did the viewers feel empathy for the gang members, but they also hoped that the gangs would not be arrested by the authorities. About two-thirds of the viewers (68.8%), 275 participants, revealed that “they did not wish the gangs to be caught.” Conversely, 16.5% agreed that they “wished they were arrested.” Another 14.8% said they wished “that only particular characters were arrested.”

#### 3.2. *The most influential characters in the series*

The data indicated that the Professor was the most influential characters in the series from the point of view of 36.3% of the sample, as illustrated in Figure 1. Berlin was the second most influential character according to 27.5% of the participants, followed by Tokyo with 17.8%, then Nairobi with 10.5%. Rio was ranked fifth at 3%. Denver was placed in sixth position by 2.3% of the participants, although he was the most influential character. Lisbon, Stockholm, and Helsinki were the least influential characters. Only 2% thought that Lisbon was an influential character, and less than 0.5% said Stockholm and Helsinki were influential characters.

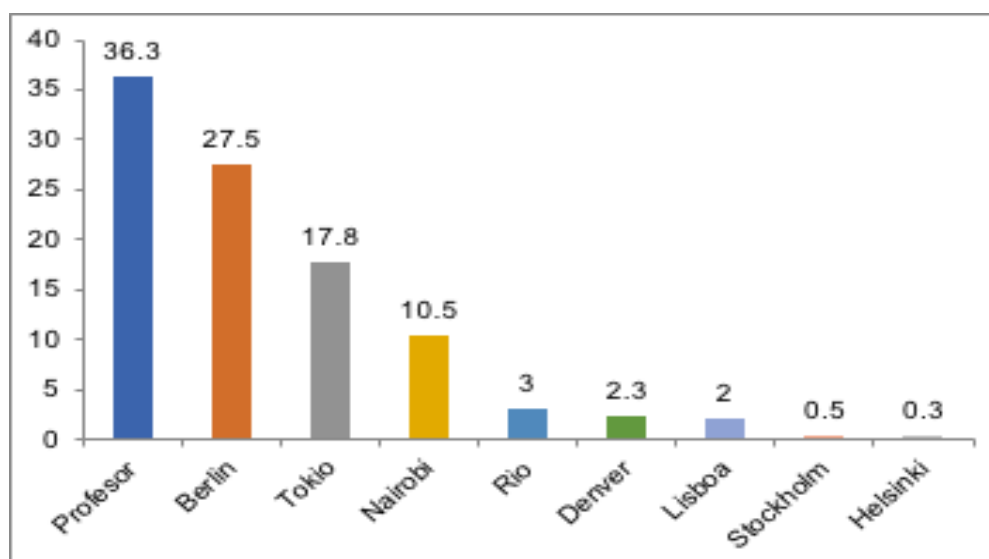


Figure1: The most influential character

When asked why the Professor was seen as the most influential character, more than half of the participants, 57.3%, referred to the character's creativity in acting and performing the role. "The ability to accomplish the mission" was placed second, as 31% of participants mentioned this reason. The character was liked by 19.8% of the participants because the character "was able to control his emotions." Lastly, 8% of the participants referred to the most influential character in relation to "masterminding the robbery."

### 3.3. Happiness when the mission was accomplished

The result assessing participants' feelings when the robbery was successful indicated that 206 participants (51.5%) felt "overwhelming happiness for their victory," and 104 participants (26%) said they felt a "kind of joy." Interestingly, 124 participants (31%) responded that they felt "worried about the possibility of the gang members being arrested." Only 42 participants, 10.5% of the sample said they felt "angry for not getting justice."

### 3.4. Justifying the first crime

The first crime in season one in the series consists of printing money rather than robbing money that was previously printed. Therefore, the participants were asked to what extent, if any, this crime was justifiable. As shown in Table 4, a total of 45 participants reported that they "totally agree" that the robbery was justified, and female participants exceeded the percentage of male participants for this option. Seventy-six participants consisting of 49 females and 27 males, reported they "agreed" that it was a justified crime. One hundred forty participants hold a neutral opinion on this matter. Sixty-one participants, mostly female, "disagreed" with justifying the robbery, and 78 participants "totally disagreed."

| The extent to which the first crime can be justified  | Total |     | Female |     | Male |     |
|---|-------|-----|--------|-----|------|-----|
|   | %     | N   | %      | N   | %    | N   |
| Totally agree   | 11.3  | 45  | 12.1   | 30  | 9.9  | 15  |
| Agree   | 19    | 76  | 19.8   | 49  | 17.8 | 27  |
| Neutral   | 35    | 140 | 30.2   | 75  | 42.8 | 65  |
| Disagree  | 15.3  | 61  | 18.5   | 46  | 9.9  | 15  |
| Totally disagree  | 19.5  | 78  | 19.4   | 48  | 19.7 | 30  |
| Total   | 100   | 400 | 100    | 248 | 100  | 152 |
| <b>chi-square: 9.498                      degrees of freedom: 4                      significance level: 0.050</b><br><b>contingency coefficient: 0.152</b> |       |     |        |     |      |     |

Table 4. Participants' perception of the robbery in season one.

This finding is consistent with the statistical indicators shown in Table 4, indicating differences, according to gender, between the participants in their opinions regarding justifying the first crime, with a chi-square value of 9.498, a significance level of 0.050, and a compatibility coefficient (0.152).

### 3.5. Justifying the Professor in *La Casa de Papel*

In all the robbery attempts, the main character, the Professor, was not at the scene of the crimes. He communicated remotely with the gang members during the operation. Accordingly, participants were asked their opinion about that. A high percentage (85.5%) of the participants reported that the Professor "needed to run the operation from the outside and warn the gangs about possible risks." Only 8.5% thought that it was because "his personality and nature are not violent or criminal." Only 6% thought that "the Professor is a weak and coward character." This finding highlights the fact that the majority of the participants assigned the actions of the most influential character, the Professor, to external attribution rather than internal attribution.

### 3.6. Representing the criminals as heroes

Table 5 below illustrates how participants perceived the role of the gang characters. About half of the sample, 47.8%, reported that the gang members are "victims of social conditions." Male participants who agreed with this were 102 in number, while 89 female participants thought of them as victims. A total of 75 participants (18.8%) thought of the characters as heroes. In contrast, 16.3% thought that the robbers were portrayed as role models. However, 40.3% of the sample thought the gang members were "criminals." The percentage of those who referred to the gang members as "criminals" were males, 33.6%, and females 44.4%.

| Participants' descriptions of the gang members' characters | Female |            | Male |            | Total |            |
|--|--------|------------|------|------------|-------|------------|
|  | %      | N          | %    | N          | %     | N          |
| Victims of social conditions                               | 35.9   | 89         | 67.1 | 102        | 47.8  | <b>191</b> |
| Criminals  | 44.4   | 110        | 33.6 | 51         | 40.3  | <b>161</b> |
| Heroes   | 13.7   | 34         | 27   | 41         | 18.8  | <b>75</b>  |
| Role models  | 10.5   | 26         | 25.7 | 39         | 16.3  | <b>65</b>  |
| <b>Total</b>   |        | <b>248</b> |      | <b>152</b> |       | <b>400</b> |

Table 5. perception of the gang members' characters.

### 3.7. The Robin Hood robbery model

The data attempted to assess the extent to which the researchers agreed with the criminals' behavior in stealing money from the rich and giving it to the poor, as in the scene where money was scattered from an airship, and people helped themselves to the money. Surprisingly, the data reported that more than two-thirds of the sample found this an acceptable idea. As shown in Table 6, it was reported that 30.8% of the sample answered "very acceptable," and 31% said it was "acceptable." Conversely, only 9.8% found it "unacceptable" to steal from the rich, and 5.9% found it "totally unacceptable." The percentage of those who answered "neutral" was 22.8%. This finding was supported by Rosero's (2019) analysis of the series which referred to Robin Hood form of robbery implied in *La Casa de Papel* series.

| Perceptions on robbing from the rich to give the poor | Female     |            | Male       |            | Total      |            |
|---|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
|   | %          | N          | %          | N          | %          | N          |
| Acceptable  | 34.3       | 85         | 25.7       | 39         | 31         | <b>124</b> |
| Very acceptable                                       | 25.8       | 64         | 38.8       | 59         | 30.8       | <b>123</b> |
| Neutral   | 23.4       | 58         | 21.7       | 33         | 22.8       | <b>91</b>  |
| Not acceptable  | 10.9       | 27         | 7.9        | 12         | 9.8        | <b>39</b>  |
| Not acceptable at all                                 | 5.6        | 14         | 5.9        | 9          | 5.8        | <b>23</b>  |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>100</b> | <b>248</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>152</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>400</b> |

Table 6. Participants' opinions on robbing from the rich and giving to the poor.

Not only did 62% of the respondents find the Robin Hood pattern of robbery acceptable, but they also predicted that it is possible for viewers to imitate the crimes presented in the series. When participants were asked "Do you expect teenagers to imitate crimes or the behaviour of kidnappers after watching the series?", 30 % of the sample answered "yes" while 51% said "no".

### Significant Associations

The data revealed that there are significant associations between the following variables. As displayed in Table 7, there is a statistically significant relationship between the frequency of viewing of the series and the acceptance of criminal behaviors presented in the series.

| The frequency of viewing the series / The acceptance of criminal behaviors | The frequency of viewing the series |              |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------|
|  | Pearson's correlation coefficient   | P-value      |
| The acceptance of criminal behaviors                                       | <b>**0.789</b>                      | <b>0.000</b> |

Table 7. Correlation between the frequency of viewing and the acceptance of criminal acts

This correlation highlights the role of online streaming content in accepting negative thoughts and behaviours. Indeed, when participants were asked “Have you ever changed one of your principles in terms of theft, crime, and violence after watching the series?”, 14% of the sample answered “yes” while 76% of the sample disagreed and 11% answered “neutral”. Although 14% of the sample is a low percentage, viewing the series by viewers who are younger than 18 years old may result in higher risks as their values about right and wrong are being constructed and influenced by internet contents. At the gender level, the proportion of males who expressed a change in their principles after watching the series was 21.7%, compared to 8.9% of females. The proportion of males who reported no change (70.4%), compared to 78.6 percent of females. For neutrals, their proportion was male (7.9%) and female (12.5%).

Secondly, the data revealed a statistically significant relationship between the empathy with the gang members' characters and the attribution of criminal behaviors and acts to external attributions, as indicated in Table 8.

| Empathy with gang members' characters / External attribution of criminal behaviors | Empathy and identification with characters |              |
|--|--|--------------|
|  | Pearson's correlation coefficient          | P-value      |
| External attribution of criminal behaviors   | <b>**0.698</b>                             | <b>0.000</b> |

Table 8. Correlation between empathy with character and external attribution.

Thirdly, the data revealed a statistically significant relationship between the scenario of the series and the favorable perception of criminal acts, as indicated in Table 9.



| The scenario of the online series<br>Perceiving criminal behaviors favorably | The scenario of the online series |              |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------|
|  | Pearson's correlation coefficient | P-value      |
| Perceiving criminal behaviors favorably                                      | **0.885                           | <b>0.000</b> |

Table 9. Associations between the scenario representing and audience's favorable perceptions of crime.

## Discussion

The results of the current study indicate a number of important findings that are related to previous studies and scientific theories. In line with Rosero's (2019) research, which reported that the discourse in *La Casa de Papel* characterized the robbers as heroes, the current study confirmed that 35% of the participants agree that the series represents the criminals as heroes and role models. The research also confirmed that the series supports the idea that the Spanish democratic system is unfair, and that it prevents true citizen empowerment. This finding explains the fact that 48% of the participants in the current study held the view that the robbers were victims of their social conditions.

The current study is consistent with a study (Raney & Janicke 2012), which emphasized the tendency of the viewer to follow the complex ethics of "morally complex characters," combinations of good and evil that have become increasingly evident in contemporary series such like *Dexter* and some police series. From this psychological viewpoint, it is clear that the majority of the participants in the study admire the characters of the Professor and Berlin. It is noteworthy that the Professor and Berlin both planned criminal operations. However, in the first season, only Berlin sacrificed his own life to ensure that the gang escaped.

The results indicated that the Professor is the most influential character. Also, almost 86% of the respondents justified the Professor being in a remote location "because he needed to direct the operation from a distance." However, some conversations between characters in the series indicated that the Professor was cowardly and weak. Lisbon said as much in season three, and Tokyo did likewise in season four. The participants' in the present research attributed the Professor's absence from the scene of the heist to external circumstances. This is in line with Rosero's (2019) psychological analysis of the character. Rosero points out that the Professor was portrayed in the series as a guardian angel, a father figure, and a teacher. The first two representations indicate that he would protect his team from evil, and he would never fail them, as he repeatedly did throughout the operations. At the same time, the teacher figure positions him as the master who knows everything, and thus, his role is to guide and direct his pupils rather than participate in their work with them.

It is also clear that the participants' attraction to the characters made them justify crimes and robberies as the result of bad external and social conditions and not blame the gang members. This is consistent with attribution theory, which suggests that individuals assign events to either internal or external personal circumstances (Mr. & McAfee 2014). Although the first series involved several serious crimes, such as kidnapping innocent school staff and students, trespassing on government property, and shooting at police officers, the majority of the sample considered the first robbery to be justified,

“just printing money, not stealing money from a person.” The current study highlights that 30% of the sample found the first crime justifiable, while 35% disagreed, and 35% held neutral opinions. This attribution to external circumstances rather than to the gang members was evident in more than one result, with many participants viewing the absence of the main character, the Professor, from the scene of the heist as remote management rather than cowardice.

The results were unanimous for the participants’ view of the gang members and the crimes carried out from a positive and justified perspective. They did not wish the criminals to be arrested. These results show the success of the series, which aimed to entertain by attracting the viewer to the characters. The aim was also the blurring of values and concepts like right and wrong. Viewers need to decide on what can be considered a legal crime and what is considered acceptable behavior. This is especially true of young viewers who may form values while watching the series, which is popular in Saudi Arabia, and imitate what they see.

The significant association between variables could be explained in light of attribution theory. The association between the frequency of viewing the series and the acceptance of criminal behaviors presented in the series could be explained by a build-up of familiarity and attachment with the characters. The familiarity leads to acceptance and justification of criminal behavior. This leads to the second correlation between empathy with the characters and external attributions. This can be explained by the tendency of viewers to overestimate situational factors when judging others, arising from the concept of selective exposure. The notion of favorably presenting characters who commit a series of crimes (Table 9) was also supported by Rosero (2019). The correlations presented in Table 9 have also been confirmed by another finding in the survey, which revealed participants’ opinions of the characters as heroes, role models, and victims of social circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

The study produced a number of important results, most notably justifying the characters’ criminal behavior and considering the perpetrators as heroes and role models. This indicates the ability of modern television series to reshape the value system of Saudi viewers. Participants tended to refer to external attributions like social pressures when judging the criminal characters. Indeed, the criminals were seen as heroes, role models, and victims of social circumstances by the majority of participants in the sample. The Professor character was positioned as the most influential character, followed by Berlin. Surprisingly, two-thirds of the sample agreed that it is acceptable to steal from the rich and give to the poor. Considering the popularity of Netflix’s production in the MENA region, it is recommended that future studies focus on assessing online streaming production from a cultural and critical standpoint.

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***Bollywood Representations of Kashmir and Kashmiris: between Orientalist  
Melodrama and Post-Colonial Representation***

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**Abstract**

This paper starts from the ideas that Indian cinema seeks to describe Indian culture and that filmmakers' use of intertextuality makes them the discernible conscience of the Indian nation in order to explore the depiction of Kashmir and Kashmiris in Bollywood films. It argues that these films portray a kind of "Indianization," not only in their plots and how characters' emotions, singing, dancing, and fighting are made essential parts of the film, but in how they are structured according to the rules of melodrama, which require a moral dichotomy that must comply with the state's agenda of fomenting Hindu nationalism. This paper deploys post-colonial theory to describe and analyze the depiction of Kashmir and Kashmiris in major Bollywood films since 1989.

