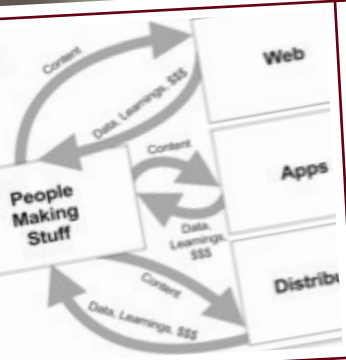


# ELON JOURNAL

OF UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH IN

# COMMUNICATIONS



SPRING 2016

VOLUME 7, NO. 1

## Joining the World of Journals

Welcome to the nation's first and only undergraduate research journal in communications.

The website of the Council on Undergraduate Research lists more than 200 undergraduate research journals nationwide ([http://www.cur.org/resources/students/undergraduate\\_journals/](http://www.cur.org/resources/students/undergraduate_journals/)).

Some of these journals focus on a discipline (e.g., Journal of Undergraduate Research in Physics), some are university-based and multidisciplinary (e.g., MIT Undergraduate Research Journal), and others are university-based and disciplinary (e.g., Harvard Political Review).

The Elon Journal focuses on undergraduate research in journalism, media and communications.

The School of Communications at Elon University is the creator and publisher of the online journal. The first issue was published in spring 2010 under the editorship of Dr. Byung Lee, associate professor in the School of Communications.

The three purposes of the journal are:

- To publish the best undergraduate research in Elon's School of Communications each term,
- To serve as a repository for quality work to benefit future students seeking models for how to do undergraduate research well, and
- To advance the university's priority to emphasize undergraduate student research.

The Elon Journal is published twice a year, with spring and fall issues.

Articles in the journal may be downloaded, reproduced and redistributed without permission for non-commercial purposes as long as the author and source are properly cited. Student authors retain copyright ownership of their works.

## Celebrating Student Research

This journal reflects what we enjoy seeing in our students -- intellectual maturing.

As 18-year-olds, some students enter college possibly wanting to earn a degree more than they want to earn an education. They may question whether communication theory and research have anything to do with their future. But they get excited at studying great ideas and topical issues.

These published articles make us aware of the solitary hours that students spend in research and the untold hours in which student and teacher-mentor work together to revise a paper for public consumption.

This journal celebrates the life of the intellect through undergraduate research. It represents the intellectual maturing that occurs by the senior year, reinforcing all that we think a university should be.

Dr. Paul Parsons, Dean  
School of Communications

## Editorial Board

Twenty-nine faculty members in Elon's School of Communications served as the Editorial Board that selected 10 undergraduate research papers for the 2016 spring issue of the *Elon Journal*.

From more than 100 research papers written in advanced School of Communications classes, 32 papers were submitted for blind review to the journal by students through encouragement and mentoring by capstone and other professors in the school.

Professors who served as the Editorial Board were Jonathan Albright, Bill Anderson, Janna Anderson, Lucinda Austin, Vanessa Bravo, Lee Bush, Naeemah Clark, David Copeland, Vic Costello, Dianne Finch, Kenn Gaither, Jessica Gisclair, Don Grady, Ben Hannam, Dan Haygood, Jooyun Hwang, Jonathan Jones, Julie Lellis, Harlen Makemson, William Moner, Phillip Motley, Max Negin, Tom Nelson, Paul Parsons, Glenn Scott, Michael Skube, Jessalynn Strauss, Hal Vincent, and Qian Xu.

Additional support was provided by Bryan Baker, who videotaped student introductions to their projects; Associate Dean Don A. Grady, who reviewed articles to help ensure the quality of the journal; and Tommy Kopetskie, who proofread articles and updated the publication's website.

## Editor's Note

This edition of the journal includes research studies on diverse media topics, such as legacy media, social media, advertising, public relations strategies, and internal communications.

Four articles focused on legacy media. Based on a case study of *BuzzFeed*, *The Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, Daring Fireball and Stratechery, Perell concluded that the Internet will foster the rapid development of both scale dependent and ad-supported publications as well as niche organizations covering a narrow subject. Based on four preteen pilots in two different time periods, Rosen found that differences in preadolescent programming from the early 21st century to the late 20th century has less to do with positive societal messaging, such as family and community values, and more to do with narcissism and the pursuit of fame. DeMare analyzed 10 different films featuring a schizophrenic protagonist. She tallied the moments of violence as well as instances of abuse in mental institutions, love as a cure, and gifted individuals. Results showed a high frequency of violent behavior in films depicting schizophrenic characters. Based on interviews with female college students, Hammer found that these women watch the reality TV series, "Keeping Up with the Kardashians," to escape reality, participate in surveillance, and feel personal connectedness.

Three papers covered social media. Cowans examined the images, captions, and hashtags of 100 Instagram posts and found some posts reflected traditional yogic principles while others did not. In an analysis of 50 Instagram posts of three female singers—Taylor Swift, Selena Gomez, and Ariana Grande—Ward examined the four categories of fan engagement: career, personal, fan, and celebrity interaction. Parasocial interaction was also measured via textual analysis. Based on a content analysis of three prominent YouTubers, Holland found two factors that contributed to their success: the appeal of their content and their appearance on traditional media.

Among the remaining three papers, Schulz traced how Greenpeace attacked a 50-year brand partnership between LEGO and Royal Dutch Shell and the effects those attacks had on LEGO's communications with its consumers and its policy decision. DeMaria evaluated internal communication in five award-winning companies. Interviews with company representatives revealed a close connection between internal communications through emails and corporate culture. After analyzing Procter & Gamble's Web advertisements from five global markets, Schmidt found that the company practiced a moderate level of standardization in ads, which allowed it to maintain a consistent brand image, while still remaining mindful of cultural differences.

These studies reflect hard work of students and their mentors in answering significant communication questions of our time. I hope the articles in this issue will inspire students in future semesters to commit to examining important research questions and submit their papers to this journal.

Dr. Byung Lee  
Journal Editor



# Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications

Volume 7, No. 1 • Spring 2016

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# Models of Internet Monetization

David Perell

*Media Arts & Entertainment  
Elon University*

## Abstract

*Predicting the future of the news industry begins with understanding the history of newspapers and the current news delivery landscape. Because the Internet has brought fundamental shifts to news distribution, successful organizations of the future will capitalize on the digital world's economics and scale. This study documents the recent adjustments in American newspaper distribution and predicts the business models required for news organizations to survive. This research found that the Internet will foster the development of both scale dependent and ad-supported publications and niche organizations that cover a narrow subject.*

## I. Introduction

Predicting the news business of the future starts with a nuanced understanding of both the history of newspapers in the United States and an understanding of the current news delivery landscape. With online readership growing and additional advertisers seeing the benefits of online marketing, it would seem that online journalism is thriving. Advertisers can target their advertisements based on online reader behavior and measure their effectiveness with unprecedented accuracy. The Internet is threatening the legacy business model of printed newspapers. Internet startups are paving the way with disruptive businesses whose success depends on the capacity for exponential Internet market growth.<sup>1</sup>

Today, more than 65 percent of people ages 18 to 29 receive their news from the Internet – outpacing newspapers, television, and radio. Digital platforms give new media companies an opportunity to build quickly with lower marketing, distribution and creation costs than legacy media companies. Although the user traffic for most digital media companies is significant, the revenue gained for digital media companies is not. The Internet economy is based on the concept that online information is abundant and largely free.<sup>2</sup>

The Internet has brought fundamental shifts to news distribution and has extended the lifespan of a story. Stories never disappear and are available “forever.” In the analog world, consumers had to buy an

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1 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. “Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study.” Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Page 24.

2 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. “Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study.” Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

**Keywords:** Media, Internet, Business Model, Advertising, News  
Email: [dperell@elon.edu](mailto:dperell@elon.edu)

This undergraduate project was conducted as a partial requirement of a research course in communications.

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entire newspaper to read a specific story or certain topic; stories lasted a short time period before newspapers were thrown away.<sup>3</sup>

Today, stories published on the Internet exist as searchable content, accessible for many years; viral stories stay relevant for a long time. Consumers have an over-abundance of choice. Distribution control has largely shifted to Google, Facebook, and Twitter. Reading choices are no longer constrained by time and location. Instead, social media platforms and search algorithms feed personalized links to consumers. Today, readers receive the best and most personalized content on the Internet with less cost and effort.<sup>4</sup> Consumers have an “effectively infinite array of choices for news, entertainment, etc.,” meaning content must stand out for it to be consumed. The best content will be widely read and distributed, while the worst content will not be discovered. Social media and search algorithms trump newspapers in the Internet age. Newspapers no longer have the best content and the delivered information is not personalized.<sup>5</sup>

The following research attempts to determine the business models that are best suited for the Internet. Most of the world is shifting from an analog world to a digital one, but this research focuses on the American media. The research identifies three business models that are primed to succeed on the Web. As defined in *Reinventing Your Business Model*, a business model is an “operational and managerial process that allows [organizations] to deliver value in a way they can successfully repeat and increase in scale.”<sup>6</sup> Business models create revenue for an organization while providing values for consumers.<sup>7</sup>

The successful media organizations and businesses of the future fall into one of the following three categories: 1) Scale Dependent and Ad Supported, 2) Subscription Dependent and Ad Supported, or 3) Internet-Only Niche Publications. This paper uses *BuzzFeed*, *The Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Daring Fireball*, and *Stratechery* as case studies to predict the future of the online news business.

## II. Background

On the Internet, consumers can seamlessly navigate from platform to platform, story to story. Legacy news organizations have lost the benefit of bundling modular sections into an aggregated product. In the words of Michael Golden, vice chairman and president of *The New York Times*, “we have lost the power of the package.” Information on the Internet is ubiquitous and news has become commoditized.

Journalists can immediately reach consumers whenever readers have access to the Internet. Links to stories appear natively on popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter or shared within seconds through email or iMessage. Before the Internet, newspaper circulation was geographically limited by the reach of delivery trucks and the number of printing presses. Prior to 1994, the only three nationally distributed newspapers were *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.<sup>8</sup> Journalists can now reach consumers with time sensitive content directly through Twitter, Facebook, and comment platforms allowing for continuous dialogue and a 24/7 news cycle that is immediately and internationally viewed.

Publishers have more information about their readers. Usage-tracking services like Chartbeat provide real-time readership data and Google Analytics to track and report website traffic, while ad-trackers serve targeted advertisements based on Internet usage, consumer interest profiling and demographics. Internet tracking and measurement allows publishers to measure the popularity of articles and modify them to increase visibility and revenue. Publishers are storing credit card information and tracking consumer habits on the Web. However, the Internet has caused reading behaviors to change. Today, viewers struggle to immerse themselves in a story. Reading times are shortening as viewers effortlessly jump to tab-to-tab and browse with

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3 Briggs, Mark. *Entrepreneurial Journalism: How to Build What's Next for News*. Thousand Oaks, California: CQ Press, 2012.

4 Thompson, Ben. “FiveThirtyEight and the End of Average.” *Stratechery* by Ben Thompson, March 17, 2014. <https://stratechery.com/2014/fivethirtyeight-end-average/>.

5 Thompson, Ben. “Newspapers Are Dead; Long Live Journalism.” *Stratechery* by Ben Thompson, March 24, 2014. <https://stratechery.com/2014/newspapers-are-dead-long-live-journalism/>.

6 Johnson, Mark W., Clayton M. Christensen, and Henning Kagermann. “Reinventing Your Business Model.” *Harvard Business Review*. Accessed November 15, 2015. <https://hbr.org/2008/12/reinventing-your-business-model>.

7 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. “Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study.” Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Page 62.

8 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. “Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study.” Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Page 56.

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multiple tabs open. Short attention spans and ubiquitous information lower advertising revenues for media providers and also harm the quality of the user experience.<sup>9</sup>

The economics of the Internet have seen a massive shift as well. Journalism is unsustainable without a dependable business model. Online media firms are characterized by “low capital requirements, low fixed costs, low production costs, low distribution costs, high marketing costs, no variable costs and rapidly declining costs.” In contrast, “the financial/cost characteristics of print newspapers model consists of high capital requirements, high fixed costs, high production costs, high first-copy costs, moderate variable costs, low marketing costs, and rapidly declining average total costs.”<sup>10</sup> For example, there is a hard cost to produce an extra copy of a print newspaper, whereas each “copy” of a news article is distributed at no cost on the Internet.<sup>11</sup> Without profitability, traditional newspapers cannot operate.

Print and online newspapers have always depended on advertisements to supplement subscription revenue.<sup>12</sup> Figure 1 shows how digital display advertising click-through rates have remain low on mobile devices. Consumers are more likely to click on Facebook advertisements or native advertisements. Advertisements that appear next to a story in a traditional newspaper format have been adapted for the Web through banner ads. Display or banner advertisements are typically disruptive to the viewer-consumers’ reading experience and therefore ignored. Banner ads invade consumer privacy through scripts and cookies, which hurt the user experience.<sup>13</sup> The most intrusive forms of online advertising, “roadblock” messages take over the entire screen before consumers can access the content they desire. Due to low click-through rates, publishers will need to find new ways to monetize their content by reforming their advertising methods.

Consumers become indifferent to banner advertisements when the number of them increases due to a phenomenon called “Banner Blindness,” where users consciously or subconsciously ignore advertisements while browsing the Internet. Both banner and roadblock advertisements harm the user experience more on mobile devices than personal computers because of the platform’s smaller screen.

Consumers are more tolerant of native advertisements that match the natural form and function of the platform.<sup>14</sup> The best native advertisements contribute to the user experience and add value for consumers. Unlike banner advertisements, native advertisements provide entertainment and information without being obtrusive and annoying. While the Internet makes advertisements more relevant, consumers find programmatic advertising annoying and obtrusive.

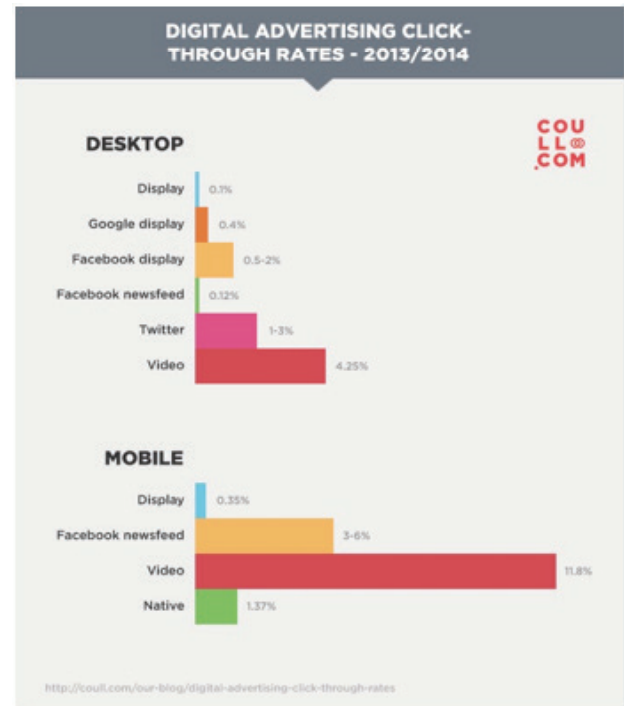


Figure 1. Coull Company Blog <http://coull.com/our-blog/digital-advertising-click-through-rates>

9 Briggs, Mark. *Entrepreneurial Journalism: How to Build What's Next for News*. Thousand Oaks, California: CQ Press, 2012.

10 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. “Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study.” Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Page 56.

11 Thompson, Ben. “Differentiation and Value Capture in the Internet Age.” *Stratechery* by Ben Thompson. Accessed November 11, 2015. <https://stratechery.com/2014/differentiation-value-creation-internet-age/>.

12 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. “Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study.” Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Page 56.

13 Salmon, Felix. “Ad Tech Is Killing the Online Experience.” *The Guardian*, July 19, 2015, sec. Media. <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jul/19/ad-tech-online-experience-facebook-apple-news>.

14 Marcus, Aaron. *Design, User Experience, and Usability: Web, Mobile, and Product Design: Second International Conference, DUXU 2013, Held as Part of HCI International 2013, Las Vegas, NV, USA, July 21-26, 2013, Proceedings*. Springer, 2013.

As smartphones and social network consumption via the Internet becomes ubiquitous, legacy business models are no longer viable. Digital media companies with business models ideally suited for the Internet are disrupting the newspaper and media businesses that depend on local circulation and constrained distribution systems. Online advertisements are faster, cheaper, measurable, interactive and more direct than analog ones. Newspaper businesses and traditional publishing conglomerates cannot survive in a world with increasing online advertising revenues because they are unable to capitalize on the potential for new and expanding advertising revenue streams.

The monetization of digitally distributed information requires a refreshed mindset that recognizes the abundance of choice that consumers have, most of which allows for free to access content. In the digital world, there are an unlimited number of pages that can be published and an infinite number of advertisements to be sold. The marginal cost of publishing and ad sales is close to zero.

Today's digital news startups are inventing new ways to monetize using the Internet where consumers can access most content for free. Increased Internet usage and sophistication prompted the rise of large organizations like *Vox* and *BuzzFeed* along with niche publications that cover a specific topic or personal or professional consumer interest profile such as *Skift*, *Stratechery* and *Politico*. Consumers are depending on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, email, and Apple News to receive written content instead of picking up a printed newspaper from their doorstep. Digital platforms can innovate quickly, accurately determine readership quantities, and shut down unsuccessful ventures with minimal capital expenditure.

### III. History of the Newspaper Industry and the Media Evolution

Johann Carolus published the first newspaper on a printing press in 1609. Since then, the newspaper has become a mass medium that has educated and informed literate citizens of the world.<sup>15</sup> More than a century ago, the newspaper industry dealt with a major technological shift. In the 1890s, telephone service and improved human transportation revolutionized reporting while the Linotype machines increased the speed of printing. These technology shifts enabled the mass production of newspapers, growing the readership pool and number of newspapers that were printed and distributed. The number of English-language daily newspaper companies grew from 850 in 1880 to 2,200 in 1910. Daily circulation grew from 3.1 million to 22.1 million during the same period.

Newspapers began charging customers a penny per issue in 1833, but did not start implementing advertisements until the 1880s when Adolph Ochs of *The New York Times* and William Randolph Hearst developed the advertising business model for newspapers. In the words of management guru Peter Drucker, "Advertising made it possible for them to distribute practically free of charge, without the profit coming from the market."<sup>16</sup> By 1914, 66 percent of newspaper revenue came from advertising, a figure that increased to 80 percent of revenue by the 1990s. To increase revenue, newspapers were incentivized to sell and distribute as many copies as possible. The size of newspapers grew along with the quantity of advertisements leading to increased costs, larger staff, and expansive, advanced printing presses. Substantial infrastructure served newspapers well when they held local monopolies. Before 1995 when the Internet first became readily accessible, newspapers depended on a monopoly/oligopoly structure due to geography and distribution constraints.<sup>17</sup> Today, newspapers are an economically unsustainable business due to complex infrastructure, rising costs, and large staff base that once monopolized them.

The rate of change in the newspaper industry has increased exponentially. It took *The New York Times* fifty years to reach 30,000 subscribers. In contrast, *BuzzFeed* launched in 2006, claims 200 million unique monthly visitors today.<sup>18</sup> Free blogging platforms like WordPress and Medium give a voice to millions of Internet users while Facebook and Twitter allow millions more to share news and information on the Internet. The Internet allows for unprecedented scale that was impossible to achieve in the analog world.

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15 Escher, Thomas. "The Newspaper Is Dead. Long Live the Newspaper.: Like My Style? Read On!" Medium, October 15, 2014. <https://medium.com/thoughts-on-journalism/the-newspaper-is-dead-long-live-the-newspaper-8b7969b4d4b6>.

16 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. "Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study." Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Page 30.

17 Andreesen, Marc. "The Future of the News Business: A Monumental Twitter Stream All in One Place | Andreesen Horowitz." Accessed November 13, 2015. <http://a16z.com/2014/02/25/future-of-news-business/>.

18 The BuzzFeed Team. "BuzzFeed." Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/about/team>

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In 2005, newspapers reached a peak in annual revenue when American newspapers earned a collective \$48 billion. By 2014 newspaper revenues fell to \$19.9 billion, a 59 percent decrease. As the Internet grew in popularity, “digital media disrupted the aggregation model that was profitable for so long”. Most consumers did not read the entire newspaper every day, but newspapers sold advertisements as if every page was read. As shown in *Figure 2*, newspaper revenue is declining across newspapers of all sizes.<sup>19</sup>

Newspaper weekday circulation has fallen 19% since 2004.<sup>20</sup> In 2011, *The New York Times* attracted more than 30 million online visitors and a weekday circulation of 900,000 newspapers. While online visits dwarf analog ones, most of *The New York Times*' revenue comes from print; distribution is rapidly shifting from print to digital.<sup>21</sup> Between 1995-2005, traditional media companies guarded revenue streams instead of innovating with new business models. Since then, newspaper reach has increased but has not kept pace with online advertising revenues. As consumers switch to accessing content digitally, newspapers are burdened with the high, rising costs and carbon-waste impacts associated with purchasing ink, paper, and financing delivery drivers and trucks.

Traditionally, the news business has separated journalists from the revenue side of the business. The American Society of Magazine Editors remains strict about “separating ad content visually from editorial content.” Journalists enjoyed the luxury of thinking their business was different from other businesses aided by the constitutional protection of the free press.

In contrast, digital media requires innovative ways of reaching audiences that benefit from an abundance of information and with editorial and journalism closely tied to expanding revenue markets. According to Syracuse University professor Vin Crosbie, “Within the span of a single human generation, people’s access to information has shifted from relative scarcity to surplus.”

However, news media in the digital age has become commoditized and it can come from anybody, anywhere. Publishing content on the Internet allows organizations to forego printing and distribution costs entirely. Newspapers traditionally generated \$500 to \$900 per year in advertising revenues per customer. With the increase of digital readership, media revenues from online viewers have dropped to \$5 to \$10 in revenues, per unique visitor.<sup>22</sup>

Marc Andreessen, an American entrepreneur and venture capitalist at *Andreessen-Horowitz*, has observed that the ubiquity of the Internet has caused three things to happen simultaneously. In the analog world, journalists had a voice and distribution was limited. The Internet provides a different model that is open, adaptable, and allows content to always be accessed. Meanwhile, separate industries are colliding on the Internet to create friction and disruption. The previous two factors drive prices down. However, the Internet’s pervasiveness has exponentially increased the number of people with access to content driving advertising volume up. Andreessen predicts the total addressable global market for news will be 5 billion

19 Briggs, Mark. *Entrepreneurial Journalism: How to Build What’s Next for News*. Thousand Oaks, California: CQ Press, 2012.

20 Barthel, Michael. “Newspapers: Fact Sheet.” Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project. Accessed November 8, 2015. <http://www.journalism.org/2015/04/29/newspapers-fact-sheet/>.

21 Peretti, Jonah. BuzzFeed’s Take on the Future of Media, July 15, 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t\\_w-lscnhEk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_w-lscnhEk).

22 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. “Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study.” Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Page 11.

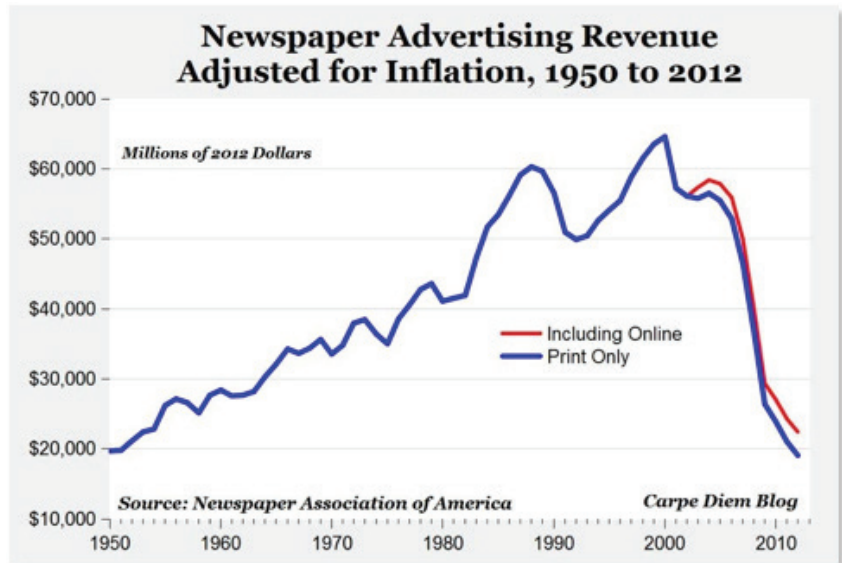


Figure 2. Newspaper Association of America.

<https://www.baekdal.com/insights/the-newspaper-associations-total-distortion-of-reality>

people by 2020.<sup>23</sup>

While news has been commoditized, analysis and engagement have not. Writers with strong engagement allow media companies to charge higher ad rates as they build loyal readerships. The Internet gives writers an unprecedented opportunity to build interest-based relationships with readers from around the world. Writers can publish articles on niche topics of interest and monetize through highly targeted contextual advertising or subscriptions. These targeted websites attract readers who are highly interested in the content and are likely to follow the writers on social media or subscribe to email lists.

## IV. Case Examples of Successful Media Organizations and Businesses

### 1. Scale Dependent and Ad Supported

After co-launching *The Huffington Post* in 2005, CEO Jonah Peretti launched *BuzzFeed* as an experimental lab. As a graduate student at the MIT Media Lab in 2001, Peretti became interested with how content and ideas spread. While writing his master's thesis, Peretti ordered a new customizable Nike sneaker with "sweatshop" imprinted on it. Peretti forwarded his email exchange with a Nike customer service representative to 10 friends before it spread from inbox to inbox. Six weeks later, Peretti appeared on the *Today Show* with a Nike representative to discuss its "sweatshop" labor practices.<sup>24</sup>

Peretti launched *BuzzFeed* to track viral content. Kenneth Lerer, *BuzzFeed's* executive chairman, predicts that the content companies of the future will focus on mobile, video, social, and technology.<sup>25</sup> Today *BuzzFeed* has more than 700 employees, five billion monthly content views and more than 200 million monthly unique visitors.<sup>26</sup> A self-defined "network-integrated media company," *BuzzFeed* derives insights from the data it receives to improve the content it produces. *BuzzFeed* aims to be indifferent to the platform where audiences view its content. Instead the company focuses on user experience, gathering data and building a sustainable business model.<sup>27</sup> Today's massive social media trends were not self-evident when *BuzzFeed* first began. Social media made it easy for content to spread quickly, while smartphones allowed readers to consume content at any time, anywhere. Increased data has developed *BuzzFeed's* content strategy with the goal of making viral content. *Figure 3* demonstrates *BuzzFeed's* cross-platform approach to news distribution. Cross platform distribution is essential for ad-supported publications that operate at scale because news is increasingly being consumed through social media channels and native applications.

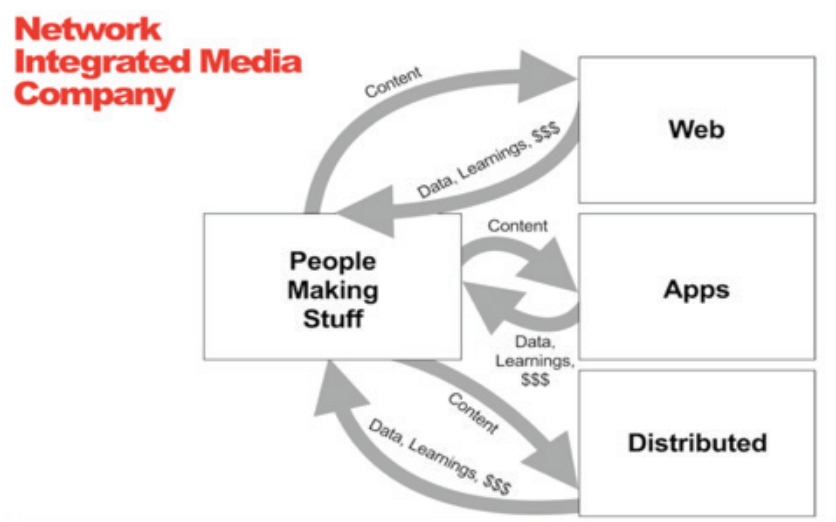


Figure 3. Buzz Feed Blog. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/daozers/making-content-for-the-way-people-consume-media-today#.tdzJ9yOQ>

23 Andreesen, Marc. "The Future of the News Business: A Monumental Twitter Stream All in One Place | Andreesen Horowitz." Accessed November 13, 2015. <http://a16z.com/2014/02/25/future-of-news-business/>.

24 Rice, Andrew. "Does BuzzFeed Know the Secret?: Jonah Peretti's Viral-Content Machine Purports to Have Solved the Problems of Both Journalism and Advertising at Once, All with the Help of a Simple Algorithm." New York, April 15, 2013.

25 Staff, BuzzFeedPress BuzzFeed. "BuzzFeed Announces Major Expansion Across All Business Lines." BuzzFeed. Accessed November 8, 2015. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/buzzfeedpress/buzzfeed-announces-major-expansion-across-all-business-lines>.

