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Andrea A. McCracken
Gonzaga University

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Manuscripts are accepted on a rolling basis, and may be submitted electronically at any time. Manuscripts should conform to the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA). Manuscripts should not exceed 8,000 words including references (although exceptions may be made at the editor's discretion) and should not have been published in any prior form. The journal follows a policy of blind review; authors should avoid any identification in the body of the manuscript or abstract.

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Message Design Logic, Tactics, and Message Goals of First and Second Requests in Romantic Relationships

GWEN A. HULLMAN
Ashland University

AMY BEHBEHANI
Uplift, Inc.

The current study investigates message design logic patterns, message goals, and message tactics in first- and second-request messages. Participants ($N = 135$) in a romantic relationship created request messages in response to hypothetical scenarios. Message design logic did not differ significantly from the first to the second request. The most commonly used design logic was conventional. Identity goals and instrumental goals were more important for second request messages than for first-request messages. Additional message strategies derived from a thematic analysis showed that first-request messages included pet names and assumed compliance. Second-request messages included counterpersuasion efforts. Results support the role of obligation in romantic relationships.

KEYWORDS: Message design logic, romantic relationships, message goals, request

Message design research has focused mainly on work relationships and associated outcomes of message structure (Bingham, 1991; Bingham & Burleson, 1989; O’Keefe & McCornack, 1987; O’Keefe & Shepherd, 1987). Message design logic has been applied to a lesser extent to messages aimed at romantic partners. Romantic relationship partners sometimes use communication to make requests of one another (Roloff, 1981), and it is reasonable to anticipate that

Gwen A. Hullman, Ph.D., is associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies, Ashland University. She can be reached at Department of Communication Studies, Ashland University, 401 College Ave., Ashland, OH 44805, USA, or at ghullman@ashland.edu. Amy Behbehani, M.A., is director of customer service at Uplift, Inc., Reno, NV, USA.

not all requests are fulfilled. Preliminary findings of nonromantic partners' message design suggests that after a first request fails, a change in message goals directs less sophisticated message design (Hullman, Seibert, Arias, & Miller, 2008; Meyer, 1997). Given the unique role of obligation and intimacy in romantic partnerships, sequential-request message design could reasonably be different in romantic partnerships as compared to less intimate relationships (Roloff, 1981). Therefore examining the message design logic and associated message goals of sequential-request messages in romantic relationships is warranted.

Second-request messages are created in response to unplanned noncompliance, which distinguishes them from planned sequential-request techniques, such as foot-in-the-door (FITD) and door-in-the-face (DITF) techniques (for reviews, see Dillard, 1991; Dillard, Hunter, & Burgoon, 1984). In FITD and DITF techniques, message designers anticipate noncompliance with their first request as part of a multistep compliance process. Romantic partners, however, may expect compliance the first time. An analysis of first- and second-request messages demonstrates how a target's noncompliance might change subsequent message design. Request messages often are studied without consideration of their development after a failure. Ifert and Roloff (1996b) suggested that "our knowledge of request messages is largely limited to initial influence attempts" (p. 119). Many studies have pointed to the importance of contextual factors in determining the nature of request situations (Ifert & Roloff, 1996a; Meyer, 2003; Shimanoff, 1987) but failed to illustrate the effects of noncompliance on the structure of the subsequent requests.

Studies focused on sequential-request messages are few. Direct requests represent one of many strategies to gain compliance (Wiseman & Schenck-Hamlin, 1981) and are used frequently in marital relationships (Dillard & Fitzpatrick, 1985; Witteman & Fitzpatrick, 1986). Intimate relational partners are expected to satisfy each

other's requests (Rolloff, 1987) but may go about asking for things in different ways (O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987). Request messages are inherently face threatening (Afifi & Lee, 2000; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Johnson, Rolloff, & Riffe, 2004). In addition, request messages typically address instrumental or task goals in conjunction with relational goals or identity goals (Hullman et al., 2008; Kim & Bresnahan, 1994). Meyer (1997) stated that people have some awareness of the relational consequences of their request messages. When a message has unanticipated relational consequences, however, especially negative ones, message plans may change.

Second requests may be more face threatening than first requests because noncompliance with the first request is interpreted negatively. The rebuff phenomenon states that a second bid for compliance is less polite (Kim, Shin, & Cai, 1998) because noncompliance with the first request creates different standards for subsequent interaction (Hample & Dallinger, 1995). These findings illustrate how communicators see more socially appropriate messages as prototypical first attempts at persuasion before moving to less appropriate choices (Bisanz & Rule, 1990).

This project examines second-request messages in the context of a romantic relationship. Sequential-request message design in intimate relationships may very well differ from design that occurs in nonintimate relationships. Existent research has failed to illustrate consistent results to inform this possibility. Intimacy generally is positively associated with facework when asking for a favor (Rolloff & Janiszewski, 1989), and because facework presents a constraint in the message creation process (Kellermann, 2004), intimacy may complicate the design. A competing argument may be that requests in more intimate relationships could pose less of a face threat, and possibly less constraint, because requests are an expectation of intimate relationships (Meyer, 2001), so the design may be less complex. Because the vast majority of message planning studies addressed nonintimate relationships, and because impacts

of the relationship on message design are unclear, more research in this area is needed.

MESSAGE DESIGN LOGIC

Message design logic (MDL) theory provides a framework to understand how people “reason” about conversational language (O’Keefe, 1988). MDL integrates message structure and function to explain how context and goals shape message construction (O’Keefe & Lambert, 1995). The logics (expressive, conventional, and rhetorical) represent the extent to which people can construct messages that accomplish their goals in alignment with their partners’ goals (O’Keefe, 1988).

Expressive design logic describes a way of converting thoughts to language through honest expression without cognitive editing (O’Keefe, 1988, p. 85). In the presence of negative emotion, expressive messages may be wrought with strings of profanities or insults, irrelevant utterances, or messages that fail to address task goals. Expressive messages also can be very direct and may seem inappropriate to most who rate them, especially within work contexts or professional settings (Bingham, 1991; Bingham & Burleson, 1989; O’Keefe & McCornack, 1987; O’Keefe & Shepherd, 1987). Using only expressive design across a number of contexts indicates a failure to recognize goals beyond expression (O’Keefe & Shepherd, 1987). In the context of request messages, expressive message design could reflect an anger-fueled complaint about noncompliance in the second attempt.

Conventional messages typically contain politeness and follow social norms. They rely on shared notions of expectations and responsibilities within social roles (O’Keefe, 1988). The conventional premise is to find a socially acceptable way to achieve one’s goals (O’Keefe, 1988). When the conventional route failed to yield a desirable outcome between roommates, the second request was

structured expressively (Hullman et al., 2008). In the context of a romantic relationship, forms of politeness and references to social roles as relational partners may serve as indicators of conventional design logic.

Rhetorical message design is the most sophisticated design logic (O'Keefe, 1988). Rhetorical messages incorporate task goals and relational goals of both partners by redefining the context (O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987). When task goals and relational goals are at odds, situations become challenging (Burlison & Caplan, 1998). Rhetorical request messages in intimate relationships may de-emphasize the current relationship as the appropriate context in favor of one that provides ease of achieving multiple goals.

Rhetorical message producers are perceived as more effective across a number of contexts (Caughlin et al., 2008; Lambert & Gillespie, 1994; O'Keefe, 1997; O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987; Scott, Caughlin, Donovan-Kicken, & Mikucki-Enyart, 2013; Vidal, 1998; White & Malkowski, 2014; for exceptions related to workplace communication, see Bingham, 1991; Bingham & Burlison, 1989; Hullman, 2004; Peterson & Albrecht, 1996). Given the robust findings related to the positive effects of sophisticated message design, we seek to establish what message design romantic partners use in their request messages:

RQ1: What message design logic do romantic partners use to formulate first- and second-request messages?

MESSAGE GOALS

Goals provide information about what people want to achieve in the interaction (Berger, 1997; Caughlin, 2010; Dillard, 1990; Klinger, 1985). Multiple goals influence the speaker's decisions about engagement and message strategy (Hullett, 2004; Min-Sun & Bresnahan, 1994; Schrader & Dillard, 1998). Creating messages

that simultaneously address multiple goals can be difficult (Berger, 1997; Caughlin, 2010; Dillard, 1990; Dillard, Segrin, & Harden, 1989; O'Keefe, 1988). Several typologies for conceptualizing goals also exist. Instrumental and relational goals originally identified in O'Keefe are supported elsewhere (Dillard et al., 1989; Hullman et al., 2008; Keck & Samp, 2007; Wilson & Putnam, 1990). In addition, others (Dillard, 1990; Hullman et al., 2008; Keck & Samp, 2007) found evidence for supportive and identity goals after noncompliance or during conflict. For these reasons, we pose the following hypothesis and research question:

H1: Instrumental and relational goal importance will decrease in the second-request message.

RQ2: Do identity-related and supporting the partner-related goal importance levels change from first- to second-request messages?

METHOD

Participants ($N = 135$) arrived at a classroom on a mid-sized western campus and received an information sheet. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 51 years old ($M = 22.86$, $SD = 5.58$; 64% female). All participants were currently involved in a monogamous romantic relationship as a condition of participation. Relationships ranged from less than 1 month to 240 months long ($M = 32.37$, $SD = 38.26$). A university institutional review board approved the following protocol.

Four situations were derived from a focus group of 15 undergraduate students who generated a list of recent occurrences for which they had created a request message directed toward a romantic partner. The most frequently cited situations were (a) you would like your romantic partner to accompany you to a class reunion, (b) you would like your romantic partner to talk about the

current status of your relationship, (c) you would like your romantic partner to pick you up from the airport, and (d) you would like your romantic partner to lend you money for rent. Four situations were provided to avoid confounding the study by using only one case for the entire sample (Jackson, 1992) or assigning participants to respond to irrelevant scenarios. All participants reviewed four situations and chose the one that best represented something they would encounter in their current romantic relationship. Chosen scenarios were rated for realism on a 7-point scale ranging from 7 (*very realistic*) to 1 (*not at all realistic*), and participants created a request message recorded word for word on the questionnaire. Participants then were told to imagine that the request they just generated went unfulfilled (reason not given), and they were asked to create a follow-up message directed at the same partner.

Half of the participants rated relevancy of four conversational goals after each message on a 7-point scale ranging from 7 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). The goal questions were included for a randomly chosen half of the sample to determine if asking participants about goals influenced the design of the second-request message. The categorical scheme for assessing goals was adapted from Keck and Samp (2007). The instrumental goal was represented by "When I created my message, it was important to me to convince my partner of my position." Relational goal was represented by the statement "When I created my message, it was important to me to maintain our relationship." Identity goal was measured by participants' agreement with "When I created my message, it was important to me to restore or maintain my own sense of self." Finally, participants rated their agreement with the following statement, which represented the support-my-partner goal: "When I created my message, it was important for me to support my partner." The final goal was included because it is particularly relevant to romantic relationships (Dillard et al., 1989; Keck & Samp, 2007).

To code MDL, O'Keefe's (1988) system for analyzing messages was used. The level of function (unifunctional vs. multifunctional) was substituted by measuring the type of goal(s). Coders reviewed a sample of messages and theory supporting the design logics to create a codebook, which referred to message characteristics and thresholds for message design prescribed by O'Keefe. A pilot test generated 30 messages that were utilized to practice coding. Two independent coders coded messages in batches of 10, with clarifying discussion about disagreements after each batch. MDL was assessed using two independent, trained coders who coded the data for Message 1 ($N = 134$) and Message 2 ($N = 135$). Reliability was .91 (Cohen's kappa). An expressive request message generated from the study was

To hell with you; I want to know when I will be anything more than a significant other. We have been together for 6 years now and all I have is this \$6 ring from Kohl's; I know you don't have a lot of money but I want something more than a ring to represent our relationship.

A conventional request message was

Hey [name], I just got the invite to my 5-year high school reunion. Do you think you'd be able to go with me? It's in a month and all my friends are bringing their significant others. I would really appreciate it if you came and met them. It'll be fun.

A rhetorical request message was

Baby, there are some things that I have been thinking about, that I believe we should talk about. They are issues that, I know you would know, would only bring our relationship to a better level if we discussed them. I know it may be difficult to go

there, but I believe it would be for the betterment of us both, if we do go there. We need to discuss the current status of our relationship, okay?

As messages included more attention to the conversational partner's goals, contextual elements of the relationship, and attempts at recontextualizing the conversation to align goals between partners, the design logic was more sophisticated.

RESULTS

The most popular situational choice for participants was asking to be picked up at the airport (47%), followed by talking about the status of their relationship (29%), making a request that the partner accompany the participant to a class reunion (19%), and asking for rent money (3%). Realism scores for the four situations were between 6 and 6.8, indicating that the participants viewed the situations as realistic for their relationships.

Message Design Logic

Research Question 1 asked what MDLs romantic partners use for request messages. The results from the Wilcoxon signed rank test showed that from Message 1 to Message 2, the change in design logic was insignificant, $p = .69$. Chi-square analysis indicated no significant differences for the second-request messages across all four situations, $\chi^2(6, N = 135) = 7.45, p = .282$, effect size = .2. However, a significant result emerged for the first-request message across situations, $\chi^2(6, N = 134) = 19.94, p < .00$, effect size = .4. The significant difference is likely caused by higher tendencies to use the rhetorical design for talking about the current status of the relationship than for asking to be picked up from the airport (see Table 1).

Table 1. *First and Second Request Message Design Logic by Situation*

	Expressive		Conventional		Rhetorical		Total	
	First	Second	First	Second	First	Second	First	Second
Class reunion	1	3	16	13	8	9	25	25
Relationship	4	5	20	18	15	18	39	41
Airport pickup	4	10	56	40	5	14	65	64
Rent money	0	0	5	4	0	1	5	5
Total	9	18	97	75	28	42	134	135

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Paired Samples *t*-Tests for Message Goals

Conversational goal	Time 1, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Time 2, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	Sig.
Convince my partner of my position	4.21 (1.91)	5.90 (1.46)	-5.19 (63)	0.00*
Maintain our relationship	5.41 (1.45)	5.41 (1.74)	0.000 (63)	1.00
Restore or maintain my sense of self	4.88 (1.81)	5.36 (1.64)	-2.79 (63)	0.007*
Support my partner	5.33 (1.66)	5.44 (1.48)	-0.539 (63)	.592

*Significant at .05 level (2-tailed)

Goals

Hypothesis 1 predicted that task goal importance and relational goal importance would decrease in second-request messages (see Table 2). This hypothesis was not supported. Research Question 2 asked whether identity and supporting-my-partner goals would change in importance for the second-request message. To test Hypothesis 1 and answer Research Question 2, half of randomly chosen participants ($n = 64$) rated the importance of the following goals: task, identity, relationship, and supporting the partner. From Message 1 to Message 2, paired t -tests revealed significant increases for task, $t = 5.20$, $p = .000$, and identity, $t = -2.79$, $p = .007$, goals. The importance of the relational goal and the supporting-my-partner goal did not change significantly from Message 1, $t = 1.00$, $p = 1.00$, to Message 2, $t = -.54$, $p = .59$. A chi-square test supported a significant difference in design logics between second-request messages produced with or without the prompt for goal information, $\chi^2(2, N = 137) = 7.93$, $p < .02$. It appears that asking participants to record their goals for the first-request message resulted in the construction of a more complex second-request message.

Additional Message Tactics

Given the absence of MDL change, and the presence of goal changes, a thematic analysis was conducted on the request messages. Other message design choices may have escaped the MDL coding scheme, so a thematic analysis was used to identify themes from the data. Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012) described this approach as an interpretive approach in which meaning is extrapolated from discourse. Messages were examined multiple times, and message content was scrutinized for themes. Themes of addressing the partner with pet names and assuming compliance emerged in the first-request messages, whereas justifications, stating consequences of noncompliance, and changing the nature of the request all emerged as themes in the second-request messages.

In first-request messages, two main themes emerged. The use of pet names and making directives were common in the first-request messages. Use of pet names, specifically “babe,” was present often and was rarely repeated in the second request.

Assuming compliance, as opposed to constructing a question as a direct request, also was a common structural theme of first-request messages. This type of sentence structure was considered a statement of assumed compliance unaccompanied by an explicit request for action. Examples of this message tactic include the following:

- Ex. 1: Honey, my reunion is coming up; what are you wearing?
- Ex. 2: Hey [name]—I’m coming back on Thursday @ 7:05 p.m.
You and [name] need to pick me up.

Three other tactics were present almost exclusively in the second-request messages: justification, stating consequences of noncompliance, and changing the nature of the request. The initial theme of justification was further developed into two subthemes to contrast the requester making a justification for the request from the requester asking for justification of the noncompliance. Explanation for request is providing more information to the target about why the request was initially made. Explanations for request are present in the following examples:

- Ex. 1: Hey so I was thinking of the high school reunion coming up. I know you didn’t think you could make it, but it would be really important to me if you came. Everyone is going to have their significant others there and you are a really important part of my life.
- Ex. 2: You know, I could get a parent to come get me, I am just excited to see you and would be very grateful to have you do this for me. I appreciate the effort and attention.
- Ex. 3: I know that questions are difficult, but it is really important

to me that we have this discussion. In order to continue a relationship we have to be able to talk about these kinds of things. I want you to feel comfortable talking to me.

Some examples of justification for noncompliance included the following:

- Ex. 1: Why can't you pick me up?
- Ex. 2: Ok baby, do you at least want to tell me why you don't want to go?
- Ex. 3: Are you sure you don't want to talk about how we are doing? Does your reluctance mean we aren't doing well?

Expression of consequences is reflected in participants' decisions to disclose what they think will happen as a result of the unfulfilled request. Consequences look different from threats (which were too infrequent to emerge as a theme), are almost always negative, and are aimed at the other person specifically as a punishment connected to the noncompliance. Examples of expressed consequences include the following:

- Ex. 1: Well if you don't pick me up I'm going to have to try and get a taxi with the money I don't have, so can you please?
- Ex. 2: I feel like if we don't talk about it, neither of us will know if there are any issues that need to be resolved or not.

Changing the request illustrated how participants followed up the unfulfilled request with a second one that seemed to require less effort:

- Ex. 1: If it is the amount of money I am asking for I can try to lower it by borrowing some money from my father. If it was half that would you be able to help me?

Ex. 2: Will you at least meet some of my old friends if I went somewhere else with them later?

DISCUSSION

The current study sought to identify design logics, message goals, and message features used in romantic partners' sequential-request messages. Findings suggest that the conventional design is most popular in shaping individual request messages and that elaboration in terms of persuasive message tactics occurs more frequently in second-request messages than it does in first-request messages. MDL theory failed to distinguish first- and second-request messages in the current study. Conventional message design logic occurred across requests and situations for individual message producers, suggesting that the conventional design logic was viewed as the most beneficial or captured the highest capability of the participants.

By far, conventional messages were used by romantic partners more so than other structures, and this finding may be an artifact of the relational context. "Requests for resources do not occur in a relational vacuum" (Roloff & Janiszewski, 1989, p. 37). Romantic partners negotiate their own actions with one another and might have a better shared understanding of relational expectations than other, less intimate relational partners do. Therefore romantic partners may compose less sophisticated messages because they do not expect to work to establish the context with language or because the existing context usually facilitates their goal fulfillment.