Keywords: Indian cinema; Hindu nationalism; Indian Muslim; Kashmir; Orientalism; post-colonialism

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## **Introduction: A linear understanding**

The contested province of Kashmir lies on the border between Pakistan and India. Kashmir has experienced considerable unrest and political violence ever since India achieved independence from Britain, and Pakistan was created by the 1947 Indian Independence Act, and especially since the militant demonstrations of anti-Indian sentiment and Kashmiri freedom movements of 1989. Much of this conflict stretches beyond a mere territorial dispute; India and Pakistan have clashed repeatedly over Kashmir because it lies largely in India, a Hindu-majority country that relies on Hinduism as a binding agent to cultivate a sense of Indian nationalism. On the other hand, Pakistan is a Muslim-majority country and Kashmir is a Muslim-majority province. Thus, Kashmir tests the supposedly secular Indian state's ability to accommodate Muslims (Behera, 2006).

In the first decades of independence, from the 1950s through the 1980s, Kashmir was a prime shooting destination for Indian filmmakers of so-called Bollywood films. Bollywood cinema has a long history and a deep influence in Indian culture (Bhatia, 2013) and among the vast Indian diaspora. Although people go to the movies to get away from the real world, "when they leave the theater, they leave with a permanent impression of images of people and circumstances" in the real world that movie-goers lack the proper context to understand (Kaul, 2010).

This is especially true of Bollywood's depictions of Kashmir. These depictions changed after 1989 when the demand for separation of Kashmir from India began; Bollywood's prolonged fixation on Kashmir's natural beauty and visual symbolism ended, and its attention turned to investigating the political connection between Kashmir and the Indian Union. This paper proposes that Bollywood depictions of Kashmir since 1989 have aimed to cultivate identity-based readings of Kashmir and India and offers three lenses through which we can see three different elements of these readings. Cinema and the media hold tremendous power in cultivating people's perceptions of identity, belonging, and the "other," but Bollywood is uniquely powerful in this way (Rajadhyaksha & Willemsen, 1994, p. 10) and thus merits special attention.

Representation of Kashmir and Kashmiris, specifically Muslims, in Bollywood films has long been a hot topic of conversation among scholars, filmmakers, critics, and audiences. According to Nitasha Kaul, Kashmiris were a people who were "bargained" into Indian/Pakistani nationhood when the British left the region (Kaul, 2010). From the mid-nineteenth century, the practice of statecraft and governance came to be tied closely to statistics, record, and classification: in the colonies, the British tried to stabilize and centralize channels of power by classifying their subjects and dealing with them in terms of race, community leaders, and religion. Hindus and Muslims were two important lenses through which people were perceived, categorized as, and then divided by during Partition (Kaul, 2010).

Bakaya and Bhatti write in "Kashmir Conflict: a study of what led to insurgency in Kashmir Valley and proposed future solutions" about major reasons for the insurgency and why it only gained momentum around 40 years after India's partition in 1989 (Bakaya & Bhatti, 2014). Martin-Lucas (2013) writes about this in "The Beauties of Kashmir," based on Nila Gupta's body of work, which explores the situation in Jammu and Kashmir

through short stories. It explicitly examines feminist theory in the context of sexual crimes committed against girls and women at the time of conflict (Martin-Lucas, 2013).

In his analysis of religious and nationalist movements, Spencer (2010) explores the current secessionist movement in Kashmir Valley and the identity politics in terms of religion, ethnicity, nationality, language, and class, among others. The study attempts to bridge the rhetoric and reality and hopes to give a fair evaluation of the role of Islam in contemporary political movements in the valley. Spencer's study uses historical, journalistic, and other literature accounts from common theoretical frameworks of the politics of identity and identity makers of religion and nationalism.

## Methods

This paper combines textual analysis with the application of critical theory to examine how Bollywood cinema constructs a visual text which shapes movie-goers' ideas about the aesthetics and people of Kashmir, various geopolitical conflicts involving India, and the various risks of cross-border infiltration, terrorism, suicide-bombing, extortion, and kidnapping. It uses the term "visual text" in order to apply conventional methods of textual analysis to film, since a "text" can be anything written, visual, or spoken that serves as a medium for communication. (Neuman, 2014).

Textual analysis is the only way to approach the film text, narratives and images of Kashmir propagated by mainstream Indian (i.e., Bollywood) Cinema. Given a large number of films based on Kashmir and Kashmiris and to find out the various aspects of representation the qualitative analysis of the data available on the subject applies in order to get insights into the ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research (Wyse, 2011).

## Theoretical Framework

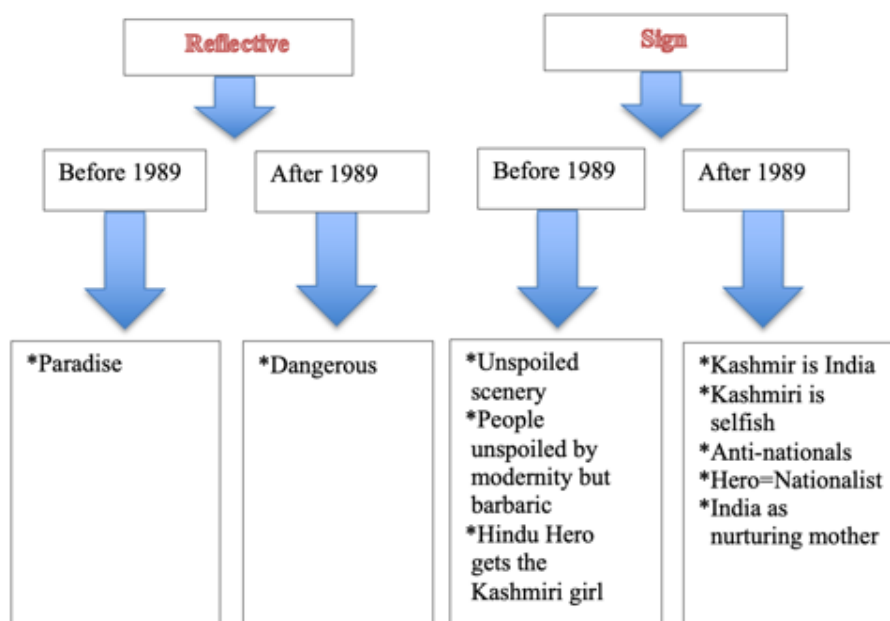
In order to understand the concept of representation and how it connects meaning and language to the culture, it is essential to examine different theories on how language is used to represent the world and explore the *reflective*, the *intentional*, and the *constructionist* approaches to representation.



**Figure 1:** The Representative and Semiotic Framework of Film Text

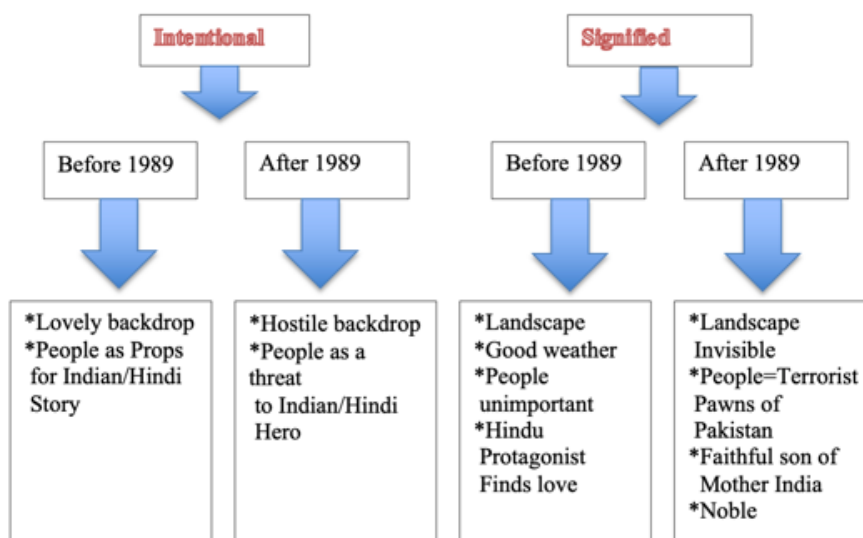
Bollywood films [Figure:1] should be understood and analyzed through the (reflective) language, which reflects a meaning that already exists in the world of objects, people, and

events; the expression (intentional) of the writer, producer/director, and the cinematographer—that is, his or her personally intended meaning; and (constructionist) meaning constructed through language (Hall, 1997) [Figure:2].



**Figure 2:** The Reflective Representation and Semiotic Sign of Film Text

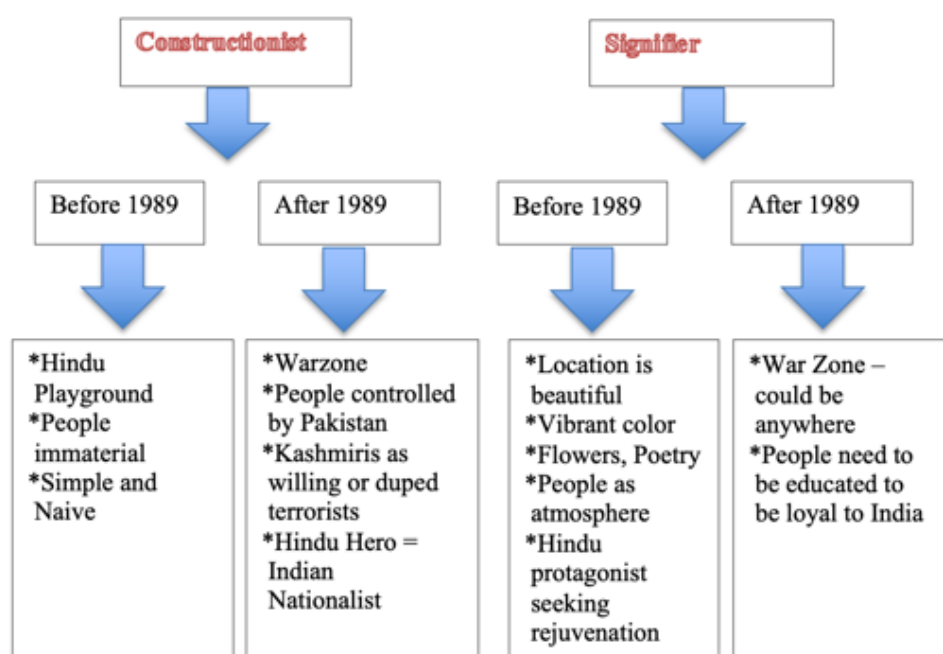
Although the reflective, intentional, and constructionist approaches to representation are among the most popular, this paper has chosen to explore the constructionist approach as it has the most significant impact on cultural studies. The variant of semiotics of the constructionist approach (Saussure et al., 1960) and Michael Foucault’s discursive model is applied for analyzing concepts of film and cultural studies in order to understand how the depiction of culture in the selected films contributes toward forming a perception of Kashmir. The face of one person, the dress of another, along with names and voices—this is exactly how the director creates an image [Figure:3]. “Visual signs and images, even when they bear a close resemblance to the things to which they refer, are still signs: they carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted” (Hall, 1997 p.19).



**Figure 3:** The Intentional Representation and Semiotic Signified Film



The general term used for words, sounds, or images that carry meanings is “signs” (Hall, 1997). Signs are organized into a language which enables us to translate our concepts into words, sounds, or images, to express meanings and communicate thoughts to other people. Language is used comprehensively: the writing system, spoken word, and visual images, whether produced by hand, mechanical, electronic, digital, or other means, are all used to express meaning. Additionally, non-linguistic language, such as facial expressions, gestures, and music, function as signs. Codes fix the relationships between concepts and signs and further tell us which language to use to convey an idea and which concepts are being referred to when we hear or read with a sign. The audience learns about the system and conventions of representation and how language and cultural codes work, thus obtaining cultural “know-how.” Moreover, it enables them to unconsciously internalize these codes and then use them to express certain ideas through their systems of representation—writing, speech, gesture, visualization, and so on—and to interpret ideas that are communicated to them using the same systems [Figure:4].



**Figure 4:** The Constructionist Representation and Semiotic Signifier Film

#### *Saussure: Signifier and Signified, Form and Content*

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure did much of his work on the social constructionist view of language and representation and shaped the semiotic approach to the problem of representation in a wide variety of cultural fields. Saussure divided the concept of a sign into two further elements: the form (the actual word, image, photo) and the idea or concept in your mind with which the form is associated. He named the first element the signifier and the second, the signified. Thus, the sign is the union of a form that signifies (signifier) and an idea signified (signified).

Additionally, Saussure insisted on the arbitrary nature of the sign and the signified: signs do not possess a fixed or essential meaning. What signifies RED or the essence of “redness” is not RED but the difference between RED and GREEN: signs are members of systems and are defined to other members of the system, and the meaning of a concept or word is defined to its direct opposite.

It is interesting to note that the relation between the signifier and signified, which is fixed by our cultural codes, is not permanently fixed (Saussure et al., 1960). The meanings of words shift, and every shift alters the conceptual map of culture, placing different cultures at different historical moments to classify and think about the world differently.

The underlying argument behind the semiotic approach is that, since all cultural objects convey meaning and all cultural practices depend on meaning, they both must work in a similar fashion to language. Not only words and images but also objects themselves can function as signifiers. For example, the Kashmiri dress, *pheran*, has a simple function to cover the body and protect it from cold weather; however, the *pheran* also functions as a sign in that it constructs meaning and carries a message. In pre-conflict films on Kashmir, the *pheran* was a simple, humble, traditional garment worn by both males and females in Kashmir, whereas in post-conflict films, it became the dress of a terrorist who hides arms and ammunition under the garment.

### **Bollywood and Social Constructionism**

Since its inception, Indian cinema has drawn inspiration from the styles, aesthetics, and semiotics from cultural forms that have been adapted in India over the centuries, often mixing them in various ways during the process of evolution into a vast cultural heritage (Dudrah and Desai, 2008). Bollywood films on the subject of Kashmir are synonymous with amusement: Kashmir provides the backdrop, and its beauty signifies peace, tranquility, and love in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s through films like *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964), *Junglee* (1961), and *Jab Jab Phool Khile* (1965). However, a sizable number of films on terrorism in Kashmir emerged after the 1980s. These films have distinctive genres of documentary, drama, thriller, romance, humor, and irony. The narrative themes combine realism and fantasy and mix all the elements of storytelling in a theatrical format.

In *Mission Kashmir* (2000), the fantasy is echoed in each song sequence, by consistently using role-playing, and a representation of reality is constructed. The space between representation and reality becomes extremely narrow, particularly in two Hindi songs that have inserted lines from Kashmiri lyrics into their choruses: *Bhumbro* (O Bumblebee) and *Hrind poshmaal gindne drai lo lo* (O Intoxicated Ones, Poshmaal, Drunk [On Spring], has come out to play).

### **Looking at Bollywood Through Semiotic Glasses**

A typical Bollywood film script is seldom logical or reflective, nor do the audiences anticipate that it will be so: popular Hindi films have been characterized by the famous Indian social scholar, Ashish Nandy, as “anti-psychological” (Nandy, 1981). Augmentation and divergence are essential to the characterization of the hero. There could be no room in this world for calm, quiet, or inconspicuously nuanced characters; thus, heroes in Hindi cinema have extremely articulated, regularly inordinate, identities that fall into very characterized generalizations. The audience promptly perceives the hero, the heroine, the miscreant, and the fool, and this typically results in the performing artists playing similar sorts of characters, to the degree of incarnating the attributes into the collective imaginings.

The movies concerning Kashmir post-1989 test rationale and play with reality in every area of the filming procedure. The content is not composed, remembering the

quintessence of Kashmiriyat: the way of life, social conduct, foundations, and procedures of Kashmir. The story structure demonstrates a kind of fragmentation, as the development of the story does not incorporate a pyramidal example. It instead utilizes a specific method, for example, flashbacks, thematic repetition, and movement back and forth through time. As per the creators and makers of Bollywood (Thomas, 2008), the embodiment of this work of “Indianization” lies in how the plot builds up.

For instance, in *Roja* (1992), the hero Rishi figures out how to change Liyaqat's mentality from evil to goodness through a dialogue “Islam Ahinsa Nahin Sikhata” (Islam does not teach violence) and looks for a conclusion to the insubordination by utilizing Islam as a weapon.

In *Mission Kashmir* (2000), the doctor who is treating Inayat Khan, the Inspector General of Police, for a wound inflicted by a bomb blast, says, “*Aaj Kal to Kashmir mein Fatwaon ka daur chal raha hai*” (these days Kashmir is governed by religious decree). This clearly imparts that Islam is about radicalism, and Kashmiri Muslims are religious zealots. In *Yahaan* (2005), the lead character, Aman, is travelling a jeep, and while having a conversation with the driver, he tells him, “*Panch Saal Ki Posting Mein Bas Ek Hi Baat Samjhaa Hoon, Kashmir Ki Baasha Hai Bandoon, Phir Wo Unki Ho Yaa Humari*” (in five years of my posting in Kashmir I have understood one thing. The language which Kashmiris understand is the gun, be it theirs or our own). This etymological content passes on a great articulation of Kashmir being an unsafe place, where individuals would only listen to you at gunpoint.