26 "The BuzzFeed Team." BuzzFeed. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/about/team>.

27 Nguyen, Dao, and Ashley McCollum. "Making Content For The Way People Consume Media Today." BuzzFeed, October 23, 2015. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/daozers/making-content-for-the-way-people-consume-media-today>.

While traditional media companies sell the same content to everybody, *BuzzFeed* focuses on leveraging the power of custom delivery of individual stories (sponsored or not) and focuses on using social media to spread them. With its content, *BuzzFeed* focuses on entertaining and inspiring readers using the advantages of the Internet to do so.<sup>28</sup>

The fast-forward business of *BuzzFeed* is based on a model of native advertising and branded, customized content. SmartInsights reports that (standard) digital banner advertisement click-through rates are at 0.1 percent and falling.<sup>29</sup> *BuzzFeed* board member Chris Dixon says “banner advertisements do not work on the desktop and will not work on mobile.”<sup>30</sup> 75 percent of *BuzzFeed*’s revenue comes from *BuzzFeed* Creative, a 75-person unit that creates custom video and list-style advertising content for brands.<sup>31</sup>

Producing hundreds of posts per day, *BuzzFeed* does not run banner advertisements, *BuzzFeed* monetizes sponsored viral content for companies that pay to place articles on the website. The company focuses on producing content that resonates so people will share it with friends. *BuzzFeed* does not charge advertisers on a per-post basis, but rather charges advertisers on a cost-per-thousand-impressions basis instead. Advertisers pay for the images and “story units” that display the branded content and drive people to the post. *BuzzFeed* charges a daily fee for advertisers’ paid posts to remain in one of the two paid spots on the *BuzzFeed* home page.<sup>32</sup>

Instead of living on *BuzzFeed*’s home page, most inbound traffic to *BuzzFeed* comes from Facebook and Twitter. Jason Kottke at Harvard University’s Neiman Journalism Lab has observed that links on the Web have moved from “the loosely connected network of blogs to tightly integrated services like Facebook and Twitter.” *BuzzFeed* does not strive to be a destination site focusing on driving traffic from networked social media sites.<sup>33</sup> *BuzzFeed*’s dependence on social media platforms has its dangers. Facebook’s control over *BuzzFeed*’s content will increasingly threaten its monetization potential. From January-September 2015, *BuzzFeed*’s visits through Facebook fell 40.8 percent to 23.7 million.<sup>34</sup> Facebook, *BuzzFeed*’s biggest referrer, controls what news feed is delivered to its 1.5 billion users.<sup>35</sup> The newsfeed filters use an algorithm to filter what Facebook users see.

Traditional ad agencies see *BuzzFeed* as a threat. The *BuzzFeed* model challenges the traditional separation between editorial content and the business of journalism. *BuzzFeed* continues to raise venture capital and grow the company while Time Inc., Newsweek and *The New York Times* have laid off employees.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, *BuzzFeed*’s native advertisements like the Jet-Blue-sponsored “The 50 Most Beautiful Shots Taken Out of Airplane Windows” or the BBC America-sponsored “10 Beautiful Places in the World that Actually Exist” monetize without being intrusive to readers.<sup>37</sup> The *BuzzFeed* model works best at scale. This model is not a viable option for startups without venture capital, according to Rob Norman on GroupM, the world’s largest media investment group.

While the company is still private, the triple-digital millions of dollars in revenue that *BuzzFeed* made in 2014 proves that big Internet companies can monetize the Web by producing viral content and monetizing through native advertisements. Ben Thompson, an independent technology writer, says “*BuzzFeed*’s writers simply need to write stories that people find important enough to share; the learning that results is how

28 Salmon, Felix. “BuzzFeed.” Medium, August 11, 2014. <https://medium.com/@felixsalmon/normally-when-some-big-deal-is-announced-in-the-business-world-a-rah-rah-press-release-goes-out-236f5ae86ee4#.1da7w5bom>.

29 Heaton, Alex. “Content Marketing Case Study: Buzzfeed - Smart Insights Digital Marketing Advice.” Smart Insights, July 1, 2014. <http://www.smartinsights.com/content-management/content-marketing-strategy/buzzfeed-case-study/>.

30 Manjoo, Farhad. “Fall of the Banner Ad: The Monster That Swallowed the Web.” *The New York Times*, November 5, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/06/technology/personaltech/banner-ads-the-monsters-that-swallowed-the-web.html>.

31 Issac, Mike. “50 Million New Reasons BuzzFeed Wants to Take Its Content Far Beyond Lists - *The New York Times*.” *New York Times*, August 10, 2014. [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/11/technology/a-move-to-go-beyond-lists-for-content-at-buzzfeed.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/11/technology/a-move-to-go-beyond-lists-for-content-at-buzzfeed.html?_r=1).

32 Rey, Jason Del. “Inside the BuzzFeed Pricing Model: How One ‘Native Advertising’ Pioneer Tries to Make It All Add up.” *Advertising Age* 83, no. 39 (October 29, 2012).

33 Kottke, Jason. “The Blog Is Dead, Long Live the Blog.” *Nieman Lab*, December 19, 2013. <http://www.niemanlab.org/2013/12/the-blog-is-dead/>.

34 Rice, Andrew. “Does BuzzFeed Know the Secret?: Jonah Peretti’s Viral-Content Machine Purports to Have Solved the Problems of Both Journalism and Advertising at Once, All with the Help of a Simple Algorithm.” *New York*, April 15, 2013.

35 Ingram, Mathew. “Facebook’s Referral Traffic Has Plunged for Some Media Outlets - *Fortune*.” *Fortune*, November 9, 2015. <http://fortune.com/2015/11/09/facebook-media/>.

36 Rice, Andrew. “Does BuzzFeed Know the Secret?: Jonah Peretti’s Viral-Content Machine Purports to Have Solved the Problems of Both Journalism and Advertising at Once, All with the Help of a Simple Algorithm.” *New York*, April 15, 2013.

37 Br, JetBlue Getaways, and Publisher. “The 50 Most Beautiful Shots Taken Out Of Airplane Windows.” *BuzzFeed*, June 3, 2012. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/h2/aaad/jetbluegetaways/the-50-most-beautiful-shots-taken-out-of-airplane>.

*BuzzFeed* makes their money.” The incentives are perfectly aligned.<sup>38</sup> For *BuzzFeed* to continue its success, it must produce native advertisements that are as engaging as the organic published content. Tech Crunch, a reputable online media blog site, reports that 75 percent of *BuzzFeed*’s traffic comes through external social media sources. Therefore, the company must continue producing viral content to drive traffic to the website.<sup>39</sup> By focusing on producing content that “makes an impact,” *BuzzFeed* hopes to leverage its scale and modern business model to build a sustainable business on the Internet.<sup>40</sup>

## **2. Subscription Dependent and Ad Supported**

Not every successful online company depends on scale like *BuzzFeed*. Internet economics virtually guarantees that a few publishers will dominate page views through viral content, while others will have to specialize. Sustaining business models are essential for a long-living publication because of the high costs of journalism. Sustainable business models generate ongoing revenue for the organization while providing value to the customer.<sup>41</sup> Organizations that charge for advertising believe that pay walls make viral posts impossible and diminish the potential influence of their organization. Publishers who keep their content behind a pay wall do so because they believe consumers should pay directly for the steep costs of journalism. Even in the traditional business model, newspapers underpriced subscription costs in hopes of increased ad revenue.

A 2006 report from Harvard’s Kennedy School of government explained that publishers of the future must create tight bonds with consumers by building differentiated and therefore exclusive publications. Consumers will pay for exclusivity. Stewart Brand at the MIT Media Lab believes information wants to be free because it can be distributed and copied at low costs. John Lancaster echoed Brand’s statement in his *London Review of Books* essay: “The Internet is the most effective means of giving stuff away for free that humanity has ever devised. Actually making money from it is not just hard, it may be fundamentally opposed to the character and momentum of the net.”<sup>42</sup>

*The Story So Far* cites three reasons that companies should charge for online access to content. Subscriptions increase revenue, and alter the notion that print media subscriptions cost money. Online content, however, remains free. However, paying audiences are generally more valuable to advertisers because payment demonstrates a deep commitment to the publication. When pay walls were first introduced, publishers feared that pay walls would detract from precious ad revenue.<sup>43</sup> Ad revenue benefits from scale and reach. Both are impossible to achieve when content is hidden from the general population behind a pay wall.

*The Financial Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* have seen the most success transitioning from a newspaper to an online subscription service. Both companies monetize through advertisements and subscriptions to serve a specialized customer segment. These publications are considered must-reads for people who work in finance, business strategy, and banking. The publications leverage subscriber data and demographics to deliver targeted banner advertisements, track trends, and increase ad prices.<sup>44</sup> *The Financial Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* know consumers will pay for content because of its influence within the business community. The wealthy demographic of readers is leveraged to charge high prices to advertisers who want to reach an affluent audience.

*The Financial Times* covers international business, finance, economic, and political news with differentiated analysis. The organization has a combined paid print and digital circulation of 747,000.<sup>45</sup> *The*

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38 Thompson, Ben. “Why BuzzFeed Is the Most Important News Organization in the World.” *Stratechery* by Ben Thompson. Accessed November 8, 2015. <https://stratechery.com/2015/buzzfeed-important-news-organization-world/>.

39 Constine, Josh. “BuzzFeed’s Future Depends On Convincing Us Ads Aren’t Ads.” *TechCrunch*. Accessed November 8, 2015. <http://social.techcrunch.com/2014/08/12/buzzhome/>.

40 Nguyen, Dao, and Ashley McCollum. “Making Content For The Way People Consume Media Today.” *BuzzFeed*, October 23, 2015. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/daozers/making-content-for-the-way-people-consume-media-today>.

41 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. “Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study.” *Blekinge Institute of Technology*, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Page 67.

42 Grueskin, Bill, Ava Seave, and Lucas Graves. *The Story So Far: What We Know About the Business of Digital Journalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. [http://cjrarchive.org/img/posts/report/The\\_Story\\_So\\_Far.pdf](http://cjrarchive.org/img/posts/report/The_Story_So_Far.pdf). Page 55

43 Grueskin, Bill, Ava Seave, and Lucas Graves. *The Story So Far: What We Know About the Business of Digital Journalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. [http://cjrarchive.org/img/posts/report/The\\_Story\\_So\\_Far.pdf](http://cjrarchive.org/img/posts/report/The_Story_So_Far.pdf). Page 67.

44 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. “Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study.” *Blekinge Institute of Technology*, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Page 60.

45 “Financial Times.” *Financial Times*. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://aboutus.ft.com/corporate-information/ft-company/>.

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*Financial Times* has the largest editorial staff of any international newspaper with an editorial team of more than 500 journalists. It leverages the Internet's unique capabilities by using a metered business model where readers can pay for the service based on usage. *The Financial Times* started charging for access in 2001 and grew to 207,000 digital subscriptions by 2010. The publication charges \$481 for its premium access to everything on the site. As of 2012, non-subscribers receive ten free stories before registering for the site. In 2011, *The Financial Times* reported that 55 percent of revenue came from content subscriptions with the other 45 percent from advertising. Subscription revenue increased from 2001 when 71 percent of revenue came from advertising and 26 percent from subscriptions. However, Rob Grimshaw, managing director of *The Financial Times'* website, FT.com says, "The outlook for the ad business online is quite bleak. There is just not enough money there." The publication is able to charge high prices for its advertisements because of differentiated content that serves a select audience of generally wealthy business professionals.<sup>46</sup>

*The Wall Street Journal* was the first newspaper with a profitable and sustainable e-business model.<sup>47</sup> At the beginning of the 1900s, *The Wall Street Journal*, with a circulation of 11,000, grew to more than 1 million by the middle of the 20th century and more than 2 million in 2010. Today, *The Wall Street Journal* is regarded as "the most respected source of business and financial news in the United States" and is perceived as a premium brand.<sup>48</sup> The online paper sits behind a partial pay wall. Some content is free to the general public and some is saved for paying subscribers. Most of *The Wall Street Journal's* revenue comes from physical newspapers despite a growing online presence. Most of its revenue depends on a subscription model supplemented by premium content.

Both *The Financial Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* target an affluent, Internet-savvy, niche demographic. The newspapers have earned strong, reputable brands and are considered must-reads for many business professionals. By consistently serving a pre-defined customer segment and pursuing a narrowly focused strategy, they will continue to serve as a model for organizations that struggle to fight off disruption.

### 3. Internet-Only Niche Publications

*The Financial Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* are not the only successful targeted publications on the Web. The enormous quantity of Internet users has paved the way for writers to monetize their blogs by diving deeply into a specific subject. Mark Briggs acknowledges that blogs are not necessarily a business model, but rather the style of Web publishing with the lowest barrier to entry. Bloggers benefit from low operating costs and "maniacal devotion" to a niche topic targeting a specific, returning and interested audience.<sup>49</sup> Independent bloggers can dependably rely on an ad-supported business model or a subscription model. John Gruber and Ben Thompson from *Daring Fireball* and *Stratechery*, respectively, prove that people will religiously follow individuals who consistently write high-quality, differentiated content.

Internet startups like Tumblr, Twitter, Pinterest, Reddit, Facebook, SnapChat, and Instagram have unbundled the traditional blog. Following people on the Internet is more common now than it has ever been.<sup>50</sup> Writers like Gruber and Thompson benefit from a low elasticity of substitution.<sup>51</sup> Differentiated content focusing on a specific subject attracts loyal readers who will pay for content and advertisers who know their advertisements will reach their desired demographic. Lisa Williams, founder of PlaceBlogger, a startup that aggregates "hyperlocal" news sites, notes, "The Web favors things that are narrowly comprehensive" that say "everything about something."

For example, *Daring Fireball* is an Apple-Focused blog founded by Gruber in 2002. The website is a home for Mac nerds, Apple enthusiasts and designers. Gruber started writing about Apple before the company's popularity exploded. He is known for insightful analysis and the opinionated content that comes

46 Grueskin, Bill, Ava Seave, and Lucas Graves. *The Story So Far: What We Know About the Business of Digital Journalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. [http://cjrarchive.org/img/posts/report/The\\_Story\\_So\\_Far.pdf](http://cjrarchive.org/img/posts/report/The_Story_So_Far.pdf).

47 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. "Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study." Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Page 70.

48 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. "Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study." Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Page 53, 60.

49 Briggs, Mark. *Entrepreneurial Journalism: How to Build What's Next for News*. Thousand Oaks, California: CQ Press, 2012.

50 Klein, Ezra. "What Andrew Sullivan's Exit Says about the Future of Blogging." *Vox*, January 30, 2015. <http://www.vox.com/2015/1/30/7948091/andrew-sullivan-leaving-blogging>.

51 Thompson, Ben. "Bloggins' Bright Future." *Stratechery* by Ben Thompson, February 2, 2015. <https://stratechery.com/2015/bloggings-bright-future/>.

from focusing on a company for 13 years. Gruber's business model is as follows: he publishes content targeted at an unequivocal audience, sells exposure to that audience to advertisers, and earns a profit from it. SimilarWeb reports that 60 percent of readers visit the Gruber site directly.<sup>52</sup> Gruber sells weekly Syndicated Feed Sponsorships for \$9,750 and generates more than \$20,000 per month. Advertisers receive exclusive promotional access to 200,000 targeted *Daring Fireball* subscribers and 78,000 Twitter followers on the @daringfireball account.<sup>53</sup> His site's generated \$20,000 per month with 2 million monthly page views. Gruber's current revenue numbers are inevitably higher because he has grown his audience to more than 4-5 million monthly Web page views. With \$9,750 weekly advertising revenue, Gruber earns more than \$500,000 per year. He has built a successful business by delivering content to a highly targeted, loyal audience that specific sponsors want to reach. Unlike larger organizations, Gruber sells ads by the week or month instead of by volume. He has proven that highly focused, ad-supported news organizations can generate a profit on the Internet. Through differentiated content that cannot be found anywhere else, Gruber has generated a loyal audience that visits *Daring Fireball* directly through his Twitter feed or an RSS feed.<sup>54</sup>

Writers who choose to monetize through a pay wall must establish a trusted and respected brand that people will pay for. To grow their audience, independent writers like Thompson at *Stratechery* have established an audience through free social media marketing channels. Thompson's fifty-one thousand tweets have led to thirty-two thousand followers. Thompson graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a degree in political science before receiving graduate degrees in engineering management from Northwestern University and a Master of Business Administration from Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management. His additional experience at Apple and Microsoft give him the credibility needed to charge readers for daily content.

For \$10 per month or \$100 per year, subscribers receive exclusive access to Thompson's Daily Update. The Daily Update "consists of substantial analysis of the news of the day delivered via four daily emails, in addition to the free weekly article." Subscribers also receive unrestricted access to *Stratechery*'s Membership Forum, which provides readers with an avenue for in-depth discussions about tech strategy and the implications of technology on society moderated by Thompson along with priority email access.<sup>55</sup> For additional ancillary revenue, Thompson monetizes his "Exponent" podcast where readers listen to the thought-process and further justification for his analysis.

Thompson's differentiated content serves a niche audience that is willing to pay for high-quality, exclusive content. According to Thomson, "Blogging scales well because it costs the same amount to produce a post on the Internet that reaches 100 people as one that reaches 100,000. I am, of course, acutely aware that there is a tradeoff when it comes to the subscription business model: by making something scarce, and worth paying for, you are by definition limiting your number of readers." Thompson's readers pay for access to him. In a world of abundant and commoditized information, people remain distinct and irreplaceable. Thompson utilizes the Internet's low cost structure to charge for differentiated content that his affluent consumers will pay for. To promote himself, Thompson combines a trusted following on Twitter and uses it to promote his free weekly article and ad-supported "Exponent" podcast. Instead of focusing on scale and a low revenue per consumer, Thompson serves a niche of followers who care about his targeted content enough to pay a recurring subscription fee.

Targeted verticals will continue rising with the growth of the Internet. *Daring Fireball* has paved the way for ad-supported companies like Skift, *CoinDesk*, *Fast Casual*, and *The Business of Fashion*. To supplement ad revenue, these companies are monetizing with events or selling exclusive content to businesses and affluent readers. Meanwhile, *Stratechery* has influenced subscription-dependent organizations like *Mattermark*, *CBInsights*, and *The Information*. Niche websites must deliver important and relevant information that is exclusive to subscribers and cannot be found elsewhere. To boost their value proposition, subscription-dependent organizations host private meet-ups and events to grow their community of committed readers. These companies benefit from the economics of the Internet and its ability to bring people with shared interests together.

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52 "Daringfireball.net Traffic Statistics." SimilarWeb. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.similarweb.com/website/daringfireball.net>.

53 Gruber, John. "Daring Fireball: RSS Feed Sponsorship." *Daring Fireball*. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://daringfireball.net/feeds/sponsors/>.

54 RSS (Rich Site Summary) is a format for delivering regularly changing web content. Many news-related sites, weblogs and other online publishers syndicate their content as an RSS Feed to whoever wants it.

55 Thompson, Ben. "The Daily Update." *Stratechery* by Ben Thompson. Accessed November 13, 2015. <https://stratechery.com/membership/>.

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## V. Conclusion and The Future of the Internet

The publications of the future will be the ones that capitalize on the Internet's economics and scale. The winners will serve the broadest reach or target narrow topics with unprecedented depth. Most of the future successful companies will focus on a small-segment, niche strategy instead of a mass-market broad-based one.<sup>56</sup> The business models of mid-sized newspapers with local monopolies are increasingly inefficient and will continue to be eliminated.<sup>57</sup> The expanding scale of the Internet means free content can effectively spread to every user on the Internet, while experts on a topic can reach interested consumers who are willing to pay a higher cost for differentiated, or customized content.

Traditional print publications will face a turbulent future as they transition to the Web. Those that survive will embrace the constant transformation of the Internet. Ad-supported publishers who depend on volume will have to be platform agnostic. They will depend on influential distributors like Google, Facebook, and Twitter, and work with them to capture mind share and consumer attention. They will rethink their relationships with advertisers by focusing more on sponsored content that attracts consumers and move away from unprofitable banner ads.<sup>58</sup>

Small, ad-supported publishers will increasingly depend on targeted advertisements and sponsored posts. Companies will always pay for ads that reach their targeted audience on a website that these audiences routinely visit. The most successful ones will use aggregation to provide value with differentiated content.<sup>59</sup> The news organizations of the future will be smaller, often published by a single writer who has a narrow focus and is a specialist in the media content field they cover. Monetization will come from dedicated readers who will pay for access to premium content, access to chat forums and further discussion. Monetization will also come from the interest base of a loyal community of subscribers.<sup>60</sup> These news organizations will be more nimble, benefit from low costs, and develop modern ad sales strategies.

Media distributors will gain influence over a world of increasingly abundant information. Algorithmic feeds of Facebook, Twitter, and Google search will control the content that consumers see. Most consumers will see content that is widely read and shared like lifestyle, fashion, celebrity, and sports news. Much of the best content will serve an affluent readership with the means to pay for exclusive access to focused writers who are experts on a particular vertical market and content experience.

Expect new business models to develop with the growth of the Web. The Internet is growing rapidly, changing daily, and companies around the world are working to bring the Internet to everybody in the world. The future promises expanded digital infrastructure promoting digital literacy, free expression, and ubiquitous Internet access.<sup>61</sup> Citizens of many third-world countries will use their smartphones to access the Internet for the first time in their lives. In less than a decade, free online content will be available to almost everybody in the world. Businesses that thrive on the Internet by developing sustainable revenue streams will lead, develop, and create a more networked, educated, and open world.

## Acknowledgements

This author extends thanks to Don Grady, associate professor and associate dean at Elon University, for guidance and support throughout the research project.

56 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. "Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study." Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Page 62.

57 Johnson, R, and A Gutierrez. "Reinventing the Business Model of the Newspaper Industry: Electronic Business Models and the Newspaper Industry The Wall Street Journal as Case Study." Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2010. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:832292/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Page 32-33.

58 Grueskin, Bill, Ava Seave, and Lucas Graves. *The Story So Far: What We Know About the Business of Digital Journalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. [http://cjrarchive.org/img/posts/report/The\\_Story\\_So\\_Far.pdf](http://cjrarchive.org/img/posts/report/The_Story_So_Far.pdf). Page 133.

59 Grueskin, Bill, Ava Seave, and Lucas Graves. *The Story So Far: What We Know About the Business of Digital Journalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. [http://cjrarchive.org/img/posts/report/The\\_Story\\_So\\_Far.pdf](http://cjrarchive.org/img/posts/report/The_Story_So_Far.pdf). Page 131.

60 Thompson, Ben. "Newspapers Are Dead; Long Live Journalism." *Stratechery by Ben Thompson*, March 24, 2014. <https://stratechery.com/2014/newspapers-are-dead-long-live-journalism/>.

61 West, Darrell. "Digital Divide: Improving Internet Access in the Developing World through Affordable Services and Diverse Content." The Brookings Institution, February 2015. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/brookings-now/posts/2014/02/how-the-internet-and-data-help-the-developing-world>. Page 22.

# Examining Preadolescent Television Programming and the Rise of Generation Me

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## Abstract

*Preadolescence is a pivotal time for individuals as they develop their own set of values, attitudes, and beliefs. With children ages 11 to 14 reportedly watching nearly three hours a day of television, TV programming can be enormously influential. This study examined how preteen TV programming has changed over time by comparing and contrasting shows from different decades. This study found the values highlighted in early 21st century programming for preadolescents are more individualistically driven and sensationalized than they were in the 1990s, resulting in a narcissistic preteen culture.*

## I. Introduction

Amidst the declining ratings in broadcast primetime television, children's television is still thriving (Martin, 2009). Kids, ages 11 to 14, spend the most time watching live TV, averaging three hours a day (Foehr, Roberts, & Rideout, 2010). And while preadolescent TV consumption has remained relatively stable over the last 20 years, what has taken a dramatic shift is the content of this programming.

Television has a major impact on children: "Through television, we have the choice of encouraging others to demean this life or to cherish it in creative and imaginative ways" (Rogers, 1999). Fred Rogers, the host of PBS's *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, said this during the Television Critics' Hall of Fame Ceremony in 1999. Fast-forward 16 years, and the number one value emphasized in preadolescent programming has become fame (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011).

Today's youth are more obsessed with becoming famous than ever before. In addition, research suggests narcissism is increasing, with each generation reaching new levels of vanity (Seigel, 2013). This paper suggests the values highlighted in early 21st century programming for preadolescents are more individualistically driven and sensationalized than they were in the 1990s, resulting in a narcissistic preteen culture.

The current study examined how preteen TV programming has changed over time by comparing and contrasting preadolescent programming from different decades.

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**Keywords:** fame, narcissism, preadolescent television, vanity, new media  
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This undergraduate project was conducted as a partial requirement of a research course in communications.

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## II. Literature Review

This literature review begins with an overview of the most widely cited relevant study, “The Rise of Fame: An Historical Content Analysis,” conducted by Uhls and Greenfield (2011a). This study asked 60 randomly selected adults to analyze the top two preteen TV shows each year in the United States over a time span of 50 years. For the purposes of the current study, only the last 10 years of the study, 1997-2007, were considered.

The goal of the study was to document significant changes in the values communicated to preadolescent audiences over the decades. A list of 16 values were generated and rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 being not at all important to 4 being extremely important.

The results showed that the top five values in the most popular preadolescent shows from 2007 were fame, achievement, popularity, image, and financial success. In contrast, the top five values in 1997 were community feeling, benevolence, image, tradition, and self-acceptance (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011a). The value of fame rose from the 15th spot in 1997, to the first spot by 2007, while the importance of valuing community feeling and benevolence dropped to the bottom of the list by 2007 (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011a). Greenfield expresses his concern with these results: “When being famous and rich is more important than being kind to others, what will happen to kids as they form their values and their identities?” (Wolpert, 2011)

That same year, Uhls and Greenfield (2011) conducted a follow-up study, “The Value of Fame: Preadolescent Perceptions of Popular Media and Their Relationship to Future Aspirations.” This time they went directly to the source, using preadolescents as their participants. This study used focus groups and mixed research methods to determine how preadolescents interpret popular media and how their interpretations relate to their future goals (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011b). The literature suggests that the terms “preadolescent” and “preteen” can be used interchangeably.

In the focus group, composed of 10-12 years olds, 40% listed fame--the idea of being known and recognized by people who are not perceptually present to any given individual (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011b)--as their number one aspiration. When asked what being famous meant, one girl responded, “Um, fame, being famous to me means like the world kinda knows you, and you know, just like being on the red carpet, and with like cameras flashing.” During the focus group, no child mentioned the need for possession of a particular skill when discussing the concept of fame. Preteens are craving fame without understanding that it should be tied to hard work and skill (as cited in Seigel, 2013). In this case fame is seen as a reward, rather than the result of having a talent.

Marjorie Cohn, former executive vice president of original programming and development at Nickelodeon, said, “Every kid thinks they are five minutes away and one lucky circumstance from being famous” (Smith, 2009). The Internet age and preadolescent television are not conveying the chance of getting a rare success or the sacrifices and skills that are required to achieve it (Wolpert, 2011). This could inevitably have a negative effect on realistic future goals and accomplishments of the American youth (Alikhani, 2011), setting a generation up for failure and disappointment.

If the messages preteens are seeing on television today are about young people achieving success and fame, it is only natural for kids to want to mimic that behavior (Uhls, 2012). Popular preteen TV shows, such as *iCarly* and *Victorious*, are about characters that are either already famous or actively seeking fame. *iCarly* is about a girl who has reached a certain level of celebrity by starring in her own Web series. *Victorious* follows Tori Vega, a teenager, who has just been accepted into the elite Hollywood Arts High School, as she struggles to be the “main attraction,” as stated in the chorus of the show’s theme song, “Make It Shine.” The issue with this programming is that it teaches children that such achievements are attainable, when statistically they are not (Lufkin, 2012).

Deborah Linebarger, director of the Children’s Media Lab at the University of Pennsylvania, believes that, “Nickelodeon viewers are at a stage when they are developing their sense of self and are particularly vulnerable to these images” (Martin, 2009). Children’s networks should be overly critical and sensitive with the content they are producing because TV content and cultural values interact and affect one another (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011a).

Apparently children learned the lesson, “you can be whatever you want to be” a little too well. This might benefit some, but most will be disappointed. The vast majority of jobs are not particularly exciting or glamorous, but preteen programming hides this reality from its viewers (Twenge, 2006).

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### **Generation Me: Narcissism and Fame**

The pursuit of fame is closely tied to narcissism--an affinity to believe one's self to be superior over others (Panek, Nardis, & Konrath, 2013). Societal trends have drifted away from an emphasis on community and the common good, and moved toward the need to perfect oneself to the point of self-aggrandizement (Drinka, 2014). Central values portrayed on the most popular preadolescent shows appear to be influenced by these trends by becoming more individualistic in nature.