Clark and Mills (1979) argued that responsiveness to a partner is a central component of communal relationships. For some partners, compliance may serve as a proxy for responsiveness in the romantic relationship. This conclusion suggests that a stated need, as opposed to a direct request, would suffice, as evidenced by assumed compliance in the current study. Using pet names in first-request messages supports conclusions that relationships act

as a contextual cue and can promote obligation as a persuasive tool (Roloff & Janiszewski, 1989). Obligation substitutes for persuasion (Roloff, Janiszewski, McGrath, Burns, & Manrai, 1988), which may explain why more elaborate designs were absent in first requests.

Intimate partners are believed to have more obligation toward one another than nonintimate partners (Bar-Tal, Bar-Zohar, Greenberg, & Hermon, 1977; Roloff & Janiszewski, 1989; Roloff et al., 1988), which may explain why few persuasive tactics were used in the first request. There is an expectation, as evidenced by assumed compliance, that a partner will comply, especially with some routine requests, such as some presented in this study. Participants used persuasive message strategies (justifications, consequences, and changing a request) only after a rejection. Perhaps the rejection served as a sign that obligation was questioned, and then persuasive tactics were needed.

When it is clear that the role of obligation is not recognized by the target, explicit persuasive tactics may be needed. Roloff et al. (1988) hypothesized that unfulfilled requests lead to negative responses and counterpersuasion tactics, such as explanations. In the current study, an unfulfilled request also led to more elaborated persuasive tactics, such as justifications, consequences, and changing the request. Explanations offer additional information with the request to justify it (Wiseman & Schenck-Hamlin, 1981) and resemble the justification for request theme in the current sample.

Task and identity goal importance increased significantly from Message 1 to Message 2, but the relational goal and the supportive goal importance remained unchanged. Increased attention to self-centered goals may explain why subsequent compliance-gaining messages are less polite and less other-centered than first attempts at gaining compliance (Bisanz & Rule, 1990; Hample & Dallinger, 1998; Herrmann, 1983; Hullman et al., 2008). This finding is supported by the change of message goals from the first- to the second-request message. Task and identity became more important aims

for second-request messages compared to first-request messages. An increase in identity goals offers insight into the presence of justifications for noncompliance in second-request messages. These types of exchanges have a propensity to damage a relationship, appear defensive, and possibly lead to conflict.

Reflecting on message goals seems to have an influence on design logic. Participants who were asked to rate message goals directly after the first request produced more complex messages in their second requests. This prompt for goal information may serve as a moment of reflection about the current situation and may also momentarily relieve cognitive load (Berger, 1997), thus promoting a clearer awareness of the situation and the overarching purpose (Langer, 1989), resulting in more complex message design.

Limitations and Future Directions

Future directions are posed in light of the current study's limitations. The current study addressed design logics of one individual. Peterson and Albrecht (1996) found that when a rhetorical design logic is employed by either the nurse or nurse manager, but not employed by the other, levels of perceived support are higher. However, in cases where both partners utilize rhetorical design logic, levels of perceived support are less. These findings point to the importance of addressing the potential for the target's design logic capability in future studies.

In this study, participants were instructed to create a second-request message after the first-request message failed. Sometimes people create follow-up request messages, and sometimes they do not. Ifert and Roloff (1996a) stated that when a request message fails, the speaker can create a new message directed at the same person, choose a different person to target with his or her message, or abandon the request. In the present study, participants were not offered the option to abandon their request messages or to change targets, although a few participants wrote on their surveys that they

would call a different person to pick them up. Changing targets was not the focus of the current investigation, but it does support a change of target as a strategy for achieving one's goals.

An advantage of this study is that communication was viewed as a sequential process instead of as a collection of independent interactions. However, message design depends not only on the speakers' assessment of the current situation but also on the targets' responses to the message. It is plausible that more than one follow-up message is needed to achieve compliance. Bevan, Hefner, and Love's (2014) work on serial arguments illustrated how simple patterns can turn into long-term patterns of interaction.

Ifert and colleagues found that people generally respond to refused requests with rational appeals, depending on the obstacle (Gibbs, 1986; Ifert & Bearden, 1997; Ifert & Roloff, 1998). Francik and Clark (1985) argued that explicit or implicit obstacles to compliance allow communicators to adapt their subsequent messages to overcome the obstacles. Flat-out refusals may not offer the same option because there is a lack of relevant information to use (Ifert & Roloff, 1998). The specific nature of the obstacle was not tested here but provides a fruitful avenue for future research.

Our data support the notion of obligation in romantic relationships (Bar-Tal et al., 1977; Roloff et al., 1988). Romantic partners in general assume compliance or use a conventional message structure to ask their partners to do things. In addition, justifications and assuming compliance also are associated with obligatory talk. Eliciting justification for noncompliance would happen when one feels the right to have compliance and expects it as part of the relationship. The presence of justification for the refusal of the request supports this notion. Justifications are mechanisms that offer opportunities for conversational partners to adapt their follow-up messages through dialogue. The results of this study illustrate the interdependent nature of request messages and point to the role of obligation and persuasion in request messages among romantic partners.

AUTHORS' NOTE

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Humor Functions Throughout Platonic Relationships: Knapp's Staircase Model

GREGORY D. SHIPMAN, DUYEN VO, ALESHA BROWN,
AND NICHOLAS BRODY

University of Puget Sound

Humor serves a core function in relationships, yet little research has examined the use of humor in nonromantic contexts. The present study extended the Knapp and Vangelisti relationship development model to better understand the use of humor over the course of platonic relationships. Participants ($N = 101$) completed an online survey in which they were randomly assigned to consider a platonic relationship in the beginning, stable, or ending stage. Participants answered a series of scales that assessed their use of humor in their relationships. Individuals who reported on relationships in the ending stage used more negative humor than those reporting on relationships in the beginning stage. The results suggest that individuals use negative humor as a tool to help circumscribe their platonic relationships.

KEYWORDS: Humor, Knapp's staircase model, negative humor, platonic relationships, relational stages

Humor is an important function within many relationships. From puns to political jokes, humor has a place in almost every social relationship. Understanding humor within interpersonal interactions is vital to comprehending relational development and dissolution. This study builds on previous theoretical foundations and past research on humor types and interpersonal relational stages to better understand the use of humor in platonic (i.e., nonromantic)

Gregory D. Shipman, B.A., Duyen Vo, B.A., and Alesha Brown, B.A., completed this project as undergraduate students at the University of Puget Sound. Nicholas Brody, Ph.D., is associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies, University of Puget Sound. He can be reached at Department of Communication Studies, University of Puget Sound, 1500 N. Warner St., CMB 1026, Tacoma, WA 98416-1026, USA, or at nbrody@pugetsound.edu.

relationships. This study builds on previous work that examined positive, expressive, and negative humor (e.g., Graham, Papa, & Brooks, 1992) and extends Knapp's staircase model (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2010) to explain humor usage across various relational stages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the theoretical work on humor functions lies in the field of rhetorical communication. Both Meyer (2000) and Graham et al. (1992) identified and categorized different functions of humor. Graham et al. identified 24 humor functions and further explained three categories of humor: positive, expressive, and negative. Positive humor can be seen as a way to include and identify with others. Negative humor acts as a form of control or a way to demean others. Lastly, expressiveness involves humor as an aid to disclosing information that may be difficult or socially unacceptable to disclose any other way.

Meyer (2000) found similar humor functions. Identification describes humor as a way communicators build support and identify with their audiences. Clarification involves using humor to encapsulate views and thoughts into anecdotes. Enforcement explains how humor allows an individual to enforce norms on an audience. Lastly, differentiation entails using humor to contrast oneself with another individual. Of the four basic functions of humor, two tend to unite communicators (identification and clarification), while two tend to divide communicators (enforcement and differentiation). Paradoxically, in certain cases, humor can be both a unifier and a divider. Despite having different categorical names, one can see the overlap between the research of Meyer (2000) and Graham et al. (1992). For example, positive uses of humor reflect the identification and clarification functions that Meyer (2000) wrote about, while negative uses of humor reflect the enforcement and differentiation functions.

Whereas Graham et al. (1992) and Meyer (2000) analyzed humor functions from a rhetorical communication standpoint, a handful of studies have looked at how these humor styles operate specifically in relationships. Cann, Zapata, and Davis (2009) looked at how the different uses of positive humor (meant to support or entertain) and negative humor (meant to demean or attack) reflect constructive and destructive effects on social interactions and relationships. They mainly focused on the perception of humor by the person using the humor and the person receiving the humor. Similar to Meyer (2000), they found that not all individuals will consider “negative” humor negative or “positive” humor positive given certain contexts and predispositions. Moreover, they found that negative humor use is more likely to adversely affect the social relationship, as its use tends to have larger discrepancies between the perceptions of the person using the humor and the person receiving the humor. Additionally, the study demonstrated that negative humor was negatively correlated with relational satisfaction.

De Koning and Weiss (2002) also explored humor and relationships, except they focused on marriages. Their results complemented those of Cann et al. (2009), as they also found that positive humor was associated with marital satisfaction and intimacy. In contrast, negative humor correlated with demand-withdrawal patterns and avoiding confrontation. Similarly, Yip and Martin (2006) found that negative humor was related to an inability to provide support to others and perceive emotions in oneself and others. On the other hand, positive humor is a better way to initiate relationships and is positively correlated with personal disclosure (Yip & Martin, 2006). Overall, research has shown that humor is a vital component in relationships and that the type of humor used can improve or damage communication and other relational outcomes. It can be used positively, negatively, or expressively to unify or divide relationships. One way to further analyze the function of humor in relationships is by examining the use of humor at various relational stages.

Knapp's relational stage model—also known as the staircase model—depicts the coming together and coming apart stages of relationships (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2010). He saw relationships as developing through increased breadth and depth of disclosure (Welch & Rubin, 2002). Both Welch and Rubin and Avtgis, West, and Anderson (1998) extended his model by researching the cognitive, affective, and behavioral distinctions between each of the 10 stages. In the initiating stage, parties usually exchange general information about themselves but remain hesitant and cautious. In the experimenting stage, conversation becomes focused on the similarities that the couple has and creating a good impression of oneself to develop a sense of connectedness. However, there is still a sense of uncertainty. With intensifying, depth of discourse increases as it revolves around one another's personal morals and values. This stage is characterized by warmth and a sense of wantedness. Once in the integrating and bonding stages, individuals delve into even more intimate feelings. The couple begins talking about their future together as they start to feel like a single unit and satisfied with the relationship. After the bonding stage, the coming apart stages follow. This process starts with differentiating and circumscribing, which both consist of discussion about the couple's differences and arguing. This often leads to feelings of confusion and disconnect. When couples start stagnating, their conversations become quite short, and parties begin feeling unwanted and/or bored. This could lead to the avoiding stage, where the couple avoids communication with each other because they are annoyed or nervous about the relationship. When the couple does converse, the topic reverts back to general matters. Lastly, the relationship can hit the terminating stage when parties are unhappy, are lonely, and talk about life without the other (Avtgis et al., 1998; Welch & Rubin, 2002).

While humor has been explored in relationships in numerous studies, none have applied humor to the relational stage model or looked at the differences in humor functions between various

stages of a relationship. However, the distinctive characteristics that differentiate relationship stages connect to the humor functions presented in the humor literature. For example, identification humor presented by Meyer (2000) may correlate with certain beginning stages in a relationship, as both feature aspects of self-image. Furthermore, Cann et al. (2009) and De Koning and Weiss (2002) found correlations between certain relational characteristics and certain types of humor, implying that humor may function differently as the nature of the relationship changes (e.g., relationship satisfaction).

Despite these studies not mentioning the staircase model, they discuss similar aspects of relations as other direct tests of the staircase model (e.g., Avtgis et al., 1998). Bethea (2001) concluded that research conducted by De Koning and Weiss (2002) and Cann et al. (2009) on humorous interactions suggested that “humorous interaction is determined by varying levels of cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes” (p. 51). Therefore, given Avtgis et al.’s (1998) and Welch and Rubin’s (2002) research that distinguishes different stages of relations by the different thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during each stage, the relationship stage may also determine the type of humor enacted. Therefore we propose the following hypotheses and research question:

H1: In the beginning stages of a relationship, humor functions more positively.

Previous research has characterized beginning stages of a relationship with self-disclosure and identification (Welch & Rubin, 2002). Positive humor facilitates self-disclosure and relational development:

H2: In the ending stages of a relationship, humor functions more negatively.

Ending stages of relationships involve a large amount of avoidance and disconnect, as mentioned by Avtgis et al. (1998) and Welch and Rubin (2002). Graham et al. (1992) and Meyer (2000) characterized negative humor as having qualities that allow the parties to highlight their differences and avoid disclosure. However, scholarship currently lacks in the understanding of humor functions within the stable stage of a relationship. Thus we propose the following research question:

RQ1: What happens with humor in the stable stage of a relationship?

METHOD

Participants

The participants ($N = 101$) of this study were mostly undergraduates enrolled in a private northwestern university. Participants were offered extra credit in communication studies courses. Other participants were recruited via social media and snowball sampling. The overall sample included 29 (28.7%) males and 72 (71.3%) females when indicating their biological sex. There were 2 high school students, 8 first-year college students, 31 college sophomores, 31 college juniors, 19 college seniors, 1 graduate student, 8 no longer in school, and 1 unit nonresponse. The mean age of participants was 21.17 years. The ethnic breakdown was 69 (68.3%) Caucasian, 19 (18.8%) Asian, 2 (2%) Hispanic, 1 (1%) African American/Black, 1 (1%) Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 9 (8.9%) not listed/other.

Procedure

The study was conducted using an online questionnaire that was distributed via social media and email. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions using Qualtrics's randomization procedure. The three conditions asked participants to recall one of

three types of platonic friendship (i.e., beginning, stable, or ending). Participants in the beginning stage of relationship condition were asked to consider one platonic relationship in the beginning stages (e.g., a new friend or an acquaintance). Participants in the stable relationship condition were asked to consider one platonic relationship that is stable (e.g., a close friend). Participants in the ending stage of relationship condition were asked to consider one platonic relationship in which they felt they had grown apart from their friend within the past 6 months.

Participants were asked to indicate their frequency of humor use on a Likert scale. The questions remained the same for each relationship stage. The questionnaire also asked participants how long they had been in the relationship that they were considering. The closeness of the individuals was also controlled for.

After random assignment into the three relational stages, 35 (34.7%) participants were assigned to the beginning relationship stage, 31 (30.7%) were assigned to the stable relationship stage, and 35 (34.7%) were assigned to the ending relationship stage.

Measurements

This study measured how humor functions (positive, negative, expressiveness) in different stages of platonic relationships (beginning, stable, ending). Humor was assessed using questions slightly adapted from a scale previously created by Graham et al. (1992). The humor functions were measured using 14 questions relating to positive humor (e.g., To what extent do you use humor for entertainment or to be playful?), negative humor (e.g., How often do you use humor to transmit verbal aggression?), and expressive humor (e.g., To what extent do you use humor as a means to share personal values, beliefs, or other personal insights [self-disclosure]?). Five questions assessed positive humor, six measured expressive humor, and three measured negative humor. Participants indicated their responses on 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very*)

often). After reviewing the Cronbach's alphas of the three functions of humor, three expressive questions were removed and one positive question was deleted to improve reliability. No questions were removed from the negative humor measure. The positive humor ($M = 3.66$, $SD = .70$), $\alpha = .71$, negative humor ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .81$), $\alpha = .64$, and expressive humor measures ($M = 4.02$, $SD = .66$), $\alpha = .72$, each displayed acceptable reliability.

The Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) was used as a manipulation check, measuring the participant's closeness to the individual he or she was asked to consider. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) using a Tukey post hoc test indicated that individuals who were randomly assigned to the beginning relationship condition reported lower closeness ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.56$) than individuals assigned to the ending relationship condition ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.72$), who in turn reported lower closeness than those assigned to the stable relationship condition ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.46$), $F(2, 98) = 9.14$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .16$.

This study sought to examine stages of friendships regardless of the length of the friendship, so we used length of relationship (in months) as a control variable. For instance, a yearlong friendship could still be in the beginning stages, and a 2-month-old friendship could be nearing its end. Thus we wanted to parcel out the variance related to relationship length so we could more precisely test the Knapp relational stage model. Participants reported on relationships that averaged 36.49 months in duration ($SD = 66.40$).

RESULTS

Three one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) tests were conducted to test the research question and hypotheses regarding whether there was a significant difference between the stage of relationship and the type of humor used. The stage of relationship was the independent variable, and type of humor was the dependent

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations

Type of humor	Relationship stage	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Positive ($\alpha = .71$)	Beginning	3.66	0.78
	Stable	3.65	0.59
	Ending	3.68	0.74
Expressive ($\alpha = .72$)	Beginning	4.02	0.69
	Stable	4.11	0.55
	Ending	3.93	0.73
Negative ($\alpha = .64$)	Beginning	2.40	0.84
	Stable	2.74	0.64
	Ending	2.86	0.87

variable. Length of relationship was entered as a control variable. A significant difference was noted for the negative humor function, $F(2, 98) = 3.1, p = .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. No significant difference was found for the positive humor function, $F(2, 98) = .02, p = .98$, observed power = .53. Additionally, no significant difference was found for the expressive humor function, $F(2, 98) = .56, p = .57$, observed power = .14. Means and standard deviations are included in Table 1. Group differences were examined with a LSD post hoc test. The test indicated that there were significant differences in negative humor usage between individuals in ending stages of relationships and beginning stages of relationships. There was not a significant difference in positive or expressive humor usage between those reporting on beginning, stable, or ending relationships.

Hypothesis 1 stated that individuals in the beginning stages of their relationships use positive humor more frequently. Our data did not support this hypothesis. Positive humor usage did not significantly differ depending on the stage of relationship. Hypothesis 2 stated that those reporting on a relationship in the ending stages

would indicate more frequent usage of negative humor. Hypothesis 2 was supported. Negative humor significantly differed between the beginning and ending stages of a relationship—negative humor was higher at the ending stages of relationships. Research Question 1 stated, What happens with humor in the stable stage of a relationship? Our results show no significant difference between humor functions in stable stages in comparison to humor functions in beginning and ending stages of a relationship.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study indicate that, in some cases, humor varies as a result of the stage of relationship. Specifically, negative humor is most frequent in the ending stages of relationships. As a whole, the results lend support to some aspects of the Knapp relational stage model (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2010). Specifically, as individuals end their relationships and enter the differentiating and circumscribing stages, conversations tend to focus on the couple's differences and often entail conflict. These communication patterns can lead to negative emotions. Thus the model supports the findings of this study, in which negative humor was also most frequent during the ending stages of relationships.

In addition, Daws, Kaplan, and Winter (as cited in Baldwin, 2007) stated that humor can minimize the harmful effects from criticism within a relationship, determining that humor protects social relationships when parties introduce negative criticism. This supports the findings in ending relationships, in which parties are less invested in the development and maintenance of the relationship. Thus they are more apt to use negative humor.

On the other hand, beginning relationships have more potential to develop. However, this stage is still characterized by hesitancy and uncertainty (Welch & Rubin, 2002). Uncertainty reduction theory states that people feel the need to reduce uncertainty about others and will use a variety of communication strategies to lower

relational uncertainty. Reduced uncertainty then leads to relational development (Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002). Humor is one communication strategy that can affect uncertainty reduction in a relationship. Negative humor is the most ambiguous form of humor, as it is the one that is most dependent on context and one's relationship with the person. Negative humor is also the most subject to discrepancies between humor creator and receiver (Cann et al., 2009). Hence negative humor has more potential to create uncertainty within a relationship than the other humor functions (Hall & Sereno, 2010). Therefore it makes sense why those in beginning relationships stray away from using negative humor. Beginning relationships are already fairly uncertain; thus, to reduce uncertainty, one would want to use positive or expressive humor, which more often functions as a form of self-disclosure. Beginning relationships would likely avoid negative humor, which has a higher chance of increasing uncertainty.