For example, the films *Junglee* (1961), *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964), and *Jab Jab Phool Khile* (1965) are similar in many ways. In all three films, Kashmir is a place where wealthy Indians go for recreation and, while there, fall in love with a Kashmiri. The location provides a beautiful setting for romance: Kashmir itself is an extended film set with Kashmiri characters and narratives being minimal or limited to the tourist visions of Kashmiris, which is either a houseboat owner or a tourist guide.

Meaning is not in the object or the person or thing, nor is it in the word. In this study Hall's “systems of representation,” Saussure's semiotic approach, and textual analysis research method is applied to Bollywood films to study the images of Kashmir, Kashmiri landscape, people and culture.

### **Film Plots: Character as Confrontation**

The films reviewed in this paper depict the following: conflict between Kashmiri separatist militants and the Indian armed forces in *Roja* (1992, directed by Mani Ratnam) and in *Mission Kashmir* (2000, directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra); radical debate in *Maa Tujhe Salaam* (2002, directed by Tinnu Verma), *Hero-Love Story of a Spy* (2003, directed by Anil Sharma), *Jaal the Trap* (2003, directed by Guddu Dhanoa), and *Fanaa* (2006, directed by Kunal Kohli); cross-border revolts in *LOC Kargil* (2003, directed by J. P. Dutta); Indo-Pakistani relations in *Zameen* (2003, directed by Rohit Shetty); issues related to the historical partition of India and the presence of the Indian military in Kashmir in *Pukar* (2000, directed by Raj Kumar Santoshi); and elements of Italian neorealism in *Sheen* (2004, directed by Ashok Pandit), *Tahaan* (2008, directed by Santosh Sivan), and *Haider* (2014, directed by Vishal Bhardwaj). The review describes the general setting and plots of these films in order to give some background for this paper's

analysis of the politically motivated depiction of Kashmir and Kashmiris.

Militants in central Kashmir create the central conflict in *Roja*. In the film, cryptologist Rishi Kumar is appointed by the intelligence wing of the Indian Department of Defense to read and decipher “crypto-coded” messages in Kashmir. Upon his arrival in Kashmir, Kumar is abducted by Kashmiri militants who are motivated by Islam to fight for the establishment of a sovereign Kashmir. Kashmiri militants are also the antagonists of *Mission Kashmir*. In this film, Muslim Kashmiri freedom seekers are fighting against the Indian establishment for independent Kashmir. One of the film’s main characters, Altaaf, is a Kashmiri freedom fighter who is portrayed as a terrorist and corrupt fanatic who commits brutal, murderous crimes.

### **Politics and Empire as Plot and Theme: Orientalism and Representation**

All great films have a theme or underlying and unifying idea that gives direction to the plot, defines the critical issues for the characters, and ultimately determines the depth of the film’s meaning (Cowgill, 1999). Indian-ness and Indian national identity have arisen as major themes in Bollywood films.

*Roja* (1992), *Dil Se* (1995), *Kohram*, *Hero-Love Story of a Spy* (2003), *Maa Tujhe Salaam*, *Zameen*, *Jaal the Trap* (2003), *Fanaa* (2006) follow the concept of nationalism and Indianness of Hindi films. The early films’ directors like Dadasaheb Phalke, who created the first feature film in India, *Raja Harishchandra* and actors came from the theatre culture. After India gained independence in 1947, it had to create a national consciousness. The popular Hindi cinema played an essential role in building this idea of belonging to a nation and nationalism. The films are examined to understand how Bollywood cinema supports and strengthens the national spirit by placing India and Pakistan as binary opposites of which the former takes a superior position.

*Mission Kashmir* (2000) and *Pukar* (2000) are the two films that use signification, subject, and the symbolic order to clarify the masking of reality. The semiotic theory demonstrates how the image signifies the signifier. In both films fantasy echoes in each song sequence, which continually uses role-playing and crafted representations of reality. The use of balaclava and the fabric covered faces dehumanize the terrorists and portray them with no positive human qualities. The negative associations are established to justify the killing of the terrorist in the mind of the viewers.

Kashmir and Kashmiris have received special attention in Bollywood films due to the conflict’s potential for exciting narratives and heroic, starkly dichotomous themes, such as the abstract battle between good and evil. Indeed, Bollywood has produced more films based in Kashmir since 1989, and these films have increasingly focused on violence and terrorism (Kabir, 2009). In recent decades Bollywood movies have portrayed Kashmir as a real-life battleground populated by sweethearts, activists, militaries, and *mujahedeen*.

Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* changed the field of literary studies by demonstrating the colonial nature of knowledge of the non-European world. Said was specifically concerned with the relationship between political or colonial power and the production of knowledge:

Knowledge...means surveying a civilization from its origins to its prime to its decline—and, of course, it means *being able to do that*. Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant...To have such knowledge of a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for “us” to deny autonomy to “it”—the Oriental country—since we know it and it exists, in a sense, *as* we know it. (Said, 1978, p. 32)

In other words, said argues that nineteenth-century Orientalists both provided information about the Orient for Western colonizers and simultaneously created an imaginary Orient viewed through the lens of white supremacy—an imaginary Orient whose very existence justified European colonization.

These salient features of Orientalism persist today in Western mass media, especially film and television (Kellner Douglas, 1995). The power to represent reality is vitally important in today’s world, according to Jean Baudrillard, who argues that facts exist simply to emulate models (e.g., narrative conventions of cinema, for example), and that this condition defines the postmodern world, which is “a question of signs of the real for real” (Dino, 2002). In addition, although India’s origins are indeed anti-colonial, we can apply Said’s framework to the depiction of Kashmir and Kashmiris in Indian cinema because of the power dynamic between India and Kashmir—i.e., because India has the power to represent Kashmir in the ways described above. This power to represent enables the Indian state and film industry to disregard and mask the failure of Indian democracy and the Indian national project in Kashmir by using inflammatory, nationalist rhetoric that places the blame for the failure of democracy in Kashmir on Kashmiris and Muslims (Kaul, 2018).

### **Agenda-Setting, Nationalism, and Representation in Bollywood Films**

The concept of agenda-setting suggests that audiences comprehend the significance of an issue through the mass media, and that the mass media amplify some messages and effectively manipulate their audience (Maxwell, McCombs, & Shaw, 1972). Agenda-setting theory can help explain the media’s capability to put some issues at the forefront of public discourse. In a pathbreaking work, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) show that, contrary to the usual image of the news media as cantankerous, obstinate, and ubiquitous in their search for truth and defense of justice, in their actual practice they defend the economic, social, and political agendas of the privileged groups that dominate domestic society, the state, and the global order (Edward & Chomsky, 1988). This paper sees agenda-setting as a subtext running just beneath the plots of Bollywood films that both helps maintain tension in films when the action slows down and functions as the deeper message of the films themselves. This section relates these reflections on agenda-setting to the representation of Kashmir and Kashmiris in Bollywood films.

Representation refers to the use of language, signs, and pictures that stand in for or speak to things that provide information about a particular community or culture (Hall, 1997). For example, the plots, settings, themes, and distinctive style of Bollywood films have made them prime enunciators of Indian-ness since their inception (Rajadhyaksha & Willemsen, 1994). Bollywood films constitute a “nation-space” that propagates Indian nationalism. Thus, representation in Indian cinema matters greatly, given Bollywood’s

status as a nation-making and -defining entity that generates a sense of national culture, community, and identity.

In this context, Bollywood takes on the appearance of a political spectacle (Nandy, 1995). Although films are works of imagination, they are not expressions of reality but rather representations of reality aimed not at accuracy but at narrativity (Ferro & Greene, 1988). This is where ideology comes into play: Narratives reinforce ideologies through semiotic language and stereotypes regarding the people, place, and history of Kashmir. Although “the interests of ideology may remain the same, its immediate content does not” (Philo, 2007, p. 108); in other words, although the settings and characters and conflicts of Bollywood films may change, their core ideas and underlying themes—the representation of Indians, Pakistanis, and Kashmiris in ways that stoke and validate Indian nationalism—remains unchanged.

*Maa Tujhe Salaam* contains more explicit anti-Pakistani sentiment. The film starts with an iconic dialogue, in which the following words are superimposed on the screen in gold: “*Dood maango ge toh kheer denge, Kashmir maango ge toh cheer denge*” (“If you ask for milk, we shall give you milk pudding, but if you ask for Kashmir, we shall crush you”). This dialogue is crude and derogatory, and it commodifies Kashmir as an object under the authority and ownership of India. This not only creates the perception that Kashmir is India’s property, but it dehumanizes Kashmiris by framing their existence as a mere commodity.

### **Conclusion: Ways forward between Cinematic and Real Kashmir**

There exists a bifurcated trajectory of peace and conflict in cinematic Kashmir. Bollywood films provide a representation of Kashmir and its political situation that serves the interests of the Indian state by demonizing and dehumanizing Muslim Kashmiris by portraying Indians as superior and associating terrorism with Islam. The pre-eminent cultural role of Bollywood films in India makes these portrayals a serious issue worth extensive consideration. Why then does this happen and what are some ways through which we can counteract the damaging effects of these representations?

The film-maker Kuman Shahani has remarked “The biggest problem seems to be that we are working within a capitalist framework and we do not have a capitalist infrastructure” (Prasad, 1998, p.29). This heavy reliance on state funding and organization to get their films made hinders filmmakers’ ability to experiment with the content and themes of their work. As a result, Bollywood is a largely ideological production that seeks to establish political unity among Indians by subordinating all internal conflicts under its primary concern, namely the survival and thriving of the Indian state.

This study has demonstrated how negative and damaging portrayals of Kashmiris in Indian cinema both create and justify the conditions for violent repression of Kashmiri political movements. If we always run the risk of Orientalizing subjects, as per Said, is there any way forward—i.e., a way in which Kashmiris might be represented in film in ways which both overcome the biases of previous and current representations and acknowledge and disentangle the potentially harmful effects of Indian domination over the nation-space of film? We might, for example, recognize domination itself as an experience alongside oppression and lean on both to break free of the tendency to see and depict the world through colonizing binaries (Mattingly, 2011).

The central claim of this study is that the Bollywood (Hindi) film industry has not portrayed the real Kashmir in pre- and post-1989 films. The textual analysis of each film and its narrative plot reveals the perspectives that promote and serve the bearers of particular ideologies. To this end, textual analysis is the primary vehicle of investigation, with the use of New Orientalism to understand the discourses around the ideas of “terrorism” and “terrorist.” Orientalism was first described in the pioneering work by Edward Said in 1978. Since then, the world has changed in many ways and come a long way in representing the other. Accordingly, New Orientalism expresses and serves, part culturally and part ideologically, as a mode of discourse in understanding and representing Kashmir. Orientalism is a thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and Occident: based on this theory, this research indicates Indian cinema to be a western-style Occident, dominating, restructuring, representing, and having authority over the Orient (Kashmiri) and what Kashmir is known to or made to do as New-Orient.

Observations on the art of film and controversial conventions like the politics of representation, stereotyping, and agenda-setting provide insights into how filmmakers construct “Kashmir,” “the Kashmiri,” and “terrorist.” This thesis argued the case of Bollywood cinema and that, based on the evidence generated by reference to numerous productions from the pre-conflict era (1960-1980) to the post-conflict period (1990 to the present), there exists a bifurcated trajectory of peace and conflict in cinematic Kashmir.

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***Fake News, Crowdsourcing and Media Outlets in Greece: Is News Credibility a Matter of Professionalism?***

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**Abstract**

Traditionally journalism is a key function for democracy. News used to be produced by professional journalists and the term "gatekeeper", used to describe a journalist's main task, filtering information, and when and how reliable news should be provided. However, users can now choose to get the information they want from many online sources, websites most of which are free and social media. Citizens of the digital era have plenty of opportunities not only to access information such as news but also to produce, share or criticize such information, whose credibility is not always confirmed. This led to the beginning of the participatory journalism era where crowdsourcing techniques such as crowd wisdom (commenting on news media websites articles or on social media pages) play a significant role in the public sphere. However, crowdsourcing, social media sources, and citizen journalism are often criticized as a key fake news generator while traditional journalism outlets seem more credible. This paper studies the fake news phenomenon in Greece using the walk-through method and statistical analysis for the most popular Greek news websites exploring the confirmed cases of fake news revealed by the Facebook certified fact-checking website "Ellinika Hoaxes". The findings of the study chart Greek media landscape characteristics and reveal new perspectives for traditional journalism, crowdsourcing, and news distribution outlets' credibility.

Keywords: Fake News, Crowdsourcing, Journalism, Fact-Checking

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## Introduction

Professional journalism used to be the key guardian of information and truth in the public sphere. Media and journalists used to deliver news and to inform in contrast to rumors that most of the time were proved as untrustworthy. Although the term “fake news” is not new, contemporary discourse, particularly media coverage, seems to define fake news as referring to viral posts based on fictitious accounts on the web made to look like news reports. A recent study defined fake news “to be news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (Edson et al., 2017). “Fake news” is fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake-news outlets, in turn, lack the news media’s editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information (Lazer et al., 2018). There are plenty of definitions of fake news that refer to the term as information that looks like news but it is not. This dissertation has not the intention to redefine the terms fake news and misinformation but to research the ways and methods that can be used to fight and limit the phenomenon and reveal where it appears.

Very few research attempts have been conducted in Greece on fake news and strategies to confine its influence in the public sphere. Crowdsourcing is a fact-checking strategy that gives society (the crowd) the opportunity to participate in the journalistic process and to propose which information has to be double-checked or to help during the procedure. “Ellinika Hoaxes” is a fact-checking platform using crowdsourcing strategies used as a reference by this dissertation to reveal the presence of fake news in the Greek public sphere.

## Literature review

Fake news is now viewed as one of the greatest threats to democracy, journalism, and freedom of expression. It has weakened public trust in governments and its potential impact on the contentious “Brexit” referendum and the equally divisive 2016 U.S. presidential election – which it might have affected – is yet to be realized. The reach of fake news was best highlighted during the critical months of the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, where the top twenty frequently-discussed fake election stories generated 8,711,000 shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook, ironically, larger than the total of 7,367,000 for the top twenty most-discussed election stories posted by 19 major news websites (Zhou & Zafarani, 2020).

Treating news media as sources of testimonial beliefs emphasizes a central role they play in citizens' lives: serving as the source of much of what we take ourselves to know. Without reliance on curated news reports, people would know little about what goes on in other countries, about the world of politics, or even about what the latest sports results are. Of course, communicating reliable information to their readership or viewership is not their only social function. For one, commercial news sources need to return a profit to their proprietors, and even individual consumers do not always turn to the news for knowledge and information only, but may also hope for some entertainment and diversion (Gelfert, 2018).

Facts, truth, and reality are according to Zelizer (2004) the “god terms” in journalism. As a profession, journalists have established their jurisdictional authority to claim them.

The discipline of verification is at the core of this structural claim to the statement of authority, setting journalism apart from other forms of communication.

Nevertheless, the acceleration of the news cycle and proliferation of news and information has raised concerns about the erosion of the discipline of verification, and by implication, the professional legitimacy of journalism (Hermida, 2012).

According to Hassan et al. (2015), fact-checking is difficult and time-consuming for journalists. What is most of the time obvious is that more resources are needed [...].

Fact-checking requires advanced research techniques. While ordinary journalism can rely on simple “on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand” quotations, a fact-check requires more thorough research so the journalist can determine the accuracy of a claim[...].

We should not be surprised if we can get very close but never reach the “Holy Grail”: A fully automated fact-checker calls for fundamental breakthroughs in multiple fronts and, eventually, it represents a form of Artificial Intelligence.