The glorification of these values in today's programming may be one influence in the documented cultural rise of narcissism (Wolpert, 2011). Twenge, the author of *The Narcissism Epidemic*, believes that narcissists just want to get attention from others and to be thought of as the best, even if they do not have any particular talent.

YouTube, which was not created until 2005, is now the number one online video destination for American youth, ages 8-11 (Nielsen Online, 2008). Preteens believe YouTube is their ticket to fame (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011b). When a preadolescent participant was asked what his goal was for making YouTube videos, he answered by simply stating, "I want to get a million subscribers" (Uhls & Greenfield, 2011b). He did not seem to care what he became famous for, as long as he attained some level of fame. "Their goal is to become famous even though they do not have anything they could become famous for" (as cited in Marostica, 2012). Being famous does not necessarily cause narcissism, but could lead to it (Seigel, 2013).

Similarly, self-aggrandizing trends are now seen in Instagram. Instagram is a free photo sharing application that enables its users to take and edit pictures and/or videos (Ochs, 2011). Instagram is a widely popular site amongst preteens that is said to cultivate negative reinforcement that "colludes with society's fixation with appearance, status, wealth, and materialism" (Tsilimparis, 2015). Preteens have made it their goal to become "Insta-famous"--a self-made micro-celebrity, known for his or her work on Instagram (Dewey, 2014). Instagram appears to have become less about sharing one's experiences and more about getting "likes" to reach an arbitrary milestone that represents validation (Hapsis, 2013). This obsession for approval and attention generates narcissistic characters who are dominating new media and preadolescent programming.

The literature review suggests that narcissism is on the rise in preteen programming in the early 21st century. Based on the seminal work of Uhls and Greenfield (2011a and b) and others in the literature review, the current study asked three research questions:

- RQ1. Does preteen TV programming from the first decade of the 2000s have more narcissistic tendencies than in did in 1991?
- RQ2. How has the representation of personal values changed in preadolescent programming since 1991?
- RQ3. What are the predominant messages in selected pilots of preadolescent shows in 1991 compared to more recent times?

### **III. Methods**

The current study used a mixed methods approach, adopted from the work of Uhls and Greenfield (2011a). Quantitative analysis was done on a narcissistic scale and a personal value ranking system, and qualitative analysis was done to examine the predominant messages from the selected pilots.

To analyze preadolescent programming, this study selected the following four pilot shows based on their high ratings in the desired demographic (Rice, 2011): A) *Clarissa Explains It All* (Frankel, 1991), B) *iCarly* (Schneider, 2007), C) *Salute Your Shorts* (Slavkin, 1991), and D) *Victorious* (Schneider, 2010).

A) *Clarissa Explains It All* is essentially about the main character, Clarissa, taking the audience through her day-to-day life as she deals with typical preadolescent dilemmas, such as family issues, school, friends, and potential love interests. B) *iCarly* focuses on a preteen, Carly, who creates a Web show with her two best friends, Sam and Freddy, that soon turns into a huge success. C) *Salute Your Shorts* tells the adventures of a group of preteens at summer camp. D) *Victorious* is about an aspiring singer, Tori Vega, navigating life at a performing arts school called Hollywood Arts.

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Both A) *Clarissa Explains it All* and B) *iCarly* are driven by female main characters navigating the usual trials and tribulations of female adolescents, such as insecurities, dating, and friendships. The other two shows, C) *Salute Your Shorts* and D) *Victorious*, are more ensemble shows, with camp and school providing a place of interpersonal relationships. So A) and B) were compared as one group while C) and D) were compared as another for analysis later.

To answer RQ1, the narcissistic scale was created based on the five qualities that most closely relate to narcissism: fame, hedonism, attention seeking, conceitedness, and how one represents oneself with an image. The current study assessed each of these components on a 4-point scale, with 1 being least narcissistic and 4, most narcissistic.

To answer RQ2, eight personal values—fame, popularity, achievement, image, community feeling, benevolence, family, and tradition—were ranked by the author based on its prevalence. For example, rank score 1 for fame means that fame is the most prevalent theme portrayed in that show.

To answer RQ3, a qualitative content analysis was done to find predominant messages. This analysis specifically looked at four categories: lessons, conflict, appearance, and language, as shown by Table 1 in Appendix.

## IV. Results

The results are structured below to address each of the three research questions. The current study found a positive answer to RQ1: There are more characters with narcissistic tendencies in recent times than 1991. As shown in *Figure 1* on the next page, the average narcissistic scores for old programs were 2.6 for A) *Clarissa* and 2.0 for C) *Salute*; and the scores for recent programs were 2.9 for B) *iCarly* and 3.0 for D) *Victorious*. Among the five categories that compose the narcissistic scale, all scores have increased over the time.

Increases in the average narcissistic scores for recent programs were mainly attributed to increases in fame scores. For example, A) *Clarissa Explains It All* and B) *iCarly* were only separated by a 0.3 point in their average narcissistic score, but the former scored a fame score of 0.3 while the latter, a 3.7.

In the *iCarly* pilot, a fan asks Carly for her autograph after her Web show goes viral. Once Carly realizes the immediate attention her newfound fame is generating, she ends the episode saying that she is definitely going to like being famous. This realization, along with Carly's obsession with getting her Web show to be seen by more than 37,000 viewers, led the current author to give *iCarly* receiving a high fame score. *Clarissa Explains It All* produced a much smaller fame score. The only indication that Clarissa has any aspirations of being famous or caring about fame is shown in the beginning of the episode. While Clarissa is introducing herself to the audience, she explains how she wished she had one name, like Madonna: "Madonna would be great," Clarissa says to the camera.

Also C) *Salute Your Shots* can be compared with D) *Victorious*. In the former, which scored a fame score of 0.2, the concept of fame is brought up just once when one camper is bragging to the other kids about knowing Janet Jackson. However, unlike in *Victorious*, these kids show no interest in the idea of fame, rolling their eyes and responding by bluntly saying, "No one cares." On the other hand, the latter generated a fame score of a 3.2 because the entire premise of the show is centered on a group of performing arts students whose ultimate goal is to be famous.

The most consistent rating over time was in the "attention-seeking" category, which proved to be high throughout all the selected programs, ranging from a 3.1 to a 3.6. No matter what decade a show is from, there always seems to be one or two characters craving attention.

Regarding RQ2 on personal value changes in preadolescent programming, the current study found that four individual-oriented values, such as fame, popularity, achievement, and image have increased while the community-oriented values, such as community feeling, benevolence, family, and tradition have decreased, as shown in *Figure 2* on page 21. (The figure appears upside down because high rank numbers represent low values.)

These findings mirrored the work of Uhls and Greenfield's (2011a) study that also found fame and achievement to be among the top values represented in preadolescent programming in the early 2000s. Benevolence, family, and tradition, although prevalent in the 1990s, fell drastically to the bottom of the list

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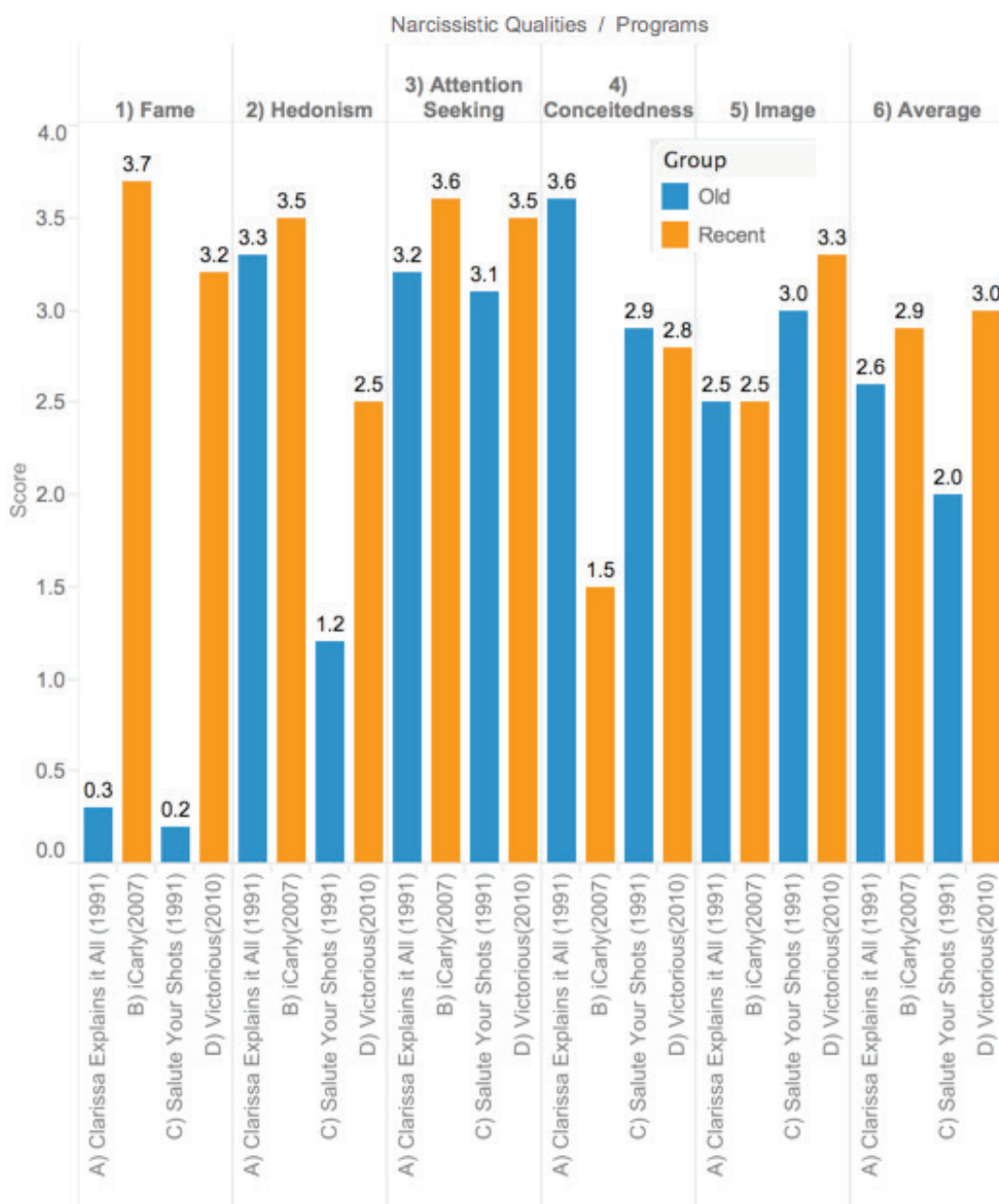


Figure 1. Comparison of programs produced in the 1990s and early 2000s.

by 2010. The real question is: are children actually adopting this new set of values? According to a study conducted by *Psychology Today*, that answer is yes. “Fame is now the number one aspirational value among children nine to eleven years old” (Taylor, 2012).

A qualitative study was done to find answers to RQ3 on the predominant messages in selected pilots of preadolescent shows, focusing on four categories of lessons, conflict, appearance, and language (Refer to Table 1 in Appendix for more detail). Through the qualitative analysis, the researcher determined that the overall messages communicated to preteens were more playful and meaningful in 1991 than the later times.

The predominant message in programming has evolved from caring about others in

1991, to caring about oneself in more recent times of 2007 and 2010. In A) *Salute Your Shots*, the word “I” was muttered less than 10 times in the first 10 minutes of the show while it was said more than 30 times in the first 10 minutes of B) *Victorious*. This suggests that preteen television has transformed into a



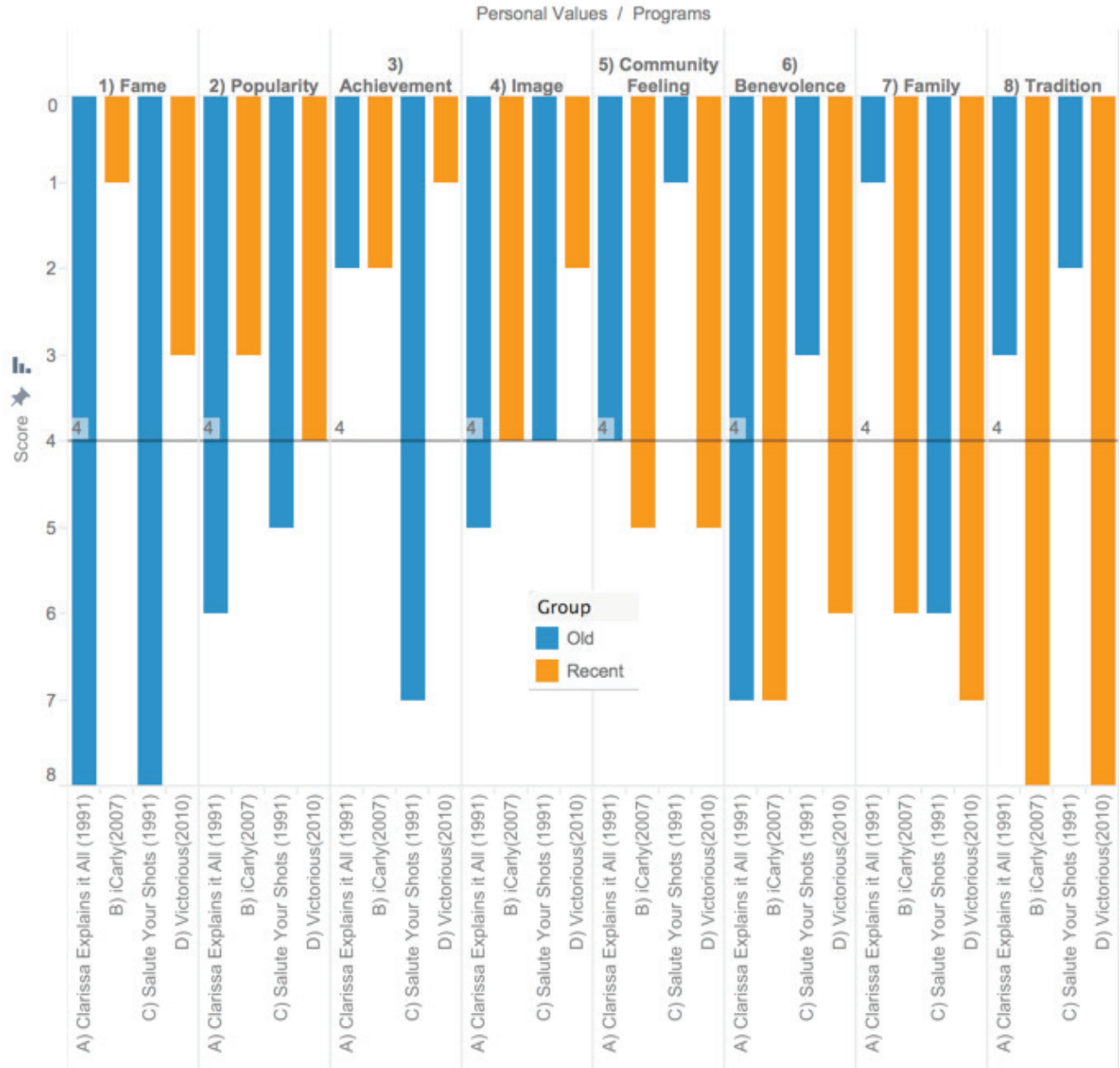


Figure 2. Rank number of each of eight personal values.

preoccupation with one's self. The former stresses the importance of putting family and friends first, while the latter focuses on individualism.

In *Salute Your Shorts*, phrases such as, “you are roasted, toasted and burnt to a crisp” and “your breath smells like a wet diaper” are thrown around by the cool crowd at camp. Although these are not the most benevolent phrases, they are harmless and received in good fun. More importantly, *Salute Your Shorts* teaches preteens the importance of putting others ahead of oneself. Michael, the new kid at camp, agrees to raid the girls' bunk to fit in with the crowd. The raid does not go as planned, and an innocent bystander ends up getting blamed for the entire incident. Despite Michael's bunkmates saying, “You got away with it, just keep your mouth shut,” Michael decides to step forward and admit that he was the one responsible for the raid. After Michael accepts the blame, the girls, instead of getting mad, respect him for coming forward.

The same thing was found from the comparison of C) *Clarissa Explains It All* and D) *Victorious*. In the former, Clarissa uses colorful language when describing her irritating brother, “that dork-pie has been a burn on my butt ever since he was born.” This kind of language is melodramatic enough to the point where

it cannot be considered offensive. In this pilot episode, Clarissa is plotting against her “dork-pie” brother but puts her personal vendetta on hold to help out her friend with his football tryout dilemma.

In the latter, Tori is nervous about starting her new school and says to her sister, “these kids are all artsy and creative and talented and I’m just normal.” Her sister responds in a sarcastic manner saying, “It’s okay, there is nothing wrong with being average.” Whether or not this was intended to be funny, all it did was put a negative connotation on being normal. It could make a viewer think that if they did not have a special talent, there must be something wrong with them. Later in the episode Tori’s sister says she was great in the showcase but quickly turns it back to herself by saying, “But I would have been amazing.” At the end of the episode Tori develops a crush on a boy who has a girlfriend. Instead of considering the girlfriend’s feelings, Tori manipulates a class exercise and gets the boy to kiss her. Instead of the class acting appalled, the students react by clapping and cheering for Tori. This conveys the message that manipulating a situation for personal gain is encouraged and acceptable.

In *iCarly*, Carly and her two best friends exploit their teacher on the Web and instead of getting reprimanded they get instant fame and popularity. This circumstance, which the whole show is based on, highlights the message that it is okay to make fun of people, particularly superiors, in order to advance your own desires. Each episode of *iCarly* is paired with a clever title including the word “i.” Some examples are as follows: *iWant More Viewers*, *iWant a World Record*, and *iAm Your Biggest Fan*. Although the creator of the show may argue that the “i” just stands for Internet, the researcher believes that starting each episode with “i” frames this show in an individualistic manner and promotes the idea of self above others. All Carly and her friends seem to care about is being viral Web stars and inevitably do not seem to care who they have to put down in order to make that dream a reality.

## V. Conclusion

The current study found two recent preteen TV programs have become more narcissistic in comparison with the other two in 1991. The study also found that individual-oriented values, such as fame, popularity, achievement, and image have become more prevalent over the time and the community-oriented values, such as community feeling, benevolence, family, and tradition, have diminished. Qualitative analysis showed that the overall messages communicated to preteens were more playful and meaningful in 1991 than the later times, when cheating and manipulation of others were accepted when they contributed to their achieving personal goals.

Preadolescence is a pivotal time for individuals, when they are developing their own set of values, attitudes, and beliefs; and it is naïve to think that they will not be influenced by what they see on TV. To revisit Fred Rogers (1999), it appears that television, at least from 2010 and onward, is less about cherishing life than it is about sensationalizing it. It is a conundrum that preadolescent television has yet to solve.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Kenn Gaither, associate professor and associate dean at Elon University, for his constant support and mentoring over the past semester. This article could not have been published without his thoughtful guidance and encouragement. The author also appreciates the editorial board for providing their insights and commentary.

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## Appendix

Table 1. Messages in Four Pilot Shows



Predominant Messages	Salute Your Shorts (1991)	Victorious (2010)	Clarissa Explains It All (1991)	iCarly (2007)
Lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People respect you more for telling the truth.</li> <li>• Being part of the cool crowd isn't everything</li> <li>• Put others ahead of yourself</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be confident</li> <li>• Step out of your comfort zone</li> <li>• Stand up for oneself</li> <li>• Be a star</li> <li>• "Normal is boring"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Payback doesn't always go as planned</li> <li>• Friends always have your back</li> <li>• Everyone has an embarrassing sibling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making fun of people leads to instant fame and popularity.</li> <li>• It's easy to create your own web show and become famous .</li> </ul>
Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Michael is being picked on for being the new kid at camp.</li> <li>• Michael raids the girl's bunk to try and impress his bunkmates.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tori must fill in for her sister at the Hollywood Arts' showcase</li> <li>• Tori is the new student who is having a hard time fitting in.</li> <li>• Tori doesn't get along with mean girl, Jade.</li> <li>• Tori kisses the Jade's boyfriend</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarissa's friend tries to avoid trying out for the football team.</li> <li>• When Ferguson presents Clarissa's training bra in show and tell she hatches a plan to send Ferg-face into outer space via helium balloons and a straight jacket.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carly and Sam pull a prank and get caught and receive punishment</li> <li>• Freddy is in love with Carly</li> <li>• A video of Cary and Sam making fun of their teacher accidentally goes on the web and instantly becomes viral inspiring them to create their own web show.</li> </ul>
Appearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes place at a camp-mainly outdoors</li> <li>• Normal, average looking kids at summer camp.</li> <li>• Bunks- no electricity, authentic</li> <li>• Kids at camp of all different shapes and from all different backgrounds.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 20- year old actors are playing 14-year-olds.</li> <li>• Wearing tight, flashy clothing on stage.</li> <li>• Saturated colors</li> <li>• Mean girl- heavy eye makeup, all black leather.</li> <li>• Graphics- twitter-like site used as a transition for between scenes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarissa talks to the audience by directly addressing the camera</li> <li>• Graphics of little doodles to help explain Clarissa's thoughts</li> <li>• Average looking girl, unkempt eyebrows and hair, no makeup, wacky, unmatched clothing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graphic of an editing screen, showing a mouse clicking on different clips, are used as a transition between scenes.</li> <li>• Wearing age appropriate modern clothing in school.</li> </ul>
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "You are roasted, toasted, and burnt to a crisp."</li> <li>• "It's awful waffle time"</li> <li>• "you got away with it just keep your mouth shut."</li> <li>• "you're going to be dead meat"</li> <li>• "i can hock a loogie 8ft in the air and catch it with my tongue."</li> <li>• "being brave usually means getting your adult teeth knocked right out."</li> <li>• "i suppose you already know who my father is?"</li> <li>• "nobody cares"</li> <li>• "Your breath smells like a wet diaper"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I" (30 times) 10 minutes of the show.</li> <li>• "Oh my god" (5 times)</li> <li>• "These kids are all artsy and creative and talented and I'm just normal."</li> <li>• "You're not normal, you're special.</li> <li>• opening: "you don't have to be afraid to put your dreams in action you never gonna fade you'll be the main attraction not a fantasy just remember me when it turns out right</li> <li>• "tomorrow you'll be ever-body's fascination."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "This is Ferguson my ugh brother, morning Ferg-face"</li> <li>• "sometimes I think he was just envious of my natural grace and good looks."</li> <li>• "some kids have all the luck, they always get pizza for dinner." (Connected to feeling neglected)</li> <li>• "Sam you can't leave, think of me."</li> <li>• "Clarissa if you don't come down right this minute, I'm sending your father up."</li> <li>• "Mom can i drive the car to town?" "What do you think you have feet for?" "to work the pedals"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Wow, they love us"</li> <li>• "Let's do a web show...we can do whatever we want, say whatever we want."</li> <li>• "I" could stand for Internet or could represent the "me" generation.</li> <li>• "if you liked our show tell your friends."</li> <li>• "Our very first web show was watched by over 37,000 people."</li> <li>• "Can I get your autograph"</li> <li>• Next episode titled- "i want more viewers"</li> <li>• "i think I'm going to like being famous."</li> </ul>

# Exaggerations and Stereotypes of Schizophrenia in Contemporary Films

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## Abstract

*Due to filmmakers focusing on violence, traumatic events, and hallucinations when depicting characters with schizophrenia, critics have scrutinized the representation of mental disorders in contemporary films for years. This study compared previous research on schizophrenia with the fictional representation of the disease in contemporary films. Through content analysis, this study examined 10 films featuring a schizophrenic protagonist, tallying moments of violence and charting if they fell into four common stereotypes. Results showed a high frequency of violent behavior in films depicting schizophrenic characters, implying that those individuals are overwhelmingly dangerous and to be feared.*

## I. Introduction

When films like *Girl Interrupted* (1999) and *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) were released to the public, people began focusing their attention on mental illness and its depiction in cinema. The representation of mental disorders in contemporary films has been scrutinized by critics for years—especially those films that deal with schizophrenic individuals (Abu-Akel & Abushua'leh, 2004, para. 1). Often media analysts argue these characters are portrayed as overly hysterical, unpredictable, and dangerous. They believe that the general public's limited and skewed knowledge of mental illness is fortified by the misrepresentations and exaggeration of the media (Parcesepe & Cabassa, 2013, para. 1). Those who suffer from schizophrenia reported that they feel rejected by society becomes of the negative representations of mental illness in movies (Dubin & Fink, 1992, p. 1). Therefore, an examination of how schizophrenia is portrayed in films deserves further study.

It is true that shock value in the portrayal of schizophrenia is irresistible to filmmakers, but National Alliance on Mental Illness reports it is also true that those suffering from schizophrenia are affected by the distribution of these films. Filmmakers tend to focus on violence, traumatic events, and hallucinations when depicting and shaping characters with schizophrenia. Some critics argue that films overdramatize these elements and doing so dehumanizes people with schizophrenia (Hyler, Gabbard, & Schneider, 1991, p. 1045). The purpose of the current paper examined the prevalence of misconstrued schizophrenic cases in contemporary films. The author content analyzed 10 different movies: *The Soloist* (2001), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *Clean Shaven* (1993), *Shine* (1996), *Shutter Island* (2010), *A Caveman's Valentine* (2001), *Benny and*

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**Keywords:** schizophrenia, film, violence, stereotypes, exaggeration  
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This undergraduate project was conducted as a partial requirement of a research course in communications.

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*Joon* (1993), *The Snake Pit* (1948), *Pi* (1998), and *The Visit* (2015), all featuring a schizophrenic protagonist. The current study compared previous research on schizophrenia with the fictional representation of the disease in contemporary films. By looking at the frequency of four common stereotypes associated with the disease: violence, using love as a cure, abuse in mental hospitals, and gifted individuals, the author tried to examine how contemporary films are representing those with schizophrenia. This study also looked at the prevalence of violence to measure how exaggerated the symptoms are.

## II. Literature Review

According to the American Psychiatric Association, Schizophrenia is “a chronic brain disorder that affects about one percent of the population” (Carpenter & Parekh, 2015, para. 1). The symptoms associated with the disease can range from hallucinations, delusions, having difficulty staying motivated, and problems thinking and concentrating (Wahl, 1995, p. 4). These symptoms usually appear in early adulthood, and affect men and women equally, but earlier onset for men tends to be more frequent. Due to these complex symptoms, there are multiple misconceptions about the disease.

Many of these misconceptions are conceived and explored in the entertainment industry—more specifically in films. A significant amount of research has been done on studying negative stereotypes in movies. For instance, the negative portrayals, according to Hyler (1991), were categorized into stereotypes: homicidal maniac, rebellious free spirit, enlightened member of society, female patient as seductress, narcissistic parasite, and a zoo specimen. More specifically, characters in these films are often times portrayed as violent, living in an abusive environment, being extremely gifted individuals, and using love as a cure for the disease (Owen, 2012, para. 7). Although violence and gifted individuals could be realistic portrayals of schizophrenia, they are often exaggerated in films (Beachum, 2010, p. 8). Movies are designed to entertain and engage an audience—directors in the past have used filmic devices to show deformed perceptions of space from the perspective of schizophrenic characters, and dismal lighting to set a dark and sinister tone. Schizophrenic characters are also called “crazy,” “loony,” and “deranged” (Pirkis, Blood, Francis, & McCallum, 2006, p. 523) by mentally healthy or “sane” characters—reinforcing the stigma.

Researchers have concluded that these wrongly portrayed or exaggerated symptoms of schizophrenia in films can negatively affect the public’s view of the disease (Hyler et al., 1991, p. 1045). In a study done by Domino (1983), students who watched *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975) had more negative attitudes toward schizophrenic individuals than those who did not view the film. This perception did not waiver over time, and it did not change after viewing more positive depictions of the disease.

People in the United States have claimed violence and unpredictability are the most pressing concerns when it comes to individuals with schizophrenia (Abu-Akel & Khalid, 2003, para. 1). Researchers have suggested that this is due to contemporary films exaggerating the frequency of violent actions committed by schizophrenic characters (Swanson et al., 2006, para. 9). In actuality, most people with schizophrenia are not dangerous or violent (Beachum, 2010, p. 13). Additionally, mental hospitals in films reveal institutions as barbaric prisons where patients are treated poorly, although in recent decades it has become a legal requirement that hospitals use the least restrictive restraints possible (Kapp, 1999, p. 4). Additionally, many films showcase schizophrenic individuals as having tremendous intellectual abilities, but researchers have found that although some schizophrenic patients have a gene that optimizes their mental capabilities, most don’t have the discipline or focus in order to truly execute these gifted traits (Meyer et al., 2007, para. 3). Lastly, films tend to feed the myth that “schizophrenia can be cured by the special empathetic understanding of a loving helper” (Owen, 2012, para. 5). However, this has yet to legitimately be proven—most individuals control the disease through the use of prescription medication (Carpenter & Parekh, 2015, para. 2). But medication may not work for every patient, as studies have reported: “80 percent of those who stop taking their medications after an acute episode . . . have a relapse within one year, whereas only 30 percent of those who continue their medications . . . experience a relapse in the same time period (Flynn, 1998, para. 9).