One reason why stable relationships may show no differences in humor functions in comparison to beginning and ending stages is that stable relationships are characterized by both the coming together and the coming apart stages in Knapp's staircase model. A beginning relationship is solely defined by the coming together stages, while an ending relationship is defined by the coming apart stages. On the other hand, Knapp's model considers relationships in the integrating, bonding, differentiating, and circumscribing stages as stable relationships. The first two are part of the coming together process, while the last two are a part of the coming apart process of relational development (Welch & Rubin, 2002). Therefore its hybridity of both escalating and deescalating stages prevents it from significantly differing from beginning and ending relationships. This insignificant finding may also reveal that individuals at the stable stage of a relationship understand how their friend responds to a certain type of humor.

Another model that might help explain the findings is social penetration theory, which delves into an individual's willingness

to self-disclose at different stages within a relationship. According to Taylor and Altman (1988), as a person self-discloses, he or she is more likely to reveal superficial information first, and as the relationship develops, the individual will disclose more intimate information. Our study focused on the beginning, stable, and ending stages of a relationship, which can relate to the orientation stage, the stable stage, and the depenetration stage described in social penetration theory. The orientation stage is the point in a relationship that uses “small talk” or “first impressions” during interactions. The stable stage allows people in that relationship to predict how the other would react to certain types of information. In this stage, self-disclosure should be open and comfortable. During depenetration, individuals remove themselves from self-disclosure.

In the depenetration stage of social penetration, the cost of self-disclosure outweighs the cost of maintaining the relationship. This may reveal that when individuals use negative humor in ending stages of a relationship, they no longer feel the desire to develop the relationship and will use negative humor as a means to withdraw from the relationship. This aligns with Graham et al.’s (1992) and Meyer’s (2000) research characterizing negative humor with differentiating and divergent qualities for the individuals in the relationship. Social penetration theory also provides some insight into the lack of support for the first hypothesis. The type of humor implemented, whether it was positive, expressive, or negative, would not be significant because people at the beginning of a relationship still do not know what type of humor to use to influence relational growth.

Bippus (2000) found that depending on the context and the individual, attempts to use positive humor may actually increase tension and conflict and negative humor may actually reduce tension and strengthen the current relationship. This supports Meyer’s (2000) conditional statement that not all “positive” humor is wholly positive. Positive humor can come from different motivations for

each individual and vary in different stages. For example, when someone uses humor to ease the tension in an ending relationship, although it may function positively, the individual's motivation may be simply to make the conversation more bearable or less awkward, rather than trying to further the relationship. This may explain why positive humor did not significantly differ between the stages of a relationship. Humor can function positively, but for different motivations, thus allowing it to function at similar frequencies at each stage of a relationship.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study contained several limitations. This study had a relatively small sample. Replication with larger sample sizes for each stage of relationship can provide a better understanding of how humor functions in varying stages of a relationship as well as more statistical power to uncover relatively small differences. Additionally, the sample included more female than male participants. Thus future research should seek a more balanced sample. Moreover, the sample was mostly college-aged students. Future research should diversify the age group measured. It is likely that humor serves different functions in older people's friendships than it does for college-aged friendships. For instance, in the present study, negative humor use varied across relational stages. In older people's friendships, where there may be more integration of one another in each other's lives because of life stage and activities associated with such stages (e.g., children), participants may be less likely to use negative humor unless the relationship has dissolved. Participant age could also affect how individuals approach humor use in their friendships, as their desired outcomes of the relationship may differ depending on life stage. Future researchers should use snowball sampling methods or a tool such as Amazon's Mechanical Turk (e.g., Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) to directly target a specific age group.

This study utilized a self-report methodology. Thus participants

may have felt pressure to respond in a socially desirable manner—perhaps overreporting their use of positive humor. To combat this, future research could examine humor usage in a naturalistic setting, perhaps by directly observing the use of humor in conversations by real couples at various relational stages.

Future research might consider the medium through which humor is expressed by exploring whether these different humor functions still apply in online expressions of humor. This study could be replicated, asking participants to consider their online humor use and testing whether online humor varies throughout a relationship. Future studies can also further explore specific uses of negative humor. Cann et al. (2009) referenced another humor scale developed by Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, and Weir (2003) that used positive and negative humor as a basis. The Martin et al. Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) further divided positive and negative humor into humor that is directed at the self and at others. Since our study found significant differences in the use of negative humor, an extension could apply the HSQ to see whether the difference in negative humor use between beginning and ending stages can be attributed to self-defeating humor or humor directed at others.

CONCLUSION

Humor is an essential function of successful friendships, but little research has examined how humor usage varies across the life span of platonic relationships. Not all humor is lighthearted, funny, or prosocial. Indeed, results of the present study find that negative humor is an especially common behavior as partners navigate the dissolution of their relationship. This finding sheds further light on how communication varies as individuals' relationships progress and regress.

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News, Meaningful Entertainment Experiences, and Self-Determination Theory

RYAN ROGERS

Butler University

This study aimed to explore the entertainment capacity of news media. Using the lens of self-determination theory and the enjoyment/meaningful experience paradigm, this study surveyed people on their news consumption habits and their perceptions of how news consumption gratifies them. The results indicate that those who consume news more feel more competence, autonomy, and relatedness. These dimensions then lead to greater feelings of enjoyment and meaningfulness. This study expanded the understanding of news media and media entertainment broadly, thereby also expanding the reach of meaningful entertainment and self-determination theory into news media.

KEYWORDS: Self-determination theory, news, audiences, enjoyment, meaningfulness

Jeffrey Toobin, a regular contributor to CNN and the *New Yorker*, was recently asked to provide advice for aspiring student journalists (Toobin, 2013). His response was that students should major in something else. Implicit in Toobin's response was that journalism is not a lucrative career path and that the state of journalism is dire. This echoes recent reports noting precipitous drops in employment, advertising revenue, and profit for news media (Saba, 2009). Based on this, it is as important as ever to understand how and why news is being consumed. In fact, Toobin stated that despite his negative

Ryan Rogers, Ph.D., is assistant professor in the Department of Entertainment Media and Journalism, Butler University. He can be reached at Department of Entertainment Media and Journalism, Butler University, 4600 Sunset Ave., Indianapolis, IN 46208, USA, or at rrogers@gmail.com.

outlook for news media, there has never been a greater demand for information. Thus there is a disconnection between the rate of consumption of media and the decline in the news industry. The aim of this article is to illuminate news consumption behaviors to cultivate an understanding of how and why news is consumed.

Drawing from the rich tradition of entertainment research, this article examines how news media entertains audiences through needs gratification of its consumers. Likewise, scholarship has demonstrated that media can be understood in terms of enjoyment and meaningfulness such that media can gratify user needs, leading to feelings of enjoyment or meaningfulness (Oliver et al., 2016; Oliver & Raney, 2011). However, to our knowledge, this line of inquiry has not been applied to news media. In turn, the current study examines news media through this lens and thus should provide insight into how news gratifies user needs and therefore might enhance feelings of enjoyment and meaningfulness.

NEWS CONSUMPTION

News can be understood as “factual information for the consumer” (Gelfert, 2018, p. 86). Gelfert went on to say that “the news, then, serves not only as a direct source of new beliefs, but also (assuming things go well) provides us with epistemic coverage, which in turn safeguards existing knowledge by keeping us abreast of changes in the world” (p. 88). Notably, a distinction is readily made within news between fact and opinion as well as between soft news and hard news (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Gelfert, 2018; Scott & Gobetz, 1992). News consumption, then, is the reception of this information.

In the current media landscape, there is no shortage of ways in which to consume the news. A multitude of platforms deliver news (newspapers, television, radio, magazines, websites, social media, etc.). Likewise, a virtually limitless number of news outlets provide content for consumption. There are more traditional and

established outlets, such as the *New York Times*, and specialized publications, such as community newsletters. Beyond these, some news outlets may have an ideological mission statement to promote certain issues, such as FOX News or MSNBC. Of course, this is not to speak of the myriad of stories, writers, and personalities that further complicate the picture on a more micro level.

Online news can be delivered on four identified platforms: aggregator, direct, web search, and social media (Flaxman et al., 2016). *Aggregators* are pages that link to news stories on other sites, such as Bing News or Drudgereport.com. *Direct* refers to a user going to a news source, such as typing in CNN.com. *Web searches* are the result of the user typing a search term into a search engine to find news on that topic. Lastly, *social media* refers to news content that one encounters through an online social web. In short, news can be read, listened to, or viewed (Flaxman et al., 2016). From there, news consumers tend to have five different patterns of consumption (Swart, Peters, & Broersma, 2017). Those who are regionally or nationally oriented consume news based on geography. Background-oriented news consumers look for high-quality content. Digital news consumers get all of their content online, and laid-back consumers let the news come to them rather than seeking it out.

While one might suspect the platform, outlet, and consumption type to produce tremendous differences on the end user, studies on news consumption have painted a complicated picture. Indeed, whether news was online or print seemed to make no difference in consumption patterns (d'Haenens, Jankowski, & Heuvelman, 2004; Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010). Meanwhile, demographic and topic did impact consumption (d'Haenens et al., 2004). Consequently, news consumption is likely a telling factor in the current study, albeit one that is difficult to nail down and not the main focus of this study.

MEANINGFUL ENTERTAINMENT

Oliver and Raney (2011) have suggested that media can fulfill feelings of meaningfulness, such as insight into the human condition. Similarly, Tamborini (2011) suggested that feelings of meaningfulness can be derived from media content when it includes morally ambiguous situations and complex ethical problems. This is understood as the paradox of enjoying something sad (Oliver, 1993). Meaningfulness expands upon more traditional understandings of entertainment media that tend to focus on the hedonic gratifications of media consumption (e.g., Zillmann, 1991, 2000). In other words, media were typically understood as enjoyable, but not meaningful, until recently. Now media consumers can derive gratification from media because media feel enjoyable and/or meaningful (e.g., Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, Oliver & Raney, 2011). For example, a sad movie like *Schindler's List* might be understood as meaningful but not enjoyable, while a zany comedy like *Austin Powers 2: The Spy Who Shagged Me* might be better understood as enjoyable but not meaningful. Indeed, this dichotomy was originally explored with movies but has been found in other outlets, such as video games (Oliver et al., 2016).

The supposition of the current article is that news content might be similarly understood as meaningful and/or enjoyable. News can frequently be viewed as sad or tragic, but entertaining news is also quite common (Liu, Dolan, & Pedersen, 2010; Shahin, 2016). This lack of uniformity in content might mirror the difference between *Schindler's List* and *Austin Powers*, and thus a similar dichotomy might be found in news content. In short, some news might be meaningful, while other news might be enjoyable, and some news might be both.

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Self-determination theory (SDT) has been useful in parsing the differences between meaningful media experiences and enjoyable media experiences (Oliver et al., 2016). SDT argues that feelings of intrinsic motivation can be understood in terms of specific psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Those needs are competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence refers to feelings of mastery. Autonomy refers to feelings of freedom. Relatedness refers to feelings of connection with others.

The argument is that the more an individual feels these needs are fulfilled, the more he or she will be intrinsically motivated. In the context of media, as more media content fulfills these needs, content will be perceived as more entertaining. This framework can also show that the different needs might be more highly associated with enjoyable experiences or meaningful experiences. More specifically, content that encourages feelings of competence and autonomy would be more likely to predict enjoyment, while media content that encourages feelings of relatedness is more likely to be meaningful to the consumer (Bowman, Oliver, Rogers, & Sherrick, 2016; Oliver et al., 2016; Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006; Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, & Organ, 2010). The arguments can be found in more detail in those pieces, but the suggestion is that feelings of competence and autonomy are pleasurable and therefore increase enjoyment. Meanwhile, feelings of relatedness imply connections between people, or at least the perception of connection with others, and thus are more meaningful.

Again, the suggestion of the current article is that this paradigm can be extended to news content. News media might make someone feel knowledgeable and therefore competent. If news media make someone feel like he or she has control, then he or she will feel autonomy. News content that makes a consumer feel connected to community or to other consumers might increase relatedness.

From there, those psychological dimensions should impact the enjoyment or the meaningfulness of that content. Notably, as discussed earlier, the type of news consumption and the outlet used are noteworthy factors as well.

NEWS MEDIA GRATIFICATIONS

Entertainment news is on the rise (Liu et al., 2010; Shahin, 2016), but news content is typically viewed to gratify needs for information, not entertainment (Zillmann, 2000). This sort of news consumption has also been described as functional (Joo & Sang, 2013). Indeed, people who consume the news tend to have a high need for cognition and a need to evaluate (Valenzuela, Bachmann, & Aguilar, 2016). In other words, news media may not gratify needs in the same ways as other entertainment media. People will consume news media if they are useful, not necessarily if they are meaningful or enjoyable.

While the utilitarian view of news media is valid, some scholarship has expanded the role of news such that it might fall outside of the role of function and information use. For example, escapism is a consistent predictor of news consumption (Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Lin, 2014; Rubin, 1984); that is, people might use news media to break out of their daily routines, not because of the information the media contain. Diddi and LaRose (2006) said that news is not just serious news anymore. Indeed, feelings of entertainment can predict usage behaviors of news, and the use of news predicts feelings of satisfaction from both information seeking as well as feelings of enjoyment (Lin, 2014; Luo & Remus, 2014). In sum, news has been understood for its informational utility and its entertainment value. Through the lens of SDT, there is a conceptual overlap between entertainment and informational utility. Informational use is not necessarily orthogonal to the psychological needs of SDT that can lead to entertainment. When a person consumes news that has a

large degree of informational utility that can enhance expertise on a topic, this person may then feel competent on those topics. Likewise, news content may induce the old adage “information is power” to create feelings of freedom or autonomy. Finally, news content that is rich in information on people or community might encourage feelings of relatedness. From there, competence, autonomy, and relatedness might lead to enjoyment or meaningfulness.

Importantly, feelings of enjoyment and meaningfulness are correlated with certain moods, positive and negative (Oliver, 2008). Typically, enjoyment is tied to positive feelings. Meanwhile, meaningfulness might be connected to a mix of distinctly positive and negative feelings. Specifically, meaningfulness includes emotions that are not wholly positive or negative, such as feeling moved, touched, or compassionate (Oliver et al., 2016). Zillmann (1988b) has suggested that people control their media diets to enhance positive moods and reduce negative ones. This is known as *mood management theory* (Zillmann, 1988a, 2000). This theory has been used to develop an understanding of how and why individuals consume media. In other words, it is an alternative yet related approach to understanding entertainment. In fact, the enjoyment/meaningful paradigm might be understood as an advancement to mood management theory.

News content might be used to manage moods. For example, a person might find consuming news content to be particularly effective at repairing negative mood states. Simultaneously, another person might find consuming news content to be particularly distressing and that it induces negative feelings—this would not be surprising given that news content frequently covers sad, tragic, or upsetting topics. Thus this content would likely be avoided. However, some news stories that induce negative emotions might be sought out for meaningful mood experiences.

As such, positive, negative, and meaningful mood states are worth examining in conjunction with the concepts discussed herein. In

this instance, news consumption might be related to the dimensions of SDT and mood states. This would help further illuminate the ways in which news content entertains audience members.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

This sample consisted of 759 individuals over the age of 18 years recruited from Mechanical Turk. The sample consisted of mainly White (83.1%) females (63.4%) in their 30s ($M = 36.09$, $SD = 13.97$). Participants were offered 10 cents USD to participate in the study. In the recruitment posting, participants were provided a URL for an online questionnaire.

Measures

News consumption was measured by the number of days per week people consumed news. Enjoyment and meaningfulness were assessed through an adapted measure from Oliver and Bartsch (2010) and Oliver and colleagues (2016). Sample items include “I have a good time when I consume the news” (enjoyment, $\alpha = .89$) and “I find the news to be very meaningful” (meaningfulness, $\alpha = .92$), rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). There were three items for each.

Affect was assessed through a series of terms rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*; Oliver et al., 2016). Respondents were asked how much they experienced these terms when consuming news. Meaningful affect included the items *touched*, *moved*, *compassionate*, and *inspired* ($\alpha = .90$). Negative affect included items *angry*, *anxious*, *tense*, and *negative* ($\alpha = .87$). Positive affect included the items *amused*, *humored*, *happy*, and *positive* ($\alpha = .87$). Typically, positive affect is tied to enjoyment, while meaningful affect is a mixture of both positive and negative affect.

Competence, autonomy, and relatedness were measured using an adapted Player Experience of Need Satisfaction scale (Ryan et al., 2006; Tamborini et al., 2010). Competence was measured with five items, such as “I feel very capable and effective consuming the news” and “I am able to find news content I am looking for quickly.” Autonomy was measured with three items, including “I feel like I have a lot of interesting options to consume the news” and “I feel like I have a lot of freedom while consuming the news.” Relatedness was measured with four items, including “I feel like I am part of a community when consuming the news” and “I find the relationships I form while consuming the news fulfilling.” These all demonstrated high reliability (respectively, $\alpha = .72, .76, .86$).

Analysis

To examine the influence of these variables on feelings of enjoyment and meaningfulness, a hierarchical linear regression was used. In Step 1, demographic variables were entered. In Step 2, news consumption was entered. In Step 3, the three dimensions of SDT were entered, and in Step 4, the affect variables were entered. One regression model was run for enjoyment and another was run for meaningfulness.

RESULTS

Enjoyment

Feelings of enjoyment were positively predicted by all three dimensions of SDT, as well as positive affect and meaningful affect. Enjoyment was negatively predicted by negative affect. See Table 1. Otherwise, enjoyment was highest for younger males who frequently consumed news. There was also a significant association between the frequency of news consumption and enjoyment.

Table 1. Regression Analysis for Enjoyment of News

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β
Step 1 ^a			
Gender ^b	-.43	.11	-.15*
Age	.00	.00	.00
Race	.07	.04	.08
Step 2 ^c			
Gender ^b	-.34	.10	-.12**
Age	-.01	.00	-.10**
Race	.08	.04	.08*
Consumption	.24	.03	.33***
Step 3 ^d			
Gender ^b	-.30	.07	-.11***
Age	-.01	.00	-.11***
Race	.06	.02	.06*
Consumption	.05	.02	.06*
Competence	.30	.04	.23***
Autonomy	.35	.04	.32***
Relatedness	.39	.02	.42***
Step 4 ^e			
Gender ^b	-.24	.07	-.08***
Age	-.01	.00	-.10***
Race	.04	.02	.04
Consumption	.05	.02	.07**
Competence	.22	.04	.16***
Autonomy	.30	.03	.28***
Relatedness	.31	.02	.34***
Positive aff.	.22	.03	.21***
Negative aff.	-.10	.02	-.11***
Meaningful aff.	.08	.03	.08**

^a $F(3,666) = 6.71, p < .001$; adj. $R^2 = .02$. ^b0 = male; 1 = female. ^c $F(1,665) = 24.78, p < .001$; adj. $R^2 = .12$. ^d $F(3,662) = 136.12, p < .001$; adj. $R^2 = .59$. ^e $F(3,659) = 123.88, p < .001$; adj. $R^2 = .65$.