In the US and Europe, different types of fact-checkers have emerged. According to Humprecht (2019), Graves and Cherubini (2016) generally distinguish two models of fact-checkers, namely, the ‘newsroom model’ and the ‘NGO model’. The newsroom model contains fact-checking organizations affiliated with an established media company. Although only a minority of fact-checkers in Europe belong to this model, these fact-checkers often have a wide reach (Graves and Cherubini 2016). In Germany, for example, the public broadcaster ARD operates its own fact-checking website. The NGO model, in contrast, involves fact-checkers that operate independently of traditional newsrooms. Those organizations are free of the editorial and business constraints of established media outlets but lack the editorial resources and reliable audiences. However, some of these organizations have managed to establish themselves in national media markets. Those outlets are completely independent, are projects of established NGOs, or are linked to universities. (Humprecht, 2019). Such a case is the "Ellinika Hoaxes" fact-checking platform which is funded only from Facebook due to its high performance in detecting non-true stories (Ellinika Hoaxes, 2019).

### **Crowdsourcing as a fact-checking strategy**

Crowdsourcing is not a brand new term. Jeff Howe proposed in June 2006 for the first time the term crowdsourcing by combining the terms crowd and outsourcing. Howe explains that the evolution of technology has led to a marked reduction in the distance between professionals and amateurs (Howe, 2008; Howe, 2006).

A suggested definition is: "Crowdsourcing is a form of collective online activity in which a person or an institution or a nonprofit organization or a company proposes, through an open invitation, to voluntarily take up a job. In taking up work the crowd must engage in personal work or money or knowledge or experience, and always involves mutual benefit to both sides. Users are satisfied with their needs, and the developer of the initiative acquires and uses for the benefit of the user what the user has contributed to the task, which depends on the activity undertaken by the user"(Estellés-Arolas, & Ladron-de-Guevara, 2012). Jeff Howe has distinguished four types of

strategies for crowdsourcing: Crowdfunding (fundraising), Crowd creation, (the crowd creates, Crowdvoting (collective vote), Crowdwisdom (collective intelligence).

The term has many uses and can be found in lots of different activities.

Crowdsourcing in Journalism is defined as an invitation for the crowd to participate in the journalistic processes in various ways, by submitting knowledge, sharing opinions, or sending photos (Antonopoulos et al., 2020).

According to Aitamurto (2015), crowdsourcing in journalism resulted in efficient knowledge search and discovery in all the cases. In several cases, the crowd provides leads and tips that the journalists wouldn't most likely have discovered otherwise.

### **Fake news in Greece**

Misinformation and fake news on Greek media, social media, and the Internet is also not a new phenomenon. According to Mavridis (2018) in her recent study about propaganda on Greek media, Patrona (2018) mentions the historical framework of the Greek case and emphasizes the fact that in the Greek public sphere there have always been misleading information, false facts, and fake news coming from the media of all types. Furthermore, in the same study, Mavridis mentions that researchers Poulakidakos and Armenakis (2014) through their study on the economic crisis of 2010 and its impact on media refer cases where significant Greek media outlets displayed fake news and misleading information. By analyzing the discourse of the most prominent Greek media, they conclude that popular and prominent Greek online newspapers, such as tanea.gr and enet.gr, made use of sentimental propagandistic methods and they generated misleading and fake news (Mavridis, 2018).

### **"Ellinika Hoaxes" fact-checking platform**

"Ellinika Hoaxes" platform commenced in Greece as a blog 4 years ago, as an idea of Thodoris Daniilidis, investigating the news circulating on the Greek internet and highlighting those that are not true. Generally speaking Laura Bononcini, Director of Public Policy of Facebook in Southeast Europe, officially states on May 2, 2019, the beginning of a partnership with "Ellinika Hoaxes".

The platform does not produce original news stories and it is not a journalistic media outlet. It is merely a fact-checking website funded by Facebook, combining fact-checkers employment and crowdsourcing strategies in order to bust fake news that emerges in the Greek public sphere.

"Ellinika Hoaxes" uses a team of professional fact-checkers who run the fact-checking procedure based on information that comes from the crowd through an open call:

"Ellinika Hoaxes encourages readers to participate in the fight against fake news. For this reason, we are always open to suggestions, remarks, corrections, submission of topics for research, etc. Your participation through the submission of proposals is one of the basic rules for choosing our topics" (Ellinika Hoaxes, 2019).

According to the platform's information, all major crowdsourcing strategies of Howe's are used (Crowd creation, Crowdvoting, Crowdwisdom except Crowdfunding).

The platform uses the following fact-checking procedure (Ellinika Hoaxes, 2019):

The crowd proposes potential non-true stories and fake news cases through the "Ellinika Hoaxes" website or official Facebook page. Then, professional fact-checkers of the platform take action:

- Step 1: Potentially suspicious material is identified
- Step 2: Content analysis: The fact-checking team contacts initial sources
- Step 3: Audiovisual research: To make sure whether audiovisual material is really related to the article's allegations.
- Step 4: Examination of scientific studies in cases of pseudo-scientific claims.
- Step 5: Communication with other fact-checking groups/organizations

### **Scope of the study and methodology**

This study aims to search whether and to what extent, news media outlets in Greece circulate fake news in the public sphere. The ongoing economic, political and social crisis has resulted in a dramatic loss of advertising revenue and other subsidies, while massive layoffs and precarious labor became the norm in the Greek press and media. At the same time, credibility and trust levels for the traditional media collapsed (80 percent for television, 65 percent for newspapers, rendering online news media brands the most trusted and read outlets (Saridou et al., 2017). Few research efforts have been conducted in Greece in order to demonstrate both the quantitative and qualitative elements of the origin of non-true stories.

In order to deal effectively with fake news, it is important to know more precisely where we will encounter it, but also which are the characteristics of the news websites that display fake news more often.

This dissertation uses quantitative & qualitative research in combination with the empirical walkthrough method. visiting the websites that displayed non-true stories (based on the Greek fact-checking website "Ellinika Hoaxes")

A comparison between different media outlets website categories such as portals/blogs and newspaper websites and TV-station websites and strategies is attempted in this paper. The study focuses on two pylons:

- a) monitoring and analyzing the characteristics of non-true stories confirmed by the Greek Facebook-approved fact-checking platform "Ellinika Hoaxes" (website categories)
- b) Analyzing certain characteristic cases of non-true stories in the Greek public sphere. Researchers recorded all the non-true stories confirmed by the "Ellinika Hoaxes" fact-checking platform between 01/10/2019 and 31/12/2019 using the walkthrough method with the use of MS Excel software.

For the data collection, researchers visited the “Ellinika Hoaxes” platform daily in order to collect and analyze data.

Researchers distinguish 4 basic website categories:

- Portals/ Blogs
- Newspapers websites
- TV stations websites
- Facebook pages

The choice for the categorization has been made according to the separation between traditional professional media and new media in order to reveal where fake news and non-true stories circulate more often.

Though quantitative statistical analysis can reveal lots of useful information, researchers used also qualitative analysis in order to review four (4) severe cases of non-true stories confirmed by the fact-checking platform "Ellinika Hoaxes" in traditional media and highlight the stories' background.

This was chosen due to the alleged “higher professionalism” of traditional media outlets and traditional journalism. The four cases confirmed by the fact-checking platform (all in high circulation traditional media outlets) concern severe incidents of misinformation and are highlighted through qualitative analysis due to the importance and magnitude of misinformation delivered.

## **Results**

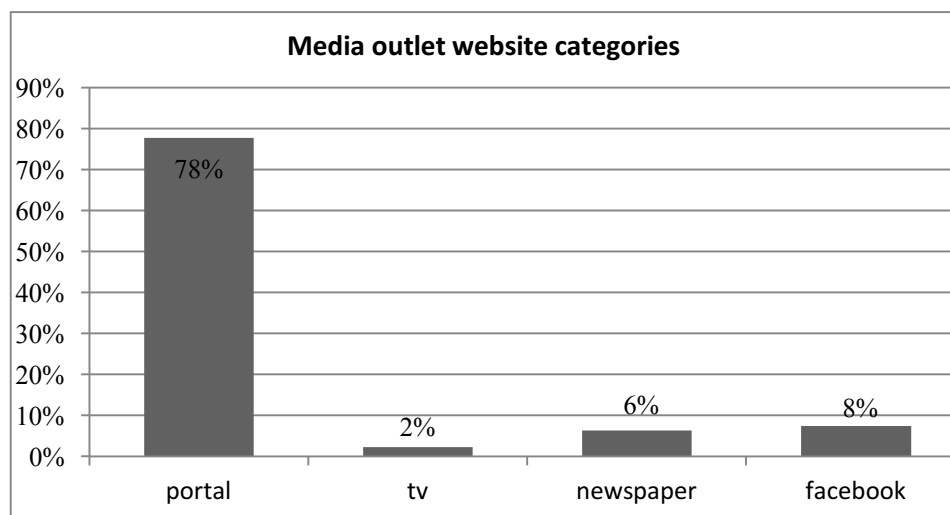
During a period of three months, (October to December 2019) the Facebook-approved fact-checking platform “Ellinika Hoaxes” confirmed 533 cases of all kinds, a quite impressive number of non-true stories and fake news diffused in the Greek public sphere.

Statistical analysis yielded quite interesting results.

A massive percentage (78%) of all non-true stories cases confirmed were spotted in portals/blogs while 8% was found in Facebook pages alone.

Nevertheless, there is a minor but not negligible percentage of 6% found in traditional newspaper websites, and another 2% found on TV station websites. We have to mention here that another 6% of cases were not finally totally confirmed as fake news although that high suspicions remain. This is the reason this percentage is absent from table 1:





**Table 1: Confirmed fake news per media outlet category in Greece**

The results of the study imply that traditional media retain their gate-keeping journalistic role, publishing a substantially lower percentage of non-true stories.

We can assume that professional journalists employed in traditional media are less vulnerable -or willing- to reproduce non-true stories.

Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis yielded a much different perspective. Through the walkthrough method, researchers came across 4 severe cases of non-true stories in traditional professional media outlets:

### Case 1

This confirmed non-true story was published by “Ta Nea” news website one of the most historical and significant Greek newspapers:

*“Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama criticized Europe for not helping enough Albania in dealing with the enormous problems caused by the deadly 6.4 magnitude earthquake. Instead, he praised Turkey and its President Recep Tayyip Erdogan”.*



Figure1: Qualitative analysis, Case 1

This case is highlighted due to the importance of misinformation delivered as it concerns international affairs, foreign policy, and diplomacy. Such cases of misinformation in foreign policy can have devastating consequences.

## Case 2

This confirmed non-true story was published in the website of “Naftemporiki” the most well known and respected Greek financial newspaper:

*“The inhabitants of Messolongi a small but historic Greek town found themselves in front of a horrible and brutal spectacle on Saturday, when they located a stray dog, from which the eyes had been removed. The unfortunate animal was found dead by residents of the area, who are asking - according to the website "agriniosite.gr" - to locate and arrest the "murderer and torturer”.*

**Figure 2: Qualitative analysis, Case 2**

This case is highlighted due to the importance of misinformation delivered as it concerns cruelty to animals, a severe crime in the western world. Such cases of misinformation create social anger and reactions, even hatred for social groups and regions.

### Case 3

This allegation was aired by Star Channel, a major Greek TV outlet, and published on the TV station's news website.

*“An Algerian jihadist who fought in Syria has posted a creepy message on the internet urging acts of indiscriminate violence following the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. According to the main news bulletin of “Star”, tv channel this man has been in Athens for a few days now, a fact that causes intense concern”.*

Ειδήσεις Lifestyle Video TV star

Εγγραφή Αναζήτηση

### Στην Αθήνα Τζιχαντιστής: Το ανατριχιαστικό μήνυμα που προτρέπει σε βία

Θρηνεί τον θάνατο του αρχηγού του ISIS

© 30/10/19, 20:15 | ΕΛΛΑΔΑ

▲ Δείτε το βίντεο από το κεντρικό δελτίο ειδήσεων του Star

Αλγερινός Τζιχαντιστής που πολέμησε στη Συρία, ανέβασε στο διαδίκτυο ένα ανατριχιαστικό μήνυμα με το οποίο προτρέπει σε πράξεις τυφλής βίας, μετά το θάνατο του αρχηγού του ISIS.

Σύμφωνα με το κεντρικό δελτίο ειδήσεων του Star και τον δημοσιογράφο Βάδιο Σύρρο, αυτός ο άνδρας εδώ και λίγες μέρες βρίσκεται στην Αθήνα, γεγονός που προκαλεί έντονη ανησυχία.

**Figure 3: Qualitative analysis, Case 3**

This confirmed fake news case is highlighted due to the importance of misinformation delivered as it concerns terrorism, social peace, and stability. Such cases of misinformation can alter the audiences' perception of reality and cause hatred, violence, provocations, and counter-reactions.

#### Case 4

This non-true story was published by Proto Thema news website the first in circulation Greek weekly newspaper and one of the most popular news media websites in Greece.

*“M.D. Tatiana Maliaga created a biological dietary supplement from hazelnut with the active ingredient “taxol” and proved to be effective in treating superficial and invasive bladder cancer”*

ΠΡΟΤΟ ΘΕΜΑ

Όλες οι Ειδήσεις Έκδοση Κυριακής Πρωτοσέλιδο

104.6 Το ραδιόφωνο που τα σπάζει Μουσικές Επιλογές

### Η γιατρός Τατιάνα Μάλιαγκα δημιούργησε από τη φουντουκιά ένα βιολογικό συμπλήρωμα διατροφής με δραστικό συστατικό την ταξόλη και απέδειξε ότι είναι αποτελεσματικό στην θεραπεία του επιφανειακού και διηθητικού καρκίνου της ουροδόχου κύστης!

Το φουντούκι είναι, ίσως, ο πιο υποτιμημένος ξηρός καρπός, με τη λογική ότι στα μπαρ προτιμούν να σερβίρουν το πιο φθηνό αράπικο φιστίκι, ενώ οι νοικοκυρές χρησιμοποιούν καρύδι και αμύγδαλο στα φαγητά και τα γλυκά τους. Ποιος, όμως, γνωρίζει ότι μια ουσία που περιέχεται στο φουντούκι καταπολεμά μια πολύ διαδεδομένη μορφή καρκίνου; Το εγγυάται μια πατέντα Ελληνίδας γιατρού, που πήρε πρόσφατα διεθνή πιστοποίηση!

Ήδη εδώ και σχεδόν 20 χρόνια, ερευνητές είχαν διαπιστώσει ότι τα φουντούκια θα μπορούσε να αποτελέσουν πηγή για την παρασκευή της ταξόλης που καταπολεμά τον καρκίνο, καθώς περιέχουν το δραστικό συστατικό πακλιταξέλη η οποία χρησιμοποιείται στην θεραπεία του μεταστατικού καρκίνου του μαστού και των ωθηκών. Σχετικό δημοσίευμα με τίτλο «Nuts source for cancer drug» είχε κάνει το BBC.

#### Thema Insights

«COSMOTE Digital Marketing4U» - Ένας ειδικός, στην υπηρεσία της επιχείρησής σου  
11/10/2019, 15:12

myblu™: Η Διαφορετική επιλογή για τους ενήλικες καπνιστές  
07/10/2019, 14:38

Stay on top: Το Digital Workplace κρατά την επιχείρησή σας στην κορυφή!  
11/10/2019, 13:25

**Figure 4: Qualitative analysis, Case 4**

This confirmed fake news case is highlighted due to the importance of misinformation delivered. It concerns pseudoscience and misinformation on critical health issues such as cancer. Such cases of misinformation can lead desperate patients and their families to non-approved, ineffective, and harmful treatments with lethal outcomes.

## **Discussion**

Fake News in the public sphere seems to be a significant threat to democracy and society. Altered truth and misinformation can have severe perpetual consequences in societies. Journalism and its "God terms" (Zelizer, 2004) seem ineffective to keep their fundamental gatekeeping role. Fake news and misinformation are present also in the Greek public sphere and very few researches have been conducted concerning Greek mediascape.

Beyond any doubt, we can claim that the percentage of non-true stories detected in portals/blogs is much higher than those detected in traditional media websites such as newspaper websites and TV station websites.

Traditional media seem to retain their credibility in comparison to portals and blogs according to the findings of the study. Nevertheless, the comparison might be deceiving. Through qualitative case analysis, we highlighted severe cases of misinformation (though much fewer) in professional traditional media mostly on hard news (Foreign Policy, Pseudoscience on Health, Terrorism). "Ellinika Hoaxes" fact-checking platform, based partly on crowdsourcing strategies, seems to be effective in detecting fake news of all kinds even in the most prominent and respected media outlets.

Thus, although professional media seem to retain their trustworthiness in comparison to new media, portals, and blogs, fake news seems to have penetrated professional journalism significantly. This fact may raise questions for different ways of monitoring news and its credibility and accuracy.