This study focused on two research questions based on these stereotypes that other researchers have found to be falsely represented in contemporary films. The first question aimed to evaluate how films portray schizophrenia, based on these perceived misconceptions. The second question asked if these negative symptoms are exaggerated in contemporary films. After analyzing 10 popular movies featuring a schizophrenic protagonist, the current study tried to answer these questions.

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### III. Method

Through the use of content analysis, the author was able to qualitatively measure how schizophrenic characters are portrayed in contemporary films and whether or not their symptoms are exaggerated. Ten movies were chosen for the analysis, all collected from the IMDB database that lists some of the most popular films featuring a schizophrenic protagonist: *The Soloist*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Clean Shaven*, *Shine*, *Shutter Island*, *A Caveman's Valentine*, *Benny and Joon*, *The Snake Pit*, *Pi*, and *The Visit*. These films were released to the public between 1948 and 2015, a wide range of years to record how the depiction of the disease has evolved over time.

After recording the protagonist's age, gender, and race, each movie was evaluated for four stereotypes: violence, using love as a cure, gifted individuals, and abuse in mental hospitals. These four appeared in multiple articles that attached stigma to schizophrenia and studied which stereotypes are the most prevalent in the media.

These four stereotypes need to be defined more thoroughly for accurate categorization of films. It was defined that violence occurred anytime the schizophrenic protagonist acted to harm another character physically, or disrupting space and objects with his or her aggressive actions. According to the definition, love as a cure was used when the movie comes to a close, and the schizophrenic character's previous symptoms appear to have lessened significantly, due to another person's presence in their life. Gifted individuals were defined as schizophrenic characters that are extremely talented in music, art, mathematics, or the sciences—to the point that other characters are pointing out their abnormal abilities and comparing them to societies standards. Lastly, abuse in mental hospitals was defined to have occurred when the schizophrenic protagonist was being incarcerated in an institution that harms or treats them unjustly—where the film is dehumanizing the character and setting out to depict mental hospitals as torturous institutions.

While watching 10 movies, the current author checked protagonists' age, gender, race, presence of violence, abuse in mental hospitals, existence of gifted individuals, and use of love as a treatment for the disease. The author also counted the number of instances where specific schizophrenic protagonists were violent to others or themselves.

The method was adapted from Pirkis, Blood, Francis, and McCallum's study (2006) and Hand's study (2010).

### IV. Findings

Based on the analysis of 10 different movies that featured a schizophrenic protagonist, the author tallied the frequency of violence and calculated an average of all the movies combined, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Occasions of violent actions in ten different movies**

Movies	Release Date	Instances of Violence With Others	Instances of Violence With Themselves
<i>A Beautiful Mind</i>	2001	4	3
<i>Clean, Shaven</i>	1993	5	6
<i>The Snake Pit</i>	1948	6	2
<i>Benny and Joon</i>	1993	2	1
<i>The Visit</i>	2015	10	5
<i>Pi</i>	1998	4	7
<i>Shine</i>	1996	5	6
<i>Shutter Island</i>	2010	9	4
<i>The Soloist</i>	2001	3	2
<i>The Caveman's Valentine</i>	2001	13	10
<b>AVERAGE</b>		<b>6.1</b>	<b>4.6</b>



Based on the analysis of 10 different movies that featured schizophrenic protagonists, the author recorded age, gender, race, and whether or not the character met the listed stereotype, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Occasions of four stereotypes in 10 different movies**

Movies	Age	Gender	Race	Violence	Abuse in Mental Hospitals	Gifted Individuals (Genius')	Using Love as a treatment for the disease
A Beautiful Mind	20s	Male	Caucasian	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Clean, Shaven	30s	Male	Caucasian	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
The Snake Pit	20s	Female	Caucasian	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Benny and Joon	20s	Female	Caucasian	Yes	No	No	Yes
The Visit	70s	Female	Caucasian	Yes	No	No	No
Pi	30s	Male	Caucasian	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Shine	20s	Male	Caucasian	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Shutter Island	30s	Male	Caucasian	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
The Soloist	40s	Male	African American	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
The Caveman's Valentine	50s	Male	African American	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

## V. Discussion

Based on Table 1, it could be concluded that schizophrenic characters in these films demonstrated a high frequency of violent behavior, averaging six occurrences per movie of violence toward others. Additionally, there was an average of about five occurrences per movie of a schizophrenic character harming himself or herself. But according to the Medical Health Association, people with schizophrenia are more likely to harm themselves than others. But the data collected from the films suggests the opposite.

It is true that rate of schizophrenics connected to violence remain somewhat higher in proportion to offenders in the general population, but according to a study done by Walsh, Buchanan, and Fahy (2002), the prevalence of such circumstances still fall below 10%. This number does not correspond with the 10 films, 90 to 100 minute long, in which the schizophrenic protagonist acted violently an average of about 6 times per movie. Additionally, four protagonists in these films committed a murder, but in reality only 13% of homicides a year are connected to schizophrenic individuals (Matejkowski et al., 2011, para. 2). Another interesting finding was the prevalence of violence in films that dated 2000 to 2015. The Caveman's Valentine, Shutter Island and The Visit were all movies released in the 21st century and all showcased the highest frequency of violence according to Table 1. The Caveman's Valentine (2001) demonstrated the highest occurrence of violence at 13 times involving the protagonist harming others, and 10 times harming themselves. The Visit, released in October 2015, is a close second with 10 occurrences of violence toward others. These findings suggest that the frequency of violence in contemporary films has increased in recent years, compared to those films that were released in the 1990s and later. One study found that "people today are 2.3 times more likely to describe a person with a serious mental illness as prone to violence than they were in the 1950s" (Pirkis, Blood, Francis, & McCallum, 2006, p. 1). A national survey found that the mental illness most often associated with violence is schizophrenia, and although it is true that 19% of people with schizophrenia committed assaults, only around 3.5% committed what could be considered a serious act, which injured another person (Swanson et al., 2006, para. 6). A solid explanation for this increase of violence from filmmakers is the desire to draw out a shocking reaction from their audience—feeling that the only way to accomplish this is injecting exaggerated scenes of brutality in their storylines to receive that instant response from viewers. David Cox, a television producer and writer once said: "Their [the filmmakers] task isn't to portray the truth, but to construct stories" (Cox, 2013, para. 4).

The fourth column in Table 2 (Race) shows that protagonists suffering from schizophrenia are frequently Caucasian and male, but rates of schizophrenia are higher among African Americans than any other race (Nauert, 2010, p. 1). The last column that recorded whether or not the protagonist fell into the "love as a cure" category shows that 80% of the films gave the impression that love for another person could cure schizophrenic symptoms, which is not known to be a permanent and legitimate treatment. Most individuals are only able to control the disease through the use of prescription medication (Carpenter & Parekh, 2015, para. 2). But in one study, only 1 out of 400 films featured effective drug therapy (Owen, 2012, para. 5). Due to the viewers' need for an emotional payoff, filmmakers are creating improbable endings to their works purely to satisfy the audience's need for a "Disney moment" or happy ending to the story.

As for the stereotype of gifted individuals with schizophrenia in contemporary films, the data reported that 50% of the films watched featured a schizophrenic protagonist with above average intellectual abilities in music or mathematics. Nearly all those listed were based on true stories, although the portrayal of their lives with the disease were skewed at times. In Sylvia Nasar's biography about John Nash, which the film *A Beautiful Mind* was based on, she states that the filmmakers "invented a narrative that, while far from the literal telling, is true to the spirit of Nash's story." In the film, Nash nearly drowns his son in a bathtub, believing that his friend, Charles, was keeping watch. In reality, because of Nash's paranoid delusions, the audience learns that his friend Charles, didn't actually exist. Although Nash did suffer from auditory hallucinations, he was not diagnosed with having visual hallucinations, despite what the film depicted (Chmielewski, 2013, p. 40). This suggests that the scene where Nash almost kills his son did not actually happen.

The sixth column in Table 2 focused on abuse in mental institutions, exhibiting that 40% of the schizophrenic protagonists experienced some kind of cruelty in an insane asylum. After watching the films, a notable observation was that a majority of the storylines were set in either the 1940s or 1950s, when mental hospitals were exercising horrific acts on patients. Therefore, modern viewers could come to the conclusion that mental institutions were currently practicing these techniques. In one study, 74% of people believed that electroconvulsive therapy is dangerous and traumatizing based on films—the same study found that this is not the case—ECT is administered today as a muscle relaxant for schizophrenics, who are unconscious during the process and most report feeling no pain after the procedure (Breggin, 1998, p. 19). However, it should be known that some patients report negative side effects post treatment, such as memory loss, fatigue, insomnia, and other physical and cognitive issues (Donahu, 2007, para. 2).

Another form of brain stimulation being used in the medical field is deep brain stimulation (DBS), which involves sending low electrical impulses to specific parts of the brain of those who are treatment resistant. After its introduction in 1987, DBS has been used in an attempt to lessen the side effects of mental and movement disorders, such as depression, Parkinson's, and schizophrenia. The procedure involves local anesthesia; therefore, it should not hurt the patient (Mayberg et al. 2005, para. 8). But this information is not conveyed in films, leaving the public with a negative perception of mental institutions and procedures.

The fifth column (Violence) shows that 100% of the schizophrenic characters in these films demonstrated some act of violence. In a national study of violent behavior, 1,410 patients diagnosed with schizophrenia were told to report incidents of violence over the course of six months, with the verification of their family members. About 19 reported acts of violence within those six months, 3% reported acts of serious violence, and 80% of the participants reported no violence (Chmielewski, 2013, p. 29 & 30). This study supports the current author's findings and calls for a closer look at why violence is so present in films featuring a schizophrenic character.

One study reported that alcohol is one of the clearest predictors of violence in individuals with schizophrenia, but none of the characters in these 10 films touched a drink, eliminating liquor from the list of explanations (Hall, 2003, p. 13). Additionally, one explanation to take into consideration could be a connection between societal violence and the mentally ill. The public considers those classified as insane having an immediate correlation to guns and explosives, knowing that they might not be held responsible for their actions thanks to the "insanity defense." But many schizophrenics are living in a fractured mental health care system. "The discomfort of . . . nine months of hospitalization was not nearly as bad as dealing with the stigma for the last forty years," said one member of a support group (Culwell, 1992, p. 41). Madness and evil are inseparable. "Nothing sells like insane, unpredictable, undetectable, gory killer . . . who has caused a great deal of pain and anguish to friends and relatives of the victim—all of high moral character" (Kalbfleisch, 1979, p. 9). So perhaps the audience enjoys being frightened by characters that are violent and have no comprehensible motive. Filmmakers are able to capitalize on that factor, and actors who want the acclaim are more likely to aim for those kinds of roles—look at Jennifer Lawrence, Kathy Bates, and Heath Ledger, all winning Academy Awards for their portrayal of mentally ill characters. The reasoning for this violent behavior could vary from film to film, but legitimate data does not back up these portrayals of violence from schizophrenics.

The current study has some limitations: Other than a small sample size of 10 films, it focused on only four stereotypes. Additionally no positive stereotypes were included in the research, limiting the results by only addressing the negative stereotypes.

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## VI. Conclusion

It is true that researchers, like Owen (2012), observed the portrayals of schizophrenic patients in contemporary films, and found that many of the films portrayed an unrealistic socioeconomic status for those characters with the disease. But it still reinforced the idea that erratic and dangerous behavior is a constant when dealing with those fighting schizophrenia. Although sensationalizing schizophrenia to sell movie tickets has been effective over the years, filmmakers who choose to avoid legitimate portrayals of schizophrenia are presenting audiences with crude and monstrous characters that contribute substantially to the discrimination and stigma attached to individuals living with the disease.

It is time to eradicate these misconceptions and stereotypes. As more empirical evidence starts presenting itself, the emphasis can be taken off schizophrenics as homicidal maniacs in films and directed toward creating and reshaping a more accurate perception of those suffering with schizophrenia.

## Acknowledgments

This author is thankful to Kenn Gaither, associate professor and associate dean at Elon University, for his supervision and advice, without which the article could not be published. The author also appreciates numerous reviewers who have helped revise this article.

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# Yoga On Instagram: Disseminating or Destroying Traditional Yogic Principles?

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## Abstract

*Today, more than 15 million Americans practice yoga, making the ancient Indian discipline synonymous with the Western society's culture of wellness. As a way to market themselves, practitioners and instructors of yoga have utilized Instagram – and its more than 300 million accounts – to virtually share their favorite poses, sequences, and yogic philosophies. This paper examines the popular culture of yoga on Instagram and how it relates to the ancient Indian traditions of which the practice was built upon. The study found that while some observed themes of yoga on Instagram reflected elements of traditional yogic principles, others did not.*

## I. Introduction

When the hashtag yoga (#yoga) was searched on Instagram, a stream of more than 15 million posts emerged, a number that grows greater each day. Scroll through the images on that stream, and one will find it plastered with aesthetically appealing photographs of mostly young, beautiful, thin women demonstrating difficult contortionist postures including fancy headstands, arm balances, twisted binds, and perfect planks. This severe emphasis on image in the yoga world of Instagram has even become a way for practitioners and instructors of yoga to market themselves, resulting in lucrative business (Lieber, 2014). Overall image and presentation of yoga postures have become an intrinsic element of the perception of the yoga tradition as a whole (Jain, 2015). But what is the original meaning of the yoga tradition and how does it compare to how yoga is now portrayed on Instagram?

Since yoga first made its way to the United States in 1805, public opinion of the ancient Indian practice has come a long way (Love, 2006). From being mocked and laughed at, to being scrutinized by the media, yoga has endured endless judgment. Finally in the 21st century, yoga has come to dominate the culture of wellness in Western society, specifically in the United States. Today, more than 15 million Americans practice yoga (Statistics Brain, 2015) and more than 300 million people have an Instagram account (Statista, 2015). The prominence of this social media platform has become a central location for yogis of all sorts to virtually share their favorite poses, sequences, and yogic philosophies.

This paper examines the popular culture of yoga on Instagram and how it relates to the ancient Indian traditions of which yoga was built upon. The current author used the hashtag “yoga” (#yoga) to find images over the course of 10 separate days in October 2015 for content analysis.

The author used the hashtag #yoga to find Instagram posts and selected the first 10 as under the

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**Keywords:** yoga, Instagram, social media, yogic philosophy, social awareness streams  
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This undergraduate project was conducted as a partial requirement of a research course in communications.

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category of “top posts” (Instagram, 2015). The study examined the content, including the image, the image’s caption, and hashtags that were posted by the user as a comment. This study did not analyze any comments from the Instagram community; in this case, the “user” refers to Instagram account owners. This content was compared with core principles of yoga that have lasted more than 5,000 years since the emergence of yoga as a tradition and practice based on core values and teachings from traditional yogic texts, including Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, Pattabhi Jois’ *Yoga Mala*, and B.K.S. Iyengar’s *Light on Yoga*.

## II. Literature Review

To understand the research topic better, the author did literature review focusing on related communications theories, traditional yogic philosophy, and changes of yoga as it has adapted to Western society.

### ***Social Media Theory***

No research was found about the effect of Instagram on yoga as a traditional practice, even though more and more research continues to emerge about social media and its ramifications. One area of study recently focused on social media’s effect on health and wellness. Two researchers found that social media has become a channel where audiences sought knowledge about health and wellness (Korda & Itani, 2013). More specifically, user-generated content, such as a platform like Instagram, “is key to successful media outreach” (Korda & Itani, 2013, p. 21). Walther (1996) explored user intentions in his reviews of computer mediated-communication (CMC) by introducing the theory of “selective self-presentation” in which users will inherently use CMC—which may be also applied to social media in this case—to optimally portray themselves to other users. Although Walther’s studies were published before the social media revolution, his theory offers fundamental reasoning as to why social media has become so prominently self-absorbed and image-oriented, especially amongst the younger millennial generation (Stein, 2013).

Instagram has emerged as a prominent social media platform for the manipulation and formation of personal image representation (Titlow, 2013). In convergence with a growing desire for health and wellness content, potential dangers emerge from these crossing trends. More recently, several studies have begun to unveil the potential dangers arising from the impact of social media on negative body image. Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) studied the link between body image and fitspiration, a play-on word, merging the words “fit” and “inspiration.” Fitspiration uses “examples of good fitness as inspiration to attain a fitness goal” (Urban Dictionary, 2011). Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) found that although fitspiration does have a positive effect on inspiration, it also has a negative effect on body image and an increase in physical appearance comparison.

### ***Computer Mediated Communication Theory***

Social awareness streams (SAS) are platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, where “users post short content items (such as status “messages,” links, or media items) instantly available publicly, or semi-publicly” (Teodoro & Norman, 2013, p. 1). Walther (1996) recognized Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) as having the ability to surpass face-to-face (FtF) communication in his hyperpersonal model, which means that CMC has inherent value and power within communication (Walther, 1996). Modern-day CMC includes social awareness streams and all forms of social media. Walther analyzed this dynamic through the traditional “Communications Process Model” of sender -- receiver -- channel -- feedback. This Communications Process Model, which can easily be applied to Instagram, is an effective way to define the actors in the communication within Instagram. In the case of Instagram, the “user” is the “sender,” who is producing and providing the content that will be consumed by the receiver. The receiver in this case refers to the Instagram community/audience viewing the content. According to Walther’s “selective self-presentation” theory, users tend to present themselves in the best possible light, shedding insight into motivations of users to post what they post. “Selective self-presentation” says that users on communication platforms, such as Instagram, will naturally try to reach the goals of achieving a particular positive impression (Walther, 1996). In simple terms this theory suggests that users of CMC have the goal of manipulating their image to present themselves in the best light.

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## **Yoga Philosophy**

B.K.S. Iyengar was an Indian-born yoga guru (in the traditional meaning of guru) who is known for helping to bring yoga to the Western world during the 20th century. Iyengar was born in India in 1918 and died at age 95 in 2014. His famous book *Light On Yoga* reveals core values and philosophy of the traditional practice. Sanskrit, the traditional language of Indian, Hinduism, and Buddhism, is used for yoga, too (Ager, 2015). The word *yoga* is derived from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, which translates to “yoke,” meaning to bind, join, and attach. It also means union or communion. One of the core principles of yoga is self-discipline or spiritual discipline through which one may attain union with God or union with the higher “Self” (Phillips, 2009). Iyengar (1966) describes this union as “the true union of our will with the will of God” (p. 1). Although yoga is now widely disassociated from religion in the modern world, yoga was traditionally framed as a religious practice, very much in accordance with obtaining spiritual enlightenment through placing faith in God and seeking union with God and the universe (Iyengar, 1966).

The *Yoga Sutra* is one of the oldest, most classical and traditional yogic texts and is still used to teach the practice of yoga in today’s modern society. Written by the sage Patanjali around 400 C.E., the *Yoga Sutra* “is the guidebook of classical, or raja (royal), yoga and is made up of 195 aphorisms (sutras), or words of wisdom,” (Rosen, 2014). In the *Yoga Sutra*, Patanjali introduces the eightfold path called *Ashtanga*, which translates in Sanskrit to “eight limbs” (ashta=eight, anga=limb).

The Eight Limbs of Yoga are elaborate and include a depth of principles and practices. Major themes within the Eight Limbs include nonviolence, truthfulness, self-discipline, spiritual-discipline, contentment, study of the sacred scriptures and one’s Self, surrendering to God, sensory withdrawal, and concentration. The third limb is *Asana*, which refers to the physical practice. In yoga the body is the “temple of spirit” (Carrico, 2007) and is a vessel for which the individual may achieve the “Universal Self.” “The yogi conquers the body by the practice of asanas and makes it a fit vehicle for the spirit” (Iyengar, 1966 p. 41). *Asana* has become the most prominent limb of modern yoga, used as a means to achieve greater physical wellbeing and a more desirable body type (Jain, 2015). The fourth limb is called *Pranayama*, which refers to “breath control” and is literally translated as “life force extension” (Carrico, 2007). The breath drives the practice of yoga, and *Pranayama* is generally inseparable from *Asana*. The final and eighth limb is *Samadhi*, which Patanjali describes as “a state of ecstasy” (Carrico, 2007) and what Iyengar refers to as a “state of supreme bliss” (Iyengar, 1966, p. 51). The Eight Limbs of Yoga were not specifically coded quantitatively within the research; however, themes from within the Eight Limbs were observed during the open coding qualitative process.

Shri K. Pattabhi Jois is another renowned Indian yoga teacher known for helping to bring yoga to the West. Jois created the popular Vinyasa flow of Ashtanga yoga, which has become a model for several fitness-oriented yoga classes in the modern era. Jois created the *Asanas* of Ashtanga as a means for entering the Eight Limbs of Yoga, outlined in *Yoga Mala* originally published in 1962. Jois defines yoga as the “path, or way which we follow or by means of which we can attain something” (Jois, 2002, p. 4) and is “the means to the realization of one’s true nature” (Jois, 2002, p. 5). Jois asks, “How can we make the mind one-pointed so that we may see the Universal Self? This is what ashtanga yoga teaches” (Jois, 2002, p. 6).

## **The Commercialization of Yoga**

Love (2006) examined yoga’s arduous journey through American media, from being mocked and made fun of, to being viciously attacked and scrutinized at the end of the 19th century, during an era of immigration and extreme xenophobia. Love uncovers the story of the media’s portrayal from times when “yoga has been feared, loathed, mocked, kicked to the fringes of society, associated with sexual promiscuity, criminal fraud, and runaway immigration” (p. 81) to currently a time of extreme attraction and lucrative business.

Jain (2015) explored how yoga had transitioned from a countercultural practice to a pop culture phenomenon through yogic entrepreneurs. Pop culture has increased the demands of a global market for yoga, reflecting a heightened desire for beauty, flexibility, and fitness as well as goals of stress reduction (Jain, 2015). Jain (2015) described the transition between premodern yoga systems and yoga in today’s society, “When we think of yoga today, most of us envision spandex-clad, perspiring, toned bodies brought together in a room filled with yoga mats and engaged in a fitness ritual set apart from day-to-day life” (p. 1). In several ways, Instagram has become another modern tool for yoga and yoga entrepreneurs to “package” the practice, and has been marketed as a means for self-development (Jain, 2015).

Deshpandé, Herman, and Lobb (2013) also studied the branding of yoga, highlighting yoga “gurus.” Guru is the Sanskrit word for teacher, guide, or master. Deshpandé, Herman, and Lobb (2013) distinguished the difference between the traditional yogic meaning of “guru” and the modern meaning of “guru,” which has come to signify celebrities within the yoga community who use their credibility to create a brand that sells. The branding of yoga has led to a six billion dollar industry. However, Shukla (2010, para. 1) pointed out that this type of fitness and image-oriented branding of yoga has created a controversy in the yoga community, especially amongst more traditional practitioners, such as Hindus in America who associate yoga with having Hindu roots.

Modern perceptions of yoga have been directly associated with greater health, wellness, physical strength, beauty, and happiness (Jain, 2015). However, within Jois’ explanation of the Eight Limbs of Yoga, it is explicitly stated that practicing yoga for these reasons will not fulfill the true path to yogic enlightenment. As stated in *Yoga Mala*, “Practicing yoga for the sake of one’s health, a firm body, or enjoyment is not the right approach,” (Jois, 2002, p. 26). Yoga in modern society is often used as a tool for self-development. Although traditional practice places a high importance on achieving one’s highest Self, freeing one’s Self from the dominance of the ego is also a core yogic principle (Iyengar, 1966).

These are examples of the disconnect between principles of the traditional yoga practice and the way yoga is framed, practiced, and viewed today in modern Western society. With an increasingly interconnected world reliant and active on social media, and with yoga’s increasing popularity in the West, it is important to assess the relationship between yoga’s popular presence on Instagram and these core principles of yoga as taught by traditional yoga gurus.

To guide this study, the following three research questions were asked:

R1: To what extent are the top yoga posts on Instagram reframing the traditional practice of yoga?

R2: What themes and patterns most prominently emerge within the top yoga posts on Instagram?

R3: To what extent are these themes coherent with the traditional practice of yoga?

### III. Method

The study content analyzed 100 yoga posts on Instagram. The author searched Instagram with the hashtag yoga (#yoga) and selected the top 10 posts under the category “top posts” over 10 random days in October 2015. Occasionally, posts selected had little or nothing to do with yoga, but simply classified as such because the users would tag #yoga, for whatever reason, possibly to gain more circulation/likes. These posts were discarded for this study, along with yoga videos.

According to Instagram (2015), “top posts appear on trending hashtags and places to show you some of the popular posts tagged with that hashtag or place,” (specific location). The algorithm used to curate these posts was not found.

This study analyzed three elements of posts: images, captions, and hashtags a user employed when posting the image. First, all 100 static images were checked for the presence of the following five characteristics:

1) Person(s) depicted in the image was wearing “minimal clothing.” If the person was wearing only a sports bra with no shirt, no pants, or a bathing suit, the image received a point for the presence of this category;

2) The person displayed an “advanced” posture. In this case, an advanced yoga posture included any type of arm balance, handstand, headstand, contortionist pose, or a demonstration of extreme flexibility or strength beyond the average human’s capacity. Discretion remained up to the researcher;

3) The person depicted was of thin and/or “fit” body type;

4) One or more women were depicted in the image; and

5) The image was outdoors. The specific reason for setting up this category was to test images’ consistency with traditional yogic instructions that explicitly state that yoga should not be practiced in the open air and that “the body should not be exposed to open air for a period of one half hour after practicing” (Jois,

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2002, p. 26). It is important to note, though, that this is not universal to all yogic teachings and was only found to be emphasized by Jois.

In addition to this quantitative coding method, a qualitative open coding method was also applied to the visual images to look for additional patterns, trends, and nuances. The open qualitative method was also done by analyzing caption text and hashtags included by the user.

## IV. Findings and Discussion

Based on the five-category content analysis, the author found at least 65% of images have at least one of the five characteristics, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: The image characteristics of the top 100 Yoga posts on Instagram**

Coding Category	Total number of images present out of 100 (n=100)
1. Minimal clothing - no shirt and/or pants/bathing suit	65
2. Advanced posture	80
3. Thin/fit body type	86
4. Woman	76
5. Nature/outdoor setting	72

*Clothing:* Among the 100 images, 65% of the images in the sample depicted an individual wearing minimal clothing, often revealing a hyper-toned/fit body that was generally very thin and slender. When it comes to a thin/fit body, it reached 86%. Only two images in the data sample depicted overweight practitioners (Refer to *Figure 1* and *2*).



Figure 1. An overweight practitioner



Figure 2. An overweight practitioner

Advanced posture and body type: 80% of the images in the sample depicted the practitioner in an advanced posture. Thin/fit body types were more likely to display an advanced posture than other types. Handstands and arm balance variations were the main types of advanced poses being demonstrated, placing a high importance on the physical/asana element of the practice, whereas virtually none of the other Eight Limbs were present. Physical strength was conveyed more often through images than captions or hashtags that used #strength, #fit, #getfit #yogastrong, or #corestrength.

Gender: 76% of the images in the sample contained women. Yoga has been marketed in today's Western society mainly for females, as represented by modern celebrity gurus, like former model turned yogi Tara Stiles (Deshpandé et al., 2013). However, in traditional yoga, women were not allowed to partake in the practice until the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Steensma, 2014).

Outdoor setting: Within the sample, 72% of images were depicted in an outdoor setting, with nature being an integral aesthetic theme. This represents another direct disparity between traditional yoga and yoga on Instagram, as the traditional practice advised practitioners to only practice indoors and refrain from being exposed to open air for at least one half hour after practicing (Jois, 2002).

## V. Analysis

Based mainly on the aesthetics of each image, the presence of “selective self-presentation” was overwhelmingly present within the data sample. The majority of posts within the sample depicted nearly flawless bodies and images that were naturally appealing to the eye. The images were in optimal perfection. The majority of images in the sample were high quality, well framed, colored and composed, and depicted nearly flawless human figures demonstrating advanced yoga postures, as shown in *Figure 3* and *4*.



*Figure 3.* A high-quality, well-framed, colored and composed, and depicted nearly flawless human figure



*Figure 4.* A high-quality, well-framed, colored and composed, and depicted nearly flawless human figure

The theme of health/wellness in accordance with inspiration was also a prominent pattern that emerged. “Fitspiration” surfaced regularly within the majority of posts, mainly as the hashtag (#fitspiration) along with #fitspo, #inspiration, #yogainspiration, #inspiredyogi, #beinspired, and #motivation. In addition, many of the textual captions encompassed themes regarding inspiration and motivation. The user would often post a longer form of caption as if she were directly speaking to the receiver. This trend of encouraging the receiver to practice yoga is somewhat related to the second limb of yoga *Niyama*, or self-discipline. *Niyama* was not once explicitly cited within the data sample, but the theme of proactivity and disciplined work ethic was common within user captions, as shown in *Figure 5* on the next page.