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

Table 2. Regression Analysis for Meaningfulness of News

	B	SE	β
Step 1^a			
Gender ^b	-.10	.10	.00
Age	.12	.00	.13***
Race	.06	.04	.00
Step 2^c			
Gender ^b	.07	.10	.03
Age	.00	.00	-.03
Race	.02	.03	.02
Consumption	.23	.02	.35***
Step 3^d			
Gender ^b	.11	.07	.04
Age	.00	.00	.00
Race	.02	.02	.00
Consumption	.06	.02	.09**
Competence	.20	.04	.17***
Autonomy	.38	.03	.39***
Relatedness	.30	.02	.36***
Step 4^e			
Gender ^b	-.05	.07	-.02
Age	.00	.00	.02
Race	.00	.02	.00
Consumption	.06	.02	.09***
Competence	.17	.04	.15***
Autonomy	.34	.03	.34***
Relatedness	.22	.02	.26***
Positive aff.	-.01	.03	-.01
Negative aff.	.04	.02	.05
Meaningful aff.	.28	.03	.30***

^a $F(3,663) = 3.70, p < .001; \text{adj. } R^2 = .02.$ ^b0 = male; 1 = female. ^c $F(4,662) = 24.19, p < .001; \text{adj. } R^2 = .11.$ ^d $F(7,659) = 113.35, p < .001; \text{adj. } R^2 = .42.$ ^e $F(10,656) = 108.46, p < .001; \text{adj. } R^2 = .08.$

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

Meaningfulness

Feelings of meaningfulness were positively predicted by all three dimensions of SDT as well as meaningful affect. See Table 2. There was also a significant association between the frequency of news consumption and feelings of meaningfulness.

DISCUSSION

Overall, this study supports the supposition that news can be entertaining and that it can be entertaining as an enjoyable experience and as a meaningful experience. First, the results show that the dimensions of SDT are connected to news consumption such that feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are tied to feelings of both enjoyment and meaningfulness. This reflects previous research indicating that media experiences can be understood through SDT (Oliver et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2006; Tamborini et al., 2010) and thus expands news content into this domain. News media can be empowering such that they might engender feelings of knowledge, expertise, and freedom. Likewise, news consumption was related to feelings of community and connection to others (Kim et al., 2016). Notably, the impact, while significant for each, varies. Autonomy was the strongest predictor for meaningfulness, while competence was the weakest. The impact of all three dimensions was more evenly weighted when predicting enjoyment. From this, one might conclude that certain dimensions of SDT are more relevant depending on the type of entertainment experience.

The current results reflect previous studies, though are not totally uniform with them. Specifically, a previous study showed that feelings of competence and autonomy were most strongly tied to feelings of enjoyment, while feelings of relatedness were most strongly tied to meaningfulness (Oliver et al., 2016). While the results do not fully comport with previous research, differences in content must be acknowledged. In the previous study,

video games were used. The function of the dimensions of SDT might differ given the differences between video games and news media. In particular, feelings of competence and autonomy in a video game likely manifest differently than while consuming news content. For instance, competence in a game is related to feelings of control, which are enjoyable, but in news, it might be related to knowledge, empowerment, and learning, which could be both enjoyable and meaningful. A similar argument could be made for autonomy such that in video games, autonomy describes the fun in pursuing objectives that interest the player. In news, autonomy may relate to pursuit of stories that are interesting but also the ability to consume content that is important to the user or that involves genuine human emotion and struggle, which may be meaningful.

Second, the significant findings for affect further expand understanding of the appeal of news media and media broadly such that the enjoyable/meaningful paradigm is useful in this domain. This analysis demonstrates that news media may be used for mood management purposes (Zillmann, 1988a, 2000). Notably, positive, negative, and meaningful affect predicted enjoyment, while only meaningful affect predicted feelings of meaningfulness. This enforces previous work indicating the difference between the emotions related to enjoyment and meaningfulness. Specifically, enjoyment is associated with a broader range of emotions, while meaningfulness is associated with specific emotions that are neither positive nor negative. For news media, this provides reasoning why people might consume sad or upsetting news beyond function or utility (Joo & Sang, 2013; Liu et al., 2010; Shahin, 2016; Zillmann, 2000).

The other predictors are worth considering as well. The frequency of news consumption positively predicted both meaningfulness and enjoyment. One explanation is that the more content is consumed, the more it gratifies these needs. More likely, however, is that when news provides gratification, a person is likely to use that medium more frequently than if it does not. If someone does not derive

these gratifications from news, he or she will use it less. While this measure of consumption was rudimentary, there is a wide range of platforms for news consumption (Flaxman et al., 2016). These different platforms merit exploration, but some researchers suggested that there is little difference between platforms (d'Haenens, Jankowski, & Heuvelman, 2004; Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010). Regardless, this reflects previous research on consumption patterns (Swart et al., 2017) such that more active consumption patterns are linked to feelings of entertainment.

Meanwhile, this sample suggested that younger people and males tended to enjoy the news more than those who were older and those who were female. The findings related to gender comport with previous research such that women tend to consume less news than men, and this appears to be a pattern over time (Bimber, 1999; Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Wen, Xiaoming, & George, 2013). Simultaneously, age has a long history of predicting news consumption such that older generations tend to consume more news than younger generations (Bachmann, 2010). Beyond that, age tends to determine how people consume their news (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). Though it has been suggested that younger people are more likely to use online news (Dutta-Bergman, 2004), this finding is not consistent (Galston, 2004; Glasford, 2008). Although unable to identify a root cause (Benesch, 2012), this conversation of age, gender, and news consumption is often in the context of gaps in education and/or engagement with content. That is, a young woman is not likely to post a comment on an online news site (Wen et al., 2013), while an older man may be more likely to do so.

As such, the current research echoes previous work on gender but not necessarily on age. Given that this study is not addressing a gender or age gap but rather the entertainment value of news, a bit of conjecture is worthwhile. Younger people may be able to enjoy the news more because they may perceive that it impacts them less than older people. The same argument might be made for males.

Consider some of the news stories that are relevant today related to health insurance costs or abortion bans, respectively, topics that would presumably be more salient to the elderly and women. As a result, this content would be less enjoyable. However, demographics included in this study were not effective in predicting feelings of meaningfulness. Thus enjoyment might be more related to the traits of the user, while feelings of meaningfulness can transcend individual traits. By providing insight into the human condition, this content may be more universal than individual.

In summary, this study provided evidence that people who consume news content derive enjoyment and meaningful experiences from that content, demonstrating that meaningfulness found in other media experiences is found in news media as well (Oliver, 1993; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Tamborini, 2011). Furthermore, the dimensions of SDT helps to explain how feelings of enjoyment and meaningfulness are achieved (Bowman et al., 2016; Oliver et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2006; Tamborini et al., 2010). These results partly, but not entirely, comport with previous studies suggesting that differences in content might be important to consider when exploring these relationships.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A series of limitations should be noted with this research. To begin, this study cannot establish any degree of causation, and the results should be interpreted as such. Notably, the dependent variables might lead to more news consumption rather than the inverse. Even so, the relationship between these concepts here is noteworthy. Also, some of the measures implemented were designed for other media. As a result, the adaptation of these measures might not have been as effective as intended. The sample, as recruited from Mechanical Turk, could not be overseen as in a proper lab setting. The sample's age range and its heavy skew toward White females, among other

aspects of the sample, might also have influenced the results. Future studies should examine a different sample. Likewise, a clearer measure of news utility could have been included. However, the researchers believe that the notion of utility can be subsumed by the dimensions of SDT, and that is accounted for within this study. Also, more elaborate measures for news consumption could have been included to address platform, outlet, and so on. This may have led to different, or at least more detailed, results.

Moving forward, further exploration into the differences between types of platforms and outlets in this domain would be helpful. Another area that would benefit from more research comprises the differences in news format. In particular, a study related to news in social media would be worth examining in more detail. An experiment testing these results for causality would also be a beneficial endeavor.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the entertainment capacity of news media. Using the lens of SDT and the enjoyment/meaningful paradigm, this study surveyed people on their news consumption habits and their perceptions of how news consumption gratifies them. The results indicate that those who use the news more feel more enjoyment and meaningfulness while consuming news. Also, competence, autonomy, and relatedness as well as affect play a significant role in how news gratifies. This study expands the understanding of news media and media entertainment broadly. This also expands the reach of meaningful entertainment and SDT into news media.

Given the precarious state of news media as stated in the introduction by Jeffrey Toobin (2013), understanding what makes news entertaining and what does not is as important as ever. This study is a step in that direction and provides practical guidance for ensuring

that audiences will have an entertaining experience—meaningful or enjoyable—with content.

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Medieval Women Christian Mystics and Muted Group Theory: The Visionary Rhetoric of Julian of Norwich

CAYLA BLEOAJA AND KEVIN T. JONES

George Fox University

For centuries, minority voices have been muted by the dominant majority (usually male). As a result, it is often assumed that the muted minority had no voice at all. While this has been found to be true in some situations, it is not true in all situations. It is no secret that the medieval Church was extremely male dominated and that women served a very small role in the Church. However, that does not mean that women had no voice at all. Many women played a significant role in the medieval Church by finding their own way to contribute to the dominant male culture. Julian of Norwich was one such woman. Acting as a Christian mystic in the Church, Julian was able to make major contributions to the Church body by engaging muted group theory (MGT), centuries before MGT surfaced. Scholarship on rhetoric and medieval women is sparse. The aim of this essay is to shed some light on medieval women's rhetoric by exploring the rhetorical strategies of Julian of Norwich to engage MGT in the medieval Church and provide a voice for the voiceless women of the time.

KEYWORDS: Julian of Norwich, muted group theory, medieval women, medieval Christian mystics

In the medieval period, Christian mystics who claimed to be exposed to direct encounters with God recorded their ecstatic experiences under the obligation of sharing the revelatory knowledge with the laity. Mysticism concentrated on ecstatic experiences of the divine and inspired a lifestyle committed to coming in contact

Cayla Bleoaja, B.A., is an honors student in the Department of Communication, Journalism, and Cinematic Arts, George Fox University, Newberg, OR, USA. Kevin T. Jones, Ph.D., is professor of communication arts in the Department of Communication, Journalism, and Cinematic Arts, George Fox University. He can be reached at Department of Communication, Journalism, and Cinematic Arts, George Fox University, 414 North Meridian Ave., Newberg, OR 97132, USA, or at kevinj@georgefox.edu.

with the presence of God in extraordinary, transcendent ways (Kroll, Bachrach, & Carey, 2002). Visionary accounts suggested that the disclosure was a result of prolonged spiritual devotion and study, rendering the mystic an elected vessel for divine revelation (Dunai, 2015). However, the literary genre of Christian medieval mysticism in medieval times was predominantly feminine at a time when women struggled to find a dominant voice. The emergence of this feminine literary genre reversed the often marginal and subservient social position of women by placing them in a legitimized position to vocalize their convictions (Butcher, 2014). As a result, Christian mystic women found a “voice” that offered them a predominant position of status and power, well before any contemporary women’s movements were conceived. Scholarship on women and rhetorical strategies in the medieval ages is sparse. Therefore it is time some light is shed on this topic. This essay will engage in a feminist rhetorical criticism to highlight the visionary rhetoric of one trailblazing mystic, Julian of Norwich, to show how her writings embodied muted group theory (MGT) centuries before MGT was conceived. It will summarize the role and function of MGT, explore the writings of Julian of Norwich and her visionary rhetoric, and draw some critical conclusions from Julian’s example to advance the study of medieval Christian female mystics and MGT.

MUTED GROUP THEORY

MGT identifies how power is acquired through the use of language, which is culturally bound and determined by the groups at the upper end of the social hierarchy (West & Turner, 2010). The theory suggests that men’s increased power over women is related to men’s increased influence over, and access to, language. Men, as a dominant group, are in control of the communication in a social space, leaving women without equivalent access to means for expression (Kramer, Thorne, & Henley, 1978). As a result,

women are “muted” and must adapt to the situation to allow for meaning making. The process of muting occurs based on the social discrepancies of power and presupposes a collective understanding of the hierarchical organization of dominant and nondominant groups in society (Gendrin, 2000). The process of muting can occur as a result of the social norms and rituals or through control of, trivializing of, and harassment toward the marginalized group (West & Turner, 2010).

MGT rests on three assumptions: (a) that men and women have different perceptions of the world based on their different social roles and tasks, (b) that men’s control over language suppresses and disadvantages women, and (c) that women must use male-dominated language to participate in social life and be heard (Kramarae, 1981). This premise suggests that it is more difficult for women to express themselves than it is for men, and that to do so, women use media not accepted by the dominant male communicators. Subordinate groups do not have a voice in the sense that they do not have “the means and ability to speak and to have one’s speech heard and be taken into account in social and political life” (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004, p. 95). Because language serves its creators better than the marginalized, muted groups appear less articulate and must construct their own means of communication to compensate (Kramer et al., 1978).

Since the introduction of MGT, the world has undergone a significant degree of change. Although critical issues, such as sexual harassment and abuse, have been addressed in mainstream dialogue for decades, the problems persist. Women, in particular, as well as other groups of muted individuals, have historically needed a language or a form of communication able to transcend their muteness. Kramarae (1981) formally presented the muted group model as a response to the way that language is “man-made.” Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley (1983) further noted that man-made language “aids in defining, depreciating and excluding women” (p. 9). As a result,

women are a muted group, marginalized and constrained by the sociopolitically dominant group and its established communication system. However, just because women are a muted group does not mean that they remain silent. Ardener (1978) explained that the issue is whether people can say what they want to say when and where they want to say it, or whether they must “re-encode their thoughts to make them understood in the public domain” (p. 21).

Previous work on gender and language has attempted to separate the public (male) and private (female) domains of speech. Kramarae (1981) noted that the ever-prevalent public-private distinction in language is a convenient way to exaggerate gender differences and pose separate sexual spheres of activity. Kramarae raised the challenge of what word might be used to point to the “connections” between alleged private and public dialogue. Such language or vocabulary might actually introduce the idea that the public and private spheres have equal value and reveal the connection between men and women to be more similar than different.

Kramarae (1981) contended, however, that ongoing dialogue about how the world works is never on an equal or level playing field. She noted that “because of their political dominance, the men’s system of perception is dominant, impeding the free expression of the woman’s alternative models of the world” (p. 3). Confronting sexual harassment from within the male-dominated system had provided little traction for awareness of the cause. An alternative model was justified. Kramarae concluded, “In order to participate in society, women must transform their own models in terms of the received male system of expression” (p. 3). Confronting masculine-dominated public communication requires constant effort and can often create insecurities over whether what was said was said in the right way. Olsen (1978) explained this challenge by noting, “Men can tell it ‘straight.’ Women have to tell it ‘slant’” (p. 23).

This duality is achieved through women’s tendency to be forced to find alternative outlets of expression. Kramarae (1981) held

that “females are likely to find ways to express themselves outside dominant public modes of expression used by males in both their verbal conventions and their nonverbal behavior” (p. 19). In later work, Kramarae and Treichler (1992) identified the variety of back-channel routes that women use to discuss their experiences, such as “diaries, journals, letters, oral histories, chants, art, poetry, songs” (p. 17), and many more. These different outlets become subversive texts that run beneath the surface of male orthodoxy. In becoming creators, and developing their own forms of communication, women can transcend the restraints and restrictions placed on their use of language (Kramer et al., 1978).

JULIAN OF NORWICH

The medieval period is generally seen as a male-dominated, if not male-exclusive, period of history. This could be argued to be especially true in the medieval Church. However, while seemingly silent during this time, a closer examination of some of the women of this period will show that women were far from nonexistent. MGT was used by some medieval women in the Church to discover their own voices in a male-dominated culture. Women like Julian of Norwich (1342–1416), an English anchoress, could not claim spiritual authority or serve ministerial functions in the Church (Burton & Stöber, 2015; Finke, 1992). The rigid social structure of the medieval period was patriarchal in that men dominated the orders of society, especially the ecclesiastical hierarchy, while women were confined to domestic, submissive roles (Ward, 2006). The status of women was defined by the ideals of the Church, which regarded women as “the lesser sex, dependent on men because of their supposed irrationality and their tendency toward sin” (Thaxter, 2013, p. 27). Texts such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* went so far as to target the inherent weakness of women and portray them as an embodiment of evil (Stringer, 2015). Nevertheless, the medieval period was

marked by a tradition of enduring female figures who claimed to be passive recipients of divine knowledge and exerted profound spiritual influence (Hemptinne & Góngora, 2004). Perhaps in response to their suppressed social position, women participated in more radical forms of religious experience and were more likely than men to gain prominence through their ecstatic encounters with the divine (Finke, 1992).

The relationship between so-called madness and spirituality seems contradictory. Medieval literature generally deemed madness, including “passions” of intense grief or desire, as a loss of rational control associated with sin (Doob, 1974). The irrational and often self-injurious behavior of medieval mystics was perceived as hysterical and disturbed even by their contemporaries (Kroll et al., 2002). Yet that authoritative figures in Church history whose experience of phenomena like hearing voices or receiving visions were considered a sacred, selective source of knowledge suggested a close association between madness and religious experience (Porter, 2002; Saunders, 2015). By citing the source of their doctrines as divine inspiration, spiritual leaders established their authority as instruments of revelation from God (Hemptinne & Góngora, 2004).

The affiliation between madness and women is central to rhetoric of the medieval mystics. Madness, regarded symbolically and metaphorically as a feminine malady for centuries, is intimately connected to the religious, political, and social dynamics of the age (Little, 2015). In the literature of medieval mystics, it is not so much a pathological construction as it is sociocultural. The madwoman reflects society. She symbolizes the reversal of the orthodox image of femininity, manifesting both a criticism and a revision of the imposed social script (Yalçın, 2018). In the discourse of dissenting feminine figures, madness can be defined as a departure from the traditional, enforced feminine roles, a rejection and reversal of the assumptions about the nature of women.

In Julian’s time, women with intellectual interests and an

edificatory calling were required to legitimize themselves against St. Paul's circumscribing dictate: "I suffer not women to teach" (Hendry, 2005). Convents provided an acceptable alternative with access to formal education and positions of authority (Burton & Stöber, 2015). Within enclosed religious orders, women were not bound to the deeply patriarchal institution of marriage, though female scholarship existed within the established boundaries of gender roles (Bruzelius & Berman, 1992). Thus celibacy itself was a liberatory act of resistance against the cultural norms that confined women (Hendry, 2005). The female monastic life, though under the dominance of the Church, provided greater degrees of autonomy, and the solitary vocation allowed women to exert agency in choosing to live as they desired.

Julian was a prolific writer and theologian as well as a mystic. Her *Revelations of Divine Love* was focused on exposing the Church to the message of her spiritual visions. It is significant that her account is considered the first text written in English by a woman. Rather than writing in Latin, the language of academia and the Church, she uses vernacular English, a language accessible to her audience. Her work is one of spiritual counsel and education, dedicated to "my fellow Christians, wishing that they might see and know what I was seeing" and be comforted, "for the vision was shown for everyone" (Norwich, 1998, p. 53). She challenged the cultural norms of the time in an effort to be heard, saying, "Just because I am a woman, must I therefore believe that I must not tell you about the goodness of God, when I saw at the same time both his goodness and his wish that it should be known?" (p. 11).