Journalism needs professionalism but the participation of the society and the crowd defending truth and democracy seems also important.

## **Conclusion**

Non-true stories and fake news are clearly present in Greek news websites and in the Greek public sphere. This can be proved definitely by this research. During a period of three months, (October to December 2019) the Facebook-approved fact-checking platform "Ellinika Hoaxes" confirmed 533 cases of all kinds, a quite impressive number of non-true stories and fake news diffused in the Greek public sphere. This study confirms the findings of Patrona (2018) "in Greece there has always been misleading information, false facts, and fake news in the media" and the findings of Poulakidakos and Armenakis (2014) "media in Greece presented fake news with misleading information in order either to promote a specific political propaganda or to gain money[...] analyzing the discourse of the most prominent Greek media, popular Greek online newspapers, such as tanea.gr and enet.gr, made use of sentimental propagandistic methods and they generated misleading and fake news".

Finding fake news cases on the Greek internet is something to be expected.

As mentioned clearly in the discussion section, although the percentage of fake news displayed in the traditional "professional" media outlets websites is minor there are severe cases of misinformation even to the most prominent and professional media outlets news websites (Case 1, Case 2, Case 3, Case 4). Especially Case 1, confirms Poulakidakos and Armenakis (2014) findings as "tanea.gr", one of the most historic and prominent news outlets in Greece, is also mentioned as a fake-news provider in their research. This result makes us skeptical about the reliability and trustworthiness of professional journalism and traditional news outlets even the largest and prominent ones.

Concluding, gatekeeping one of the key-roles of professional traditional journalism, is a procedure that perhaps might not continue to solely rely on professional journalists. The NGO model (Humprecht, 2019) fact-checkers who do not belong to media and fact-checking platforms of alternative strategy (such as crowdsourcing), may play a decisive role in the war against misinformation in the future.

### **Limitations and Future Possibilities**

The first limitation is that the study concerns only Greece. Thus, the generalization of results is limited. The second limitation is that the fake news cases and data were collected only from the "Ellinika Hoaxes" fact-checking platform. Future research can include Europe and countries of North America and Asia. Enlarging the scale will yield a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in different countries and societies. Furthermore, other models of fact-checking and fake news fighting strategies can be used as a research reference.

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## ***Similarities and Differences in the Right-wing Populists' Video Campaigns***

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### **Abstract**

Right-wing populist parties attempt to influence their voters in different ways. While previous analysis of right-wing populist language and rhetoric has concentrated more on texts and posters, and less on the audio-visual aspects, this article seeks to specifically address right-wing populist videos appearing on the internet and in social media and examine how these channels are used strategically. It analyses some case studies from Europe, especially Austria, Germany and Slovakia, and compares them. The contrast is intended to highlight specific strategies right-wing populists use for communication among the individual parties. Similarities and differences between the countries and strategies are also discussed.

Keywords: Populism, Political Campaign, Manipulation Strategies

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## Introduction

The database for analysing populist campaigns consists of YouTube videos from official right-wing populist parties and politicians: in Germany, AfD TV (operated by the Alternative for Germany), with 91,300 subscribers and 602 videos, the AfD-Fraktion im Deutschen Bundestag (AFD Representatives in the German Federal Parliament) with 109,000 subscribers and 2,713 videos and Dr. Frauke Petry's channel with 693 subscribers and 200 videos; in Austria, FPÖ TV (operated by the Freedom Party of Austria) with 63,000 subscribers and 3,111 videos, Österreich zuerst (Austria First) with no data on the number of subscribers and 4,843 videos, Manfred Haimbuchner's private channel with 1,390 subscribers and 96 videos and Team HC Strache with 1,220 subscribers and 60 videos; and, in Slovakia, the channel operated by representatives of the People's Party Our Slovakia in the National Council (ĽS Naše Slovensko v NR SR) with 13,600 subscribers and 200 videos, Štefan Harabin's private channel with 25,800 subscribers and 194 videos and Sme rodina - Boris Kollár with 2,680 subscribers and 286 videos.

All the data listed above is current as of 12 October 2020. Comparing the subscribership among the video channels in the three countries, it demonstrates that even a smaller county like Slovakia may have channels covering a wider circle of subscribers than its counterparts operated by larger and historically longer established right-wing parties. In general, parties represented in the countries' parliaments have a greater audience and encountered more success compared to non-parliamentary parties, with the exception of Štefan Harabin's channel, while parties or politicians that have split from their original parties have a much smaller impact, such as Frauke Petry and Team HC Strache, although even in this case they can very quickly achieve a level of subscribership and influence comparable to another political competitor, such as between Haimbuchner and Strache. A well-chosen communication strategy also seems to play a crucial role. The analysed videos illustrate several basic strategies to be addressed here in greater detail, particularly identity politics, humour, irritation, intimidation and "fake facts" alongside polarisation and stratification. These strategies will be demonstrated with specific examples, taking a comparative perspective and looking for similarities and differences between the examples both at the level of individual countries and between strategies. Proceeding methodologically and inductively, there is no attempt here to put these results into other theoretical contexts.

## Identity strategy

Identity is one of the fundamental elements for addressing recipients of a message and gaining their confidence. It can take two forms, either an instrument to enable people to identify with a particular politician or leadership candidate (most often the party leader), or to unify them into a collective consciousness. The first case is illustrated in a video from Ľuboš Krajčír's candidacy for Slovakia's National Council [URL 1]. Campaigning on the We Are Family party list, he sought to present himself as an ordinary person – a tough, athletic type working hard at his job. His declaration of being "ready to work in high-level politics for the people" underscored a contradictory aspect of the little man in high-level politics, indirectly pointing to himself as "the man in the street" like you and me. Simultaneously, this aspect of humanity is a foundation building block for the central concept of populism, namely that it stands behind the people. Party leader Boris Kollár emphasises the candidate's

quality, calling Krajčír both a successful local politician and a fine man (1:06). Kollár's description of him packs moral qualities and characteristics such as perseverance, discipline, boldness, commitment, diligence and a fighting spirit that separates him from others and especially Krajčír's political opponents.

Notwithstanding, the building of a collective consciousness is much more strongly evident, whose aspects were noted in the first example of candidates working side by side, together as a team. An interesting technique used in this respect is rhythmic melodies and songs reflecting a common spirit. To some degree, they are reminiscent of traditional folk songs, although more from their character than the particular genre to which they have been assigned. The video produced by People's Party Our Slovakia [URL 2] starts with a lone figure leaning over a bridge railing and staring into space. As he starts walking across the bridge in tune to dynamic background music, he is joined by children and then other women and men sympathising with the party. The imperative "Rise Up!" repeated in the song seeks to rouse collective action by intoning viewers to break bread with them, to unite for the sake of their children and not let the "third" win (0:37). Besides the powerful rhythm heard throughout the video, there are a number of symbolic and stirring references to "feeling your heart beating in your chest", to willpower, self-sacrifice and fighting with your body and soul. The song additionally makes intertextual references to Slovakia's national anthem, especially alluding to the nation having been asleep and the need for the people to wake up and confront the past and present. Awareness of the nation is visually strengthened by the national flags the marchers are carrying.

Pointing to national symbols, the FPÖ likewise seeks to evoke a feeling of unity [URL 3], visually dominated in the video by Austria's landscape, the Alps, the Danube and major cities in the country. The induced national identity is complemented by generally human aspects like closeness to others, the desire to communicate and staying together, feelings critical at time of crisis. National identity becomes part of a stronger collective identity, implied with the words "Long live our country! Long live our Austria! Only together are we strong enough to overcome the crisis." (0:43 – 0:47)

In the spirit of a common goal, a collective identity can even be transnational in nature. This is evident in a video of Marine Le Pen expressing her support for "Sme Rodina" and calling upon Slovaks to vote for it in European Parliament elections. The message she broadcasts is for a Europe of nations and for European countries to be finally heard (0:18 – 0:23) [URL 4]. A recurring element is the "*vox populi*" tone of voice as the central theme of populism), also expressed non-verbally at the close of Kotlebist candidate Ondrej Ďurica's video [URL 2] to be a strong voice for Slovakia (Figure 1).



Figure 1

While the previous videos are accompanied by unequivocal gravity and pathos, targeted relief characterises the video where former Austrian FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache emphatically raps [URL 5] about people desiring for Austria to continue existing, to get out and vote for freedom. [...] In the video, he urges patriotic Austrians to vote for Austria to remain free and neutral, to end the misery of the red-black coalition and to vote for freedom. The introduction to the video shows archival footage which, besides the main idea behind it, makes an intertextual and historical connection to Leopold Figl, Austria's first post-war Federal Chancellor and a major personality deeply involved in the restoration of Austrian sovereignty in 1955.

## Humour

The previous video suggests a strategy of comic relief, exaggeration and humour in general as methods for reaching out to supporters and identifying with them. Another musical example is a video where Slovak rapper Mišel and "Sme Rodina" chairman Boris Kollár urge people to vote in the 2020 general election [URL 6]. The video's main element ironically points out what We Are Family seeks to change. Playing on the Slovak words for "citizens" and "regular people" (*občania*) and sheep (*ovca*), they address anybody unable to comprehend or unaware of the ruling political elites as "*ovčania*" for letting the elites "herd" them.

A similar focus can be found in appeals to voters from the FPÖ in several videos the party produced for the 2019 European parliamentary election. The first video [URL 7] shows an ordinary man waking up to discover the EU election won by his political opponents and them keeping all the horrible promises they made. Such news leaves him terrified and frightened. But everything ends on a happy note when he wakes up and learns that it was all a nightmare, and so hurries off to vote. The next video features a similar constellation of political rivals. When an FPÖ supporter decides to walk his dog instead of going to vote, his neighbours from rival political parties celebrate. But fortunately for the FPÖ, its leader Strache and one of the party's members in the European Parliament, Harald Vilimsky, confront the supporter, explain why he should go to the polls instead and even offer to watch his dog [URL 8]. Besides directly addressing the party's faithful, the video suggests general identifying values such as commitment, community, assistance in need and solidarity, all of which appeal to viewers even more.

Slovak politician Štefan Harabin, chairman of the non-parliamentary VLAST party, chose to joke as part of his advertising strategy. In his humour laden videos, he hyperbolically stylises himself as a judge convicting and sentencing different political rivals for crimes such as corruption, misappropriation and tax fraud [URL 9] and, in the first three seconds of another short clip, wielding a gavel (Figure 2) to rap the fingers of a hand sneaking onto his desk to steal something [URL 10].

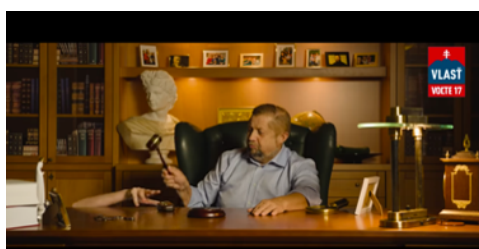


Figure 2

As the gavel rhythmic raps the hand's knuckles, he over-enunciates the words "You should not be stealing; but, Andrej". His enunciation of the Slovak equivalent of "you should not be stealing" and calling specific politicians he encounters by their first names opens up a polyvalent meaning in the context of two different examples of major political figures. Meanwhile, spontaneous laughter can be heard behind the camera. His videos have a common feature of turning the emotion of laughter into an instrument he intends to wield in order to reinforce the relationship between the political party and its voters, as they reinforce the party's platform among potential voters.

### Irritation and intimidation

There is a tendency far more often to instrumentalise emotions generated from uncertainty, irritation or fear. To a large degree, the decision whether intimidation is present in the direct contact a political party or its personalities make with its (potential) voters, such as in panel discussions and campaign rallies, or only indirectly communicated in the party's presentations and direct action, in the end lies in the audiovisual resources analysed here.

The first example in this section is a video produced by the Alternative for Germany (AfD), *The numbers are exploding: every other unemployed person has a migration background!* [URL 11]. The title both reinforces and evokes an atmosphere of fear through verbal lexemes, generating a strong negativism that retains its force, even though spoken only figuratively. If a bomb explodes, it has fatal consequences for anybody that happens to be near it. When numbers "explode", thus increasing sharply, it can have fatal consequences for both individuals and the entire society.

The video runs a minute and five seconds and can be divided into two larger parts. The first half (0:00 - 0:29) identifies a political opponent as the culprit responsible for everything that has gone wrong (Figure 3-4) and explicitly lists the negative effects of her decisions (Figures 5-7). The opening images provide evidence of the sophisticated way the opponent, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, is identified when she first appears with her notorious motto "*Wir schaffen das!*" (We can do it!), whose meaning is transformed, however, by the video creator's comment of the social system becoming ever more burdened. The second statement transforms the target of the denotation, indicated by the pronoun "*das*" (it), from a positive connotation to a negative fact.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Yet it is the other half of the video that turns into a springboard for depicting negative information and arousing among viewers a feeling of distrust toward a political rival, either inducing or further strengthening the atmosphere of concern. Along these lines,

there is also a need to glimpse the political opponent's repeated promise of enrichment and skilled workers immigrating into Germany (Figure 5). Broken promises are normally associated with a loss of confidence when there is already a sense of having been double crossed, and this type video only reinforces it further. This claim additionally contrasts with the statements in Figures 6-8, pointing out how the narrator interconnects them to form a line of information with a rising degree of seriousness.

The claim shown in Figure 5 is then set off against the assertion in Figure 6 of immigration contributing to Germany's higher unemployment instead. Whereas immigration is connoted positively in Figure 5 and interpreted as necessarily strengthening Germany's skilled workforce, Figure 6 twists the argument for it to acquire a negative connotation by referencing the origin of a problem or negative consequence (*"But the truth is that immigration has led to even higher unemployment in Germany"*). The next two assertions made in Figures 7 and 8 below use statistical data from the Federal Labour Office to back Figure 6's claim and the source to make the claim credible.



Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Following this sequence of negative information, the leader of the Alternative for Germany in the German Bundestag enters the scene in the second half of the video and explains that the federal government acts as if Germany has infinite reserves (Figure 9) and migration into the "Promised Land" at any price seems to be the goal (Figure 10). Standing as "one of the ordinary people", she draws attention to honestly working people already living in the country, either self-employed or employed by others, that have been injured, put at a disadvantage or endangered by the condition created; in her words "that have paid the price" (Figure 11) and who have to support the growing army of social cases (Figure 12). Viewers may feel concerned about the length of time the situation has persisted and angry about specific social cases, but they will accordingly become upset with everybody that has allowed people from outside Germany to have profited from the German social system.



Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

The final demand, in opposition to Chancellor Merkel's statement at the introduction to the video, expresses the need to stop immigration into the country's social system (Figure 13), whereby the AfD makes clear its dual position, placing itself among ordinary people on one hand and protecting ordinary, honest workers on the other. It also indicates how the AfD's views are the polar opposite of those expressed by its political opponents.



Figure 13

Another example is a video by the same party about the new migration wave sweeping Germany [URL 12]. In this case, too, the title combines negatively connotated "migration wave" (*Migrationswelle*) and "sweeping" (*zurollen*) to raise concerns about the possible consequences. The strategically chosen visual elements seen in the first part of the video are especially worth noting. These are camera shot of the "hordes" of migrants travelling toward the viewer's homeland. The large groups of migrants walking steadily forward and the long lines of them standing reflect the theme of the video (Figures 14-16), while in the background the narrator intones that "internal evaluations by the Ministry of Interior indicate that illegal border crossings and asylum applications in all of the Balkan countries are at an even higher level than they were in 2017 and 2018". It can be added the visual elements found in Figures 15 and 16 multiply the negativism associated with the migrants.



Figure 14

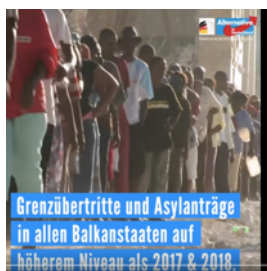


Figure 15



Figure 16

Nevertheless, what makes the video partially paradoxical is the relatively neutral, calm voice of the narrator accompanying it. He sounds professional and provides the video with a documentary character somewhat at odds with the objective pursued by the strategy, yet it is very closely related to the strategy discussed in the next section.

### “Pseudo” facts

The emotional strategies selected for the videos are frequently covered over by rationalised elements. In this spirit, an almost documentary narrative can be perceived in the videos discussed in the previous section. In addition, various statistical surveys and data have appeared in the previous examples. This strategy is not necessarily

politically motivated and has actually been a tendentiously chosen tool in the media world.