Figure 5. A thin woman demonstrating an advanced yoga posture.

Many other captions in the sample reflected the same theme: “If you want something, there is no one stopping you but yourself . . . Live your dream and don’t be afraid to go for it!” (@northcarolina\_yogagirl, Instagram, October 26, 2015). The theme of “living one’s dream” was one that consistently surfaced throughout the sample along with several hashtags related to this pattern, including #liveyourlife, #liveyourdream, and #followyourdreams.

#fitspiration, which appeared frequently, has been shown to have a negative effect on body image (Tiggemann et al., 2015). This emphasis on fitspiration, combined with the fit/thin body type dominantly represented within top yoga posts on Instagram, demonstrates a sharp contrast to traditional yogic principles. Jois (2002) said that yoga should not be practiced for the sake of outward appearance of physicality and specifically discourages yogis from practicing yoga for physical strength and physical fitness.

The only concrete representation of the Eight Limbs in their definitive form was present within the *Asana* and *Pranayama* limbs, highlighting the physical practice and the life force breath used to guide the physical practice. These limbs were minimally present. Some poses, in which the sender provided a step-by-step guide for the receiver to practice the pose, contained the Sanskrit word for the pose. In the image below, the user @laurasykora challenged her followers to try the pose Eka Pada Galavasana, or “Flying Pigeon” (See Figure 6).

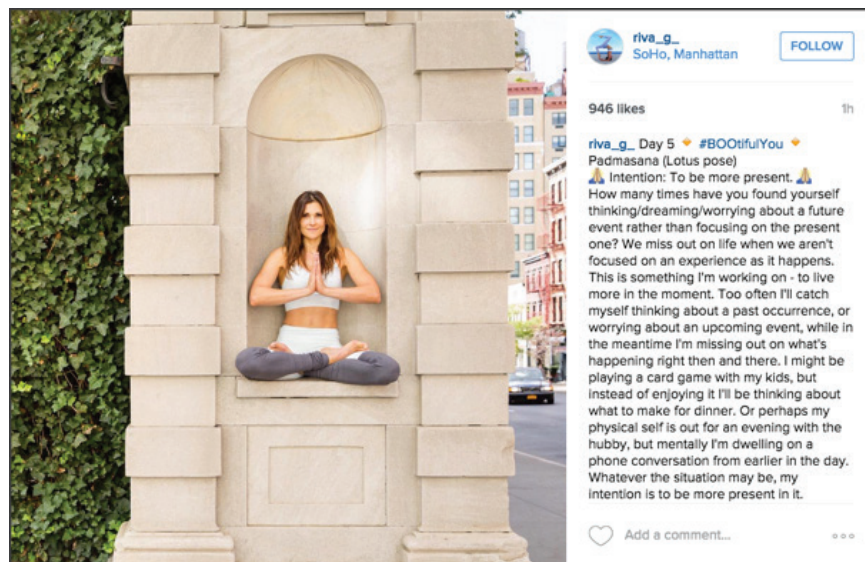


Figure 6. A well-known yoga practitioner demonstrating an advanced arm balance.



Although the user described the pose clearly while accurately citing and emphasizing the traditional Sanskrit language for demonstration, traditional teachings advise yoga learners against the general practice of learning yoga postures from images: “Yoga should never be learned from reading books or looking at pictures. It should only be learned under the guidance of a Guru who knows the yogic science and is experienced in its practice” (Jois, 2002, p. 28).

One recurring theme in the sample was the value of being present and content. These are core principles of traditional yoga and highly emphasized in classic yogic text. These goals may be achieved through the Eight Limbs and experienced in full form during the final limb, *Samadhi*. During *Samadhi* “there remains no sense of ‘I’ or ‘mine’ as the working of the body, the mind and the intellect have stopped as if one is in deep sleep,” (Iyengar, 1966, p. 52). Although *Samadhi* was never directly referenced, messages implying this were presented, primarily as the theme of being fully present in contentment (See *Figure 7*).



*Figure 7.* The traditional yoga theme of “presence” is represented in the user’s caption.

User @riva\_g\_ captioned one post with “Intention: to be more present . . . This is something I’m working on - to live more in the moment. Whatever the situation may be, my intention is to be more present in it” (@riva\_g\_, Instagram, October 21, 2015).

Although several of the messages in the captions demonstrated an attempt by the user to connect to principles within the traditional practice, there was a clear disconnect between the two. Rarely any of them placed an emphasis on clear-cut yogic themes within the traditional texts.

However there were exceptions to this trend. For example, the user @dylanwerneryoga directly cited Patanjali in the caption of one of his posts: “In the yoga sutras, Patanjali says that for a posture to be an asana it must have two qualities. Sthiram- effort and Sukham- ease” (@dylanwerneryoga, Instagram, October 28, 2015). This user demonstrates connectivity to the traditional practice and an active effort to incorporate these principles into his generated Instagram content (See *Figure 8* on the next page).





Figure 8. The traditional Yoga Sutras is cited in the user's caption.

Self-development was a major trend while emphasizing both physical and mental health with overall wellbeing as the main goal. Encouragement and inspiration to achieve this goal was prominent, with a considerable significance placed on happiness. Images, captions, and hashtags were used to inspire viewers to achieve optimal physical ability, especially through images that reflected not only strong bodies, but also a sense of joy, peace, and fulfillment. This is consistent with the traditional practice, which emphasizes the importance of achieving optimal physical and mental wellbeing. Iyengar (1966) discussed this important element of the yoga practice when he wrote, "To the yogi his body is the prime instrument of attainment. If this vehicle breaks down, the traveler cannot go far. If the body is broken by ill-health, the aspirant can achieve little" (p. 24). While images reflected this principle, however, they did not fully recognize the true purpose for achieving optimal wellbeing. In traditional yoga, the health of an individual is only used as a means for connecting to a higher state of enlightenment, with both the "Universal Self" and God (Iyengar, 1966). A healthy body and mind are deemed crucial for achieving "supreme bliss" and for connecting with God, which was not a theme present within the selected sample.

## VI. Conclusion

The study found themes and values from the top yoga posts on Instagram, such as fitness, fitspiration, inspiration, being present, and happiness. While these themes mirror elements within traditional teachings, very few of the yoga posts analyzed directly reflect traditional teachings.

The findings mirror previous research that has shown how yoga has transformed from ancient India to the present day, coherent with the West's emphasis on yoga as a physical practice for the obtainment of fitness, health, and stress-reduction. The image-based culture of yoga on Instagram also suggests that this social media platform has become another tool for yoga instructors, "gurus," and practitioners to brand and market themselves.

Yoga on Instagram has become far more about the physical body, and its physical appearance, than anything else. This trend is in extreme conflict with the teachings of traditional yoga that discourages using yoga to attain such goals of physical strength and beauty. Although having a strong and healthy body is important to the yoga practice, the teachings write that it should be used only as a vehicle to achieve a higher power, a theme that was almost nonexistent within the examined sample.

## Acknowledgments

This author is thankful to Glenn Scott, associate professor at Elon University, for his supervision and advice, without which the article could not be published. The author would also like to thank Julie Lellis, associate professor and associate department chair at Elon University, for her guidance and inspiration. The author also appreciates numerous reviewers who have helped revise this article.

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# A Content Analysis of Celebrity Instagram Posts and Parasocial Interaction

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## Abstract

*Instagram allows users to share a snapshot of their lives with a mass audience in a matter of seconds. This capability and power has not gone unnoticed by celebrities, who are highly aware of the impact their social media accounts have on fans and the relationships they create. The purpose of this study is to find fan engagement and the parasocial phenomenon in celebrities' Instagram activity. It analyzed 50 Instagram posts of three female singers—Taylor Swift, Selena Gomez, and Ariana Grande—to find which categories of posts engage fans. It also investigated the parasocial phenomenon in fans' comments.*

## I. Introduction

African-American Social networking sites (SNS) are applications that allow users to create a personal profile and then connect with people to share information, personal thoughts, and other types of media (Tsiotsou, 2015). These sites range from Facebook featuring a compilation of status updates, messaging, and photo-sharing, to the more recent platform Snapchat, which allows users to send photos to friends that disappear in a matter of seconds. For all platforms, the ideas of connectivity and network-building are key. In most instances, these connections are a result of two-sided relationships; family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, etc. are all people with whom a real-life interaction has occurred. However, there are some instances where this is not the case; these are known as parasocial relationships.

Parasocial relationships are born after continuous parasocial interaction, which often occurs with media figures and celebrities who have extensive fan bases. Fans have a desire for connection, but contact is almost exclusively one-sided. When it comes to SNS, celebrities have millions of followers. Since there are thousands of notifications and replies for each celebrity's post, it is impossible for the celebrity to see and respond to each individual. Research has shown that even with the lack of a personal response from the celebrity, an audience may still respond emotionally. When given a look into a celebrity's personal lives, fans believe themselves to be a part of the network (de Backer, Nelissen, Vyncke, Braeckman, & McAndrew, 2007).

Instagram, an image-driven platform, creates a unique visually oriented storytelling opportunity. The de Backer et al. (2007) article emphasized the importance of Twitter as a new forum for parasocial interaction. Instagram takes this interaction a step further. For fans, it is more than just a status update from their favorite

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**Keywords:** parasocial interaction, Instagram, celebrity, uses and gratification theory, social networking  
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This undergraduate project was conducted as a partial requirement of a research course in communications.

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celebrity; it is an actual look into what that person is doing. This sets the stage for what may develop into parasocial attachment, having implications on an individual's psychological and lifespan development (Stever & Lawson, 2013).

This capability and power has not gone unnoticed by the celebrities themselves; they are highly aware of the impact their social media accounts have on fans and the relationships they create. One of the best examples is pop superstar Taylor Swift. As of September 2015, Swift is the most followed person on Instagram ("Top 100 Instagram, 2015). In addition to the typical self-promotion and personal interest content, she is known for replying to and commenting on fan pictures and posts and sending them the occasional present or two (Borison, 2014). Her fans, like many other celebrity worshipers, are exposed to personal information, and then taken further away from reality and deeper into the world of parasocial interaction.

This study examined celebrities' Instagram activity to find out what posts engage fans and to what extent they are used to promote a community conducive to the development of parasocial interaction.

## II. Literature Review

For this study, a literature review was done on the concept of parasocial interaction, other related theories, studies on Instagram, and research on parasocial interaction focusing on television programming.

### ***Parasocial Interaction and other related theories***

"Parasocial interaction (PSI) refers to an imaginary social relationship, an imaginary friendship, an illusion of face-to-face relationship and an interpersonal interaction between the media user and the consumed media" (Tsiotsu, 2015, p. 403). The concept of PSI was first established in 1956 by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl. It wasn't until the 1970s, when uses and gratifications theory was applied to mass communication research, that interest in PSI took off. Since then, most discussion has occurred in regards to the characteristics of PSI and its psychological and social effects. Parasocial interaction has been studied most often using television personalities such as newscasters or soap opera characters (Giles, 2002). Fans grow to know media figures through observation of their life; some suggest that parasocial interaction may be a functional alternative to interpersonal relationships for certain people (Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

Stever and Lawson (2013) studied Twitter as a channel for communication between celebrities and fans. Using a mixed methodology of qualitative content analysis and open coding in grounded theory, they analyzed the content of 12 entertainment media celebrity accounts. Their study found that these celebrities' communication via Twitter could be broken down into three realms: social, marketing, and parasocial. The "live" component of Twitter "gives a fan the sense of actually 'being there' with the celebrity and, as such, is possibly the most intimate form of media communication used to date by celebrities to connect with their fans" (Stever & Lawson, 2013, p. 351).

For the current study, the author focused on adolescent girls' parasocial interaction since there has been not much research on this age group. One study conducted by Theran, Newberg, and Gleason (2010) found that the majority of girls saw celebrities as media figures and not as interactive partners, as opposed to someone to connect to and build a relationship with. However, most of the women cited in the study were old enough to be the girls' mothers, not girls themselves.

Many theories and ideas dealt with the significance and role of parasocial interaction. Uses and gratifications theory has "three basic tenets: (i) people are goal directed in their behavior, (ii) they are active media users, and (iii) they are aware of their needs and select media to gratify these needs" (Rubin & McHugh, 1987, p. 280). As previously mentioned, some believe that parasocial interaction parallels the interpersonal relationship; the parasocial interaction satisfies the need of an interpersonal relationship the consumer may be lacking.

Researchers, such as Shao (2009), have studied the relationship between social media and uses and gratifications theory. The purpose of the study was to determine the appeal of user-generated media (UGM), such as YouTube and Myspace, which were popular at the time. It found three ways of interacting with UGM: producing, participating, and consuming. The findings showed that people consume UGM for fulfilling their information, entertainment, and mood management needs. People participate in it to interact with other humans and build social connections. Lastly, content is produced for purposes of self-expression and self-

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actualization. These findings lay groundwork and provide background on the role that uses and gratifications theory plays in parasocial interaction via social media.

### ***Instagram***

Instagram is a photo-sharing, video-sharing social networking service that has quickly become one of the top applications for mobile devices. Lee, Lee, Moon, and Sung (2015) found five primary social and psychological motives driving Instagram users: social interaction, archiving, self-expression, escapism, and peeking. Findings revealed “Instagram users are motivated to establish and maintain social relationships with other people using this platform” (Lee et al., 2015, p. 559). The study also suggested there is a certain truth to images that cannot be attained by other SNS such as Twitter; photos shared on Instagram have a credibility that a simple Tweet may lack.

Smith and Sanderson (2015) studied Instagram as a platform for self-presentation. Their method provides a framework for the current study in analyzing content on Instagram. They analyzed both images and caption text because the two elements would not necessarily lead to the same results. They found that the content could be categorized in the following six themes: humanitarian, family driven, personality traits and interests, endorser, dedicated athlete, and socialite.

### ***Research on parasocial phenomena***

The majority of research on parasocial interaction has been done on the relationship between consumers and television characters. Hofner’s study (1996) asked children to name their favorite TV character and explore reasoning for identification and parasocial interaction with said character. These bonds were examined along four traits: the perceived attractiveness, strength, humor, and intelligence of the character. The study found that most of the boys selected same-sex characters while only half the girls did so. An analysis of the character trait results revealed that when dealing with identification, girls prioritized appearance over all else, while males valued intelligence.

Tian and Yoo (2015) studied parasocial interaction with health-related reality television programming, specifically *The Biggest Loser*. They noted that the structure of reality television set it up so that the audience will form an attachment to the participants. Public voting increases audience participation, thus causing the audience to be further invested in the television figures and their lives. This study revealed that parasocial interaction is positively correlated to exposure, or the amount of time spent watching the show.

Existing studies on parasocial behavior and media progressed from a focus on television characters and personalities to celebrities on social media sites such as Twitter. Stever and Lawson’s (2009) study established that there is content meant to communicate with fans that is not driven by marketing and promotional purposes; celebrities often use it to be “real” with fans. However, they do not delve much past establishing the existence of such content.

The current study explored how this parasocial phenomenon unfolds on Instagram among their users. The study asked two research questions:

RQ1: What types of messages do celebrities post to Instagram?

RQ2: What type of content gets the most response and to what extent is this response parasocial?

## **III. Methods**

For this study, three celebrity Instagram accounts were coded and analyzed for their content. Taylor Swift, Selena Gomez, and Ariana Grande are three young artists who fall in the top five in number of Instagram followers (Tiffany, 2015). These three female singers, about the same age, have quite a large following, indicating a greater opportunity for parasocial interaction.

Modeling the current study on a study by Stever and Lawson (2013), the author did content analysis to effectively analyze celebrity Instagram accounts. Content analysis is generally used for “sorting messages into different categories according to some set of classification criteria” (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009, p. 42). Textual analysis was also employed to explore the parasocial phenomenon. First, the most recent 50

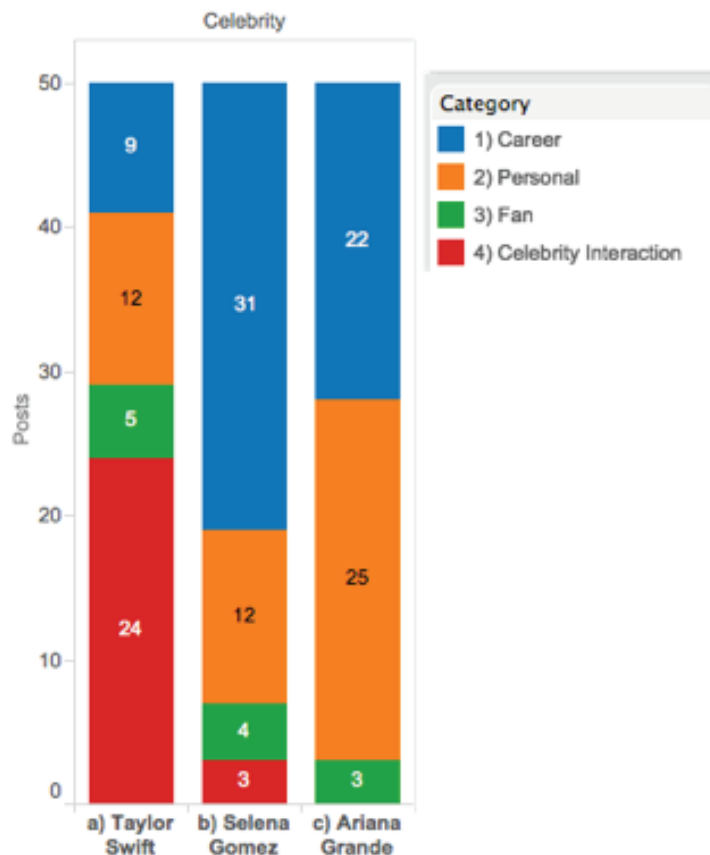
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Instagram posts by Swift, Gomez, and Grande each as of October 14, 2015, were coded to find the type of content and the level of fan engagement. Textual analysis was done on the most recent 20 comments, as of November 4, 2015, to determine parasocial interaction. This included comments where the user mentioned the celebrity directly and instances of personal in-depth messaging that implied a deeper relationship or connection with the celebrity.

## IV. Findings

A content analysis of the three artists led to four categories of career, personal, fan, and celebrity interaction. The career posts involved anything related to music, awards, promotional appearances, and product endorsements. Personal content included likes, dislikes, familial events, and events/gatherings the general public would not otherwise know about. Fan posts were anything directed at the fans as a whole and typically included “you” in the caption, indicating communication with the celebrity’s audience. Celebrity interaction included content where other celebrities/media were tagged in an acknowledgement of interaction between them.

A total of 150 Instagram posts were divided into four different categories: career (62), personal (49), fan (12), celebrity interaction (27). Overall, the celebrities’ careers were the most common topic, but when looking at each celebrity individually, this is not the case, as shown in *Figure 1*. Taylor Swift’s posts were primarily directed at other celebrities (24), followed by her personal life, her career, and fan interaction. Swift was on tour when this research was conducted, so many of her posts were assumed to be related to her career. Contrary to the expectation, her posts leaned toward celebrity interaction because she infamously invited celebrity friends to join her on stage. She was often interacting with them, through tags and mentions, rather than posting about the tour itself. Selena Gomez’s Instagram was filled with posts promoting her new album *Revival*, making up the majority of the career (31) category, followed by her personal life, including travel and hanging out with friends, fan interaction, and posts interacting with fellow celebrities. Ariana Grande posted about her personal life (25), followed by career and fan. Celebrity interaction scored a zero. If her brother Frankie J. Grande had been treated as a celebrity based on his growing popularity, however, her interaction with him would have led to an increase in the celebrity interaction category.



*Figure 1.* The categories of Instagram posts by celebrity

Fan engagement was measured through the number of likes and the number of comments the three celebrities’ posts garnered, as shown in *Figure 2* on the next page. For a relative comparison of two measurements, likes used bars measured by the left axis, and comments with a gantt line plotted against the right axis.

In terms of likes per category, Swift’s personal posts received the most likes (1.56 million), followed by

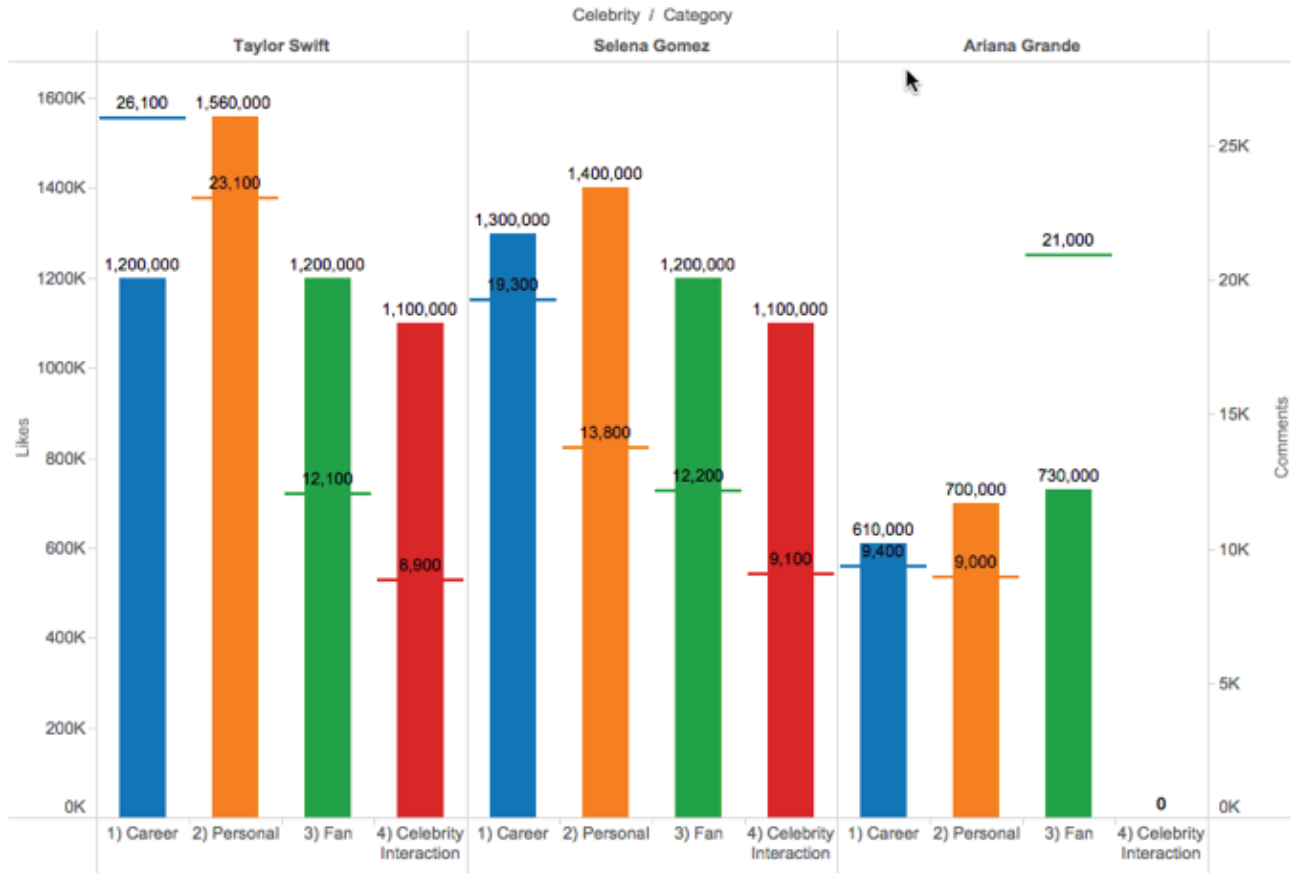


Figure 2. Average number of likes and comments per category

career, fan content, and celebrity interaction. Gomez followed the same pattern as Swift. On the other hand, Grande’s likes came most from the category of fans (.73 million), followed by personal life and fan-related.

The gantt lines representing the volume of comments on each category showed that Swift and Gomez are similar, getting most from career, followed by personal, fan and celebrity interaction. On the other hand, Grande garnered the most comments from the category of fan, followed by career and personal.

Proportionally, the number of likes each artist received on each category is much greater than the corresponding number of comments, as shown in Figure 2. The tick mark interval for likes is 200K, while the tick mark for comments was displayed at a far larger scale on the same chart. It’s reasonable because clicking on the like button would take far less time than writing out a comment. When scrolling through an Instagram feed, users will probably be flooded with hundreds of posts a day. To read others’ comments before writing their own, or just writing an independent comment requires greater interaction and engagement than just liking it.

This study focuses on Instagram rather than Twitter, and although Instagram does not have the same conversational nature and functionality of Twitter, audiences are still engaging with Instagram content in a parasocial way as shown one Instagram comment below:

*“Hello Taylor, my name is Katelyn this is my mom’s Instagram. And I love u. I was at your concert at Kansas City Spirit Center and I just wanted to say. I love you so much and I listen to your music every night before I go to bed and I have posters of you all over my room I love you so much and I just wanted let you know that I’m 10 years old and I still love you.” (via @mommajb2)*



In the current study, parasocial interaction was measured via textual analysis. What fans wrote was coded as being parasocial if the comment mentioned the celebrity directly, or if the comment addressed the celebrity in a personal manner. Either way, they established a sense of a one-sided relationship. The act of mentioning the celebrity in a comment begs for attention, even though the celebrity in question may never respond. Fans would feel as if they were writing directly to a celebrity when they write personal letter-style comments on the celebrity’s post, although their comments would be never replied to.

The number of the total comments for each category is shown with bars; and the percentage of parasocial comments out of all comments are shown as dots in *Figure 3*.

The positive relationship between the number of comments and the level of parasocial relationship exists only in the career category. Swift (19%), Grande (10.5%) and Gomez (10.5%) all received the volume of comments that consist with the level of parasocial interaction in this category. For Swift, fan elicited the same parasocial response as career, followed by celebrity interaction and personal. The parasocial level reached more than 10% in all categories, implying a high level of close relationship felt by her fans. Gomez and Grande scored a parasocial level of below 10%, except for career.

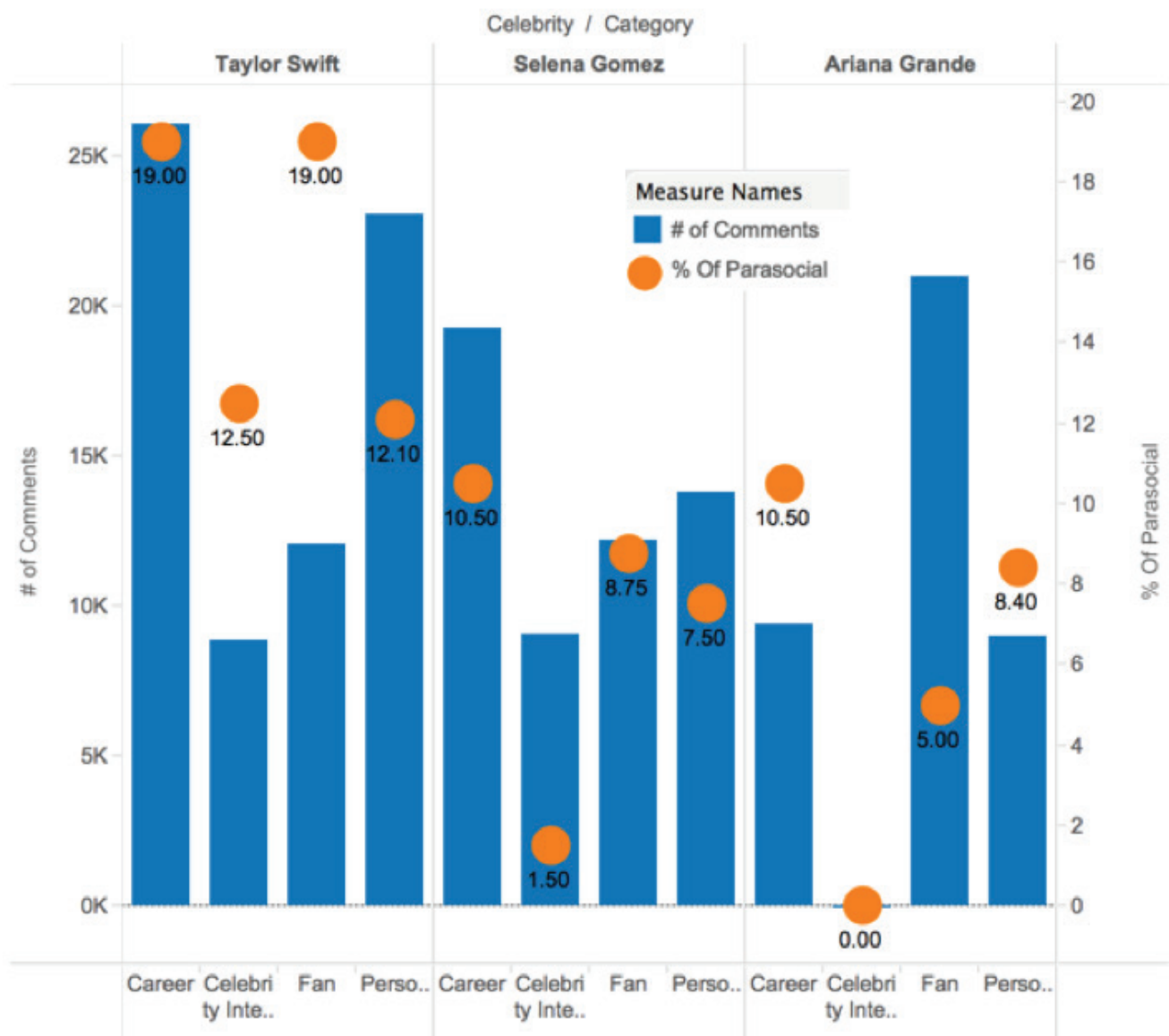


Figure 3. Percentage of parasocial interaction among comments in each category

## V. Suggestions for future studies

Future studies could take the current study a step further with examining responses from users with uses and gratifications theory. As Shao's (2009) did, future studies may look at engagement in user-generated media for social interaction and community development through the uses and gratification lenses. Behaviors, such as rating, saving, sharing, and commenting on content, are meant to fulfill a user's social needs. There is a chance that these interactions will decrease the user's loneliness, depression, isolation, and increase self-acceptance and acceptance by others. If this is the case, then @mommjb2, who was mentioned earlier, is somehow gratified by this interaction with Swift. Again, celebrities of this status have millions of followers, but only thousands of comments, so there must be something motivating each user who takes the time to leave a comment. The chances of Swift actually seeing this post is slim to none, yet @mommjb2 took the time to post the comment.