Julian was moved to interpret her visions in the physical enclosure of anchoritic isolation, a liminal space that influenced the shape of her affective theology (Farrugia, 2016). Her physical and textual spaces engendered one another in the sense that her containment mediated her identifying with the incarnated sufferings of Christ and that she lived out Christ's passion in ritual death within the

sacred interiority of her anchorhold. The inner space was both womb and tomb. Julian's physical confinement distanced her from the external world and separated her from its strictures, granting her privileged access to "the supreme teacher" and liberation to engage more radically with her visions (Norwich, 1998, p. 11). Removed from a position of confrontation with the outside world, Julian used the intimacy of her mystical space and her seclusion with God to release her ideology and authorize it as informed by the divine.

Julian recorded that her "showings" were revealed to her in three ways: by "bodily vision" (physical), "spiritual sight" (supernatural), and "in my reason" (cognitive; Norwich, 1998, p. 53). She distinguished the voice she heard in her mind from her own thinking by consistently attributing it to God. Part of Julian's spiritual evolution was coming to believe that her rapt experiences were more than hysterics. God contradicted her disbelief, saying, "Know well now that what you saw today was no delirium . . . accept it, believe it, hold to it and comfort yourself with it" (Norwich, 1998, p. 157). Julian's visions were recalled as both "a very great joy and bliss to me" and "agonizing and also terrifying and tormenting" (p. 155). While she experienced many visions as an opening of her "spiritual eyes," in one "horrible" episode, it was "the Fiend" who was "thrusting a visage like a young man's close to my face" and trying to strangle her (p. 152). Julian sensed smoke, a foul stench, and a great heat, but there was no physical fire. Such "terrors of the mind" affected her physically and mentally, and she concluded that it is "the Fiend who had come to torment me" (p. 153). The plural and multisensory nature of her visions and her experience of them as incomprehensible and despairing have attracted a variety of contemporary psychological diagnoses (Saunders & Fernyhough, 2017). However, within the medieval paradigm, the voices and visions that characterized the mystical experience moved the individual to transcendent spiritual understanding (Kroll et al., 2002).

Julian opened her text by recounting her prayer for "vivid

perception of Christ's passion," "bodily sickness . . . to the death," and "three wounds in my lifetime" (Norwich, 1998, pp. 3-4). It is on her presumed deathbed that she received her 16 revelations, as she looked upon the image of the crucifix (Norwich, 1998). It is significant that Julian's mystical experiences had their origins in bodily distress, as it connected their authority to the simultaneously corporeal and transcendental nature of her physical suffering. Julian defined sufferings of the body as a replicating of the experience of Christ; thus bodily weakness is reinterpreted as access to God. Julian desired "every kind of suffering both of body and soul" to more intimately experience God and receive the rites of the Church (Norwich, 1998, pp. 3-4). Her language suggested the profitability of physical illness is in its symbolic representation of a spiritual conversion; the negation of the self and relinquishing to sickness are represented as setting the self apart from society and identifying with Christ.

Referencing the martyr Saint Cecilia, Julian asserted her desire to embody the torments and turmoil of Christ "as others did who loved him" (Norwich, 1998, p. 3). Her fixation on suffering was not singular but a common theme in the accounts of holy female mystics (Hendry, 2005). The phenomena of visionary texts and hysterical women intersected in the unifying motif of the abuse of the body. The prevalence of illness, ascetic practice, and anchoritic contemplation in mysticism is indicative of the role of extreme physical affect in achieving a visionary experience (Saunders, 2016). Julian perceived suffering in the human condition not as a punishment but as a channel through which God drew man "up to His bliss" (Norwich, 1998, p. 84). Within a medieval paradigm that associated masculinity with mind and femininity with bodiliness, women could compensate for their inferiority by claiming a bond with Christ in his passion, thus accessing the sacredness associated with his body (Spearing, 2002).

The afflicted body of Christ is at the center of Julian's text. Her

visions of Christ's body on the cross are graphic and carnal, compelling in their physicality. The sight of his suffering was the locus of her revelations, as the medium through which "he himself [shows] me this, without any intermediary" (Norwich, 1998, p. 45). She described his agony in dying as "most distinct to me in his blessed face, and especially in his lips . . . fresh, red-tinted, and lovely," and rendered in loving detail "the dear skin and the tender flesh, with the hair and the blood . . . all raised and loosened from the bone by the thorns where it was slashed through in many pieces, like a sagging cloth" (Norwich, 1998, pp. 64–66). Medieval spirituality emphasized Christ's humanity; the physical suffering of the human body was a sacred symbol of the means to salvation (Spearing, 2002). For Julian, there was a crucial relationship between suffering and love; the suffering of God and the suffering of humanity were drawn together and unified in the crucifixion. She saw in physical suffering "a great union between Christ and us . . . for when he was in pain, we were in pain" (p. 68).

Julian's graphic presentation of Christ's mortal torment surpassed the conventions of her genre and parallel the asceticism of women whose extreme treatment of their bodies mimicked Christ (Spearing, 2002). The body became a text that legitimized Julian as a receptacle of divine knowledge and, further, the site of a social struggle to overturn female subjection. First, the embodied nature of her revelations called attention to the physical nature of Christ, whose bodily suffering conflated with Julian's. In her sickness, Julian was "filled with remembrance and feeling of his blessed Passion"; she was suffering with Christ (Norwich, 1998, p. 45). The medium of the body was meaningful thus the site of union with Christ—through the body, Julian had direct access to God. The paradox is that it is the physicality of her devotion that empowered her to draw authority from affective piety, an exchange that reversed the conventions of feminine passivity and receptivity.

Julian's text is not only affective but also uniquely psychological,

presenting a perspective into the mind of a holy mystic. In narrating her experiences and their profound spiritual implications, she created a complex metaphor of the self that provides insight into her own mentality and self-concept. When left to herself, Julian recorded feeling “oppressed, weary of my life, and so disgusted with myself that I could hardly bear to live” (Norwich, 1998, p. 63). The pain she felt, though “worse than bodily death,” was contrasted with her love for Christ, through which there was “no pain that could be suffered comparable to the sorrow I felt to see him in pain” (p. 67). The somatic tension between the divine and the self is indicative of the self-reflexive, subjective essence of Julian’s visions, in which she identified with Christ’s persecution as a mirror image of her personal anguish. The personal and the psychological served as counterpoints for Julian’s argumentation; in the contrast, the passions of mystic religious fervor become the source of reason. Thus, she wrote, “I thought: Is any pain like this? And I was answered in my reason” (p. 67).

Julian’s meditations were cognitive and rhetorically rich, informed by a familiarity with theological tradition and innovation in argumentation. In recounting her mystical visions of God, she challenged the established doctrines of sin and salvation and presented a daring ideology that likened divine love to maternal affection through metaphors of conception, childbirth, and nursing. As if alluding to the dichotomy between male and female gender roles, Julian juxtaposed God’s lordship and fatherhood, which “should be feared,” with his everlasting goodness and blessed love, by which we “fall upon our Lord’s breast like a child upon its mother’s bosom” (Norwich, 1998, p. 163). Using homely language and domestic imagery to describe the relationship between God and humankind, she turned the strictures of her society to venerate the woman.

Julian’s rationalization was born out of an inability to comprehend the manifestations of divine punitiveness pronounced in the

prescribed Catholic doctrines of eternal damnation. Though she desired to have “a complete vision of hell and purgatory,” she “could learn nothing about it” and found evil conspicuously absent from her showings (Norwich, 1998, p. 87). Without denying the teachings of the Holy Church, Julian proposed a portrait of the nature of God in which his harshly masculine disposition of retribution played no part, as she “could see no blame and anger in God” (p. 106). She wrestled with such theological complexities by offering a subtle critique of the Church’s teachings and presenting visionary doctrinal content of her own.

Yet, Julian introduced herself with a deliberate declaration of extreme modesty, calling herself “a simple, uneducated creature” (Norwich, 1998, p. 42). She accentuated her humility throughout her work, going as far as to instruct the reader to “quickly forget me, a paltry creature” and imploring that “God forbid that you should say or assume that I am a teacher, for that is not what I mean . . . for I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail” (p. 11). Despite her self-deprecating description, Julian’s radical and literary language alluded to a more formal education and informed understanding of traditional theology (Novotny, 2015). However, Julian did not make explicit reference to scripture or other theological sources in her text; rather, she pointed broadly to “the teaching of the Holy Church” as the radix of her understanding (Norwich, 1998, p. 3). Additionally, despite the contentious ideology, she repeatedly claimed not to have “perceived anything . . . that bewilders me or keeps me from the true teaching of the Holy Church” (Norwich, 1998, p. 11). Julian’s caution to avoid direct conflict with orthodoxy was indicative of the influence and power of the Church. She was sensitive to preventing the dismissal of her teaching as heretical or in opposition to the prevailing doctrine and, as a woman, was aware of the risk of being too outspoken.

Julian’s exegesis was conscientiously and deliberately written, masterfully addressing fundamental theological issues in a period

of adversity and schism. The rhetoric of divine manifestation allowed her to invoke the ethos of God, and her madness, real or not, epitomized a potent form of resistance against the rationality of patriarchal institutions. Does claiming that Julian was mad deprecate or strengthen her credibility? Profoundly, her private communion with Christ authorized both her doctrine and the worldly criticism of it. Julian documented a provoking interaction in her account, in which when “a man belonging to a religious order” heard of her delirious behavior, he responded with laughter, but when he heard of her hallucinatory visions of the crucifix, he became “very serious and [marveled]” (Norwich, 1998, p. 152). As this incident evinces, there is power in the intersection of religion and madness. The so-called madness of medieval mystical women is perhaps best understood as a construct of a patriarchal society, a rhetorical contrivance in response to the male-defined perspective of femininity.

DISCUSSION

Julian of Norwich offers an example of how women in the past expressed themselves within the power structure of the dominant group. She exercised subversive language and literary forms to circumvent the restrictions of a period in which the production and dissemination of texts were controlled largely by men. In her writings, Julian both implicitly and directly addressed the structural inequality that limited women from engaging in a public sphere of communication, pointing to the power differential between women and men. Women have long been muted by the way language “defines, deprecates, and ignores women” (Kramer et al., 1978, p. 643). This is evident in the way they have been historically excluded or limited from contributing to the public domain and in how they developed back-channel methods of communication to make themselves heard. Muted groups can respond either by participating

within or working around the expectations of the dominant group. Julian's devotional work demonstrated both alternatives, as she challenged the conventional norms and ideologies of the medieval Church while maintaining a position of deference.

While the interpretations of her visions are circumscribed by established doctrines of the Church, they also subvert the Church's conventional emphasis on the wrath and retribution of God. Her language, through its use of the feminine body and maternal view of Christ, posited a new way of speaking about God's view of, and relationship with, humankind. Julian's innovations of language allowed her to articulate a nontraditional religious perspective that accounted for marginalized groups, such as women and sinners, while remaining with Julian's nuanced, intellectual writing exemplified her mastery of theology and literary language and her knowledge of scripture, Church teachings, and patristic tradition (Baker, 2004).

Julian took the deficient, preyed upon component of femininity and elevated its status by framing it as a divine vessel, instrument, and site of encounter. Her physically and emotionally charged narrative of the body "draws upon well-established rhetorical patterns of logic, structure and metaphor," through which she "utilized the male dominant rhetorical systems of her time and altered them to create her own innovations of language" (Novotny, 2015, p. 13).

There is clear rhetorical significance to the exercise of mystical visions in feminine medieval literature as an appeal to a higher authority. The visionary accounts of other female mystics across Europe—including the French Marguerite D'Oingt, the Dutch Hadewijch of Antwerp, the Saxon Mechtilde of Hackeborn, the German Gertrude of Helfta, the Swedish Saint Bridget, the Italian Catherine of Siena, and the English Margery Kempe—manifest rhetorical parallels to those identified (Dickens, 2009; Dunai, 2015; Watkins, 1983). Women did not have access to power through the formal ecclesiastical authority of men, so they procured power

through the authority of their direct connection with the divine. As a result, they could assert a public voice by presenting their arguments as part of a larger narrative, grounded and authenticated in the unquestionable source of the divine. The authority of supernatural revelation provided a platform of spiritual and societal influence, especially in the Church, where the power and influence available to women were restricted in contrast with men. Whether lay mystics or members of religious orders, medieval women were able to participate in theology and philosophy by claiming divine support through the rhetoric of personal revelation.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the rhetoric of the medieval mystics through the framework of MGT illustrates how female persons overcame their muteness by devising a new language and means of communication through the “madness” of divine revelation. Julian of Norwich challenged the constraints of her position as a woman by authoring a text designed to teach others. She dramatically altered the orthodox view of the divine and of femininity through her innovative narrative, which both reflected and dismantled the conventions of her time. In doing so, the experience of women was reclaimed and elevated, so that they were no longer curbed by their position as members of an “inferior” group but able to use their state as a marginalized group to access an exclusive form of communicative authority.

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My Ego Made Me Do It: The Image Repair Strategies of Brian Williams

JAMES KAUFFMAN

Indiana University Southeast

On February 4, 2015, popular news anchor Brian Williams apologized on air for telling a false story about riding in a helicopter shot down in Iraq in 2003. The media and the public attacked Williams. NBC News launched an investigation into his reporting and public statements and then suspended Williams for 6 months and replaced him as anchor on *NBC Nightly News*. In June, Williams appeared on *The Today Show* and tried to explain his actions, repair his image, and rebuild his credibility. This study examines Williams's image repair strategies. It discovers that Williams used poorly two strategies that held out the greatest hope of repairing his image—mortification and corrective action—and that he relied primarily on evading responsibility for his actions by blaming an alter ego whom he did not know and did not control for telling the untrue stories. Furthermore, the study proposes that expectations for some jobs constrain the strategies available to those seeking to repair their images. Critics should consider these constraints when evaluating image repair efforts.

KEYWORDS: Brian Williams, crisis communication, image repair, television news, news anchors

On February 4, 2015, news anchor Brian Williams ended the broadcast of *NBC Nightly News* by apologizing for telling an inaccurate story in which he claimed he rode in a helicopter shot down in Iraq in 2003. Soldiers who had served on the Iraqi mission in 2003 prompted Williams's admission when they challenged an NBC Facebook entry Williams posted on January 30, in which he made inaccurate statements about the helicopter incident. Williams

James Kauffman, Ph.D., is professor of business in the School of Business, Indiana University Southeast. He can be reached at School of Business, Indiana University Southeast, New Albany, IN 47150, USA, or at jkauffman@ius.edu.

responded to the soldiers' challenges by admitting his error and apologizing on the Facebook page. A reporter at the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes* read the exchange and contacted Williams, who agreed to an interview. Williams again admitted his error. The newspaper contacted management at NBC News on February 4, 2015, for a comment on Williams's admission; management then met with the anchor. Williams decided to make his on-air admission on the evening broadcast.

The media attacked Williams and his on-air apology. The *Los Angeles Times* labeled Williams "a self-aggrandizing fabulist" (Goldberg, 2015); the *New York Times* criticized the apology as "muddled" and "insufficient" (Steel, 2015); National Public Radio characterized it as a "stunning apology" that "didn't sit well with many veterans" (Folkenflik, 2015). The *New York Daily News* said the apology "raised more questions than it answers" (Steinberg, 2015). A survey conducted the day after the apology found that 80% of respondents thought that Williams should not continue as an NBC news anchor, with 70% saying they did not view his apology as sincere (Weinstein, 2015).

On February 6, Deborah Turness, president of NBC News, launched an internal investigation into the veracity of Williams's reporting and public statements. On February 7, Williams announced he would step down from the anchor post temporarily but proposed that upon returning, he planned to continue his "career-long effort to be worthy of the trust of those who place their trust in us" (Williams, 2015). On February 10, Turness addressed the situation publicly. She announced Williams's punishment: suspension for 6 months without pay; she also announced that Lester Holt would serve as interim anchor. Furthermore, she reported on the findings of the internal investigation, saying that Williams had "misrepresented events" in telling the helicopter story "on other occasions" in other venues. She characterized his actions as "wrong and completely inappropriate" for a news anchor (Turness, 2015). Turness added

that management suspected other fabrications: “We have concerns about comments that occurred outside NBC News while Brian was talking about his experience in the field” (Turness, 2015). The crisis took a great toll on the public’s perception of his trustworthiness. A survey taken after Williams’s admission and suspension found that his trustworthiness ranking dropped from 23rd most-trusted celebrity in America to 845th (Simon, 2015).

As his suspension came to an end in June 2015, Williams sat for a two-part interview with Matt Lauer on NBC’s *The Today Show*. Observers characterized the interview as the opening of an “apology tour” designed to “rebuild trust and respect” for the anchor (Hinckley, 2015; Steel, 2015), but the 6-month hiatus did not appear to reduce contempt for him. The media referred to Williams as a “disgraced” former anchor (Wemple, 2015b), characterizing him as a “serial fibber” (Hinckley, 2015) and nicknaming him “lyin’ Brian” (Blinder, 2015).

Using the Facebook post, the *Stars and Stripes* interview, the broadcast apology, and the *Today Show* interview, Williams attempted to repair his tarnished image and rebuild his credibility and trust with the media and the public. With so many options for news and public suspicion and distrust of traditional news outlets at an all-time high, anchors on the major news outlets must establish and maintain their credibility and trust to attract a large, national audience. This study examines Brian Williams’s image repair strategies in his Facebook post, his *Stars and Stripes* interview, his broadcast, and his two-part interview on *The Today Show*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have conducted numerous studies of how corporations, politicians, and entertainers have attempted to repair their public images in the aftermath of taking actions that the public perceived as objectionable. Among entertainers, the image repair

attempts by athletes have received a great deal of attention (see, e.g., Benoit, 2014; Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Blaney, Lippert, & Smith, 2013; Brazeal, 2008; Fortunato, 2008; Holdener & Kauffman, 2013; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). Fewer studies have examined the image repair attempts by actors or media personalities. Scholars have examined actors Hugh Grant (Benoit, 1997a), Mel Gibson (Stein, 2010), and Christian Bale (Johnson, 2011) and comedian and actor Ricky Gervais (Kauffman, 2012). Furthermore, researchers have studied the image repair attempts of media personalities Jim Cramer of CNBC (Browning, 2011), televangelist Jimmy Swaggart (Legg, 2009), Jon and Kate Goslin (Moody, 2011), Oprah Winfrey (Oles, 2010), Don Imus (Kramer, 2014), Rush Limbaugh (Furgerson & Benoit, 2013), David Letterman (Compton & Miller, 2011), and Paula Deen (Len-Ríos, Finneman, Han, Bhandari, & Perry, 2015).

Only a few studies have examined the image repair attempts of journalists or news organizations. Hindman (2005) studied the reaction of the *New York Times* to Jayson Blair's plagiarism and fabrication scandal. The study used both image repair and paradigm repair theories to explore how the newspaper attempted to repair its own image and journalism more generally. Hindman discovered that in trying to repair its image in light of publishing Blair's stories, the paper used numerous image repair strategies to blame, and to distance itself from, Blair and to argue that the news paradigm still worked, but its enforcement efforts had failed. Additionally, two studies examined the image repair attempts of Dan Rather and CBS News following the George W. Bush Memogate scandal. Mazer (2013) and Kaylor (2010) found that Rather and CBS News employed a variety of image repair strategies. Both studies concluded that the image repair efforts failed. Kaylor highlighted the "unusual situation" of news organizations and journalists engaging in "image repair" (p. 121). He argued that journalists rely heavily on their "personal credibility" to garner an audience.

Attacks on their personal credibility threaten their “influence” and the “product they offer” (p. 121).