Štefan Harabin's VLASTĚ in Slovakia provides another example. In a video produced in January 2020, the party points to the "purchase" of truth mediated by the media [URL 13]. It is clear from the video that the focus is on popularising the party, and yet it zeroes in on faults in the system and the inability of average people not always to defend themselves. In terms of composition, the video is relatively simple, presenting mostly slides of white text in a black background. The first slide, shown in Figure 17, blazes in upper-case letters, "THEY WANT TO STOP HARABIN AND HIS VLASTĚ PARTY" and below them in lower-case "Don't trust the media and the polls; they're lying to you!". This is followed by a series of slides statistically assessing the party's and its leader's popularity as "facts" underscored by their growth, while also perceived concurrently as a trigger for media ignorance (Figure 18). The next slides to appear in the video are well-known examples of purchased public opinion based on evidence (recordings of conversations by political rivals about buying a research agency or newspaper to conduct their own opinion polls), which seek to reinforce the credibility of objective statistical surveys and let viewers verify the information presented by the media. Ultimately, viewers are strongly encouraged not to be deceived. They are urged not to believe the corrupt media or the survey they have purchased. Finally, in Figure 19, the words "lies and manipulation" close out the slides.

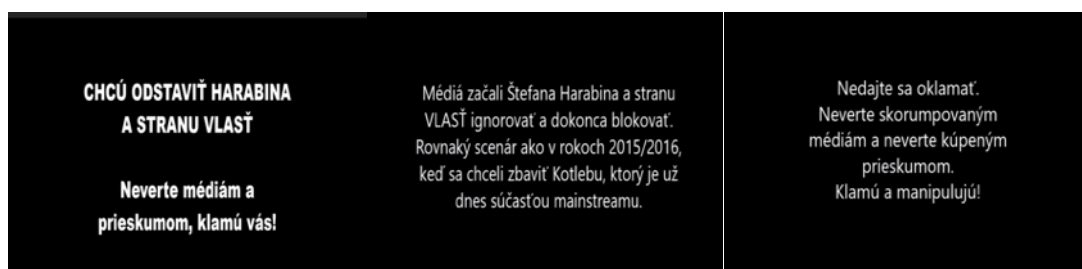


Figure 17

Figure 18

Figure 19

Pseudo facts are also a favourite instrument employed both to demonise refugees and castigate political opponents to induce the desired atmosphere among viewers. They provide misleading or distorted figures, exaggerated attributes and high-sounding scenarios to back their claims. These "facts" are packaged so viewers are barely able to withstand the onslaught of information and are frequently overwhelmed, even as they are increasingly called upon to take precautions and verify what they have been told. Receiving such information, viewers find themselves in an atmosphere of fear and put their trust into the hands of those protecting them from it. A similar strategy is evident in another video produced by the AfD [URL 14], where they report on the case of a man called Allasa M. He had applied for asylum and then illegally moved to Germany. After committing a crime there, he was deported from the country, but still managed to return after another application for asylum. This demonstration serves to argue for legitimising the party's own political candidates because they offer solutions for combating such cases.



## Polarisation and stratification

Against the background of the migration crisis (and similar to the videos produced by the FPÖ, People's Party Our Slovakia and VLASTĚ), the videos start feeding off polarised opinions, which often goes hand in hand with the strategies of presenting the “facts” and of irritation and intimidation. Polarisation usually concerns attitudes, problem-solving approaches and accepted decisions, ultimately leading to viewers becoming politically polarised. The earlier videos from the AfD demonstrate how opinions have become polarised at the state level, where their very structure reflects the two political poles that have developed. However, polarisation can also be seen horizontally in the country's relationship with supranational institutions, with the EU the most often mentioned.

In a video produced by VLASTĚ [URL 15], it is possible after the opening minutes to notice a comment by leader Štefan Harabin of him learning about the European Parliament's decision to set up a European fund for migration and Asia and appropriating 10 billion euros for it. He calls it essentially a scheme to redistribute migrants across Eastern Europe, most likely through mandatory quotas and was something he had forewarned long ago when everybody was laughing at him. Furthermore, he complains about having been mocked by Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová or EU Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič and other members of the Slovakia's parliament. He closes by saying “I think Slovakia can and must never allow it [for him to be ridiculed]”.

Where Harabin dissociates himself from the EU's position while in the same breath points out his disagreement with other parliamentary parties, a similar direction is taken by People's Party Our Slovakia in its video *“We filmed the dark side of Brussels; what the media doesn't want you to see!”*, criticising the EU in order to express its own disagreement with the EU's opinion and decisions [URL 16].

The video itself is a series of slow-motion panning and images shot in Brussels, the centre of the EU, with background music playing in a slow, minor key to accompany comments from different members of the party. The main thematic aspects seen in the video are associating the migration crisis with the idea of a multicultural Europe, the EU's support of “non-traditional” social groups and the EU operating as a supranational body. The comments themselves progress toward outlining the predominately negative consequences of the strategy the EU has chosen for itself. Examples are narrated by several People's Party Our Slovakia candidates for the European Parliament and they include an introduction from the capital of the European Union filmed at one of Brussels' largest markets, where a member of the party comments about the difficulty finding any of the original European population; narration from another member in a neighbourhood where his guide once lived, and being told by him that there was only one Muslim family at his school when he attended it and remarking that practically no original Belgians live in that section of the city now because they had fled in fear. He further comments that Brussels had once opened its borders to immigrants and now police officers and soldiers, some with machine guns, stand at every corner. Finally, a third member talks about the Islam in Europe being more than mosques with minarets and the call to prayers, as is presented by the media, but also terrorist attacks, “no-go zones”, and a never-ending fear among families of their children ever returning home alive and healthy. He

continues to talk about the propaganda of multiculturalism in Brussels he sees at every step, of pictures of smiling black people and Africans, and how a multicultural society should look (Figure 20 – 22).



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22

The three candidates also point out, in contrast, the differences between the EU's attitudes and the platform of People's Party Our Slovakia. Examples here include Brussels' and the European Union's current push for gay rights and permitting homosexual couples to adopt children, as opposed to the party's own defence of the traditional family and how it has been marginalised. They also rail against Brussels spending millions of euros on LGBTI propaganda and not appropriating a single euro to supporting and protecting traditional families. They claim that anyone daring to criticise or question the EU's LGBTI policy is automatically labelled an extremist and fascist (Figures 23-25).



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25

Their comments likewise indicate their political opposition to the influence of the European Union's liberal policies, where open borders have changed everything. The intensity of their intimidation escalates again in a statement reminiscent of the direct impact of laws and regulations adopted by the EU, where they stress the supremacy of laws adopted by the European Parliament over Slovakia's laws and express their fear that all they have seen in Brussels will come to Slovakia, too.

But there is similar polarisation and stratification taking place among people living inside a country, too, and not just externally toward other countries and institutions. We are Family's video *"Aggressive Slovakia"* seeks to portray their opponents as vulgar, primitive demonstrators, against whom the party sees its own members as tolerant and seeking dialogue. In a twist on the Bible, the video exhorts "to give bread to whoever comes at you with a stone". We Are Family party leader Boris Kollár carries croissants to an ignoring crowd that tramples them at 0:55 in the video (Figure 26). The clip seeks to define Kollár as decent and morally superior in a polarised scene where an amoral onlooker simultaneously acts as a magnet in the spirit of a positive identity.



Figure 26

## Conclusion

The videos analysed here display striking similarities across geographical aspects, with rather minimal characteristic variances that mostly result from the country's own political and social context and events. Perhaps the most striking difference is the narrative provided by German and Slovak populists. While the German right-wing populist parties opt for a mostly moderate tone approaching a documentary, Slovak parties bring much more emotion to a seemingly substantive approach, pointing out supposed facts on their merits. In contrast to the other two countries, the FPÖ's style lies on the border between these two political spectra, although the boundaries between them tend to be thin, blurry and intersecting. These differences may result from each nation's own mentality and nature, while the assumption that because populist parties in Slovakia are much younger and less able to mask their emotionally targeted strategies seems likewise more plausible an explanation.

The emotional aspect is the most significant element uniting these campaigns, not only in a transnational context, but also cutting across the range of all these strategies. Here the difference is only in the degree of transparency and subterfuge. Humans are the most emotional of living things. They tend to look at the world around themselves, objects and events through emotions. Emotion is a person's first reaction to outside stimuli, which can be so intense in some cases that what is evoked can lead to persistent and even unpredictable actions. Therefore, it is not surprising for the potential of people's emotions to be exploited as a tool to induce or influence actions from others in various areas, including the political sphere.

When considering populist political parties, fear is the primary emotion they employ, whose presence can also be analysed audio-visually. The effectiveness of building, maintaining and reinforcing the atmosphere of fear, at the level of a larger group of viewers or a nationality can be expressed in the collective fear aroused. The videos analysed here purposefully apply a wide range of elements that can intimidate a potential viewer verbally, nonverbally, visually, through musical elements or by spouting misleading statistics. People normally encounter impulses that generate fear. These impulses concurrently generate defence mechanisms against the envisaged and yet unwanted danger. The defensive reaction can be an attempt to avoid danger, to escape from it or to eliminate it. But the danger where the response is collective fear, whatever specific stimulus generated it, is so wide and deep that no individual is able

to limit or eliminate it, so people place their trust in whatever can protect them and whoever wishes to resolve the issue.

It is political parties that have taken over the role of “protector”. Taking the opposite perspective, building and maintaining an atmosphere of fear definitely guarantees an expression of confidence in political parties able to demonstrate that they have been caught in the same situation, while expressing their own lack of confidence in the parties they portray as having secondarily perpetrated the danger in the first place. An alternative to this dominant concept is the endeavour to build an identity through positive identification, often associated with a significant degree of impassioned behaviour. Accordingly, it is much more interwoven with various symbolism and intertextual links to the past.

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***Digital Deliberative Democracy in Indonesia:  
An Analysis from System Theory Perspective***

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**Abstract**

This article aims to analyze the practice/quality of deliberative democracy in Indonesia regarding the use of digital technology. The implementation of digital government or e-government at the central and regional levels is one element to assess the extent to which the quality of democracy and policymaking takes place by optimally utilizing digital technology and involving the wider public. The System Theory perspective is the primary analytical tool for obtaining general and detailed explanations of the complexities of digital government and deliberative problems in Indonesia. Data were obtained through individual and group interviews with various sources in the central government and several regions (cities) such as Surabaya, Makassar, Surakarta, and Jember. The results show that the quality of deliberative democracy in Indonesia, which is facilitated by digital technology, has not run optimally. One of the issues that stands out is that system integration is not running well because of high differentiation and large gaps between the central and regional governments or between one region to another.

Keywords: Deliberative, Democracy, Digital, System, Indonesia

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## Introduction

The digital government in Indonesia, so far, has been implemented within the e-government framework, which began in 2003. This is marked by Presidential Instruction (INPRES) No. 3 of 2003 concerning national policies and strategies for e-government development. Furthermore, e-government is one of the five priority sectors in the 2014-2019 Indonesia Broadband Plan. In 2018, the President issued Presidential Regulation No. 95 concerning Electronic-Based Government Systems, which became the legal umbrella for implementing e-government in Indonesia. But, during almost two decades of its implementation, the digital government in Indonesia has not been running optimally due to several issues related to various factors, such as technical, geographical, regulatory, leadership, to financial factors (Rose, 2004; Rahardjo, Mirchandani, & Joshi, 2007; Hermana, et al., 2012; Prahono & Elidjen, 2015; Choi, et al., 2016; Aritonang, 2017). Indonesia conducts an internal evaluation of the implementation of e-government through the Indonesian e-Government Rating (PeGI) by the Ministry of Communications and Informatics (MCI) and the Electronic-Based Government System Index (SPBE) by the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform (PAN-RB).

From the central to regional levels, the government in Indonesia has been aggressively using digital technology and creating various platforms for government and public service needs in the last decade at least. The number of local governments (Provinces and Districts / Cities) is currently 548, and each local government usually has dozens of applications or platforms. So it can be said that there are thousands of platforms being developed for the needs of today's digital government in Indonesia. This number does not include platforms developed by other ministries and state institutions. The increasing number of internet users and smartphone users are two of the factors driving this. The number of internet users in Indonesia in 2020 reaches 175 million users and 338 million mobile phone connections (We Are Social, 2020). However, this gigantic quantity of platforms is not matched by these platforms' technical and substantive quality, as seen in the annual reports of PeGI and SPBE. The visible trend is that government institutions at various levels are competing to create platforms. This was then followed by the classic bureaucratic problem in Indonesia, namely the sectoral ego. Each institution has its own platform and its own database that is not synergistic and integrated.

Meanwhile, one of the important aspects of digital governance and become a serious problem in Indonesia is participation, more precisely public participation. In the e-government framework, this aspect is known as the concept of e-participation. United Nations (2014) explains that electronic participation is "the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy, decision making, and service design and delivery to make them participatory, inclusive, and deliberative." Indonesia's achievements in this aspect are less than encouraging. Based on the E-Government Development Index (EGDI) released by the United Nations in 2018, Indonesia's electronic participation index has increased from the previous year but is still in position 107. This shows that there are still fundamental public involvement problems in Indonesia's government process and policymaking, especially through digital technology facilitation.

The issue of public participation in the policy-making process itself can be further drawn or linked to the concept of deliberative democracy, which can be understood in



normative and empirical contexts (Steiner, 2012). In this research, deliberative democracy is interpreted as an ideal condition in policymaking by involving the public or society on a wide scale and through procedures based on optimal rationality, openness, and inclusiveness. Deliberative democracy is also interpreted from the system perspective, which means that the ideal conditions above have boundaries that are identical to the boundaries of democracy. In the Indonesian context itself, the concept of deliberation, which comes from the Latin phrase *deliberatio*, literally means 'consultation,' has the equivalent of 'musyawarah'. Thus, practically/empirically, this concept is not an unfamiliar thing in Indonesia.

The ideal deliberative democracy can run with several principles or functions, namely epistemic, ethical, and democratic (Mansbridge, et al., 2012). Epistemic is related to preferences, opinions, and decisions based on facts and logic, ethical with the principles of mutual respect, and democratic with the principles of plurality, equality, and inclusiveness. According to Jürg Steiner (2012), "there is an agreement in the normative literature that mutual respect in the sense of reciprocity is a key element of good deliberation." The successful realization of these three functions will guarantee the legitimacy of policies and ultimately lead to the ideal conditions of deliberative democracy (Mansbridge, et al., 2012).

The presence of digital technology impacts deliberative democracy, both in its theoretical and empirical settings. Similar to the context of technology in other socio-political dimensions, in deliberative democracy, technology comes with two contrasting consequences, positive and negative. On the one hand, technology promises a bright future of deliberative democracy because of the technical advantages it brings, enabling a high number of participants. On the other hand, digital technology is considered to have the potential to create polarization, leading to weak policy legitimacy. These are only a small part of the debate on the role of digital technology in the context of deliberative democracy. Several scholars have researched deliberative democracy and its relation to the presence and use of digital technology itself in different contexts and perspective (See Jaeger, 2005; Zhang, et al., 2013; You, et.al., 2015; Davidson & Elstub, 2014). What distinguishes this research from others is the case selected, the study's focus, and the main analytical tool used namely the System Theory perspective.

The System Theory perspective is the primary analytical tool for obtaining general and detailed explanations of the complexities of digital government and Indonesia's deliberative problems. The system perspective has several advantages in understanding deliberative democracy (Mansbridge, et al., 2012). The system perspective allows us to think about deliberative democracy in large-scale societal terms, to analyze the division of labor among parts of a system, and to introduce into the analysis large contextual issues and broad systemic inadequacies (Mansbridge, et al., 2012). In this study, System Theory itself specifically refers to Niklas Luhmann's ideas (1984; 1997a; 1997b) regarding modern society, especially regarding the complexity of social systems due to changes in the system's environment. Luhmann's way of looking at the existing systems and how these systems operate is used to understand the empirical facts of the ongoing digital government implementation and deliberative democracy. The system, according to Luhmann, works in an autopoietic way which is characterized by the ability of the system to create its basic elements, determine its own boundaries and structures, refer to itself (self-referential), and are

closed although still concerning the external environment (Luhmann, 1984; 1997a; 1997b). Using the system perspective for analysis, Indonesia's digital government model will automatically be seen as a large system consisting of several sub-systems, working with special codes and dealing with complex environmental conditions.