Another approach is to look at these findings from the perspective of identity development. For this study, the majority of Swifties, Arianators, and Selenators, as they are self-referred to, are adolescent girls. And for adolescents, the adoration of celebrities is a normal part of identity development (McCutcheon, Ashe, Houran, & Maltby, 2003). Though Theran, Newberg, and Gleason (2010) found that most adolescents viewed celebrities as media figures, others have shown that most adolescents experience a strong attachment to a celebrity at some point in their lives. Girls who view these celebrities as idols may allow them to influence their attitudes or beliefs (Giles & Maltby, 2004). Further exemplifying this point is @london.mconachie, who left this comment, *"I love u Ari ur my idol. I want to be just like you."* An idolization of Grande is expressed to the point that @london.mconachie states a desire to be just like her. This is significant because of a potential correlation between celebrity-produced content and identity development of adolescent girls.

One limitation of this study is that it focused solely on artists, so the findings cannot be generalized to all celebrities. For example, the draw to the career-related content may be a trend exclusive to the music industry. It would be worthwhile to see if this is the same with actors, models, athletes, and other media figures.

## VI. Conclusion

This study aimed to learn what kind of content celebrity Instagram accounts sent out to fans. Furthermore, this study sought to determine what type of content gets the most response and to what extent that response falls in the realm of parasocial interaction.

Their messages, 150 posts, were divided into four different categories: career (62), personal (49), fan (12), celebrity interaction (27). As far as what type of content gets the most response, there is no clear answer. On average, Swift and Gomez both received the most likes on personal posts while Grande's were posts ones that interacted with fans to some degree.

While Grande's most commented on were also fan, Swift and Gomez received the most comments on posts related to their careers. Although the type of content that was eliciting fan engagement was inconsistent among the celebrities, the greatest percentage of parasocial-like behavior occurred on career-related content for all three.

## Acknowledgements

This author is thankful to Glenn Scott, associate professor at Elon University, for his supervision and advice, without which the article could not be published. The author also appreciates numerous reviewers who have helped revise this article.

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# How YouTube Developed into a Successful Platform for User-Generated Content

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## Abstract

*Since its development, YouTube, the world's third most popular online destination, has transformed from a video-sharing site into a job opportunity for content creators in both new and mainstream media. Based on content analysis, the study examined how three prominent YouTubers have created a successful personal brand. Analysis revealed the common characteristics that these online celebrities shared, the appeal of their content to viewers, and their use of traditional media to strengthen their branding. The study also found that younger viewers prefer watching YouTube videos because they were able to relate to the authenticity of user-generated content.*

## I. Introduction

On October 2, 2010, Felix Kjellberg uploaded a 2-minute YouTube video of himself speaking on camera while playing a video game. Today, Kjellberg, better known by his YouTube alias, "PewDiePie," uploads to an online audience of more than 40 million subscribers.

At just 24, Kjellberg has developed his online persona into a brand name that pulls in an estimated \$4 million in ad sales a year (Kain, 2014). Kjellberg is not alone. An astonishing number of individuals have made YouTube their career. With consistent viewing from cable's most sought-after age demographic, ages 18 to 49, YouTubers like Kjellberg have formed a virtual yet powerful relationship with their viewers (Luscombe, 2015). User participation helps in creating the stability of loyal audiences. The wide variety of content makes YouTube a place where just about anyone can find a video that interests them, whether they are looking for Kjellberg's video game commentary or want to watch a beauty guru's daily makeup routine. Of the 3.2 billion people who have Internet access, more than 1 billion are accessing YouTube videos (Luscombe, 2015). Founded in 2005 as a platform where amateur users could upload and share their videos online, YouTube has now established itself as a part of the entertainment industry.

Since its development, YouTube has transformed from a video-sharing site into a job opportunity for content creators in both new and mainstream media. This paper used content analysis of three influential YouTubers—Felix Kjellberg (PewDiePie), Zoe Sugg (Zoella), and Grace Helbig (itsgrace)—to examine how YouTube has evolved and developed into a career platform during the past decade. It tried to identify what makes a YouTube channel successful through examining the qualities of three influential YouTubers who each

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**Keywords:** YouTube, user-generated content, personal branding, content creators, viewers  
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This undergraduate project was conducted as a partial requirement of a research course in communications.

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represent one of the site's most popular content categories.

## II. Literature Review

This literature review described how YouTube started as a site to distribute user-generated content and later has developed into a platform where an individual can build a personal brand and turn it into a career.

Before analyzing the rise and success of Felix Kjellberg, Zoe Sugg, and Grace Helbig, it is important to understand how YouTube has grown as a content-sharing platform around the world. Founded by Chad Hurley, Steven Chen, and Jawed Karim, YouTube launched with little fanfare in June 2005. As Burgess and Green (2009) explained in their book, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, "YouTube was one of a number of competing services aiming to remove the technical barriers to the widespread sharing of video online. The website provided a very simple, integrated interface within which users could upload, publish, and view streaming videos without high levels of technical knowledge" (p. 1). YouTube was comparable to other video-start ups at the time until Google acquired the site for \$1.65 billion in October 2006 (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 1). The site has steadily gained popularity, and since 2008 it has consistently been in the top ten most visited sites globally (Morreale, 2014). Almost a decade later it is the world's third most popular online destination with availability in 61 languages and a million advertisers (Luscombe, 2015).

Since being purchased by Google, YouTube has evolved from a site where amateur and ad-free videos were posted to an online destination that is now consumed by commercialized and professional videos. But there is another side as Morreale (2014) wrote, "Its tagline 'Broadcast Yourself' invites ordinary users to take an active part in creating the material they consume. At the same time, less obvious is that YouTube is a business whose purpose is to generate profit" (p. 114). About this institutionalization of YouTube, Kim (2012) wrote, "If the pre-Google era of YouTube is characterized by amateur-produced videos in an ad-free environment, the post-Google purchase stage is characterized by professionally generated videos in an ad-friendly environment. Because of YouTube's popularity, industries have shown a deep interest in monetizing it" (p. 56). This interest in monetizing content has allowed channels that started as a hobby to develop into a source of income for content creators.

Describing this development from hobby to job, Lavaveshkul (2012) wrote, "Their beginnings were simple and they produced their videos from beginning to end: they wrote the script (if there was one), acted, did the camera work (oftentimes using an inexpensive camera on a tripod), and did the post production work as well" (p. 378). To a viewer, the lack of professional lighting, scripts and a set made the experience of watching a YouTube video more relatable. Kjellberg further elaborated on this experience in an interview when he said, "Unlike many professionally produced shows, I think I've established a much closer contact with my viewers, breaking the wall between the viewer and what's behind the screen. . . . What I and other YouTubers do is a very different thing. . . . My fans care in a different way about what they are watching" (Grundberg & Hansegard, 2014). Sugg also recognized the importance of creating an environment that is relatable to viewers when she said in an interview, "You want to make it a cozy environment and put in your own personal touches. I just sit on the edge of my bed because for me your bed is the coziest place to be, and you want people watching to feel as comfortable as you are filming" (Tan, 2015, p. 98 ). Sugg's and Kjellberg's approach to YouTube has helped them attract and keep the attention of not only brands that want to work with them, but also loyal viewership.

YouTube has more American viewers between the ages 18-49 than any cable network, helping increase its revenue by an estimated \$1 billion over the last year (Luscombe, 2015). YouTubers have the attention that advertisers and cable networks desire, as explained by Burling (2015), who wrote, "Book publishers are starting to pay more attention to a form of expression that has exploded over the past decade: fictional web series and vlogging, or video blogging, found mostly on YouTube. Why? That's where the kids are" (p. 22). YouTube is now the ultimate destination for kids logging on to the Internet, Luscombe pointed out, mentioning an anecdote: "*Variety* asked a bunch of teens to choose their favorite stars among 20 names, the top five were all from YouTube" (p. 72).

With consistent views from a critical mass of audience, YouTube has created an opportunity for the average person to build his or her personal brand. Kozinets and Cerone (2014) wrote, "Social branding

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has been creating grassroots ‘micro-celebrities’ with increasing frequency. For personal branders, being storytellers who are capable, yet fascinating and even fantastic is a sound strategy” (p. 21). The influence of a YouTuber’s personal brand is demonstrated through the success of brands wanting to collaborate with content creators, such as Kjellberg, Sugg, and Helbig.

Based on the research from the literature view, this study aimed to answer three questions about YouTube:

RQ1: What are the qualities of user-generated content that make it appealing to viewers?

RQ2: What are similar characteristics that popular YouTubers have in common?

RQ3: How have YouTubers utilized traditional media to help build their personal brand?

### III. Method

This study analyzed elements within the videos of three prominent YouTubers and the structure of their channel. They were selected based on Lavaveshkul’s (2012) study, which analyzed the top 10 most subscribed to YouTube channels of 2012. These 10 channels could be divided into three categories of gaming, comedy, or how-to. The current study selected one channel from each category based on their popularity on YouTube. The three YouTubers were Felix Kjellberg (gaming), Grace Helbig (comedy), and Zoe Sugg (how to).

To find answers to the research questions, the author developed 18 questions, based on the studies of Lavaveshkul (2012) and Biel and Gatica-Perez (2011). (Refer to Appendix for a list of all questions). Some answers were found by examining the videos of the three YouTubers on November 9 and 10, 2015. Others were found from Social Blade, a statistics website that tracks growth across social media platforms including YouTube (“Track YouTube,” 2015).

Content analysis was used for this study because of its characteristics that Neuendorf (2002) described. According to him, “Content Analysis may be briefly defined as the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics. It includes the careful examination of human interaction” (p. 1). Content analysis allows for an objective comparison of the three channels. Instead of focusing on viewers’ opinions, this study focused on the content of each individual’s channel.

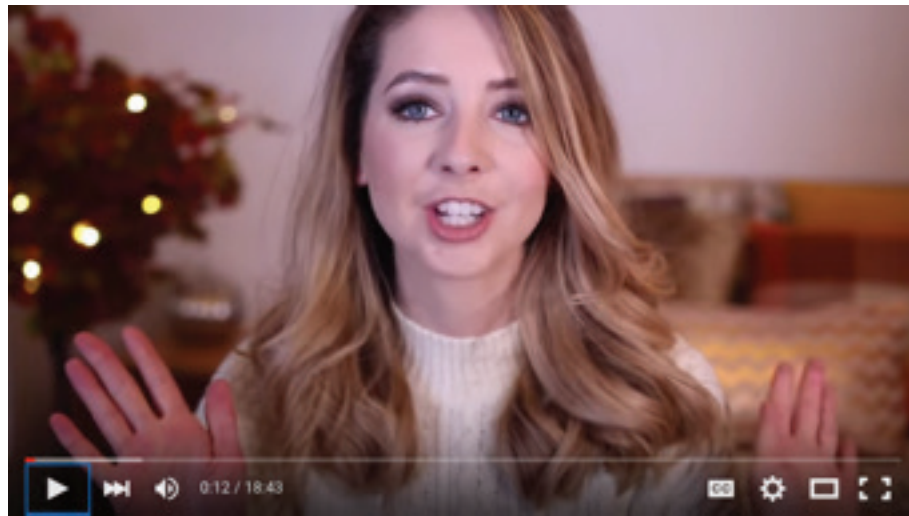
### IV. Results

The current author analyzed the layout of the three Youtubers’ landing page. Both Sugg and Kjellberg featured logos on their channel. On the other hand, instead of logos, Helbig displayed in a banner her uploading schedule and a slogan that stated, “What a Charming Idiot.” Only Kjellberg displayed advertising on the landing page of his channel. For example, his banner advertised his book, *This Book Love You*, which was released in October 2015, as shown in *Figure 1*. A commercial did not play before Kjellberg’s newest video. Instead a banner advertisement was displayed at the bottom of his video. On the other hand, Sugg and Helbig displayed an advertisement in their most recent videos before the clip began.



Figure 1. Kjellberg’s logo and advertising on his banner

The three YouTubers shared similarities, like their filming location, which is primarily inside their homes. Sugg sat primarily at the end of her bed, as shown in *Figure 2*, while Helbig and Kjellberg usually sat at a desk. Even though Kjellberg (gaming), Sugg (how-to), and Helbig (comedy) represented different categories, all three YouTubers talked about objects within their videos. Kjellberg made commentary while sitting at a desk and playing a video game. Sugg's content involved baking, reviewing products, hauling items from a store, or talking about a collection of her favorite items throughout the month. Helbig used objects the least among the three, but she still posted a variety of comedic reviews or how-to videos. Each YouTuber linked their various social media sites to the landing page of their YouTube channel. None of them used the "about" feature to describe the content on their channel.



*Figure 2.* Sugg's filming location in the video, "October Favourites | Zoella"

Kjellberg has 40,315,481 subscribers, and 10,341,904,335 overall channel views as of October 2015. His videos garnered 29.6 million views per month on average. His estimated yearly income from YouTube reached between \$1M-\$16.5M. Sugg has 9,458,481 subscribers and 586,711,156 views overall on her channel. She garnered 22.95 million viewers per month. Sugg's estimated yearly income was between \$64.6k-\$1M. Helbig had 2,781,292 subscribers and 156,687,601 views on her channel. Her total views per month was 7.51 million. Helbig's estimated yearly income was between \$22.6K - \$361.1K. The three YouTubers earn income through advertisements placed on their videos, brand deals, and additional projects that generated profit outside of their channel.

They all began posting content more than five years ago. Kjellberg, Sugg, and Helbig each had their own individual uploading schedule. Helbig uploaded Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, while Sugg uploaded every Sunday. Kjellberg uploaded content the most frequently, with at least one or two videos posted daily. Based on their last 10 videos, the average video length for Kjellberg and Helbig was around 7 minutes. Sugg's average video length was about twice that at 15 minutes.

Outside of her channel, Sugg had a product range called "Zoella Beauty," which included a variety of bath products, cosmetic cases, and novelty make-up items. Sugg had written two novels, *Girl Online* and *Girl Online 2*. She also revealed her wax statue in September 2015 for Madame Tussauds London. She has appeared on *The Great British Bake Off* and the cover of *Seventeen Magazine*. In 2013 and 2014 Sugg won "Best British Vlogger" at the Radio 1 Teen Awards, and in 2014 took home the Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Award for "UK Favourite Vlogger." She also won the Teen Choice Award for "Choice Web Star: Fashion/Beauty" both in 2014 and 2015.

In addition to uploading YouTube videos, Helbig hosted her podcast, "Not Too Deep with Grace Helbig." She appeared in a series of Lowe's television commercials and has co-produced and starred in the feature film *Camp Takota*. She was the author of *Grace's Guide: The Art of Pretending to Be a Grown-up* and had a new book, titled *Grace & Style*, coming out the following spring. Helbig also hosted a comedy talk show for E! Entertainment, titled *The Grace Helbig Show*. On October 28, 2015, Helbig uploaded a video, titled "We're Making a Movie," where she announced that she would be creating another movie with fellow YouTubers Hannah Hart, Marmie Hart, and Lionsgate. Unlike Helbig and Sugg, Kjellberg was involved in few

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outside projects. He had released a book, *This Book Loves You*, and a video game, *PewDiePie: Legend of the Brofist*, on iOS and Android. He also won the 2014 Teen Choice Award for “Web Star: Gaming.”

## V. Discussion

This section focused on dealing with the three research questions, the YouTube video qualities that appealed to viewers; common characteristics among the three studied; and how the three used traditional media to strengthen their personal brand.

### ***YouTube’s transformation from video sharing to profitability***

The three YouTubers all began posting videos more than five years ago. Helbig began posting content as early as October 2006, just one year after the site was developed and around the same time that YouTube was purchased by Google. According to Kim (2012), “Since being purchased by Google, YouTube has adopted a new e-commerce model; it puts banner ads in videos or in YouTube pages and shares the revenue with the copyright holders of the videos. The basic idea of selling banner advertisements is to play commercials during the streaming of videos” (p. 57). All three featured advertisements in their videos. An advertisement played before videos even began on Sugg’s and Helbig’s channels, while Kjellberg had a banner placed in his video. Over the past decade, YouTube became a launching pad for careers (Luscombe, 2015). Based on the videos watched throughout this study, Kjellberg, Sugg, and Helbig all mentioned that they used their videos as a source of income.

Kjellberg was then the most subscribed user on YouTube, with over 40 million subscribers and 10 billion overall views on his channel (“Track YouTube,” 2015). His videos generated more views than the world’s population, which was then a little over 7 billion (“Worldometers,” 2015). Grundberg explained, “The 24-year-old Mr. Kjellberg, who created PewDiePie five years ago, had parlayed his persona into a brand name that pulls in the equivalent of \$4 million in ad sales a year, most of it pure profit” (2014). According to *Business Insider*, most YouTube millionaires got paid through advertisements, previews, and sponsored videos. Side projects, such as book deals, also added to their amount of income (Kosoff, 2015). Kjellberg, Helbig, and Sugg all had advertisements display throughout their videos in addition to book deals. Sugg’s book, *Girl Online*, “broke the record for highest first-week sales for a debut author in the U.K., selling 78,109 copies—besting J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* titles and E.L. James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey*” (Burling, 2015, p. 24). Without Sugg’s following on YouTube, her book would likely be just another young adult novel. What began as a place for Sugg, Helbig, and Kjellberg to upload videos as a hobby is now their career.

### ***Appeal to Viewers***

In relation to RQ1, the study found a YouTuber’s authenticity appealed to their viewers. Strangelove (2010) explained, “There is no one authoritative YouTube identity, but there is one dominant YouTube community—the community of amateur videographers. Their numbers will most likely always exceed those of participating celebrities and media corporations” (p. 113). Each YouTuber analyzed in this study began as a normal individual posting videos online. YouTube provided a look into the extraordinary lives of everyday people (Strangelove, p. 127). This study found that all three YouTubers filmed inside their homes either sitting on the edge of their beds or at their desk. They have conversations with a camera through vlogging (video blogging). Burgess and Green (2009) explained, “The vlog reminds us of the residual character of interpersonal face-to-face communication . . . it is a form whose persistent direct address to the viewer inherently invites feedback . . . Traditional media content doesn’t explicitly invite conversational and inter-creative participation” (p. 54). According to Sörman, founder of a YouTuber network in Sweden, “PewDiePie is like a cool friend you have and subscribing to him is almost like Skypeing with him—that’s why viewers are such dedicated fans” (Grundberg & Hansegard, 2014).

All three link their other social media platforms to their YouTube account so they can continue to interact with viewers. Kjellberg’s fans, or “bros” as he called them, were engaged because he took the time to talk about them in videos or answered their questions (Kosoff, 2015). Helbig and Sugg did the same and had created a community for their fans within the Internet. Strangelove (2010) explained, “Participation in online groups leads to a psychological sense of community. People can be deeply engaged in online communities.

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... On YouTube we find groups of individuals who interact around shared interests” (p. 105). Sugg’s biggest piece of advice for creating good content on YouTube was “to be yourself and have fun. If you’re not having fun, no one is going to have fun watching your videos” (Tan, 2015, p. 98). Creating an enjoyable, personable environment distinguishes YouTubers from other celebrities. They are being themselves and creating an environment where the viewer feels as though they are listening to their friend speak. Within this environment viewers are able to engage with an online community that enjoys similar content.

### ***Qualities of Successful YouTubers***

Regarding RQ2 on the qualities that influential YouTubers have in common with one another, the study found the following: Helbig, Sugg, and Kjellberg invited viewers into their homes by filming and vlogging in their bedrooms or living rooms. Biel and Gatica-Perez explained, “Although conversational vlogging is obviously not exclusive of YouTube, the forms of social engagement inherent in vlogging are key features that distinguish YouTube as a platform for creativity and participation around video, rather than just a repository and distribution system” (Biel & Gatica-Perez, 2011). This allows for diverse content even within each YouTuber’s category. Each YouTuber in this study used two elements, background music and objects, throughout their videos. The background music was specific to each YouTuber and became a part of their brand. The music was instrumental and helped to move along the audio of each YouTuber. Objects varied for each YouTuber, but overall Helbig, Sugg, and Kjellberg were each talking about something or someone specific in their videos.

The videos uploaded by each YouTuber in this study varied in length; however, the average video length did not exceed 20 minutes. Although Sugg’s content is about twice as long as Helbig’s and Kjellberg’s, it is still significantly shorter than a traditional 30-minute television program. According to Kim (2012), “YouTube has come to represent what video on the web looks like: short, mostly humorous, and easily accessible” (p. 53). Uploading schedules for each YouTuber varied; however, each individual posts at least once a week. Even though Kjellberg, Sugg, and Helbig did not post content on the same days, each YouTuber has developed their own routine schedule so their viewers know when to expect content. Their viewers consist of a younger demographic, as “YouTube is the ultimate destination for kids logging on the Internet. It pretty much owns kids’ eyeballs at this point. One of its core demographics is 8 to 17 years old” (Luscombe, 2015).

### ***Personal Branding through Traditional Media***

Regarding RQ3 on YouTubers’ reliance on traditional media, this study found that their personal brand became influential by working with traditional media. Helbig’s YouTube channel included segments from her television show, *The Grace Helbig Show*, which ran for eight episodes this past summer. Jeff Olde, executive vice president of E! Entertainment, explained, “This show is a fresh take on the conventional talk show with a very unconventional host who has already captured an enormous fan base of young viewers on the Web” (Stedman, 2015). A traditional network like E! Entertainment utilized user-generated content to gain younger viewers. Helbig is currently working on her second movie with Lionsgate. She even appeared on an episode of *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* in March 2015 (“How Grace”, 2015). Sugg has also made her share of television appearances, including a segment on *The Great British Bake Off*.

Although YouTube draws in more viewers, traditional media such as television or professionally generated content are not going anywhere soon. According to Strangelove (2010), “Amateur video’s proliferation of quick thrills and brief clips also feeds into an attention-deficit generation . . . Fragmentation in itself does not spell doom for television. In the end, even though contemporary audience is highly fragmented, it is still watching commercially produced entertainment” (p. 168-169). YouTubers are not trying to end professionally generated media with their user-generated content. Sugg, Helbig, and Kjellberg are not exclusive to YouTube. They are on television, being nominated for or winning Teen Choice Awards, and each have a published book. To build their personal brand and audience, they have taken advantage of traditional media in addition to their YouTube channel.

### ***Future for YouTube***

With jobs that rely on viewers, it is easy to question the longevity of the online careers of Helbig, Sugg, and Kjellberg. YouTube has completely transformed in 10 years from a site where content was shared to a place where user-generated content thrives. Luscombe (2015) explained, “Not only must the company contend with youth-savvy tech firms—your Snapchats, your Spotifys, your Vines—but established media

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companies are onto the fact that kids are just future users” (p. 75). With increased competition, Helbig, Sugg, and Kjellberg have to maintain their audience while appealing to new viewers. As their young viewers grow older, each YouTube celebrity is faced with the problem of appealing to older loyal fans while still attracting new viewers. Strangelove (2010) explained, “Above all, what the moment of YouTube highlights is the uncertainty surrounding the future of participatory culture, and the complexity arising from the intersection of various changing and competing ideas about what digital media are, or could be, for” (p. 107).

## VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, YouTube has evolved from a content sharing website to a platform for creating user-generated content. An analysis of popular YouTubers explains why viewers find videos from Helbig, Sugg, and Kjellberg entertaining. Regardless of the category they represented, the trip all shared similar video elements including filming location, an uploading schedule, and video length. YouTube is the world’s third most popular online destination because viewers, especially those of a younger demographic, can relate to the authenticity of user-generated content. In addition to their own content, popular YouTubers are utilizing traditional media to build their personal brand. They can be found on bookshelves, on the television screen, and even in a wax museum.

This study had its limitations. The sample size of this study was small. If the size was larger, more data could have been collected that would have further explored the similarities and differences that popular YouTubers share. This study did not focus on the audience of each YouTuber. Future research could be conducted among different age groups to gain more perspective about what viewers like and dislike about user-generated content.

## Acknowledgment

The author would like to extend thanks to Kenn Gaither, associate professor and associate dean at Elon University, for his constant guidance throughout this process, without which this article could not have been written. The author also thanks the School of Communications and the numerous reviewers who have helped revise this article.

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## IX: Appendix

### **Coding Sheet**

#### **General information**

1. Name of YouTuber:
2. Date Retrieved:
3. Location while Filming:
4. Does the person have a logo?
5. Is there advertising on the page?

#### **Questions**

1. What is their most popular video?
  2. What is their total subscriber amount on the day the information is retrieved?
  3. When did they begin posting videos?
  4. How do they describe themselves in their 'about' section?
  5. What is the total amount of channel views?
  6. What is the total view per month as of October 2015?
  7. What other forms of social media do they promote on their landing page?
  8. What is the overall "theme" of their channel?
  9. How many videos do they have uploaded?
  10. What are their estimated yearly earnings?
  11. Does this person have an uploading schedule?
  12. Based on their last 10 videos, what is the average length of one of their videos?
  13. What are some of their brand deals or projects outside of their channel?
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# An Analysis of LEGO's Response to an Attack on its Partnership with Royal Dutch Shell

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## Abstract

*In 2014, Greenpeace launched an attack on a 50-year brand partnership between Danish toy company LEGO and Royal Dutch Shell, an oil and gas corporation. Through the analysis of Greenpeace's campaign and LEGO's responses over a three-month period, this case study examined how Greenpeace influenced LEGO's communications with its consumers and its subsequent decision to terminate its partnership with Shell. Findings suggest that the popularity of a Greenpeace viral video played a role in LEGO's decision, in addition to accusations questioning LEGO's investment in children's futures.*

## I. Introduction

In light of worldwide economic hardship and an increasingly competitive business market, it seems that a family-owned business specializing in the manufacturing of tiny plastic building bricks would be struggling for success. But careful craftsmanship coupled with decades of strategic branding has led the Danish toy company LEGO Group to become one of the most popular toy companies in the world.

However, LEGO's 50-year partnership with oil and gas corporation Royal Dutch Shell caught the attention of Greenpeace in July 2014, which launched a campaign attacking the toy company for supporting a corporation threatening the Arctic environment. Greenpeace's attack on the partnership peaked with its release of a YouTube video titled "LEGO: Everything is NOT awesome," a work by BAFTA-winning creative agency Don't Panic. The video depicted an Arctic landscape that was made of LEGO bricks and taken over by Shell oil drillers, showcasing the environment as it is slowly submerged in oil. Greenpeace used a gloomy cover of "Everything is Awesome," the Academy Award-nominated theme song of *THE LEGO MOVIE*, as background music, and closed the video with a clear call-to-action--viewers have to sign a petition to tell LEGO to end its partnership with Shell.

Following multiple other public demonstrations led by Greenpeace and more than 1 million signatures on a petition to end the LEGO-Shell partnership, CEO of the Lego Group Jørgen Vig Knudstrop released a statement on October 18, 2014, that LEGO will honor the co-promotion contract it signed with Shell in 2011 but not renew the contract once it expires.

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**Keywords:** brand partnerships, crisis communications, stakeholder relations, viral media, non-governmental organizations

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This undergraduate project was conducted as a partial requirement of a research course in communications.

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As social concerns become increasingly relevant to global stakeholders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) wield increasing power over corporate business decision-making. This research examined how LEGO responded to an assault on its partnership with Shell and how Greenpeace's use of viral media to attack LEGO's corporate purpose ultimately drove the toy company to end a successful 50-year brand partnership.