Unlike the charges of plagiarism and fabrication in the case of Blair and the *New York Times* or the attack on Rather and CBS News for using questionable sources in reporting on George W. Bush, Williams had to respond to a direct challenge of his trustworthiness in reporting news. Williams faced an uphill battle in regaining trust. He faced not only a skeptical public who had an all-time low opinion of the news but also a critical media.

For journalists like Brian Williams who admit to committing an act the public views as offensive, research has suggested that two repair strategies may have the greatest chances of improving their tarnished images: mortification (apologizing) and corrective action (Benoit, 2014; Benoit & Drew, 1997; Blaney, 2016; Blosenhauer, Cos, & Worrell, 2016). Benoit (1997b) described effective mortification as one in which the guilty party promptly and sincerely “confesses and begs forgiveness” (p. 181). People admire those who “have the courage to accept blame for their actions” and express remorse (Benoit, 1997a, p. 263).

In addition to mortification, audiences usually want a person who admits to committing an offensive act to offer corrective action. People wish to know who to blame for an action. However, people will find it “more reassuring to know that steps have been taken to eliminate or avoid future problems” (Benoit, 1997b, p. 184). Characterizing “a firm commitment” to corrective action as a “very important component” of image repair, Benoit deemed it “especially important for those who admit responsibility” (p. 184). Moreover, one meta-analysis of 30 years of apologia, image repair, and crisis communication studies found corrective action as the most successful repair strategy (Arendt, LaFleche, & Limperopulos, 2017).

Besides using mortification and corrective action to rebuild trust, journalists who admit to lying should avoid offering excuses or trying to evade responsibility. Doing so can hurt their

perceived sincerity. For example, Benoit (2014) analyzed cyclist Lance Armstrong's attempt to repair his image after revelations that he had repeatedly lied about taking performance-enhancing drugs. Benoit pointed out that Armstrong engaged in mortification in his interview with Oprah, but he undermined his apology by adding appeals to defeasibility. He observed, "Persuaders are often reluctant to apologize; even when using mortification sometimes they cannot resist adding an excuse" (p. 129). The study now turns to an explanation of its method of analysis, its key assumptions and repair strategies, and a description of the artifact under investigation.

METHOD

For crisis communication, image restoration and its various iterations has been "the dominant paradigm" (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007, p. 130). This study utilizes Benoit's (2014) image repair theory. Benoit built his theory off the image repair scholarship in accounts (e.g., Scott & Lyman, 1968), *apologia* (Ware & Linkugel, 1973), and related areas. Many researchers have used image repair theory to study crisis communication (e.g., Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1997b, 2014; Burns & Bruner, 2000; Coombs, 1995, 1999; Hearit, 2006; Rowland & Jerome, 2004; Ulmer et al., 2007).

Benoit's theory assumes that communication is goal oriented and that people want to maintain a positive image. If a person's positive image comes under attack, he or she feels compelled to respond. Benoit further asserted that for a threat to be viewed as credible, it must have two components: The audience must believe an offensive act occurred, and it must attribute responsibility for the act to the accused. Benoit identified 14 potential communicative strategies an accused can use to repair his or her tarnished image. Benoit's typology of repair strategies provides a critic a way to identify and then to analyze the image repair efforts (Benoit, 1997a, 2014).

Additionally, Benoit (2014) argued that entertainers, politicians, and corporations face different audience expectations and situational challenges that can constrain their choices and influence the success of their image repair strategies.

Benoit (2014) has theorized that people accused of a serious transgression will attempt to protect their image by employing one or more image repair strategies. Benoit stressed that people must perceive the transgression as serious and that the accusers must view the accused as responsible for the wrongdoing. Furthermore, the theory identifies five general strategies from which speakers can choose in attempting to restore or repair their tarnished image: denial, evasion of responsibility, minimization, corrective action, and mortification. Three of the strategies have subcategories.

In denial, speakers have two options: deny the action took place or shift blame to another. In evasion of responsibility, speakers have four options: characterize their action as a justifiable reaction to an action committed against them, argue their action stemmed from inadequate information (defeasibility), characterize their action as an accident, or argue that they acted with good intentions (even though events went wrong). In attempting to reduce the act's offensiveness, speakers have six options: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack of the accuser, or compensation. In *bolstering*, speakers try to improve the audience's positive view of them to overshadow the negative action. In *minimization*, speakers attempt to reduce the effects of the negative action. In *differentiation*, speakers try to distinguish the act from acts that are similar but viewed as more offensive. In *transcendence*, speakers propose that larger, more important concerns motivated their action. Speakers also can *attack the accuser* in an attempt to reduce the accuser's credibility. In *compensation*, speakers offer something of value to make up for the loss or pain. In *corrective action*, speakers have two options: promising to take steps to prevent the action from occurring again or promising both to fix the problem and to

prevent occurrences in the future. In *mortification*, speakers admit wrongdoing and ask for forgiveness.

For the analysis of Brian Williams, the author read the public statements of Williams in response to allegations of lying about the helicopter story. These included his Facebook post on February 4, his *Stars and Stripes* interview on February 4, his *NBC Nightly News* broadcast on February 4, and his two-part interview on *The Today Show* on June 19. The author identified Williams's image repair strategies and tactics using Benoit's typology.

FINDINGS

Williams used seven image repair strategies: good intentions, accident, defeasibility, differentiation, shifting the blame, mortification, and corrective action. He relied most on evasion of responsibility strategies (good intentions, action, defeasibility) and least on mortification and corrective action strategies. First, Williams proposed that he had good intentions in telling the helicopter story. He opened his February broadcast by characterizing his motive for recounting the story as an attempt "to honor and to thank" a soldier who had protected him and others on the mission. He repeated the assertion in the broadcast, calling his story "a bungled attempt" to "thank" a special veteran ("Transcript," 2015). Similarly, in the Facebook post, he characterized his action as "simply an attempt to thank" the soldier, the military, and "veterans everywhere" (Wemple, 2015a). Finally, in the *Stars and Stripes* interview, he said that he set out to "honor" and "call attention" to a special army veteran in retelling the helicopter story (Tritten, 2015).

Second, he tried to evade responsibility by characterizing his false stories as accidents. In his broadcast, Williams said he "made a mistake" in remembering events ("Transcript," 2015). In the *Stars and Stripes* interview, he asserted that he never would have "chosen to make this mistake" (Tritten, 2015). On his Facebook

posting, Williams told veterans he felt “terrible about making this mistake” (Wemple, 2015a). He tried to add credence to his depiction by highlighting that the incident occurred 12 years before. He repeated the idea in his Facebook page: “I think the constant viewing of the video showing us inspecting the impact area—and the fog of memory over 12 years—made me conflate the two” (Wemple, 2015a). He not only blamed the length of time that passed since the incident as a contributing factor but also suggested that repeated watching of videos that reported on the event had caused him to appropriate that memory. In his interview with Matt Lauer, he stressed that he had retold stories that had taken place “years after the event and in many different areas, live discussions and talk shows, discussions with students” (Nash, 2015). Williams argued in the interview that the mistakes in his recounting events of the story came from confusion: “It got mixed up. It got turned around in my mind” (Nash, 2015).

Third, Williams engaged in differentiation. Williams went to great lengths to stress that he did not intentionally try to mislead people. In his Facebook post, Williams said he had “no desire to fictionalize” his experience and “no need to dramatize” the events that took place. “Nobody’s trying to steal anyone’s valor,” he proposed (Wemple, 2015a). In the *Today Show* interview, Williams admitted that over the years, he told stories “that were not true.” However, he added, “It is very clear. I never intended to” (Nash, 2015). Matt Lauer pressed Williams, asking him directly if he lied. Williams responded, “I told the story correctly for years before I told it incorrectly. I was not trying to mislead people. That, to me, is a huge difference here” (Nash, 2015).

Fourth, Williams employed a combination of defeasibility, differentiation, and shifting the blame in an attempt to evade responsibility. Williams utilized defeasibility in arguing that he lacked self-awareness and therefore that people should not hold him accountable. He did not know his motive or the impetus for

telling inaccurate and embellished stories. He explained to Matt Lauer that he used his 6-month hiatus to go on a “necessary” journey of self-discovery to identify what “change” took place that led him to take such unusual actions. Williams explained that he reviewed “everything, basically twenty years of public utterances” (Nash, 2015). In the interview, he called the review “torture,” but he called it “absolutely necessary. I have discovered a lot of things.” He referred to the soul searching as a “time of realization” (Nash, 2015). He added that he had to review his past “to figure out how it happened” (Nash, 2015). On *The Today Show*, Williams explained that in his journey of self-discovery, he uncovered someone he did not know or like. Williams recounted that he read newspaper stories about himself “not liking the person I was reading about and, wanting—I would have given anything to get to the end of the story and have it be someone else. But it was about me” (Nash, 2015).

Williams used differentiation to distinguish Brian Williams the anchor from Brian Williams the celebrity, who appeared as a guest on various shows and before various audiences. Williams suggested that he became a victim of fame. In the *Today Show* interview, Williams argued that his hiatus allowed him to “find out in me what changed.” He goes on in the interview to describe the genesis of his alter ego:

I have always treated words so carefully. That’s the coin of our realm. That’s our tool. It’s the key to our credibility and our integrity. But, Matt, it is clear that after work when I got out of the building, when I got out of that realm, I used a double standard. Something changed. And I was sloppier and I said things that weren’t true. (Nash, 2015)

When pressed by Lauer, Williams said that away from the NBC anchor post, “ego” made him think he “had to be sharper, funnier, quicker than anybody else. Put myself closer to the action, having

been at the action in the beginning” (Nash, 2015). He added that telling untrue stories “came from clearly a bad place, a bad urge inside me. This was clearly ego-driven, the desire to better my role in a story that I was already in. That’s what I have been tearing apart and unpacking and analyzing” (Nash, 2015). In the interview, Williams characterized the false stories simply as a manifestation of much larger problems: “What happened is the fall of a whole host of other sins” (Nash, 2015).

Finally, Williams relied least on two strategies: mortification and corrective action. Williams included an appeal to mortification in his first attempt to repair his image. In the February news broadcast, Williams told the viewing audience, particularly veterans, “I want to apologize.” He ended his seven-sentence statement by telling “veterans everywhere” that they had his “greatest respect” and his “apology” (“Transcript,” 2015). In his Facebook post, Williams said “I apologize,” and he commented to the soldier who questioned his retelling of the helicopter story “you were right and I was wrong” (Wemple, 2015a). Furthermore, in the *Today Show* interview, Williams acknowledged that he failed to apologize effectively in his broadcast. He added, “I am responsible for this. I am sorry for what happened here” (Nash, 2015). Surprisingly, Williams made only one appeal to corrective action. In his June interview with Matt Lauer, Williams proposed that he had taken the necessary steps to solve the problem. Williams asserted, “What has happened in the past has been identified and torn apart by me and has been fixed, has been dealt with. And going forward, there are going to be different rules of the road” (Nash, 2015).

DISCUSSION

Williams employed mortification and corrective action, but he performed them poorly. Williams used mortification, but he apologized for making mistakes, not for lying. He apologized promptly,

but the public questioned his sincerity. The media and the public soundly criticized Williams for his differentiation and his failure to admit he lied. For example, the *New York Times* attacked Williams, noting, “He couldn’t say the L word” and “he clung to small, self-preserving distinctions: He didn’t lie, he just didn’t tell the truth” (Stanley, 2015).

Williams made one short reference to corrective action. He tried to reassure the media and the public by saying that he had “identified” the problem, torn it apart, and “fixed” it. Given his lengthy discussion of his lack of self-awareness and lack of personal control over his actions, one finds it hard to believe that the media and the public would accept his assertion that he had “fixed” his ego and exorcised the “bad places” responsible for his problems. One might assume that since he argued that he ran into problems when he stepped outside his role as anchor and appeared as a celebrity on television shows and in public appearances, he would promise to cease making those appearances and concentrate on his anchor position. But Williams offered no evidence or explanation to support his claim that he had solved his “ego” problem. Undoubtedly, his failure to offer a credible, detailed plan to stop lying and exaggerating hurt his chances of rebuilding his trust and credibility.

Not only did Williams perform poorly the two strategies that held out the best hope to regain the public trust but he also offered numerous excuses, which further hurt his credibility. Williams used strategies aimed at evading responsibility. His audience may have been sympathetic to his explanation of faulty memory as a cause of his error, especially since the events in question happened years before during a hectic time in his life. However, his use of a variety of appeals to evade responsibility may have undercut this explanation. He especially came under attack for attempting to distance himself from himself. He proposed that his hiatus allowed him to go on a journey of self-discovery and reflection in which he identified the motive and genesis of his inaccurate stories. He argued

that, unconsciously and unintentionally, he had gone through a metamorphosis from a cautious news anchor to a celebrity who became seduced by fame. He did not like or recognize this alter ego, and it made him take unimaginable and unacceptable actions. The celebrity Brian, driven by ego, embellished and sought attention and adulation. Those desires came from a “bad place.”

The media identified and criticized his distancing strategies and his attempts to paint himself as helpless or possessed by a third party. The *New York Post* laughed at Williams’s explanation: “He said he was powerless over his ego. Seriously” (Peyser, 2015). The *New York Daily News* observed that from the start of the interview, Williams “distanced himself from his own actions” (Hinckley, 2015). The *New York Times* went further: “Almost like a white-knuckled addict who feels captive to the demon fix, Mr. Williams distanced himself from his fibs” (Stanley, 2015). The media especially lambasted his attempts to shift the blame to a bad part of himself or to an unknown force. The *Washington Post* hammered Williams: “To hear him tell it, he didn’t lie! His ego did” and “Williams blamed himself, or at least a part of himself” (Wemple, 2015b). The *New York Post* castigated his attempt to sidestep responsibility by characterizing Williams’s excuse as “something wicked was done to him by an unknown force” (Peyser, 2015). Moreover, the *Washington Post* observed that to believe Williams, one must accept that his “‘bad place’ has been controlling his utterances for years without his awareness” (Wemple, 2015b).

Williams’s attempts to evade responsibility for his actions by citing personal defeasibility, or lack of self-awareness of his actions and his motives, failed to convince the media or the public. They also rejected his attempt to shift the blame to an alter ego, or a sinister part of himself, whom he did not know or like. Overall, the media panned Williams’s attempt to repair his image and to rebuild his trust through his pivotal *Today Show* interview. The *New York Times* called it “a tortured mea culpa that didn’t close a

chapter” (Stanley, 2015). The *New York Daily News* attacked Williams for dancing around Lauer’s questions and using “so many evasive responses and so much tortured jargon” (Hinckley, 2015). Moreover, the *New York Post* wondered whether Williams could “tell fact from fiction” and worried about “his sanity” (Peysner, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Brian Williams’s public statements failed to repair his image. He apologized for making a mistake, not for lying. He used a brief appeal to corrective action, but he offered no explanation or elaboration. He advanced strategies aimed at evading responsibility for his actions. His excuses and his poor execution of mortification and corrective action ruined his attempt to repair his image. Public trust, once lost, is extremely difficult to regain. Brian Williams got caught lying at a time when only 18% of the American public had confidence in television news, the lowest rating in 20 years (Newport, 2015). Rebuilding trust may never occur for some people who perform actions the public views as objectionable. Golfer Tiger Woods, for instance, never regained the public’s trust after his admission of marital infidelity (Simon, 2015). It remains to be seen whether Williams, or any journalist caught lying, can ever regain enough trust and credibility to return to precrisis prominence.

This case study leads one to question the efficacy of using personal defeasibility as a repair strategy. One can identify others in the recent past who attempted to evade responsibility by citing personal defeasibility, referencing an alter ego, and then blaming it for the offensive act. For instance, Holdener and Kauffman (2013) analyzed Michael Vick’s strategic use of third person references as an attempt to distance himself from his actions. They identified possible benefits and detriments of using the strategy but ultimately characterized it as “fraught with dangers” (p. 98). Moreover, one finds others citing personal defeasibility, or lack of self-awareness of

their motives for acting, as an image repair strategy. In the aftermath of making anti-Semitic comments to a police officer when pulled over for drunk driving, actor Mel Gibson offered an apology to the Jewish community in Los Angeles, citing personal defeasibility as part of his defense: “I am in the process of understanding where those vicious words came from during that drunken display, and I am asking the Jewish community, whom I have personally offended, to help me on my journey through recovery” (“Mel Gibson’s Apology,” 2006). Similarly, former University of Arkansas football coach Bobby Petrino reflected back a few months after the university fired him in 2012 on why he chose to become involved in an extramarital relationship with a female staff member and to lie about her riding as a passenger on a motorcycle he crashed into a ditch:

When I look back on it there is no good answer. All I know is that I wasn’t thinking and I wasn’t acting correctly. That’s not how I was raised. That’s not how I raised my children. I take responsibility for it and I really am sorry. I have played it over in my head a million times. How could I do this? How could this happen? (Schad, 2010)

Brian Williams, Mel Gibson, and Bobby Petrino said they took responsibility for their actions, but they asserted that they did not understand the motive or impetus for those actions. They planned to take a journey of self-discovery to understand themselves, to uncover their motives, and to solve their problems. In asserting that they acted unconsciously and unintentionally, they hoped that audiences would not hold them accountable. However, audiences did not accept their explanations. Furthermore, the strategy caused even greater damage to their credibility. In depicting themselves as acting without awareness or consciousness, they ran the risk of doing irrevocable damage to their reputations, as the public would perceive them as unreliable, untrustworthy, or even unstable.

These findings about defeasibility are consistent with studies by Benoit (2006) and Benoit and Henson (2009) regarding President George W. Bush. The researchers pointed out the risky nature of American presidents using defeasibility. For example, Benoit (2006) examined President Bush's use of defeasibility in responding to criticisms when Bush ran for reelection in 2004:

When an incumbent president proclaims a lack of information and/or ability to control events in the world, that may excuse blame for past problems, but at the same time, it undermines faith in the president's ability to deal with future problems. (p. 302)

Similarly, journalists may face a defeasibility dilemma when attempting to repair a tarnished image. The credibility of journalists comes largely from their ability to communicate information accurately and honestly. The public expects journalists to collect sufficient and accurate information before reporting. Consequently, citing lack of information as justification for an error brings into question a journalist's skill and credibility. Furthermore, lying, misrepresenting facts, or embellishing stories raises questions about the credibility and integrity of a journalist. If a journalist uses defeasibility to propose that something (intoxication, mental illness, lack of self-awareness, etc.) inhibited his or her ability to act professionally, then at minimum, the public would expect the journalist to offer a detailed and appropriate plan of corrective action to fix the problem and to ensure it does not happen again.

The job expectations of presidents and journalists would appear to make defeasibility a poor repair strategy. One might reasonably conclude that the expectations of other jobs also may constrain the strategies people in those positions may employ successfully to repair a tarnished image. This finding refines Benoit's contention that entertainers, politicians, and corporations face different audience expectations and situational challenges that constrain the choices

and influence the success of the image repair strategies each may use (Benoit, 2014). Yet, grouping jobs into such broad categories may not allow for distinctions in job expectations that constrain and influence the success of image repair strategies.

Future image repair studies should pay close attention to the ways in which and the extent to which job expectations can constrain the strategic choices available to those responding to crises. Undoubtedly, in making evaluations of people's attempts at image repair, researchers would benefit greatly from understanding the constraints under which people in certain jobs operate in selecting image repair strategies.