### *Method*

Amidst the euphoria of digital technology implementation in Indonesia, as briefly explained in the beginning, this research aims to analyze the quality of deliberative democracy in Indonesia regarding digital technology use. The implementation of digital government at the central and regional levels is one element to assess how the quality of democracy and policymaking occurs by optimally utilizing digital technology and involving the wider public. This research looks at and finds out to what extent digital governance implementation in Indonesia (national and regional) can enable the realization of the ideal deliberative democracy as envisioned. Some of the questions to be answered in this research include: (1) Has the digital government system running so far been formulated and worked with the main principles of deliberation? (2) Have the platforms developed enabled broad public participation in policymaking and encouraged the public to participate rationally? (3) Are existing digital platforms able to encourage the presence of a broad discourse on various public issues without technical and substantive limitations?

This research utilized a qualitative approach to obtain data, arrange findings, and analyze the results. Data were obtained through individual and focus group discussions with various sources in the central government (Ministry of Communications and Informatics (KOMINFO) & Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform (MENPAN-RB)) and several regional governments (cities) such as Surabaya (East Java), Makassar (South Sulawesi), Surakarta (Central Java) and Jembrana (Bali). These four regions can provide various portraits of digital government implementation and its relation to involving citizens in it because of the character of the regions and their respective backgrounds. Data were also obtained through direct observation of several digital government platforms developed in these four research regions.

The digital government's portrait and public participation dynamics in the four research areas are definitely insufficient to describe the quality of deliberative democracy running in Indonesia comprehensively. This research looks more at existing practices or those carried out from the government's side. Further research will need data that can provide perspectives from the public or other relevant parties regarding the implementation of digital government itself and the deliberation process that may run in it. However, the results shown in these four areas are sufficient to provide an entry point for understanding the deliberation process taking place in Indonesia, especially in the context of today's complex digital society.

The following sections describe some general and specific findings based on data obtained from the study area. A brief analysis will be presented with the System Theory perspective, which is the main analysis tool chosen.

## ***Results***

The digital government system running in Indonesia in the last two decades has been driven by the rapid development of technology and the need for better public services. Along the way, the government at the central and local levels has developed various technologies and platforms that are used for this purpose. Implementation issues that arise later are related to technical aspects and related to aspects of motivation, skills, and the underlying values and principles. The issues faced, for example, limited access to computers and internet networks, the inability to use various available platforms, to the users that are not following their intended use. The scope of issues that arise is also related to the drafted regulations, including the authority and institutional structures established to implement this digital government.

Regarding deliberation issues, the central and regional governments also seek to realize public participation in government activities and policymaking by digital technology. However, community involvement is limited to a one-way model that takes the form of complaints. For example, the central government has developed a platform called LAPOR!, which is actually intended as a medium for public participation. REPORT! Stands for People's Online Complaints and Aspirations Service. In its implementation, the problems faced by this platform also concern structural issues. This platform was initially run by the Executive Office of the President (KSP) and later transferred to Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform.

Besides, LAPOR! has been a complaints platform, tended to be 'one way,' and arguably less dialogic. This platform does not confront the public and the government in need of dialogue to formulate policies. The contributing factors can be traced from the technology side, the level of understanding of the users and the developer/manager, and the policies formulated to operate it. This, of course, requires further and more detailed research. However, apart from the existing weaknesses or shortcomings so far, this platform is actually quite potential to become a deliberation platform because it is widely known by the public and sufficient to integrate government units at various levels from central to regional. However, to make this happen, conditions that must be met in advance are needed, ranging from individual, organizational to systemic dimensions.

The screenshot shows the LAPOR! website interface. At the top left is the LAPOR! logo and the text 'TENTANG LAPOR!'. At the top right are 'MASUK' and 'DAFTAR' buttons. The main heading is 'Layanan Aspirasi dan Pengaduan Online Rakyat' with the subtitle 'Sampaikan laporan Anda langsung kepada instansi pemerintah berwenang'. Below this is a form titled 'Sampaikan Laporan Anda'. The form has a section 'Pilih Tipe Laporan' with three radio button options: 'PENGADUAN', 'ASPIRASI', and 'PERMINTAAN INFORMASI'. Below the options is a note: 'Perhatikan Cara Menyampaikan Pengaduan Yang Baik dan Benar' with a question mark icon. There are two text input fields: 'Ketik Judul Laporan Anda \*' and 'Ketik Isi Laporan Anda \*'.

Figure 1: The interface of LAPOR! (<https://www.lapor.go.id/>)

The following sections provide a brief overview of the four research areas, namely Surabaya, Surakarta, Makassar, and Jember. In Surabaya, digital governance is one of the success stories and has become a reference for other regions and even the central government. The Surabaya City Government has made digital technology the backbone of government administration and public services. This city portrait shows one of the important dimensions underlined in realizing the work of digital government, namely strong leadership. What is also evident from the development of digital governance in Surabaya is close collaboration with universities. The main platforms used by the Surabaya City Government for community participation are the 112 command center services and the e-musrenbang platform (development and planning forums). However, from the deliberation side, the platforms developed in Surabaya have not yet been optimal in providing a broad space for involvement and dialogue for the public in the policy-making process in various dimensions.

In the Surakarta case, the city government has developed several digital government platforms focused on public service activities. Two institutions that become the main actors are the Communication and Information Office and the Population and Civil Registry Office. Efforts to involve the community in the policymaking process are prioritized offline by conducting face to face meeting. The mayor meets directly with the community through a routine program called Sonjo Wargo, held in each sub-district. In this program, the Mayor and Deputy Mayor have a direct dialogue with citizens to hear aspirations. This is done because not all Surakarta citizens have access to or can use the city government's digital platform.

The Makassar City Government runs a digital government like many other regions by developing various website-based platforms and mobile applications. The Smart RT / RW platform is a mobile application developed by the Makassar City Government to involve citizens in the policymaking process. However, this application's role has not been maximized due to technical constraints and limited knowledge of citizens regarding its function. Apart from that, the City Government is also working with the

Provincial Government of South Sulawesi in developing the Baruga platform, which is more of a complaint platform like LAPOR !. Deliberations facilitated by digital technology in Makassar have not run optimally due to factors that are also identical to what happened in the two previous cities.

In the 2007-2013 period, Jembrana Regency became a pilot for implementing e-government in Indonesia. In that period, Jembrana Regency became the destination of comparative studies of several local governments, the central government, and many international agencies interested in implementing e-government. The Jembrana Regency Government has developed the Jimbarwana Network (Jimnet), an e-government network infrastructure and public services. In fact, Jembrana has shown a positive portrait through the e-voting system developed for the Village Head election process. However, this good practice did not continue due to several problems, ranging from budget, human resources, leadership, and policies

### **Analysis & Conclusions**

In general, the results show that the quality of deliberative democracy in Indonesia, which is facilitated by digital technology, has not run optimally. This occurs for several reasons that are both technological and substantial. The issue of gaps in access and ownership of the equipment to participate is a fundamental problem. The platform's availability by the central and local governments is not followed by most of the community's ability in material and skill aspects. Not all people have the tools to access the platform, and the network infrastructure is not evenly available even in urban areas. Digital government platforms are also developed with a government perspective without sufficient public involvement in the design to evaluation process for the development of their features.

Previously, it was imagined that digital technology could solve one of the deliberation problems in the offline context, namely the limited number of individuals involved. The internet is believed to allow everyone to be involved without the limitations of time and space. In fact, the issue of access to technology, as mentioned above, is a hindering problem. This can be solved by providing a network infrastructure that evenly reaches each area. Also, users' skill problems need to be solved with various strategies, from socialization to inclusive digital literacy programs.

One of the issues that stand out is that system integration is not running well because of high differentiation and large gaps between the central and regional governments or between one region to another. The lack of synergy between the central and local governments from the system perspective means different 'operating codes.' The central government sets policies that are difficult for local governments to follow. One of the reasons is that policies in one ministry are not in line with other ministries' policies. At the central government level, there is no synergy in the design and implementation of digital government. Local governments are confused about implementing various policies, and in fact, not all of those policies are relevant to each region's needs and conditions. Some local governments are even more progressive and innovative in developing digital technology for public services than the central government. This became a problem because the central government then attempted to carry out standardization for data integration purposes. Several regions

were then forced to adjust to the central government's demands even though they eventually had to return to 'old' technology.

Also, the government seems to lack of understanding of ideal deliberative principles and procedures, which should provide ample opportunities for the citizens to be involved in the policy-making process, in this case, facilitated by technology. Both at the national level and in the four regions that became the research areas, the ongoing deliberations' quality does not show the ideal portrait expected. Existing platforms are unable to fulfill epistemic, ethical, and democratic functions. The community is not given sufficient space for rational and argumentative dialogue with the government. The government is still trapped in the logic of 'one-way' communication. What is needed in the context of the current information society is an interactive two-way communication model and provides an opportunity for the parties involved to build common meaning. According to Mendonça, et al., (2020) "deliberative democracy needs to go beyond verbal forms of communication and acknowledges the crucial role of non-verbal communication in expressing and exchanging arguments".

From a system perspective, what is happening in Indonesia today shows that Indonesia's digital government system is unable to reduce the complexity of its environment. These complexities include the rapid development of technology, the growing popularity of social media as the main communication and information channels, decentralization and the increasingly important role of regions, and the emergence of a new generation and digital culture. This complexity is ideally responded through the system's internal mechanisms such as differentiation (segmentation, stratification, and functionality). In fact, system differentiation is not going well. Several regions that have to return to 'old' technology due to the central government's policy demands are one of the indications. Also, the inability of this system does not necessarily mean that the system has failed. It is more appropriate to read this as a process of evolution of Indonesia's digital government system in the increasing complexity of its environment. The success then will be largely determined by the system's ability to respond to problems that exist in the external and irritate other social systems to move. In the end, the quality of digital deliberative democracy in Indonesia today is still far from the ideal expectations imagined.

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## ***Turning the Exorcist's Heteropatriarchal Order 'Upside Down' in Stranger Things***

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### **Abstract**

The popular Netflix series *Stranger Things* is often-noted for critiquing homophobia and conservative gender norms. This paper argues that the series—primarily the second season—actively dialogues with *The Exorcist* to upend the Christian heteropatriarchal order that the film attempted to restore. In contrast to *The Exorcist's* single mother Chris MacNeil, the character Joyce Byers discredits the only known religious professional in the fictional town and demonstrates a distrust for the male scientists before herself exorcising the MindFlayer from her son Will. Whereas the demon that possesses MacNeil's daughter Regan self-identifies as the Devil, the Mind Flayer's soldier Demorgorgons physically resemble Christian depictions of Satan. But, while the Devil in *The Exorcist* functions to literally demonize Regan's lesbian sex acts, the *Stranger Things* monsters are often read as a metaphor for homophobia.

Keywords: Stranger Things, The Exorcist, Religion and Film, Christian Right, Heteropatriarchy

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## Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a rising fascination with Roman Catholic exorcisms. The Vatican has organized courses to train exorcists (Baglio 2009); and in the mid 2010s Pope Francis took to Twitter to confirm the Catholic belief in the literal existence of Satan in the world. In 2017 the conservative U.S Conference of Catholic Bishops arranged for the first ever English translation of the ritual handbook *Exorcisms and Related Supplications* (Mariani, 2018). Meanwhile, the hierarchy has seemingly weaponized the rite in the political realm. For instance, American exorcist John Esseff linked gender neutral child rearing to Satanism (Roberts, 2019). And, in 2013, while Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn was signing legislation to legalize same-sex marriage, Bishop Thomas Paprocki was leading an hour of prayers of “supplication and exorcism in reparation for the sin of same-sex marriage” (Roewe 2013).

These incidents echo the conservative gender and sexuality ideologies embedded in *The Exorcist* (1973). The narrative of the film, and the novel by the same title, centers on the diabolical possession of Regan MacNeil, a 12-year-old girl. After psychiatrists prove unable to cure Regan, her mother, Chris—a divorcee atheist—beckons a Jesuit priest to perform an exorcism. In one of the most infamous scenes Regan is seen masturbating with a crucifix and pushing her mother’s head between her legs. The narrative concludes with the priests, representatives of patriarchy, restoring Regan’s normalcy. The film has been read as an indictment on both feminism and homosexuality (McCormick 1974; Scahill 2010).

This paper argues that *Stranger Things 2*—released in 2018 against the backdrop of the recent resurgent interest in exorcisms—actively dialogues with *The Exorcist* to affectively upend the heteropatriarchal order the film sought to restore. The protagonist, Joyce Byers performs an exorcism without the aid of any male Christian ritualists for her son Will. Moreover, rather than being associated with homosexuality, the monster that possesses the boy has been interpreted as a metaphor for homophobia (Reynolds 2016; 2017; Roach 2018). Upon delineating the ways by which the *Stranger Things* narrative subversively engages *The Exorcist*, I conclude this discussion with an examination of how the series simultaneously dialogues with past and present socio-political contexts.

## Intertextual References to *The Exorcist*

Much of the discussion surrounding the immensely popular 80s nostalgia series *Stranger Things* focuses on the extensive pop culture references belonging to that decade. However, the series also engages a number of 70s classic horror texts. To date, the series’ engagement with *The Exorcist* (1973) has received scant attention. Tracey Mollet (2019) only gives passing mention to references to *The Exorcist* found in the conclusion of *Stranger Things 2* (ST 2.9)—specifically Will Byers’s change in personality as he becomes possessed, his thrashing while bound to a bed as well as the actual purging of the Shadow Monster/MindFlayer from Will’s body. However, numerous other allusions can be found throughout the second season—if not the entirety of the series (e.g the flickering of electrical lights signals the presence of the demon/monster.)

For instance, like *The Exorcist*'s Regan, Will is also artistic (and viewers are presented with multiple glimpses of Will/Regan's drawings). Prior to learning of Will/Regan's possession, the respective child's single mother Joyce/Chris is seen either preparing a bath for or bathing the child. Room and body temperature also figure prominently in both of the narratives. Scenes capture a cold draft coming from Will/Regan's bedroom window and both children report being inflicted by burning sensations.<sup>1</sup> Further, both possessed characters attempt to call out for rescue: Will uses Morris Code; Regan etches the word 'help' on her stomach. In sum, the prevalent references invite interpretation as to how *Stranger Things* actively dialogues with *The Exorcist*. This paper argues that the Netflix series subverts the conservative Christian gender and sexuality ideologies embedded in *The Exorcist*.

William Blatty, author of the novel *The Exorcist* and the screenplay by the same title, insisted on the actual presence of Satan in the world and a literal interpretation of Catholic doctrine (Wehner 2013). Not surprisingly, then, the demon in the narrative self-identifies as the Devil and his presence is linked, if not equated, with transgressive behavior (lesbian sex acts) or life situations (single motherhood) that deviate from conservative Catholic notions of gender, marriage and sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Thus the exorcism performed by male priests symbolically justifies, and attempts to restore, the Christian heteropatriarchal order. In contrast, the *Stranger Things* monsters—which physically resemble Satan—are metaphoric for both homophobia and conservative Reagan era gender norms. Moreover, the exorcism is conducted not by male Catholic priests but by a single mother.

### **The Heroic Priest-Exorcist to the Single Mother-Exorcist**

When interviewed for a feature in *The Atlantic*, Matthew Schmalz explained that alongside immigrant Catholics' requests for exorcisms, concerns over the declining priesthood may help explain the recent institutional interest in promoting the rite (Koningisor 2011). Put simply, aspiring priests may find appealing authorized power to fight supernatural demonic forces. The film *The Rite* (2011) resurrects the trope of the exorcist-priest as hero that dates back to *The Exorcist*. Michael Cuneo (2001) argues that *The Exorcist* countered negative portrayals of Catholic priests by depicting the Jesuits as heroic:

From their first appearance in the novel to their climactic deaths, it was clear that Blatty's two Jesuit exorcists were meant to be regarded, for all their human frailty, as mythically heroic figures. . . In the winter of 1973 *The Exorcist* was released as a movie under the same title, and Blatty's Jesuit exorcists proved every bit as commanding on film as they had in print.<sup>3</sup>

The priests' authority, however, is dependent on the film's women characters appearing "passive, helpless and lost in a cruel world without male help and guidance"

<sup>1</sup> The *Stranger Things* monster demands that the temperature be kept cold. In contrast, the demon of *The Exorcist* appears to be the cause of the host's chilled environment. During the exorcisms Regan/Devil is burned by holy water and Will/MindFlayer by the sauna room temperature.