## **II. Literature Review**

To provide theoretical background to interaction between LEGO and Greenpeace, the author did the following literature review focusing on branding partnerships, public relations tactics to promote the activist agendas, stakeholder theory, and situational crisis communication theory.

### ***Creating Branding Partnerships and Brand Associations***

A company's brand, or the unique image or association a consumer may have with a particular product or service, has an important influence over consumer decision-making and should be managed carefully (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). While branding must revolve around creating key associations within the mind of the consumer, companies must also work to differentiate their brands from competitors' in order to establish a strong presence within the consumer market.

Occasionally, however, companies may decide to create a brand alliance or co-brand their products (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). These brand partnerships may be formed to combine positive attributes and potentially to conceal or diminish more negative product attributes, though the effectiveness of this method had not been proven through consumer research. These partnerships often occur between lesser-known brands trying to establish a market presence and more well-known brands (Cunha, Forehand, & Angle, 2015). These partnerships usually result in the lesser-known brand gaining more awareness and positive associations, while the well-known brand does not necessarily benefit from the partnerships.

Two models based on psychological theory have been used to test the effects of brand associations on consumers and their purchasing decisions: the human associative memory theory (Anderson & Bower, 1973) and adaptive network models (Janiszewski & van Osselaer, 2000). Though these models operate based on different principles, both are founded on the idea that consumers can be influenced by both positive and negative brand associations, and consumers' brand perceptions can influence the reputational and financial well-being of a company or organization.

### ***Public Relations and Activism***

Greenpeace and other NGOs are increasingly utilizing public relations tactics to promote their activist agendas and accomplish organizational goals. Many scholars have examined the roles of public relations practitioners as they manage relationships between organizations and activist groups. Ciszek (2015) argued that activism can actually be viewed as a form of public relations. While classic public relations models may not sufficiently represent how activist organizations employ public relations tactics, Ciszek (2015) proposed that activist efforts be viewed through a cultural-economic lens, which bridges the gap between public relations and activism.

To understand how publics may view the communications efforts of activist groups, Jahng, Hong, and Park (2014) examined the effectiveness of moderate versus radical activist group communication strategies. Contrary to their hypothesis that moderate activist groups would gain a more positive perception among publics, they discovered that publics do not tend to perceive a large difference between moderate and radical groups. However, they found that communication strategy itself actually played a larger role in public perception of an activist group. Since public protests were found to be the most preferred communication strategy for both radical and moderate groups, this study suggested that activist groups should focus on selecting appropriate communication strategies, rather than concentrating on promoting their organizations as either moderate or radical.

### ***Stakeholder Theory***

Stakeholders can be defined as "any individuals that can affect or are affected by [an] organization's

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operations” (Daugherty, 2001, p. 395). Stakeholder theory, first coined by Freeman in 1984, discusses the importance of engaging stakeholders with businesses both in benefitting an organization’s mission and reaping positive financial benefits. Since Freeman’s first description of stakeholder theory, other scholars have expanded on this theoretical perspective and applied it to numerous areas of marketing, communications, and business. Kaler (2003) explained that, despite its general divergence, advocates of stakeholder theory have agreed that the main purpose of a business is to serve its particular set of stakeholders, and some stakeholder groups may be valued more than others. A main tenet of stakeholder theory also revolves around the idea that organizations may be morally responsible for the well being of certain stakeholder groups (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). In addition, though a company may claim responsibility for certain stakeholder groups, the idea of stakeholder theory also stems from a need for stakeholders to contribute back to an organization’s mission or financial well being (Freeman, 1984). Organizations must focus on the perceptions of key stakeholders, as these stakeholders often directly contribute to an organization’s financial or reputational goals.

### ***Situational Crisis Communication Theory***

Coombs’ (2007) situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) suggests that an organization’s reputation can be affected by how it responds in a crisis situation, and whether the type of response corresponds with the type of crisis facing the organization. Coombs organized types of crises into three main clusters (victim crises, accident crises, and preventable crises), and proposed recommended responses for each crisis cluster (deny, diminish, and rebuild respectively). Though Greenpeace’s attack on LEGO’s brand partnership with Royal Dutch Shell may not have been perceived as a communications crisis, the framework of Coombs’ situational crisis communication theory can guide the understanding of LEGO’s responses to the *Save the Arctic* campaign, with particular respect to LEGO’s focus on the well being of its stakeholders. A key factor of SCCT is based on the idea that stakeholder perceptions of an organization’s reputation can be harmed if stakeholders attribute responsibility for a crisis to that organization. Organizations must respond appropriately to crises in order to maintain positive stakeholder perceptions.

SCCT has been used to analyze crisis responses for both corporate and nonprofit organizations. Sisco, Collins, and Zoch (2010) examined Red Cross crisis responses over a period of 10 years to assess how often the nonprofit utilized the response strategy according to SCCT. They determined that if the Red Cross had employed the SCCT-recommended strategy more often, the organization could have been able to better repair its reputation during each crisis. Choi (2012) also utilized SCCT to evaluate BP’s response to the Gulf oil spill crisis through the analysis of BP press releases. By analyzing the press releases through SCCT frames and examining key terms communicated in the releases, Choi determined that BP was able to effectively handle the oil spill crisis through its communication efforts to improve damage caused by the spill and acceptance of responsibility for the crisis.

## **III. Methods**

Qualitative research, specifically the method of case study, was used in this research to better understand how activism targeted at a brand partnership affected crisis communication responses to stakeholders. Specifically, the question guiding this research is how LEGO’s communication to its stakeholders evolved in response to Greenpeace’s intensifying campaign. According to Yin (2014), case studies use a theoretical framework with the advantage of exploring multiple sources of evidence. The framework of a case study allows in-depth insight, testing of theoretical prepositions, and a look at the phenomenon as a whole, not just at the single elements of crisis communication, stakeholder engagement, or activism.

The author examined Greenpeace’s activism and LEGO’s response by conducting qualitative content analysis of external and internal documents, such as press releases and blog posts, released by both LEGO and Greenpeace during the three-month period when Greenpeace conducted its campaign against LEGO. Multimedia formats, including the two videos released by Greenpeace (“LEGO: Everything is NOT awesome” and “LEGO: Help children save the Arctic”), were also analyzed. Items from Greenpeace and LEGO, including the two videos, were analyzed to observe the evolution of LEGO’s responses to key Greenpeace messages as the NGO gradually intensified its strategic attack against the brand partnership. Source documents were

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reviewed until the data reached a saturation point (Yin, 2014). Through the analysis of these documents, the author created a comprehensive timeline of the crisis, along with a brief overview of LEGO's corporate philosophy and corporate responsibility programs to provide a deeper context for LEGO's corporate background.

Documents were analyzed systematically through an open-coding approach for emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This qualitative method allowed for in-depth examination of themes and messages communicated by Greenpeace and LEGO. To enhance validity of findings, the author used a case study approach that triangulated findings from three or more sources (Yin, 2014).

## IV. Findings

The following findings covered analysis of LEGO's philosophy and programs and Greenpeace's campaign against the LEGO/Shell partnership and LEGO's responses.

### ***LEGO's Corporate Philosophy and Programs***

LEGO's core philosophy revolves around its founder Ole Kirk Kristiansen's motto: "Det bedste er ikke for godt," or "Only the best is good enough" (Jobbank DK, 2013, para. 1). The LEGO Group is committed to producing only the highest quality products with the mission to "inspire and develop the leaders of tomorrow" (LEGO Group, 2011, para. 1). LEGO's six values (imagination, creativity, fun, learning, caring, and quality) revolve around its commitment to instilling creativity and imagination in children.

Many of LEGO's responsible partnerships incorporate the company's commitment to the lives of children. The LEGO Group funds the LEGO Foundation, an organization that works with schools and families across the world and encourages LEGO's goal of learning through play (LEGO Group, 2013). In addition, the LEGO Group's LEGO Education program focuses specifically on working with educators to provide LEGO-based learning resources to schools around the world (LEGO Education, n.d.).

The LEGO Group also focuses on environmental concerns with the purpose of making "a positive impact on the world our children will inherit" (LEGO Group, 2014a, para. 1). LEGO's approach includes a commitment to reduce carbon emissions and attempts at using and sourcing manufacturing materials in a more responsible manner. LEGO has set a short-term goal for 2016 of becoming carbon positive, implementing a carbon dioxide reduction program among suppliers, pursuing sustainable raw materials, and having zero waste in production by 2020 (LEGO Group, 2014b).

### ***Interactions Between Greenpeace and LEGO About LEGO's Partnership With Shell***

The following highlights how Greenpeace and Lego interacted about the latter's partnership with Shell. The same timeline can be found in a table format in Appendix.

**June 2012** – Greenpeace launched *Save the Arctic* campaign at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, or Rio Summit (Glaser, 2015).

**July 1, 2014** – Greenpeace announced new campaign centered on LEGO. Greenpeace accuses LEGO of "putting sales above its commitment to the environment and children's futures" (Greenpeace, 2014a, para. 2). While staging a protest at a LEGOLAND amusement park in Windsor, England, the environmental group encouraged LEGO to "Save the Arctic" and "Block Shell" (Oster, 2014). In response, LEGO posted a statement to its website about continuing "to explore innovative and creative ways to solve the current environmental issues and deliver in compliance with ever-increasing standards," which was later removed.

**July 2-3, 2014** – Greenpeace tweets staged mini-protest photos, showcasing LEGO figures protesting LEGO's partnership with Shell in front of famous international and national landmarks (Ayeche, 2014). The featured landmarks are located in the United States, France, Chile, Colombia, Brazil, New Zealand, Australia, Spain, Canada, Czech Republic, and Argentina (Greenpeace, 2014b).

**July 8, 2014** – Greenpeace posted "LEGO: Everything is NOT awesome" video on YouTube. The video's description reads:

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We love LEGO. You love LEGO. Everyone loves LEGO. But when LEGO's halo effect is being used to sell propaganda to children, especially by an unethical corporation who are busy destroying the natural world our children will inherit, we have to do something. Children's imaginations are an unspoilt [sic] wilderness. Help us stop Shell polluting them by telling LEGO to stop selling Shell-branded bricks and kits today. Greenpeace is calling on LEGO to end its partnership with Shell to Save the Arctic (Greenpeace, 2014c).

Jørgen Vig Knudstorp, CEO of the LEGO Group, responded with an online statement on Greenpeace using the LEGO brand. He stated that LEGO believes that "this matter must be handled between Shell and Greenpeace. We are saddened when the LEGO brand is used as a tool in any dispute between organisations." He also confirmed that LEGO would uphold its 2011 long-term contract with Shell. (LEGO Group, 2014c).

Greenpeace responded through a statement written by *Save the Arctic* campaigner Ian Duff, who pointed out the discrepancies between LEGO's company values and commitment to environmentalism and Shell's plans to drill in the Arctic. Duff stated, "'Only the best is good enough' says LEGO's Chief Executive Jørgen Vig Knudstorp. We wish that were true. But as long as the company keeps on helping Shell clean up its image, that can never be the case" (Duff, 2014a, para. 15).

**July 11, 2014** – Warner Brothers Entertainment accused Greenpeace of unfairly using *THE LEGO MOVIE*'s "Everything is Awesome" theme song, in addition to including two of the movie's main characters, in the parody video. The video was removed from YouTube, where it had gained nearly 3 million views (Turner, 2014).

After moving the video to rival streaming site Vimeo, Greenpeace tweeted: "Did we offend someone? Banned from YouTube, back up on Vimeo. Watch our LEGO video [link] #BlockShell" (Greenpeace UK, 2014).

**July 12, 2014** – Within 18 hours, Warner Brothers retracted its complaint, and the video was reposted on YouTube (Zakarin, 2014).

**July 16, 2014** – Greenpeace added decals of a Shell logo, an oil spill, and unhappy LEGO figures cleaning up the spill to the windows of a main LEGO production center in the Czech Republic (Greenpeace, 2014d).

**July 17, 2014** – Greenpeace delivered 50 giant LEGO bricks to the LEGO headquarters in Billund, Denmark. Each brick represented 10,000 signatures on a petition asking LEGO to end its partnership with Shell. LEGO employees did not acknowledge the demonstration, and Greenpeace protesters built a blockade of LEGO bricks in front of the headquarter entrance (Greenpeace, 2014d).

**July 29, 2014** – Fifty children gathered outside the London LEGO headquarters to build Arctic animals out of LEGO bricks (Lynch, 2014).

**August 4, 2014** – Greenpeace released a second video, titled "LEGO: Help children save the Arctic." The video was narrated by three young girls from around the world to demonstrate that Shell's actions affect children everywhere. The video was significantly less popular than "LEGO: Everything is NOT awesome," but still garnered views after its release (Greenpeace, 2014e).

**October 8, 2014** – After three months of Greenpeace campaigning, LEGO CEO Jørgen Vig Knudstorp announced that LEGO would honor the contract made with Shell in 2011, but the company would not renew a contract with Shell when the 2011 contract ends. He reiterated that LEGO believed "Greenpeace ought to have a direct conversation with Shell. The LEGO brand, and everyone who enjoys creative play, should never have become part of Greenpeace's dispute with Shell" (LEGO Group, 2014c, para. 4).

Greenpeace congratulated LEGO on its decision with a statement on the Greenpeace website: "This is fantastic news for LEGO fans and Arctic defenders everywhere. And it's a huge blow to Shell's strategy of partnering with beloved brands to clean up its dirty image as an Arctic oil driller" (Duff, 2014b, para. 2).

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## V. Discussion

The analysis of LEGO's responses to Greenpeace's campaign shows that, though LEGO did not respond to each step of Greenpeace's campaign, it employed different arguments to deflect Greenpeace's criticism. Its main responses were released in the form of two press releases from CEO Jørgen Vig Knudstorp that were published on the LEGO website. In response to Greenpeace's initial attack on LEGO's partnership with Shell, the toy company reiterated its commitment to finding sustainable solutions to current environmental problems, which was reflected in the information on its corporate responsibility programs provided on the LEGO website. After Greenpeace released its first viral video attacking the LEGO/Shell partnership, LEGO responded by criticizing Greenpeace's tactics.

Throughout Greenpeace's campaign, LEGO maintained that Greenpeace should have communicated directly with Shell about the issue and stopped involving LEGO in the dispute. Encouraging a conversation between Greenpeace and Shell and removing itself from the controversy is perhaps the most consistent message LEGO communicated. LEGO was clear in its desire to not be involved in Greenpeace's *Save the Arctic* campaign in each of its responses, including its final announcement that it would not be renewing a contract with Shell.

However, despite its criticism of Greenpeace's tactics and its insistence that it not be involved in the Greenpeace/Shell dispute, LEGO ultimately conceded to Greenpeace's demands. A message communicated in the press release from LEGO after Greenpeace released its first viral video hinted at a main issue that LEGO faced during Greenpeace's campaign. In the release, Knudstorp acknowledged that Greenpeace might have succeeded in creating confusion in the mind of its stakeholders about LEGO. He stated that LEGO "rejects the tactics Greenpeace uses that may have created misunderstandings among our stakeholders." (LEGO Group, 2014c, para. 5).

Indeed, Greenpeace consistently pointed out the negative effects of Shell's actions on children's futures and criticized LEGO for going against its own corporate values by supporting Shell. Knudstorp, in turn, perhaps unknowingly acknowledged that Greenpeace succeeded in creating misunderstandings of its stakeholders about LEGO's intentions. Greenpeace arguably created a disconnect in the mind of its stakeholders between LEGO's core values and action by pointing out disparities between LEGO's corporate purpose and its Shell partnership. Freeman (1984) emphasizes the importance of understanding the key perceptions of stakeholders, and LEGO's attempt to repair the disconnect created by Greenpeace's campaign reflects this main tenet of stakeholder theory. In addition, LEGO's response relates to Coombs' situational crisis communication theory (2007), in that the toy company's response highlights its attempt to diminish its responsibility for the crisis in order to maintain positive stakeholder perceptions. In the future, it would be valuable to analyze LEGO's response to Greenpeace's campaign using Coombs' specific categories of crisis and their respective appropriate responses.

Additionally, Greenpeace was able to spread this message through the use of a viral video. This combination of the potential of shifting stakeholder perceptions and use of viral media may have been a driving factor in LEGO's ultimate decision to not renew its contract with Shell. Future research could explore this use of viral video as an activist campaign strategy using Jahng, Hong, and Park's (2014) methods of examining moderate and radical activist campaign communication strategies.

## VI. Conclusion

In an age where consumers value corporate transparency and turn to online media to engage in dialogue about social issues, a viral Internet campaign tying a beloved brand to a pertinent environmental concern could destroy a company's reputation. Greenpeace's calculated campaign strategies, which utilized viral online media and directly attacked LEGO's mission to inspire children worldwide, targeted the very core of the LEGO corporation. Despite LEGO's reputation as a brand that values imaginative play and pursues sustainable solutions, Greenpeace's argument that LEGO's concern with profit outweighed its care for children seriously threatened the perceptions of LEGO among its key stakeholders.

As NGOs like Greenpeace continue to execute strategically powerful campaigns to influence corporate decision-making, how should corporations respond? In the case of LEGO, CEO Jørgen Vig

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Knudstorp criticized Greenpeace's methods of attacking LEGO to get to Shell but ultimately conceded to the NGO's demands.

Though LEGO resisted the eventual termination of its contract with Shell for months, its ultimate decision was fundamental in maintaining the positive perception of the LEGO brand among key stakeholders. Because LEGO's entire corporate mission is built on its commitment to children – arguably its most important public stakeholders – and Greenpeace clearly laid out how LEGO's partnership with Shell was indirectly supporting activities detrimental to children's futures, LEGO's eventual decision upholds the values it claims to honor most. LEGO's challenge now lies in its ability to examine how its key stakeholders may perceive future actions and brand partnerships. In order to maintain its reputation, financial success, and standing as a leading global toy company, LEGO must ensure its future business decisions and brand partnerships reflect its corporate values and communicate these connections clearly to its key stakeholders.

## Acknowledgments

This author is grateful to Lucinda Austin, assistant professor at Elon University, for her constant guidance and support, without which this article could not have been published. This author is also thankful for Byung Lee, associate professor at Elon University, and the anonymous reviewers for their assistance with the revision of this article.

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## Appendix

**Table 1: LEGO Responses to Greenpeace Campaign Actions**

Date	Greenpeace Action	LEGO Response
July 1, 2014	New campaign against LEGO/ Shell partnership is announced.	LEGO releases a statement reiterating its commitment to solving environmental issues.
July 2-3, 2014	Staged LEGO figure protest photos posted on Twitter.	No public response.
July 8, 2014	“LEGO: Everything is NOT awesome” posted on YouTube.	LEGO CEO encourages Greenpeace to go directly to Shell and confirms LEGO will uphold contract with Shell.
July 16, 2014	Decals of oil spill added to LEGO building in Czech Republic.	LEGO employees ignore decals; no public response from LEGO leadership.
July 17, 2014	Delivery of LEGO bricks with petition signatures.	LEGO employees ignore demonstration; no public response from LEGO leadership.
July 29, 2014	Children protest outside of LEGO headquarters in London.	No response.
August 4, 2014	“LEGO: Help children save the Arctic” video is released on YouTube.	No response.
October 8, 2014	Greenpeace congratulates LEGO on its decision.	LEGO CEO announces contract with Shell will not be renewed once current contract expires.



**Table 2: LEGO Responses to Key Messages from Greenpeace**

Greenpeace Messages	Greenpeace Medium Used	LEGO Response	LEGO Medium Used
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "LEGO has fallen in with the wrong crowd."</li> <li>2. Shell is using LEGO.</li> <li>3. "Greenpeace is calling on LEGO to live up to its own values."</li> </ol>	<p>Report published on Greenpeace website</p>	<p>LEGO will continue "to explore innovative and creative ways to solve the current environmental issues and deliver in compliance with ever-increasing standards ...We're saddened when the LEGO brand is used as a tool in any dispute."</p>	<p>Press release from LEGO CEO, Jørgen Vig Knudstorp</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Shell's actions destroy a happy environment LEGO has created</li> <li>2. "Shell is polluting our kids' imaginations."</li> <li>3. "Tell LEGO to end its partnership with Shell."</li> </ol>	<p>"LEGO: Everything is NOT awesome" video</p>	<p>"Our stakeholders all have high expectations of the way we act. So do we. We reject the tactics Greenpeace uses that may have created misunderstandings among our stakeholders on our way of doing business ... We will not be part of the Greenpeace campaign."</p>	<p>Press release from LEGO CEO, Jørgen Vig Knudstorp</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "Imagination is precious. Keep our Arctic dreams alive."</li> </ol>	<p>"LEGO: Help children save the Arctic" video</p>	<p>No public response from LEGO following the release of this video.</p>	<p>N/A</p>

# Evaluating the Internal Communications of the Triangle's 'Best Places to Work'

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## Abstract

*Fun. Creative. Engaging. These adjectives may come to mind when thinking of the best places to work. But what makes a company culture successful? This study evaluated internal communications in companies deemed "Best Places to Work" by the Triangle Business Journal and its influence on corporate culture. Interviews with five professionals from the "Best Places to Work" listing revealed a close connection between internal communications and corporate culture. The study found that providing an environment where open communication and feedback are encouraged reflects the corporate culture and aids in its development.*

## I. Introduction

Fun. Creative. Engaging. These adjectives may come to mind when thinking of the best places to work. But what makes a company culture that is fun, creative, and engaging? A Forbes study defines company culture as "something that is pre-existing in your company's genetic code; it's not something that employees bring with them" (Craig, 2014, p.1). Thus, company culture is a visible representation of what an organization is and "influences substantially more often all processes, relationships and results in a company" (Neagu & Nicula, 2012, p. 424).

One primary way of articulating and encouraging company culture is through internal communications. In its simplest form, internal communications represents employees' communicating with one another. Internal communications can also be a managerial function that allows individual members of teams to communicate effectively with one another. While this communication may take place on more traditional media, it may also be through newer platforms like social networking. Bennett, Owers, Pitt, and Tucker (2010) wrote that these new platforms may help to ensure that "team spirit and culture is maintained no matter where you are in the world" (p. 61). Moreover, internal communications, a subset of strategic communications, plays an integral role in defining an organization, no matter how large or widespread an organization.

This paper explored the role of internal communications in shaping the *Triangle Business Journal's* "Best Places to Work," a reflection of effective company culture. The study did evaluate various methods and tools used in internal communications to see what common connections can be drawn between those tools and award-winning management.

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**Keywords:** internal communications, job satisfaction, corporate culture, open feedback, employee participation  
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This undergraduate project was conducted as a partial requirement of a research course in communications.

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## II. Literature Review

Many prior studies examined the effect of company awards on corporate success, as well as the use of internal communications as a culture builder. This study looked at that existing body of research to evaluate the link between receiving an accolade for internal communications.

### ***Company Awards and Prestige***

No matter what their industry, companies are eligible to compete for awards, some more prestigious than others. As numerous studies illustrate, merely receiving a symbolic award is enough to motivate workers to improve their performance. Kosfeld and Neckermann (2011) found that award recipients improve productivity by about 12 percent, on average, after receiving an award. Fisher, Dauterive, and Barfield (2001) also found that winners of quality awards, such as the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in the United States show greater returns in stock prices. Receiving recognition for a certain award seems to improve both internal and external outlooks for a company. Frey and Neckermann (2009) called attention to the economic effects of company awards, noting that accolades play such a large role because they “cater to the substantial human desire to be recognized by others” (Frey & Neckermann, 2009, p. 181). Thus, as more companies realize the benefits of receiving awards for recognition, the awards will continue to be more competitive.

### ***Measuring Company Culture***

A few key studies in the past 15 years (Flamholtz, 2001; Neagu & Nicula, 2012) have supported the belief that company culture is linked to financial success. Rather than comparing cross-functional data from a number of companies, Flamholtz (2001) looked closely at various departments within one company to see what effects culture had across all departments in that company. Using this method, Flamholtz found a “statistically significant relationship between culture and financial performance” (Flamholtz, 2001, p. 268). In addition to that link, Neagu and Nicula (2012) also found a relationship between culture and other facets of the workplace. Company culture, they said, “is relevant to any issue that seeks to ensure efficiency in the organization” (p. 424). Company culture can be linked to producing more than just purely financial results.

While studying the connection between company culture and job satisfaction, Lund (2003) looked closely at four different culture types. The first, market culture, emphasizes a goal-oriented environment and competition. The second, bureaucratic hierarchy culture, stresses stability and a formalized structure. A third culture, the adhocracy, emphasizes a dynamic and entrepreneurial environment. Finally, the fourth culture, clan, emphasizes loyalty and mentorship. Lund found that companies with either a clan or adhocracy culture elicited much higher levels of job satisfaction than the market and bureaucratic hierarchy cultures. Thus, companies that encourage “a strong sense of pride in fraternity and interdependence” are more likely to have happier employees than those that encourage independence and not collaboration (Lund, 2003, p. 229).

### ***Internal Communications as a Culture Builder***

To support and unify a company’s culture, effective internal communications is necessary. Ruck and Welch (2012) analyzed various audits of internal communications tools to see how researchers were evaluating internal communications. Finding that the communications reflect much more management-centric environments than employee-centric, they argued that “opportunities for employee voice can be significantly improved” in a different environment (Ruck & Welch, 2012, p. 301). Many of the current methods for evaluating the effectiveness of internal communication merely look at the content of the messaging and not its role in building relationships, fostering dialogue, and engaging the organization. Other studies have found that virtual internal communications techniques can help bridge that gap and foster relationships. For example, Bennett et al. (2010) found that social networking can help in “ensuring team spirit[,] and culture is maintained no matter where you are in the world” (2010, p. 139). Akkirman and Harris (2004) found that virtual office workers reported higher levels of satisfaction in personal feedback, communication climate, and relationships with supervisors, likely due to extra effort in networking with remote workers.

It is the responsibility of companies to take that extra step and employ internal communications for the benefit of employees, whether that is fostering relationships or providing more opportunities for collaboration. Business leaders have a key role in encouraging communication in their organizations. “Blogging lets you participate in communities you want to cultivate—whether it’s your employees, potential

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employees, customers, or anyone else—and leverage your corporate culture competitively” (Napoli, 2006, p. 1). Thus, effective internal communication can also increase employees’ levels of trust in their executives by creating a more open and transparent company culture. Further, the marketplace of ideas theory can be applied to internal communications in the sense that in an open culture where the communication of ideas is not moderated or shut down, the best ideas will naturally rise to the top. Napoli (2006) found that this theory has been used more often in deregulatory contexts than pro-regulatory contexts, which suggests a movement toward more open forms of communications.

While many studies have looked at specific internal communications strategies, little research exists that establishes internal communications as a strategic method of communication that will help shape corporate culture. This study aimed to answer the following research questions regarding companies identified by the *Triangle Business Journal*:

RQ1: How do the level of monitoring, forms of dissemination, and ease of use play a role in internal communications in “Best Places to Work?”

RQ2: What qualities of effective internal communications are most influential in shaping “Best Places to Work?”

RQ3: How does internal communications influence corporate culture in the “Best Places to Work?”

### III. Methods

Developed in 2003 by Quantum Research, the “Best Places to Work” survey seeks to recognize companies nationwide for hosting environments where people “simply love to work” (*Ultimate Guide*, 2015). The competition, segmenting companies by region, grants awards to winners based solely on employee responses to the survey for each region. Winners are published in that region’s publication partner and then are invited to a reception dinner. For the purpose of this study, the researcher looked at companies from the “Best Places to Work” in the Triangle, which covers the central North Carolina area.

To explore the link between internal communications and the corporate culture behind winners of the *Triangle Business Journal*’s “Best Places to Work” survey, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from four different companies on the 2015 awards list. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. This qualitative method was beneficial in generating a diverse set of opinions from companies in various industries in central North Carolina.

The sample was created by examining the list of current and past winners of the *Triangle Business Journal*’s “Best Places to Work” awards. The researcher made a list of companies that had been included at least twice in the past four years. From this list, the researcher selected companies from varying industries and sizes. Of the 12 companies contacted through this method, four participated in the study: three companies—Company B, Company C, and Company D—via telephone interview and Company E via email. The researcher also interviewed a representative from Company A, which had been awarded for the first time in the 2015 awards for comparison with the other four companies. (Companies were identified as “Company A, B, C, D and E” in the paper to keep the organizations anonymous.) The participants ranged in both experience level and time spent at their current company. One participant has been with her current employer for 1 year, three participants have been with their employer for 2-5 years, and one participant had been with his employer for 14 years. Three of the five participants currently occupy managerial roles. A moderator guide was created to facilitate the interview and focus on the above research questions (See Appendix).

Before the interviews began, participants summarized their positions and time with the current employer. These background answers provided personal information that impacted the individuals’ knowledge and familiarity with their company’s internal communication practices.