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Hurts So Good: Communicating the Emotions That Occur While Listening to Popular Music

SCOTT HADEN CHURCH
Brigham Young University

There is a lack of research in the field of communication studies that has examined how individuals articulate meaningful experiences derived from listening to popular music. The objective of the present study was to represent the vernacular voices of listeners in the scholarly conversation about the communicative potential of music. This study used the qualitative method of phenomenology as an interpretive lens for understanding how listeners ascribe emotional meaning to their experiences listening to popular music. Collected through in-depth interviews of five college-aged men, the data revealed that for these participants, popular music can communicate painful feelings through its function as (a) a time machine, (b) a source of identification with others, (c) a means of musical immersion, and (d) a variety of personal therapy.

KEYWORDS: Phenomenology, popular music, emotions, pain, qualitative

Popular music has the potential to communicate emotions and feelings to the listener (Meyer, 1956; Sacks, 2008). The study of popular music—music from genres such as rock, soul, punk, dance, heavy metal, and so forth, rather than classical or jazz music (Gracyk, 2007; Lull, 1987)—is especially salient to communication because it “expresses meaning that has no parallel in human life” (Lull, 1987, p. 10). Still, research in communication has largely neglected to explore this phenomenon (Lull, 1987).

The effect that popular music has on the listener is generally explored by scholars in other fields, instead; critical theorist

Scott Haden Church, Ph.D., is assistant professor, School of Communications, Brigham Young University. He can be reached at School of Communications, Brigham Young University, 305 BRMB, Provo, UT 84602, USA, or at scott_church@byu.edu.

Theodor Adorno, for example, argued that popular music lacks the capacity for communicating emotion. Popular music is too formulaic to express genuine emotion—it is even “pre-digested” by record executives to optimize it only for maximum sales and downloads—thus rendering its listener intellectually and critically passive (Adorno, 1991, 2002). Aesthetically speaking, popular music numbs the audience, distracting them from confronting the pain of everyday life. Thus more painful elements are needed in popular music to trigger uncomfortable emotions in the listener, liberating him or her from its otherwise crippling malaise (Adorno, 1991). In sociology and cultural studies, this question of the potential of popular music to emancipate or oppress social groups is crucial to the scholarship (Frith, 1996).

Some studies in the psychology of music, on the other hand, suggested that pain in music might be useful because it “is capable of arousing deep and significant emotion in those who interact with it” (Sloboda, 2005, p. 203). A sort of catharsis may accompany it, where “a grief response to music . . . allows [the listener] to bleed off in a controlled manner a certain amount of harmful emotion with which one is afflicted” (Levinson, 1997, p. 230). But not all scholars consider pain in music to have a cathartic effect on the listener.

Scholars in psychology have argued that music that expresses pain of some sort may adversely affect the emotional state of the listener, inducing violence within the listener toward the self or others (Johnson & Cloonan, 2008; Stack, Kryszynska, & Lester, 2007). For example, the goth subculture, inspired by music characterized by dark themes, has been investigated concerning its links to suicide and self-mutilation among its adolescent adherents (Rutledge, Rimer, & Scott, 2008). Other literature has hedged that claim, stating only that “there exists a positive relationship between listening to pop music and adolescent problem behaviours” (North & Hargreaves, 2005, p. 433). The perception about the potential harm of popular music may be rooted in American public discourse. In

1999, for example, shock rocker Marilyn Manson's name was implicated in the aftermath of the death of 12 students and 1 teacher who were shot and killed at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. In multiple media outlets following the massacre, the two teenaged killers were alleged to have been frequent listeners of Manson's aggressive music, though this claim was quickly refuted by other sources (Burns, 1999). This was not the first time concerns had been raised about aggressive metal music; 15 years earlier, two young men committed suicide after listening to the music of Judas Priest. In this case, however, a suit was brought against the band due to alleged subliminal messages that existed in the music, inciting these deaths (Henry & Pappa, 1990). Both of these cases are notable in that they illustrate the moral panic that often arises when popular music's effects are examined. Although these cases may be shrugged off as inflammatory conservative reactions from the media (Burns, 1999), these still warrant inclusion in analyses of music's effect on the listener. Given that over 96% of listeners have experienced the emotion of sadness when listening to music (Sloboda, 2005, p. 207), and that intensified sadness (like depression) is sometimes a component of suicide and violence (North & Hargreaves, 2008, p. 197), music as an emotional stimulus is important to examine. Inspired by these questions, this study explored how pain in popular music is experienced by the listener.

Scholarship on popular music in communication studies asks different questions than the aforementioned research. A communication scholar might inquire, If music truly can communicate emotion, then how might the listener ascribe meaning to it within the context of the listening experience? If pain in popular music can indeed be experienced, how might the listener articulate that experience? Given the prior research supporting music's sometimes dangerous potential, an examination of how listeners communicate the feelings they experience listening to popular music may provide further understanding of the personal gratifications of music. The

objective of the present study was to understand the essence of experiencing emotion while listening to popular music.

The preceding questions about popular music and communication are warranted; typically, research about popular music in the field of communication studies has focused primarily upon the lyrics (Gonzalez & Makay, 1983) or the interplay between the lyrics and the music (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001) but has failed to examine the listener's response. The scholarship might detail the rhetorical and emotional power of popular music (e.g., Irvine & Kirkpatrick, 1972; LeCoat, 1976; Matula, 2000; Rasmussen, 1994). Some of this literature has argued that the aesthetics of the musical form and the "discursive linguistic symbols" of the lyrics working in concert may function rhetorically to reflect or imitate genuine emotions that the listener experiences in everyday life (Langer, 1953; Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001). Furthermore, because of the psychological impact of the musical form (Burke, 1968), coupled with the rhetorical potential for lyrics (Irvine & Kirkpatrick, 1972), the music may function to communicate feelings within the listener that language alone may not have the capacity to communicate (Reimer, 1989). This may be explained by music's role as a *change agent*, helping the listener by offering an alternative perspective about a troubling situation (Sloboda, 2005, p. 204). This may also be explained by music's dialectical offering of pleasure and pain to the listener in the form of intensity and release patterns, the frustration or fulfillment of desire (Burke, 1968; Langer, 1953). This process, it should be noted, does not necessarily create emotion in the individual, but *reflects* it (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001): "It allows a person access to the experience of emotions that are somehow already 'on the agenda' for that person, but not fully apprehended or dealt with" (Sloboda, 2005, p. 204). Irrespective of the actual process, music affects the emotional sensibilities of the listener.

Despite the mountain of literature about music's effect on the listener, however, there are deficiencies in the scholarly approaches

to the phenomenon. First, literature has often focused exclusively on the cognitive responses in the listener to the music (Levitin, 2006; Sacks, 2008). Although these studies may have purported to discuss emotional responses, the findings were proposed through a neurological framework that looks exclusively at the brain. Second, much literature regarding music's emotional and communicative potential has been philosophical or theoretical (see Said, 1991), squarely out of the realm of the empirical. This literature, while aiming to discuss the social impact of music, still neglected the individual perspective of the listener. Third, although the corpus of literature regarding emotion and music dates back decades, much of it was written regarding music in general, without specifically addressing the case of *popular* music, that is, music that is well liked by the people (Rubin & Melnick, 2001) rather than by the "minority culture" that traditionally enjoys classical music and opera (Williams, 2000). To focus the study specifically on individual perceptions of experiences with popular music is important given popular music's widespread appeal. Fourth, often the studies addressed emotions in general and how they are expressed in music. However, given the particular charge by Adorno that popular music needs to demonstrate more pain, the present study focused entirely on that emotion. Fifth, phenomenological approaches relating to emotion have been discussed in existential philosophy (Crossley, 1998; Merleau-Ponty, 1962), and applied also to anxiety (Hyde, 1980, 1984), but a phenomenological approach to emotional responses to popular music provides a unique opportunity to examine the phenomenon.

Finally, the aforementioned literature generally shares one other crucial deficiency: It is biased toward the discourse of expertise. Although research has attempted to explain the effects of music on emotion using the languages of music theory (Meyer, 1956), philosophy (Davies, 2003), and rhetoric (see Cohen, Wei, DeFraia, & Drury, 2011), for example, the experience as expressed through

vernacular discourse is less common. These nonexpert voices are particularly important to understand the phenomenon because they provide an underrepresented perspective on the effect of popular music. As such, this study attempted to provide these voices entrance into the scholarly conversation. Exploring an aggregate of responses has the potential to provide an understanding of how the young listener ascribes emotional meaning to music and then constructs that emotion via its verbal articulation.

The purpose of this phenomenological study, then, was twofold. It strove to (a) represent the voices of a few people who have experienced feeling pain while listening to popular music and (b) generate a basic understanding of the essence of experiencing pain while listening to popular music. At this point in the study, the phenomenon of emotional responses to popular music will be generally defined as any perception of pain that exists within the music or is instigated within the listener as a result of the music listening experience.

PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS AND WORLDVIEW

The present study was conducted generally using the social constructivist paradigm. This paradigm posits that individuals create meanings and understandings of the world around them by interacting with others in a society that has been constructed by these interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). This paradigm is particularly common in phenomenological investigations, because the researcher's task is to attempt "to make sense [of] (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world" (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). The social constructivist paradigm was salient to the present study given the data regarding how others have ascribed meaning to their experiences; in a phenomenological study, the "description of a thing incorporates its meaning" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 70). Thus the design of the method is geared to this perspective, where, as the

participant describes the experience, he or she assigns meaning to it, thereby constructing the reality of the experience.

The study used the transcendental–phenomenological approach as advocated by Moustakas (1994). The crucial qualifier for this approach is the careful self-reflexivity of the researcher, which stipulates the importance of the researcher being able to bracket himself or herself out of the research and to “see [the phenomenon] naively” (p. 101). This reflexivity is called *Epoche*, which is interpreted to mean that the researcher should refrain from using his or her personal attitudes and prejudices to influence the process of his or her research and risk subsequently silencing or altering the voices of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Incidentally, any attempt to completely distance the researcher from the phenomenon observed is all but impossible. As explained by Van Manen (1990), “how does one put out of play everything one knows about an experience that one has selected for study?” (p. 47). Still, it is important to acknowledge one’s biases by foregrounding them in the study (Creswell, 2007). Ideally, the researcher should attempt to see the phenomenon as if it were the first time and try to create new ideas regarding it accordingly. But, if those preconceptions creep back into the study, as they likely will, “it is better to make explicit [the researcher’s] understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 47). To that end, self-reflexivity here is warranted: Initiating this research, I certainly had biases regarding popular music. For me, the essence of an experience listening to popular music usually culminated with a catharsis, clarity, or some variety of therapeutic reckoning. I considered the song to be the blank script upon which my soul wrote its sorrows or joys and my soul the blank canvas upon which the song registered its images of pain, joy, sorrow, and hope. In short, my past experiences of feeling profound emotions from listening to popular music inspired this study and colored my perceptions of the participants’ responses.

Transcendental-phenomenological reduction describes the qualities of the experience by *looking*, *noticing*, and then *looking again*, so that the researcher may “reduce [the data] till we reach the stream of pure consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 92–93) and be led back, metaphorically, to the source of the meaning. In the midst of all this, the researcher should revisit the data multiple times to see what might be missing. *Horizontalization* is very important to this step. This concept mandates that the researcher understand that significant statements made in the data do not exist in a hierarchy of importance; every statement has a value equal to the value of the others. Furthermore, just as a new horizon will always appear after an old one, as Moustakas (1994) explained, so do new findings emerge every time the researcher revisits the data.

The final philosophical component of phenomenology, *imaginative variation*, aims to approach the phenomenon from different perspectives and synthesize them to create a structural description of the essence of the experience, or how it happens. The composite textual essences from the reduction step and the structural descriptions of the data from the imaginative variation step (both comprising what Moustakas, 1994, calls the “intentionality” function of the research) may then be synthesized to create an essence of the phenomenon.

As an application of these concepts, Moustakas (1994) demonstrated their uses in multiple studies, but not until after he outlined adaptations he had synthesized from approaches made from the Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen method of analysis. From the outset, the researcher is required to clearly bracket his or her biases regarding the phenomenon in question. After the data are collected, transcribed, and analyzed, themes emerge, and every “invariant horizon” relating to the experience is collected. Afterward, the researcher needs to examine these further to determine if certain meaning units are constitutive of the phenomenon under investigation. If not, they may be eliminated, thus reducing the amount of

usable raw data. These meaning units are then clustered together, validated, and examined for textual and structural descriptions of the experience, both of which are ultimately combined to create a universal essence of the phenomenon.

As mentioned, this study sought to provide a space wherein people could describe their painful experiences with popular music. By giving this vernacular discourse a forum with which to share its emotional responses to music, not only were these voices able to participate in the scholarly discourse but they provided empirical insight into some of the critical claims made by social critics like Adorno. As mentioned earlier, Adorno (1991) posited that pain and “terror” (p. 60) must be present in popular music to emancipate music-consuming masses from the oppression of those corporate entities that produce that music. This polemical view toward mass-produced entertainment becomes oppressive in its own right, because it does violence to the perception that one can enjoy music by its own merits. Historically, this debate has only been reserved for the deliberative participation of intellectuals. Even when this debate extends downward to the realm of the public, it still is limited to the words expressed by “experts” in the field. His claim regarding aesthetics, however fascinating, merely promotes the discourse of expertise.

Research Questions

The central question that guided this analysis was, What meanings do college-aged listeners ascribe to the experience of feeling emotions while hearing popular music? Several subquestions followed: What constitutes the participants’ emotional experiences while listening to popular music? What is the context in which the participants experience emotions while listening to popular music? What is their overall description of feeling emotions while listening to popular music?

METHOD

The present study employed the phenomenological approach to examine the proposed questions. This qualitative research approach was deemed the ideal method for finding answers to the central question guiding this study, because phenomenology principally presents an inquiry into the nature of a lived experience (Creswell, 2007). It also strives to achieve a commonality between lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994), thereby providing an insight not only into the nature of the phenomenon in question but also into shared human experience.

Data Collection

Once the approval of an institutional review board was secured, the data collection commenced with the in-depth, semistructured interviews of five college students enrolled at a large midwestern institution who listened to popular music every day. Despite this level of education, the discourse of the participants was still considered common parlance, because none of these students were musically trained or published in academic journals about music, unlike the theorists who contributed the literature reviewed earlier. Another assumption that led to this choice of sample is that the participants' history of taking university classes would be beneficial in helping them articulate their emotional responses to music.

A purposeful sample of these participants was collected to provide the data for the analysis, meaning that the individuals and sites were selected "because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). The sample was composed of a homogeneous group of participants assembled by using criterion sampling strategies, given that these are important characteristics for phenomenological studies. Creswell recommended that this method study the lived experiences of "several individuals" (p. 57).

Unlike other methods, in which the sampling of participants is thought to be empirically generalizable to a larger population, phenomenology has a different aim, which is to focus on the singularity of the phenomenon. As Van Manen (2014) explained,

the only generalization allowed in phenomenological inquiry is “never generalize” . . . it does not make sense to ask how large the sample of interviewees, participants, or subjects should be, or how a sample should be composed and proportioned in terms of gender, ethnicity, or other selective considerations. (p. 353)

In other words, an accurate description of the essence of the phenomenon is more important than traditional methodological measures such as saturation or diversity of participants. In fact, fairly homogeneous samples are recommended: Phenomenological analysis “finds a more closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant” (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 56). Exemplifying these suggestions, Dukes (1984) recommended studying 3–10 participants, though as few as 1 might suffice; Boyd (2001) recommended 2–10 participants; Finlay (2011) claimed that 3–6 participants could be a reasonable size. Polkinghorne (1989) recommended that the researcher employ a range of 5–25 participants, as long as they all have experienced the phenomenon. Therefore the sample size of five participants in the present study was considered sufficient. The site of the interview was determined by the participant, which in each case was chosen to be on campus for the convenience of each participant.

The participants were recruited by the placement of a recruitment script on a web page for the university’s communication studies website. No monetary compensation was provided to the participants; however, four of the five participants requested that their names be submitted to their instructors for extra credit in their respective courses. Before each individual interview, the

participant was read a preinterview ethics statement. Each also signed two consent forms signifying his permission to be audio recorded and to voluntarily participate in the study.

The recruitment script mandated that the potential participants meet several criteria: They needed to be at least 19 years old, currently enrolled in college, and everyday listeners of popular music. Operationalizing popular music for the study was difficult because its definition is highly contested by pop music scholars (Gracyk, 2007; Shuker, 2002). Ultimately, popular music was defined as anything other than classical music or jazz, following Shuker's equation of "popular music" as "commercially oriented," typically consisting of the musical genres of "rock" and "pop" (Shuker, 2002, p. 227; 2008, p. 5). In addition, the participants needed to have experienced at least one emotional reaction from listening to popular music and consent to being able to describe those emotional reactions. Those emotions were specified by giving examples of what can be considered an emotion: happiness, sadness, pain, and joy. However, in the course of the data collection, the participants often spoke of a diversity of emotions that exceeded these ones listed in the recruitment script.

As mentioned, given the criteria for the study, the sample of the five participants was largely homogeneous; all five were male and classified their ethnic background as White/Caucasian.¹ Participants reported an average age of 22.4 years (range, 20–25 years; $SD = 2.07$). All participants reported being in college, with four of them working on an undergraduate degree and one of them working on a graduate degree. The average length of time that they had been enrolled as college students was 4.5 years (range, 3.5–7 years; $SD = 1.41$). Finally, all of the participants declared that they listened to popular music every day. The average amount of time spent listening to music by the participants was 156 min/day (range, 60–390 min/day; $SD = 133.15$). Despite this interest in music, none of the participants had actively sought out academic

research about music, thus suggesting that their responses would reflect a vernacular perspective on the phenomenon. Given their fulfillment of these criteria, the participants were considered to be appropriate candidates for the study.

By way of interview procedures, the in-depth interviews were conducted using a protocol that was designed to achieve the goal of a phenomenological study: to reveal how the participant described his lived experiences in terms of the phenomenon and the context within which those experiences took place (Moustakas, 1994). Upon the completion of the pretest of the protocol, some of the questions were modified slightly to include specific follow-up questions designed to clarify ambiguities that existed in the original questions. Ultimately, the interview protocol contained the following questions:

- Why do you like to listen to music?
- Have you done research about popular music in the past?
- What have you experienced emotionally when you've listened to popular music?
- What were the circumstances that surrounded this experience that led you to feel these emotions?
- How would you describe the experience of listening to popular music and feeling emotion?

The data were collected from multiple sources, primarily from these interviews and secondarily by the visual depiction of experiences by two of the participants.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The interviews were recorded using an audio recorder, transcribed verbatim, and then read multiple times before significant statements were extracted from the data. The interviews from the five

participants yielded 48 single-spaced typed pages of verbatim transcripts. Once the data were collected and transcribed, they were compiled securely, and the participants were assigned pseudonyms so as to protect their identity. After these measures were taken, the coding process took place, and significant statements eventually emerged.

To obtain a robust level of methodological rigor, the data analysis was conducted in strict accordance with the Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen model outlined by Moustakas (1994). Initially, to compensate for any preconceived notions the researcher might have had regarding the data, significant statements were extracted regarding music in general. These statements addressed germane and often tangential ideas, such as the nature of different genres of music, aggression in music, and the musical makeup of a “sad” song. Those were eventually pared down to significant statements specifically regarding the central phenomenon. To account for horizontality, the data were carefully analyzed multiple times in the search for significant statements from which meaning units were eventually drawn, followed by the textual and structural descriptions. These meaning units and descriptions will be delineated in the results section of the analysis.