<sup>2</sup> These associations are more pronounced in the novel. Stephen E. Bowles (1976, p. 209) summarizes notable omissions from the adaptation: "In the book, the demon attacks Sharon for her sexual fantasies concerning Father Karras and continually abuses Chris for the predominance of her divorce and career."

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Kelly J. Wyman (2004) notes the "Christ-like" powers of the *The Exorcist*'s priest-exorcists.

(McCormick 1974, p. 21). The patriarchal tone of the narrative is arguably more pronounced in the novel. Take, for instance, Blatty's description of Chris' sense of relief upon meeting Father Merrin: "She'd been watching him, glowing with relief at the sense of decision and direction and command sweeping into the house like sun-drenched day" (1971 [2011], p. 327). Ultimately, Chris depends on the two Jesuit priests to rescue her daughter.

In *Stranger Things 2*, Joyce Byers stands in for Chris MacNeil. Like Chris, Joyce is also a single mother with a possessed child. However, Joyce does not rely on priest-exorcists (the series is largely devoid of Christian symbols and characters) and distrusts the male scientists in charge of treating her son Will. In this regard, a scene in season one might be read as foreshadowing how the series will subversively dialogue with *The Exorcist*. When her ex-husband Lonnie suggests she go to a "shrink" or "Pastor Charles" for counseling, Joyce retorts aghast: "They can't help" (ST 1.5). Despite being subjected to gaslighting the woman protagonists, particularly Joyce and Eleven who play essential roles in conducting the exorcism, tend to be more adept in combatting the monsters of the Upside Down (Jackson Joseph 2018).

### **Homophobia: The Work of the Devil**

The 'Upside Down' in the *Stranger Things* narrative is a parallel universe that reflects the dark realities of the fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana. The realm is overtaken by other-worldly vines, threatening organic matter and the echoing screeches of preying monsters. This mirror image of Hawkins invites interpretation as to what plagues the town. The prevalence of homophobic bullies prompted Daniel Reynolds (2016; 2017) to argue that "homophobia is the real monster in *Stranger Things*." In a similar vein, Emily E. Roach suggests the possibility of reading "the Upside Down as a metaphor for the threat of homophobia" (2018, p. 144). These assertions demand a closer examination of the Upside Down and the creatures that reside there. Liesl E. King (2017, p. 11) describes the former in relation to the Christian Hell and the Demogorgon monsters as resembling Satan:

Although the Bible does not depict a humanoid satanic figure, popular versions of the devil picture it as part human, part-creature, and Revelations offers up the anti-Christ in the form of a many headed beast, suggestive of Dustin's Dungeons and Dragons' term for the creature—"Demogorgon". Although our beast is not many-headed, it takes many forms. . . This shape-shifting beast which emerges from a murky, underground space is suggestive of the evil being that resides in the biblical story of Hell, which artists such as Fra Angelico (c 1431) have depicted as a nightmarish space filled with humans enduring on-going terror and torture.

King's argument is bolstered by Nancy Wheeler telling the monster to "go to hell" while shooting it with a pistol in season one's finale (ST 1.8). The damnation is repeated numerous times and is not reserved exclusively for the Upside Down creatures. For instance, Joyce, while detained, tells her captor Dr. Brenner—a scientist whose practices allude to discredited psychiatric gay conversion therapies (Roach 2018, p. 139)—to "go to hell" (ST.1.8).

As noted, the demon in *The Exorcist* self-identifies as the Devil and while possessed Regan performs a lesbian sex act—when Chris discovers Regan masturbating with a crucifix, Regan pushes Chris’ head in between her legs yelling “Lick Me! Lick Me!” Andrew Scahill (2010, p. 47) observes: “the film uses lesbianism in the traditional horror film manner: to make the monster more monstrous, the threat more threatening, and the crisis more critical.” *Stranger Things*, however, associates the monster with homophobia (and the policing of gender norms) rather than homosexuality. The resemblance of the Demogorgon with depictions of Satan coupled with the implicit equating of the Upside Down with the Christian Hell provides further invitation to read the text as inverting *The Exorcist*’s messaging on gender and sexuality.

### Revisiting Reagan Era Satanic Scares and Ex-Gay Christian Exorcisms

The final episode of *Stranger Things 3* closes with a direct reference to the Satanic scares of the 1980s when a local news broadcaster proffers sensationalized speculation that government conspiracy or Satanism might explain the bizarre happenings in Hawkins (ST 3.8). Relevant to the present discussion are the moral panics that respectively surrounded Ouija boards and Dungeons & Dragons (D&D). In *The Exorcist*, prior to being diabolically possessed Regan is seen playing with a Ouija board to communicate with an imaginary friend named Captain Howdy. Subsequently, Christian exorcists in the United States asserted that experimentation with Ouija boards, the occult or Asian religions function as entry points for demons (Cuneo 2001; Mariani 2018). D&D, another game conservative Christians associated with Satanism, features prominently in *Stranger Things* (Waldron 2005). The role playing game, however, does not function as a means for the monster to enter Hawkins. Quite the opposite is true. Will and his friends use D&D as a conceptual tool kit to understand the Upside Down and battle the monsters. This aligns with 21<sup>st</sup> century positive evaluations of D&D that focus on its therapeutic effects and potential to help youth develop skill sets (Wetmore 2018).

The game also provides players with a space for gender exploration (Mussett 2014), which is significant considering that Will—and other characters—have been read as queer (Roach 2018). Aside from passing suggestions that Will might be gay, his sexuality remains ambiguous.<sup>4</sup> However, it is clear that he is unable to conform to the hetero/(hyper)masculine ideals that his father Lonnie and the residents of Hawkins impose on him and his friends. Roach observes the relation between the homophobic bullying the boys are subjected to and their perceived lacking in masculinity. This is especially evident in season one when Joyce tells police chief Jim Hopper that Will is missing. Roach (p.136) describes the scene:

When she talks to Hopper about Will’s disappearance she highlights his sensitivity and explains how that resulted in homophobic bullying. She says Will is ‘not like you. He’s not like me. He’s not like most’ and suggests that her ex-husband, Lonnie, ‘used to say he was queer, called him a fag’ (ST.1.1).

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<sup>4</sup> The most direct inference occurs when Mike says to Will: “It’s not my fault you don’t like girls” (ST 3.3).

Since the monsters are metaphoric for homophobia,<sup>5</sup> Will's exorcism can be understood as an emotional healing ritual performed in response to the homophobic bullying he is subjected to. In the preliminary stage of the exorcism Will's family and friends attempt to communicate with him to stop the monster from taking his life. Towards this end, loved ones share stories with Will to keep him from succumbing to the monster. Roach details the allusion to the LGBT rainbow in this scene.

When Will is struggling against the Shadow Monster that possesses him, his mother keeps him tethered by recalling his drawing of a rainbow ship and her pride at his work. This juxtaposition of rainbows and pride creates another connection between Will and a symbol of political significance to LGBT communities (2018, p. 137).

In Christian exorcisms, holy objects (e.g. crucifixes) are used by priests to control the demon (Baglio 2009). Thus the LGBT rainbow essentially stands in for Christian symbols. This is significant given the history of Christian exorcisms being performed to "convert" homosexuals to heterosexuality (Ross & Stålström 1979; Cuneo 2001; Fetner 2005, p. 75). Incidents occurring during these rituals sometimes closely parallel scenes from *The Exorcist* (Scahill 2010, p. 48). Exorcisms aimed at changing individuals' sexual orientation belong to the broader Christian (evangelical) ex-gay movement that emerged in the 1970s and continued to exert its influence until the early 2010s. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a number of prominent ex gay leaders were discovered to be gay. The largest blow to the movement came when Exodus International announced in 2013 that it would shut down (Merritt 2015).

"Conversion" or "reparative" therapies led by mental health counselors and Christian ministries are known to have caused detrimental psychological effects on participants (ibid). In contrast, Joyce's exorcism, coded as affirming Will's LGBTQ identity, restored his health. Once the Shadow Monster is cast from his body, Eleven, another queer coded character, closes the gate to the Upside Down (read: Hell), which is deep underground and depicted with fire imagery, to effectively lock the monster out of Hawkins. Of course, this is only a temporary defeat for the monsters/heteronormativity. The closing scenes of *Stranger Things 2* hint to viewers that the series will continue with the characters again being pitted against both bullies and otherworldly forces.

At the junior high Snow Ball a girl asks Will to dance. Notably she addresses Will by the same name bullies called him, "zombie boy" (ST. 2.9). Thus, the invitation coupled with the name calling reinforces the pressures to conform. Will initially appears hesitant, prompting Aviva Briefel (2019) to speculate: "maybe he really doesn't want to dance with her or any girl, for that matter." He does, however, accept the dance. The season ends though with a long shot, capturing the monsters looming over the gymnasium. The ending "is protective of the kids' normalcy, establishing physical barriers—the school walls and the pavement—between their sexual discovery and the monsters out to get them" (ibid).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Roach (2018, p. 138) further argues that the monster, "described with the language of disease and infection," alludes to the AIDS crisis.

<sup>6</sup> Briefel argues the Snow Ball's heteronormativity is ultimately undermined by references to the prom scene in Brian De Palma's (1976) *Carrie*.

Not surprisingly, the monsters return in *Stranger Things 3*. The constant resurgence of homophobic bullying represented by demonic attacks parallels a historical trajectory. Recently, the ex-gay movement, previously noted to have relied on exorcisms to change people's sexuality, has quietly resurfaced (Merritt 2019). If past decades are any indication these ministries will likely extoll ideals of heteronormative masculinity (Robinson & Spivey 2007). (Recall Will experiences homophobic bullying due to his lacking in masculinity). Moreover, in the Trump Era the Christian Right, which was most influential in the 80s—Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority—the decade that the *Stranger Things* narrative is set in, has regained prominence. Recent emergent forms of Christian nationalism are patriarchal (Whitehead and Perry 2019) and linked to structural violence against LGBT communities (Bjork-James 2020). The series dialogues with past and present via references to Ronald Reagan, the president championed by the Moral Majority, and Donald Trump, the presidential candidate who won the white Christian evangelical vote in 2016 and 2020 (Sherwood 2020).

## Conclusions

It might be tempting to consider *Stranger Things* alongside a subgenre of Euro-horror 70s exploitation films that imitated and queered the *The Exorcist*. Ian Olney (2014, p. 570) argues that this genre emerged in response to broader cultural transformations including the Women's Rights and Gay Liberation movements occurring across Europe. In contrast, to date, each installment of *Stranger Things* was released in the Trump era, a period marked by the rise (and contestation) of right wing populism and regressive gender and sexuality ideologies. Discussing how the series dialogues with 1980s mad science films, Melissa A. Kaufler (2018, p. 85) observes:

In a decade where America has become simultaneously more progressive yet horribly regressive almost simultaneously between the elections of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, *Stranger Things* is undeniably timely. Unlike its eighties mad science film predecessors, *Stranger Things* is a multilayered confluence of threats and subsequently, it is simply a cultural reflection of what the 2010s are: the 1980s all over again only with more threats and more uncertainty and more weaponization and exploitation.

The series makes (in)direct references to both Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump and thus can (as Kaufler suggests) be read as engaging the socio-political milieu of the 80s and late 2010s. Reagan re-election campaign yard signs code characters as either oblivious to the Upside Down (e.g. Karan and Ted Wheeler) or as bullies—including the teens that taunt Will in the trick or treating scene. The children trick or treat in an upper middle class neighborhood. As Will approaches a house with a Reagan/Bush '84 sign displayed prominently in front of the driveway he is confronted by teenagers who call him "freak" and "zombie boy." Accosted, Will drops his handheld camcorder—a device that alludes to AIDS activism (Roach 2018, p. 142)—falls down and slips into the other world of the Upside Down (ST 2.2). The incident is all caught on video and given more prominence to the narrative when Joyce spots in the footage (in front of the bullies and the yard sign) the monster looming in the sky (ST 2.3). The scene links, or rather equates, homophobia and Reaganism with the monster. Joyce presses pause to examine the outline of the monster *and* to give viewers a chance to reflect on the horrific anti-gay rhetoric of the Moral Majority signified by the yard sign and made monstrous by the Mind Flayer.

Ironically, Scahill's subversive queer reading of *The Exorcist* offers insights as to how *Stranger Things* subverts the 70s horror classic in the context of the 80s and 2010s. Invoking John Rechy's notion of queer rage, Scahill (2010, p. 49) theorizes the appeal of *The Exorcist* to queer spectators:

Central in this film is rage—rage directed at the psychiatric, the medical, the parental, and the religious. It shares a common terrain with queer rage, so rarely expressed—tinged with blood, with shit, with cum, with pus, with vomit, with disease, with every other bodily abjection that the social order links to queerness—and turned upon their oppressors, saturating them in the disgusting volition of its own displaced aggression. Recall the bodily abjection called upon by John Rechy to characterize queer rage. For desire that has been repeatedly and systematically demonized by the agents of heteronormative order, perhaps the most pleasurable response is to join with the forces of hell and wage a hedonistically destructive war (Scahill 2010, p. 49).

Of course, the *Stranger Things* protagonists don't "join with the forces of hell" but rather rage against these forces that are recast in the series as homophobic and misogynistic—or to borrow Rechy's term the embodiment of "heterosexual fascism" (1978, p.231). Scahill examines queer fan discourses surrounding *The Exorcist* "wherein Regan always still remembers and is held unrescued in an perverse state of possessive transgressive erotic power." In the case of *Stranger Things*, however, mainstream viewers are invited to hope for Will's rescue from the pressures to conform. To be clear, rage is not eroticized in *Stranger Things* as it is in Rechy's *Sexual Outlaw* or in the fantasies of *The Exorcist*'s fandom. In the Netflix series, anger figures into Will's rescue mission as well as the self survival of the other marginalized characters just as it does in Rechy's accounts of aiding victims of hate crimes.

The battles with the monsters/bullies provide a subtext that not only critiques Reaganism but also alludes to resistance against Trumpism. The 80s merge with the present when *Stranger Things 3* introduces two blond, tan, male characters—Mayor Kline and the *Hawkins Post* editor Bruce—that (un)deniably<sup>7</sup> allude to Donald Trump. Mayor Kline has real estate deals with Russia and re-election signage with formatting that resembles that of MAGA yard signs (Bradley 2019). Moreover at his American flag flanked Fourth of July festival he poses with young (teenage?) beauty contestants. On the other hand, Bruce bears a strikingly close physical resemblance to a young Trump and exhibits obscene displays of sexism in the office by taunting teen protagonist Nancy Wheeler (Clarke 2019).

Battles with these Trump-like characters signify and protest the structural violence imposed by Trumpism. LGBTQ rights have been jeopardized by Trump appointed "judges friendly to the Christian Right" (Poshner 2020). The administration has banned

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<sup>7</sup> The Duffer Brothers and actor Cary Elwes have denied fans' suspicions that the show was commenting on the Trump administration (Bradley 2019). These dismissals may perhaps be attempts to help market the series to conservatives. *Stranger Things* was listed at the bottom of *Insider's* list of 27 politically divisive TV shows. Amongst surveyed viewers 33% identified as liberal and 18% as conservative (Oswald 2018). There is other evidence that *Stranger Things 3* enjoys appeal to conservatives. The Christian site *Movieguide* gave the series a positive review that among other things praises *Stranger Things* for perceived "subtle Christian references" and a "pro-capitalism worldview," but takes issue with "tidbits of feminism" and "a homosexual reference."



transgender persons from the military—and more alarming it reversed non-discriminatory policies at homeless shelters and public schools put in place to protect transgender individuals. Propelled by Trump era policies and rhetoric, fanatic anti-LGBTQ hate groups, many of which stem “from grassroots churches,” skyrocketed in 2019 (Moreau 2020). *Knowing that Kline/(Trump)’s dealings put lives (particularly her sons’ lives) at stake in the town/(nation), Joyce sucker punches the corrupt mayor/(commander in chief)* (ST 3.7). Meanwhile, Trump posed threats to women’s reproductive rights and equal pay protections (Zoellner 2020), and his 2016 campaign mainstreamed the misogynistic sentiments of the far right. *When Nancy smashes an assailant monstrous Bruce, now an anointed monster of the Mind Flayer’s army, over the head with a fire extinguisher she intones the Stranger Things’ battle cry: “go to hell”* (ST 3.5).

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