The textual and structural descriptions were drawn from a combination of the “invariant horizons”—a further pared-down list of nonrepetitive and nonoverlapping statements—and the four meaning units that emerged. Theoretical saturation in meaning units was not reached. However, the meaning units extracted from the data are classified broadly so as to account for many of the codes that appeared. Additionally, unlike with other qualitative methods (e.g., grounded theory), it is acceptable if phenomenological research does not reach saturation: This is because “phenomenology looks not for sameness or repetitive patterns. Rather, phenomenology aims at what is singular” (Van Manen, 2014, p. 353). Increasingly, recent studies have pointed out that claiming saturation in

qualitative research is sometimes problematic or unclear and that some studies are not compatible with the notion of saturation (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). The common essence of the experience is the objective of this method, not reaching saturation as in other qualitative approaches.

Finally, once the textual and structural descriptions were compiled, a composite of these were combined to provide a “universal description,” which will be provided in the “Essence” section of the study. Incidentally, given the interdependence of the thoughts expressed in the participants’ answers and the thematic slippages between the significant statements, the four meaning units were not mutually exclusive.

Throughout the data analysis process, several validation strategies were employed with the goal of perpetually trying to improve the accuracy of the findings. The strategies used throughout this process are outlined clearly in Creswell’s (2007) text: reflexivity, triangulation, peer review, and member checking.²

Triangulation was used as a verification strategy during the data collection process, by the collection of multiple sources of data, both verbal interviews and artwork by two of the participants. The findings were also subject to further validation criteria when they were made available to peer review, to multiple groups of roughly 25 scholars each, whereupon they proceeded to offer suggestions for improvement. Finally, the findings were also subject to member checking, where the participants’ views on the accuracy of the interpretations of the findings were sought out. Once the themes and descriptions were shared with the participants, any necessary changes at the request of the participant were made to the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were many significant statements salient to the phenomenon in question. The statements in toto presented some clear loci of

meaning and tentative sites of clusters wherein they could be assembled. Each statement that was coded was subsequently detached from the code, and then all were reassembled into meaning units. Four meaning units emerged relating to the lived experiences of the participants relating to their experiences with painful music.

Meaning Units

Meaning Unit 1: Emotional music as time machine. In describing his experiences about the capability of painful music, one of the participants articulated an apt metaphor: “I definitely think it has that ability to act as a time machine” (Brandon, 133–134). The time machine metaphor was chosen as a meaning unit because it was frequently referenced when the participants talked about the power of music to transport them to a past experience or, conversely, remind them that one cannot turn back time. An example of the former follows:

There is certain songs that, you hear it, and it will take you back to a certain time. There are certain songs where I remember exactly where I was at, at the time, it will make an emotional response out of you. (Alex, 123–125)

An example of the latter follows:

It’s just a sad song . . . [about] never really being able to say goodbye for the last time, and never really making their final amends before that person died. I don’t know, just listening to that was a sombering, sombering experience I guess. (Jake, 143–147)

This meaning unit was also selected when the participant would make a statement regarding a painful memory that the song evoked within him or when he would state that painful music might make him nostalgic for the past. The memories the participants often

associated with music were generally about loss, specifically, about failed past relationships or the death of someone who was important to the participant or the author of the song that transmitted that sadness. This meaning unit was summarized concisely by Joseph: “I don’t think [that these songs] would be of any value to me if they didn’t remind me of my own experiences” (203–204).

Meaning Unit 2: Emotional music and identification with others. Another site of meaning occurred whenever the participants spoke about the identifying power inherent in painful music. This meaning unit was selected when a participant said that he either associated with the apparent pain of the artist who wrote or performed the song or said he felt like he identified with the lyrics. It was also selected when the participant said he identified with others and their painful experiences. Jake said that listening to many songs that were painful was “like having someone speak to you” (176). Another spoke about the ability of these songs to become personalized to one’s needs based upon their capacity to communicate a sense of identification:

Because [pain is] like universal I guess, everybody’s been through it, everybody knows what it’s like. And it’s bound to happen to you sometime, and so I guess that’s what I fall back on . . . the lyrics I felt were really similar to an experience I had had while I was in my relationship. And that I mean it wasn’t necessarily word for word, but it was almost eerie how close it was to me, and so it made it even more powerful. (Curtis, 112–114, 153–156)

When the participants would speak about the primacy of the message in painful music, it would also be clustered as the identification unit of meaning.

Meaning Unit 3: Emotional music allowing the listener to be “one with the music.” In describing the ideal context for a painful experience, one participant stated,

I have the [headphones] that it'll just drown everything out, and that way I can be in my own little world, I don't have to listen to the noise, nothing in the background, nobody talking on TV, and just it lets me be one with the music. (Alex, 259–261)

This statement succinctly states what was determined to be a meaning unit as the research progressed. This meaning unit was assigned when the participants made statements that they chose music that facilitated a sort of isolation, functioned as a way to focus, or allowed him to feel immersed within it. When people spoke about being alone—or listening on headphones, or getting lost in the music, or listening to music loudly—“one with the music” was assigned. Joseph explained this sensation as a dialectical experience, prompting feelings of both pain and pleasure:

If I turn on music, and I turn it really loud, it's to drown out everything but that music. And so, I think that in and of itself is a sense of estrangement. But yet, it's a very pleasurable feeling, right, it's a very enjoyable feeling to know that everything else doesn't exist at that moment. So, this knowledge that everything else doesn't exist except that moment is a sense of estrangement. But it's sort of a Buddhist kind of estrangement, [*laughs*] that only the moment exists, and nothing else exists beyond that. (149–155)

This feeling of unity with the painful song was best accomplished through the act of using headphones to enhance that feeling of becoming one with the music: “I guess maybe you feel like the music is more a part of you or something. I mean, it's not so distant and feels like [it is] surging directly into you” (Curtis, 208–210). This particular meaning unit was an important aspect of the experience because it also led some of them to moments of calm or introspection. The feeling of being removed and

engulfed in a separate consciousness could have a cathartic aspect to it, which leads us to our final meaning unit: painful music as therapeutic.

Meaning Unit 4: Emotional music as therapeutic. The “therapeutic” label was assigned whenever a participant mentioned that this music was vital or important to him, or allowed him to grieve, or provided him freedom or control, or was capable of changing or reflecting his moods. The larger meaning taken out of this classification is the fact that painful music could provide the participants with something that could help them in some way, even though some of the significant statements classified under this unit were not always as positive as conventional wisdom would perceive them. Curtis described music as functioning as a type of catharsis: “[This music] is just kind of a release, to just, I don’t know, bask in my sorrow for a little bit” (160). Painful music sometimes functioned as a proper response to reflect the participant’s mood: “If I break up with a girlfriend or something sad happens, I listen to sad music” (Curtis, 23–24). “If somebody is depressed . . . they’re going to listen to something depressing, something dark, and something that reflects the way they’re feeling” (Alex, 95–97).

However, despite the statement that people might seek out painful music that might intensify their feeling of sadness, it often had the opposite effect. Joseph stated that an album had once reflected his mood in light of a painful breakup, but while listening to it later,

the album changed meaning for me. All of a sudden it began to have this sense of hope, it was kind of a, it changes meaning completely. So it wasn’t about despair anymore, but now it’s about hope, because I was actually going back and facing the cause of despair. So as my moments in life changed—and as the album sort of acted as the soundtrack to those moments of life—so did the meaning of the album. (263–268)

Even though their experiences with pain and music were not always this pronounced, each participant spoke of how listening to the music helped him in some way, by helping him to relax, grieve, or revisit the past. Brandon spoke of how music could evoke feelings: “[The song,] it’s kinda talking about heartache and the past, but for some reason like, just the way the song progresses, I’m not sure I can put my finger on it but, there’s also . . . it feels like there is hope there too” (265–267). Thus, although much of the music that the participants spoke about was painful in a way, it provided some sort of means of escaping or confronting those painful feelings.

The perception of painful popular music as therapeutic was significant to the study because each of the previous meaning units could be subsumed under this meaning unit: Visiting past memories, identifying with others who suffer, or feeling immersed in the music could each have a therapeutic effect upon the participants. In fact, one of the participants articulated this point after examining the aforementioned meaning units during the member-checking process. Another participant stated that he did not recall specifically ever having mentioned this particular point, but he felt that music helped him change moods and had the ability of “assisting” him in certain ways.

Textual Description

The experience of listening to particularly painful music and feeling emotion can be called a complete, sensory experience (Jake), a shared lived experience (Curtis and Alex), or useful (Joseph and Brandon) for evoking feelings of nostalgia and painful memories that have been reappropriated and changed. The apparent underlying commonality here is the same as the fourth meaning unit: Painful music can be therapeutic.

The experience was described as being consummate and sensual for Jake. When asked if he could describe the experience, he stated,

Complete, in one word . . . like I said, I'll listen to a certain song, I'm back on the beach, you can smell it, you can see it, you can hear it, you know you can hear the waves even though they're not in the song, because that's what you're thinking about. It's like a forced dream, I guess kind of . . . I think that would be like, me asking you what do you feel now, your hands touching each other, you're feeling the seat, you feel . . . I mean you could go on for days about what you're just feeling in just one second. (266–270, 405–407)

This composite description was interpreted to show at least two of the meaning units at work: painful music as a time machine and painful music as therapeutic. The implication here is that popular music has such a power to evoke memories that it can facilitate a visceral experience where the visual or aural is not sufficient to account for the memory. The tactile and olfactory senses have just as much presence in these memories. This perspective about the experience could certainly be considered therapeutic; there is value in being able to lucidly revisit past memories.

When speaking specifically about the pain in music and their respective experiences, both Curtis and Alex described the primacy of shared experiences and music. While all of the participants to some degree described this same component of the phenomenon, Alex spoke about it in depth:

I think so, certain songs may take, talk about you know you've lost somebody, like Eric Clapton does in "Tears in Heaven," you know I lost a few people very close to me, and that kind of thing it almost tugs at your heart, because you relate to this song, you know how that person feels almost, and the lyrics, it's so sad, but it's something that, it makes you feel better because you're not alone in that type of situation, in something like that, and it makes you feel better. You don't feel as alone, I guess, it's,

somebody else knows how that feels, even though it's a horrible feeling to feel, it's relatable. (205–211)

This perspective clearly relates to the second meaning unit, painful music as identification. All of the participants spoke about the painful experiences—both real and fictional—of the artists. If these were known and expressed through the lyrics, they could intensify the presence of pain in the listener's experience. These feelings of identification with the artist, or the protagonist of the song, or other listeners of the same song contribute to the overall solidarity that the participants felt when they listened to painful music and experienced emotion. This intimate reaction to music also has therapeutic value.

Finally, both Joseph and Brandon described emotional music by discussing its use value. Joseph, in particular, lauded its ability to evoke an appropriate memory that could provide him with experience to cope with his current situation:

[Music] is useful. Like if I boil it down to something, it would be its use value . . . I can use it to transplant myself and in doing so, evoke different emotions that I needed evoked at the time . . . And I can use that, right, because it can go so many ways. I can use that, if I need to evoke that feeling for whatever reason. And, in the knowledge that somebody else is feeling that feeling, right, so if I ever need to feel that feeling, like “man I’m pushing things too hard” or “I’m doing this,” then that offers me just that one moment, you know, I can use it for that. So, I can kind of control my emotions through music, it gives me that control. (526–527, 541–542, 564–569)

Brandon explained how music could make him nostalgic, even though he did not consider himself an innately nostalgic person:

It's going back to songs that make me feel kind of more depressed or sadness . . . those are the ones [where] I concentrate on the lyrics. And so I think it's the ones that kind of focus more on the lyrics and telling a story of a person that's had their heart broken, or you know reminiscing about the past. Again, I think it's a nostalgia factor. (232–236)

This statement provides a conceptual bridge to one of the main components of the textual description given by the participants: Emotional music communicates identification and nostalgia through lyrical content. Often the participants would speak about the powerful and poignant messages offered by these songs, and every participant spoke of the painful quotient of the song and his shared emotional experiences with that song being enhanced by the lyrics.

In contrast to the identification and nostalgia that were transmitted through the lyrics, the changing of moods within the participants generally came from the tempo and “atmosphere” of the individual song. Some participants said their feelings of sadness while listening to music related to the minor chords in the songs. Another participant attributed his mood to the minimalism and repetition of the musical form, while two others related it to a slow tempo. In each of the cases, these aspects of the musical form were powerful agents in the changing or reflecting of the moods of the participants. Generally, other theorists have likened these to intensity and release patterns within the music (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001).

Structural Description

In describing the individual contexts of their experiences, all of the participants but one said that headphones were an important component of having the full emotional experience. Because the “one with the music” meaning unit has already been discussed at length here, the issue of *control* will be the focus for this section. A

statement by Jake illustrates the power of music to help the listener feel more in control of his or her life:

It's something I really only listened to by myself. And that's mostly like a headphones type thing. When you put in headphones, I think half the reason people do it, is just so they can just get in their own world and get away from absolutely everything. Because sound is such an important sense for humans. And so if you can completely control what you're listening to with headphones, you have so much more control over your surroundings. (225–230)

In addition to being able to more fully appreciate the lyrics and nuances of the music, and the control over the situation it gave the participants, the headphones provided a way to escape the banality of everyday life or take the edge off of difficult situations:

When [people] feel pain, they look for something that makes them feel better. A lot of people, they'll turn to alcohol, they'll turn to drugs, and I think a lot of people turn to music, because they may be in pain, and they're looking for escape almost, or something to take their mind off the situation. And they'll look to music to try and help them relax and just get away for a little while, so they almost get lost in the music. (Alex, 246–251)

The only participant who did not say it was ideal to have headphones to have an emotional experience from music said he felt that way because he had never owned headphones before. However, significantly, he did say that he turned up the music loudly to tune out the outside world—the same reason the others gave for why they used headphones.

Headphones or none, all of the participants agreed that being alone was the ideal situation to facilitate an emotional experience

with music. Some argued that emotional music is more or less powerful when it accompanies visual images like motion pictures or television. One argued that it is more powerful to have the control to start the CD, while another said it is more powerful when it occurs on the radio, because it may result in the listener feeling that there has been a divine intervention of sorts to have that particular song play at that particular time. However, they were all in agreement that the ideal context involves being alone: Curtis and Alex specifically described experiences listening while they each laid in their beds, Joseph spoke of sitting at his deck on a windy night, and Brandon spoke of walking alone. Jake only said that one should be “in an atmosphere when you can get more in touch with yourself” (249–250), before elaborating that one should be alone while wearing headphones.

Essence

People can experience emotion while listening to popular music after something painful has happened to themselves or to the artists who wrote the song. The song might be painful also because it reminds them of a particularly painful experience or a happy experience that is irretrievably gone. It is difficult for them to describe this experience without also describing the music; the lyrics of the song will generally convey feelings of solidarity and nostalgia, while the musical form will often reflect or influence the mood that the individual is feeling.

The context of the emotional experience is largely contingent on the control the individuals have over their circumstances, in a location where they can be alone and unhindered by other preoccupying stimuli. The experience is more intense when they are alone and listening on headphones to music that is generally simple and slow, with poignant lyrics relating to death, loss, loneliness, or estrangement. The experience is often felt as painful, but also therapeutic, when the individuals feel that it helps them in some way.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to answer some of the following questions: Does popular music influence how we feel? Can pain in popular music be therapeutic or detrimental? In what context are the expression and reception of pain most facilitated? Can people truly communicate the pain they feel from listening to popular music? The participants all expressed a love of popular music and gave concrete examples of when and how they had experienced pain while listening to it. Although the question was not asked if music influenced them, each participant described experiences when they felt a marked change in their emotional state from listening to music. According to the descriptions of the participants' lived experiences, popular music can function as an emotional stimulant.

Still, this study did not conclusively address the potential destructive behaviors that might be caused by music's potential for communicating painful feelings. The relevant claims addressed in the review of literature (see Johnson & Cloonan, 2008) were not specifically measured in the research questions here, nor did much insight into these claims emerge organically in the interviews; however, one of the participants chose to speak about this without being prompted to do so, stating that "with the Marilyn Manson stuff and Columbine, you know you can try and make that connection [that music can provoke violence], but it's a little far of a stretch, but, you know, I'm sure a little bit of it is, a little bit of that anger comes from that music" (Alex, 85–87). One participant, then, tentatively drew a connection, but not authoritatively. However, additional methodological procedures could lead to more insight into this important topic; Irving Seidman (2015) recommended a three-interview series to facilitate more in-depth insights into the nature of the phenomenon, through which researcher and participant can discuss the participant's life history, the details of his or her experiences with the phenomenon, and his or her individual

reflections on the meaning. Had this study used this three-pronged interview approach, more discussion on the potential of painful music to lead to these types of destructive behaviors may have emerged, assuming that there would have been a stronger trust and rapport between the researcher and the participants. That said, the in-depth interviews, member checking, peer review, triangulation, and overall use of validation strategies (see Creswell, 2007) led to a high level of reliability of the findings discussed here, due to close and careful adherence to Creswell's guidelines for the procedure.

It is significant that each of the participants decided to explain his experiences while listening to popular music by addressing the therapeutic value of the pain he felt. Rather than seeking to avoid feeling pain from music, all of the participants sought it out in one way or another based upon its personalized use value. The importance of this function of emotional music as therapeutic cannot be understated, because it may indirectly address concerns that emotional music—particularly of the painful variety—will drive listeners to depression or suicide. Although this study neither confirms nor refutes claims of causality between popular music and depression and violence, it does present a small sample of college-aged men who communicated a positive use value for popular music despite—or because of—their related feelings of pain. According to the data, popular music can indeed function as a “change agent” (see Sloboda, 2005), mediating between moods, both good and bad.

This research also addresses Adorno's (1991) claims that popular music cannot contain “terror” and pain within it, or at least that that pain cannot be detected in pop music by the passive music consumer. One of the questions underlying this research asked if pain truly exists in popular music and, if so, how listeners ascribe meaning to it. Although some of the participants lamented the state of popular music and an alleged artificiality that pervades it, each had experienced concrete lived experiences with pain and popular

music. The listener, it appears, has a role in the construction of the pain. For example, though the song may not explicitly carry a painful message, the listener might ascribe meaning to it by feeling a sense of identification or using it as a means to revisit past painful experiences. Thus, though in no way does this refute Adorno's arguments, it does provide a perspective of a few individuals who believe that they have been emotionally moved by popular music.

NOTES

- 1 This was an important decision for the researcher to make, because the intention of such a study is to isolate the essence of a shared experience (Van Manen, 2014). Therefore a relatively homogeneous sample of participants for the study was desirable to lead to a more easily discerned essence from the data (Smith & Osborn, 2007). With this particular qualitative method, the depth of experience rather than the breadth of experience is the ideal objective.
- 2 Throughout the study, attempts were made to maintain a level of self-reflexivity. As mentioned, I have had many experiences with the central phenomenon; specifically, I have spent many hours poring over my music collections and frequently experiencing profound emotional reactions from these listening sessions. Due, in part, to this yearning to listen to and feel the music, I have performed and recorded music with many people for over 20 years. As I have immersed myself into the welcoming waters of this music, I have naturally developed preferences for the ideal context within which I could experience emotion from this music, and there was some slippage between these preferences and my articulation of primary and secondary questions to the participants in this study. Lamentably, these assumptions did certainly guide my data collection to an extent, but I believe that a rigorous adherence to the research criteria set forth in these texts has helped hedge that influence. Ultimately, this self-reflexivity is necessary from the beginning of the study. This is essential not only for phenomenological research but for qualitative research as a whole (Creswell, 2007).

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