To answer RQ1, the participants were asked about the specific tools their companies used for internal communications. This conversation shed light on the methods in which the companies communicated internally, what employees used each tool, and why each tool was used.

Participants were asked to rate the ease of use for their internal communications methods as a whole on an 11-point scale, with 0 being impossible to use and 10 being extremely simple. Participants also discussed the level of moderation for the various tools of internal communications, and how comfortable

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employees felt using them. The conversation then shifted to how these strategic communications were chosen and disseminated. Participants discussed what internal teams or individuals were involved in crafting internal communications and how often they distributed this messaging.

To evaluate RQ2, participants were asked to think about a specific instance where they believed their companies had employed effective internal communications strategies. To help prevent confidentiality problems, the participants were instructed not to share the details about the communication itself. Instead, they were asked to think about specific attributes of the communication that they felt made it successful. Participants were then asked to think about an example where internal communications wasn’t successful, and evaluate their reasoning behind that example in the same way.

To address RQ3, participants were asked to explain how internal communications shaped corporate culture, or vice versa. This gave insight into how the companies were using successful attributes associated with strategic communications and how that was connected to their company’s culture.

## IV. Findings

After transcribing the interviews, the researcher coded the text for common themes, including open communication, dissemination, the ease of use of internal communications tools, characteristics of effective internal communications, and its influence on corporate culture. This section describes the findings in the same order.

### ***Open Communication***

While the internal communications tools varied from company to company, one consistent response across the board was the idea of open communication. When asked about the level of control exercised over their communications tools, participants described an environment with very little, if any, monitoring of communications vehicles. One participant, an employee at Company D, said that open communication was part of the company’s mission.

*“I feel like people feel free . . . partly because our company is all about freedom of choice, and open source: Open decisions, open ability.”*

Other participants agreed that open communication was a vital part of encouraging honest ideas and opinions. A participant from Company A emphasized the importance of providing employees with an outlet to provide constructive feedback.

*“The ability and freedom to express your thoughts of improving our business is an overriding factor that ensures we give folks the forum and allow their voices to be heard.”*

Respondents also noted that while their internal communications outlets are not moderated, it is up to the individual employees to choose whether or not to use them. A participant from Company B felt participating in open communications forums was a self-directed task, but one encouraged by the company.

*“Any kind of feedback that you want to give at any employee level is definitely welcomed, and if people choose not to have input, then that’s their choice but it’s definitely always encouraged.”*

### ***Communications Dissemination***

The selected companies varied in size from 17 employees to more than 50,000. As a result, some companies had specified communications teams that worked to send out internal communications to each member of the company, and others relied on themselves. While the people and groups behind the dissemination of these messages varied, the main form of dissemination remained fairly static across the board; all of the respondents cited email as the primary vehicle for internal communications messaging.

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Participants also noted the distinction between interpersonal internal communications and company-focused internal communications. A respondent from Company C mentioned he sees a link between disseminating informal internal communications and fostering a bond among employees.

*“So not even in a boastful way, but a lot of our employees will share personal situations with the office via email . . . those kinds of things go out to everyone. And it’s remarkable, the feedback, because when you send an email like that that’s not really work-specific to your coworkers, the reaction could be varied, obviously. But I think one of the reasons we have been successful with “Best Places to Work” for the last couple of years is that a lot of the folks really do care about each other here.”*

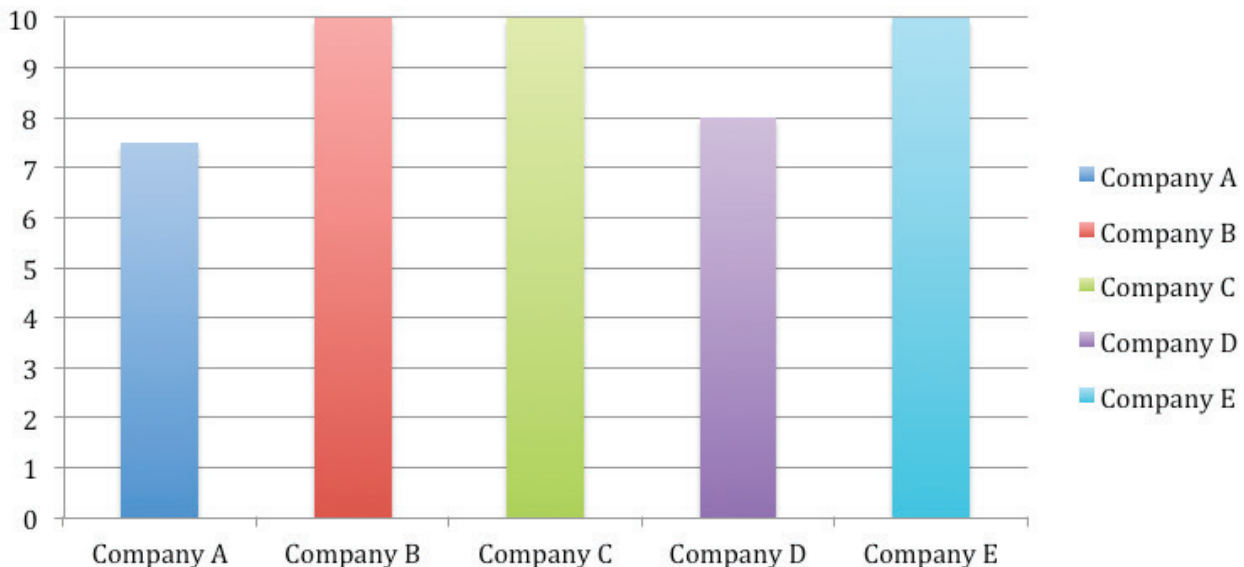
While respondents agreed that interpersonal internal communication occurs frequently, they said that most company-focused internal communications are disseminated only on an as-needed basis. Participants said the frequency of this type of communications depends on the company’s activity in the news and the community. If a company is going through major changes, employees could see several emails each day. But if employees are just receiving an update on the state of the business, they might only receive an email once a month. Regardless of the frequency, participants agreed that the communications needed to be disseminated in a way that clearly articulates why the message is important. A participant from Company A pointed out the importance of disseminating company-focused internal communications in a digestible way to help employees understand the issues at hand, but still keep them engaged.

*“Delivering information in a very concise and compact manner—with then a reference to other materials where folks can go at their leisure and really dig into the details—is a really efficient way to make sure that you reach your target audience and that they hear you. But you’re not keeping folks tied up for hours at a time trying to go through infinite details on a call.”*

### **Ease of Use of Internal Communications Tools**

Regarding the overall ease of use of their company’s internal communications tools as a whole, all participants assigned more than 7 points out of the maximum of 10 to their company’s tools, as shown in *Figure 1*. The participants said the simplicity of their tools allowed them to get their job done more efficiently. One participant from Company E referred to her company’s tools as “tried and true,” providing quick and reliable communications solutions.

The two respondents that gave the two lowest ratings mentioned different tools individuals and groups have adopted. These respondents from the two largest companies in the sample noticed that the



*Figure 1.* Internal Communications Tooling Ease of Use Rating (0 to 10)

diversity in both age and corporate function of employees affected what tools they chose to use. For example, the representative from Company A mentioned that generation gaps affect the types of tools associates use and become more comfortable with.

*“I think the tools are very easy, but I think if you were to look at survey results in terms of communications, and we do that, you can see differences in the generations of employees. So you’ll see that certain generations prefer certain types of communications or a certain tool, and other generations like another delivery method.”*

The representative from Company D mentioned that corporate teams often choose different tools to accomplish the same task, which presents a problem of setting up a new tool for some teams. The tools themselves are easy to use, but setting up tools isn’t always so.

*“Once we get into the tools they’re fairly intuitive and easy to use, but it’s just figuring out how to get set up, that’s a challenge.”*

Despite the aforementioned challenges and having a larger set of tools than the smaller companies represented in the sample, the representatives from Company A and Company D both ranked the overall ease of internal communications tool use on the high end of the scale (giving a rating of 7.5 and 8.0 respectively).

### ***Characteristics of Effective Internal Communications***

When discussing examples of what they believed to be effective instances of internal communications, the participants pointed out that feedback is vital in internal communications. Two respondents viewed feedback as critical in crafting effective internal messages. Participants said feedback helped them to understand what their audience looks for in internal messaging and what methods of reaching them will be the most effective.

*“The best laid plans and the biggest money that you can spend can all be wasted if you’re not delivering information to folks that either they need or they want, or it’s through some type of method or mechanism that they don’t use or embrace.”*

Participants also mentioned that gathering feedback through communications is an integral part of keeping up with changes in the business world.

*“You can’t fall in love with something. Something works well today; it may not work well next year, two years from now, five years from now. You need to continually gather that feedback and determine what is the best way to do this now.”*

Internal communications plays a vital role in this process by ensuring that external messages align with the corporate culture. Participants noted that the opportunity to provide and communicate feedback internally helps make sure the company stays in line with its values and mission, even as it goes through these changes.

*“If we’re in a situation where the core values aren’t being observed or followed, I think that feedback is really important to get things back on track.”*

When discussing effective internal communications strategies, participants repeatedly referenced the importance of engaging the audience. Some participants suggested doing so by more interpersonal interactions, like face-to-face meetings and impromptu conversations. Two participants said that the location where a message is disseminated could even encourage or hinder engagement with that message.

*“We actually have a couple spaces in the office that are really geared toward collaborating . . . a tall table that’s set aside that can accommodate 8 or 10 in a group to sit and talk.”*

Another participant said that choosing a non-traditional location for the communication could engage the audience by providing them with a sense of novelty. For example, she said her company places tripods outside of elevators with communications messaging on them, but only does this twice a year.

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*“I really like that and I think it’s effective because of its timeliness and location, and because the rest of the year, there is nothing in that space . . . It doesn’t get lost in the shuffle of other communications or messages, because that space has literally nothing standing there.”*

A participant from Company A agreed that communications evoking a sense of novelty can effectively engage the audience by providing an exception to normal, everyday communications methods. While the information itself may be nothing out of the ordinary, presenting it in a different way creates a more engaging experience. For example, he referenced a communications method employed by one of Company A’s executive vice presidents. Rather than sending out a whitepaper or even plain text monthly update, this executive created a video where he outlined the important information and provided additional resources for associates interested in engaging further with the content.

*“If you just give them data, you just give them raw facts. It doesn’t clarify for the organization how important that is or why it’s important. So it’s certainly less powerful. That type of data dump, if you will, is certainly a less effective means of communication.”*

### **Influencing Corporate Culture**

The participants all agreed that internal communications maintains a close relationship with corporate culture, but they had various opinions about which influenced and shaped the other. Some of the respondents felt that the culture shaped internal communications by providing a framework for those communications to abide by. One participant from Company B said, *“We really kind [of] have the philosophy that if what we’re doing doesn’t speak to the core values or the goals, then we’re not going to do it.”*

Other respondents had the sense that internal communications helped shaped the company culture. A participant from Company D believed that providing open outlets of communication enabled employees to participate and contribute to the culture in ways they might not otherwise be able to. She offered an example where employees became increasingly vocal about the soft drink selection in the office, and started a long email chain about it internally, which ultimately resulted in a new office program by the facilities team.

*“People were originally so vocal about the flavor [of drinks] they put in the cooler that it evolved to where our facilities team started a rotation of the top flavors, because people openly and collaboratively decided what they want. Now that’s drinks. That’s not technology, that’s not cloud computing, that’s not storage, that’s not any of those things. But that’s part of our culture. And the openness of communication is very uniquely accepted and revered actually in that environment.”*

Whether the internal communications shaped corporate culture, vice versa, or the two evolved together, participants agreed there is certainly a close link between the two. Participants frequently referenced terms like “open,” “collaborative,” and “sharing” to describe both their corporate culture and communications methods. The participants all agreed that internal communications needs to effectively reflect a culture that is in line with the company’s mission and values. A representative from Company A added the importance of not stepping too far out of the bounds of corporate culture, especially when it is so open.

*“The ability and freedom to express your thoughts of improving our business is an overriding factor that ensures we give folks the forum and allow their voice to be heard. But, keep this in mind. too. It is a workplace. We are a financial institution. By nature, most financial institutions are somewhat conservative, so there’s obviously pressure from precedent and just the organization and culture, to not go too far out of bounds from what you would come to know as [Company A’s] culture.”*

## V. Conclusion

This study looked at what factors influenced effective internal communications and the relationship between internal communications and corporate culture. According to the studies conducted by Bennett et al (2010); and Akkirman and Harris (2004), internal communications is closely linked to corporate culture, and this study reaffirms that finding. When prompted about monitoring communications, participants said they felt encouraged to speak openly via internal communications because their corporate culture supported honest exchanges. Participants agreed that formalized message dissemination was dependent on the structure of the company, but informal methods were acceptable for all. According to the study by Bennett et al. (2010), even informal communications helps shape and maintain a team or company’s culture. All participants in the study also agreed that the ease of use for internal communications tools was high, and reflected a collaborative work environment where feedback was encouraged. Likewise, Akkirman and Harris (2004) found that feedback and a positive communication climate was crucial in improving the job satisfaction for virtual office.

Although the participants cited a few different characteristics of effective internal communications, all agreed open communication that encouraged participation from a variety of perspectives was a key to success. Ruck and Welch (2012) wrote, “Traditional approaches to assessment [of internal communications] are themselves becoming outdated. They emphasize volume and channels rather than content and dialogue.” Those findings support the results of this study, which illustrates how important open dialogue is in effective internal communication. Additionally, participants believed that encouraging and involving feedback in internal communications was “critical.” Asif and Sargeant (2000) pointed out that internal communications is not linear, but iterative, evolving “in response to feedback from the target audience.” Participants in the study echoed this thought, mentioning how feedback helps their companies understand what their audiences are looking for from internal communications.

Finally, while there was no consensus among participants as to which influenced the other, all participants agreed that internal communications was tied closely to corporate culture. Neagu and Nicula (2012) wrote, “The main objective in terms of culture is the development of consistency and defense of values.” Participants in this study reiterated that finding, explaining that internal communications was one way to consistently reflect corporate culture. Participants also highlighted the importance of making sure internal communications was strategic and aligned with the values of the organization. If the two aren’t aligned, participants said, then the communication should not be disseminated because it would not be an accurate representation of the corporate culture.

This study found a key commonality across companies included in the “Best Places to Work” listing: Open and free-flowing communication that encourages audience feedback and participation. This finding aligns with previous studies that found a close link between internal communications and corporate culture, but provides new insight into what that link is.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

While this study contains original research that analyzes best practices for internal communications and its relationship with corporate culture, more research needs to be done to corroborate the findings. This study looked specifically at successful organizations in the central North Carolina area, as determined by the *Triangle Business Journal*. By limiting the companies to this location, perspectives may be skewed toward homogeneity. The researcher of this study was also only able to speak with five companies, so achieving a larger representative sample may provide a more diverse set of responses.

Additional studies may also examine companies that have not achieved awards similar to the “Best Places to Work” recognition and compare their internal communications techniques with those of the companies listed in this study.

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## Acknowledgments

The author would like to extend many thanks to Glenn Scott, associate professor at Elon University, for his guidance, inspiration and advice, without all of which the article could not have been published. The author is also thankful to Byung Lee, associate professor at Elon University, for his supervision and help of revision for this article.

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# Standardization of International Advertising Strategies: A Content Analysis of Pantene Pro-V

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## Abstract

*With products available in more than 180 countries, Procter & Gamble is one of the largest global advertisers. Considering today's global marketplace, it has become increasingly necessary for multinational companies like Procter & Gamble to effectively communicate with people from diverse nations. This study examined the extent of standardization practiced by the company for its Pantene Pro-V line of products and which components are most commonly standardized or adapted. Analysis showed that Procter & Gamble practiced a moderate level of standardization, which allowed it to maintain a consistent brand image, while still remaining mindful of cultural differences.*

## I. Introduction

In today's global marketplace, it has become increasingly necessary to communicate with people from diverse nations. The growth and further expansion of multinational companies to other countries and the fact that the economies of many nations have become entwined, all necessitate improved communication. As a result of this need, the latest technology has evolved to provide new opportunities for improved communication, which has benefited the advertising industry on a global scale. These improved means of communication, such as the Internet and social media, allow advertisers to easily reach their desired target audience within each geographic market.

With advertisers expected to spend \$545.4 billion on advertising worldwide in 2015, up 4.9% from 2014, the question once again turns to whether or not advertisements for global products or companies should be standardized (Ad Age Datacenter, 2014). The standardization of international advertising is one topic that has been widely debated among practitioners and scholars over the last 50 years (Harris, 1994, p. 13). Proponents argue that "buyers everywhere in the world are the same, or very similar and, therefore, can be persuaded by universal advertising appeals," while opponents cite "insurmountable differences" between countries, and even regions within the same country as reason for creating separate advertisements (Harris, 1994, p. 13). Despite strong support from each side, there is a need to further examine international advertising practices conducted by multinational companies to gain a better understanding of the process before making a final decision regarding the standardization of international advertising.

With operations in more than 70 countries and products available in more than 180 countries, Procter & Gamble is the largest global advertiser in terms of dollars put toward worldwide media spending

**Keywords:** international advertising, standardization, adaptation, Procter & Gamble, Pantene Pro-V  
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This undergraduate project was conducted as a partial requirement of a research course in communications.

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(Ad Age Datacenter, 2014; "Where We Operate," n.d.). One of Procter & Gamble's first global brands was Pantene, which has quickly become one of the multinational company's top three brands with products available in more than 100 countries (Kokenge & Grubow, 2010, p. 74). By conducting a content analysis of digital advertisements produced by Pantene, one of the leading global advertisers for its global line of hair care products, the author could gauge how much this multinational company standardized advertisements across international markets and which elements in particular. Ultimately, this analysis will shed insight into how the standardization process is implemented and serve as a basis for future research into the practice of standardization by multinational companies.

## II. Literature Review

Despite the ongoing debate over the standardization of international advertising, previous research suggests two main approaches to international advertising: standardization and adaptation (Papavassiliou & Stathakopoulos, 1997, p. 504).

### ***Standardization-Adaptation Continuum***

In general, "standardization" has been defined as the "formulation, publication, and implementation of guidelines, rules, and specifications for common and repeated use, aimed at achieving optimum degree of order or uniformity in a given context, discipline, or field" (Business Dictionary, 2015). In the context of advertising, standardization occurs when "the execution tactics of advertising elements, such as copy and visuals, are kept the same across advertisements in various countries" (Nelson & Paek, 2007, p. 65). Therefore, international advertising standardization is defined as "using a common approach, such as a common advertising message, to promote the same product across national boundaries" (Papavassiliou & Stathakopoulos, 1997, p. 504).

The second main approach to international advertising is adaptation. "Adaptation," or "adapt," is defined as "to change something so that it functions better or is better suited for a purpose" (Merriam-Webster, 2015). In the context of the advertising industry, adaptation is defined as "using different advertising messages in separate markets" (Wang & Yang, 2011, p. 25).

With two main approaches, it may appear as if multinational companies must select one approach over the other. However, the decision to standardize or adapt advertisements is not a dichotomous one. Rather, multinational companies choose somewhere between the two extremes of complete standardization and adaptation when they decide on the form and extent of standardization (Harris, 1994, p. 13). Researchers Papavassiliou and Stathakopoulos (1997) have also suggested that "international advertising decisions can be viewed on a continuum with two polar ends of the continuum being standardization of creative advertising strategy and tactics, and adaptation of creative advertising strategy and tactics" (p. 505). In their research, they presented a comprehensive list of factors that influence the degrees of standardization along the spectrum. The factors are divided into three levels—local, firm, and intrinsic—each of which consists of aspects, such as the local culture(s), managerial characteristics, and the relationship between the multinational company and the advertising agency respectively (Papavassiliou & Stathakopoulos, 1997, p. 506-518). By understanding standardization to be on a continuum, it is then possible to begin to examine factors that influence an advertisement's location on the continuum.

### ***Content Analysis of Standardization***

There have been several prominent content analysis studies conducted on the international advertising practices of multinational companies, including those by Mueller (1991), Whitelock and Chung (1989), and Seitz and Johar (1993). Along the same line, Harris and Attour (2003, p. 155) compared print advertisements for one brand in two different national markets. They divided an advertisement into different categories and then weighed each category based upon its importance by assigning different points. Each component was measured by an interval scale. Their study provided important insights into the practice of standardization, particularly by acknowledging that "while international advertising standardization is a widespread practice, total standardization is the exception rather than the rule" (Harris & Attour, 2003, p. 156).

Based on previous studies, researchers began to pay attention to the degrees of standardization on

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the spectrum, while also working to understand the impact that differing degrees of standardization can have on advertising in different markets and what elements may be standardized or adapted most frequently. Harris and Attour (2003) tried to answer many of these questions by conducting their own content analysis with an updated version of a previous model.

The Harris and Attour (2003) model, adapted from the Whitelock and Chung (1989) model, utilized a scoring system that allocated points to various components, such as visual elements, body copy, general layout, product placement, product packaging, color(s), and size of the advertisement (Harris & Attour, 2003, p. 156). One of the biggest differences between the two models is that the Harris and Attour (2003) model broke the elements down into more specific subcomponents to gather more information about which components are most commonly standardized or adapted in advertisements. For example, the visual element was broken down into three subcomponents: visual background, the models/spokespersons that appear in the advertisement, and modifications made to product packaging/presentation. Additionally, the copy element was broken down into four subcomponents: headline, sub-headline, body text, and slogan (Harris & Attour, 2003, p. 157).

The Harris and Attour (2003) model, which is based on interviews with advertising executives (p. 157), relies on a weighted system. If a headline of an advertisement was completely different in two different nation markets—for example, it was neither in the same language nor conveyed the same meaning—then it would be awarded 10 points for dissimilarity. If it is not completely different, lower points were assigned depending on the degree of dissimilarity. After examining each of the components, the points measuring the dissimilarity would be totaled and then subtracted from a total of 100, meaning a complete similarity or standardization. The resulting number would be the degree of standardization. A more detailed version of the Harris and Attour model, complete with the scoring system, is shown in *Figure 1*. The left column shows the weight for each component and subcomponent; the right column shows scales used to measure the dissimilarity of an advertisement in two different nation markets.

EJM 37,1/2	(1) Picture (40 points):		
	(a) Visual background (20 points)	Local (ten points) Different (20 points)	
	(b) Model(s)/spokesperson (ten points)	Local (five points) Different (ten points)	
158	(c) Modifications (ten points)	Minor (five points) Major (ten points)	
	(2) Text (32 points)		
	(a) Headline (ten points)	Same language/different meaning (three points) Translated/same meaning (six points) Completely different (ten points)	
	(b) Subhead (six points)	Same language/different meaning (two points) Translated/same meaning (three points) Completely different (six points)	
	(c) Body text (copy) (ten points)	Same language/different meaning (three points) Translated/same meaning (six points) Completely different (ten points)	
	(d) Slogan (six points)	Same language/different meaning (two points) Translated/same meaning (three points) Completely different (six points)	
	(3) General layout (ten points)	Minor differences (five points) Major differences (five points)	
	(4) Product portrayal (six points)	Difference in size (one point) Difference in number (one point) Replaced by local (two points) Other differences (two points)	
	(5) Product packaging (six points)	Difference in size (one point) Difference in number (one point) Replaced by local (two points) Other differences (two points)	
	(6) Colour(s) of the advertisements (three points)	Colour vs B/W (one point) Different colour (three points)	
	(7) Size of the advertisement (three points)	As original + extra section (one point) Different size (three points)	
	<b>Notes:</b> Total score = sum of points from all the elements; degree of standardisation = 100 - total score		

*Figure 1.* Harris and Attour (2003) Model Scoring System

Note: This chart was used in “The International Advertising Practices of Multinational Companies: A Content Analysis Study” by G. Harris and S. Attour (2003). p, 158.

### III. Methodology

When analyzing international advertising by Pantene, a brand of Procter & Gamble, for its Pantene Pro-V line of products, the author followed the Harris and Attour (2003) model. Three research questions were asked to focus on the current standardization practices of the largest global advertiser and to gain a better understanding of how the practice is implemented there:

RQ1: To what extent does Pantene Pro-V practice standardization?

RQ2: Which elements are most commonly standardized?

RQ3: Which elements are most commonly adapted?

### Sample

In order to content analyze the standardization of international advertising for Pantene's Pro-V products, it is important to select advertisements from various global markets. To do so, five countries in which Pantene Pro-V's products were advertised were selected systematically by choosing every third country from the list of the World's 25 Largest Advertising Markets of 2015 (Ad Age Datacenter, 2014). The list, which ranks advertising markets in order of size from largest to smallest, is based on the projected major-media spending by country in 2015 (Ad Age Datacenter, 2014). Beginning with the top one and choosing every third country systematically, the author selected five countries: the United States (#1, \$182.7 billion), Germany (#4, \$24.9 billion), France (#7, \$13 billion), Canada (#10, \$11.5 billion), and Argentina (#13, \$8.5 billion) (Ad Age Datacenter, 2014). After selecting the advertising markets, the author selected the actual advertisements for the content analysis based on convenience sampling. Web advertisements were selected from the homepage of each country's respective Pantene Pro-V website in September 2015. Content analysis was done on the following components and subcomponents: picture (including visual background, model(s)/spokesperson, and modification), text (including headline, subhead, body text, and slogan), general layout, product placement, product packaging, colors, and size of the advertisement. Finally, it is important to note that the sampled advertisements were translated into English by native speakers before analysis.

### IV. Results

Regarding RQ1 on Pantene Pro-V's standardization, the current study found that Canada scored the highest standardization score of 68, followed by Argentina (59), France (57) and Germany (45)—see Appendix A for the complete breakdown of points. The average standardization score of 57.25 is along the lines of prior studies that found total standardization and total adaptation to be the exceptions, rather than the rule (Harris & Attour, 2003; Wang & Yang, 2011).

Regarding RQ2 on most commonly standardized elements, the current study found that the background and color(s) are the most commonly standardized elements. Each advertisement in the sample featured a solid white background with a gold Pantene Pro-V (vitamin) and gold liquid splash, as shown in *Figure 2*.

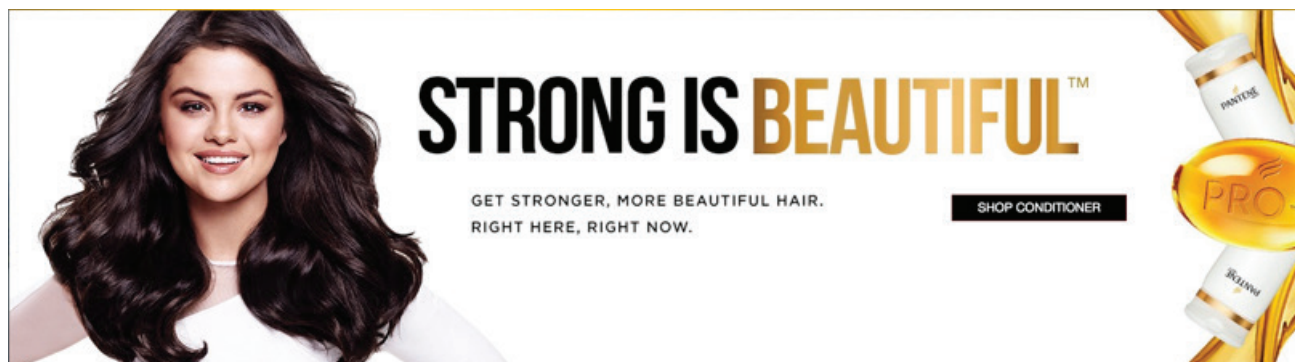


Figure 2. Pantene Pro-V Advertisement - United States ("Untitled Image – United States," 2015)



Regarding RQ3 concerned the most commonly adapted elements, which often depended on the country that the advertisement was designed. The current study found these elements were the models/spokespersons featured, the headline, product packaging, and general layout of the advertisement itself. Looking at all of the advertisements together, it is clear there was no template for what side of the advertisement the model should be on or how large the products should be featured. Each advertisement also featured a different model or models, some of whom are well-known celebrities, like Selena Gomez, the new spokeswoman for Pantene in the United States, while others featured lesser-known models. In addition to the visuals, the advertisement's copies, particularly the headlines, were noticeably different, whether in language or in meaning. For example, the headline for the advertisement from the U.S. simply reads "Strong is Beautiful," while the advertisement from Germany reads "O'Zopft is," or "It is tapped," a common phrase used when tapping a keg at Oktoberfest in Germany. By making changes to, or adapting, elements such as these, Procter & Gamble has been able to tailor the advertisements to better suit specific markets.

### **Market with Most Amount of Standardization**

When compared to the advertisement from the United States, which was used as the control advertisement, the one from Canada was the most standardized in the sample. It shared many of the same elements in the advertisement, including visual background, language, color scheme, and product packaging. As previously discussed, the visual background and color scheme were found to be the most standardized elements, which holds true in regards to this specific advertisement with its white background and gold accents, including the gold Pro-V vitamin. While some of the advertisements in the sample were also originally produced in English, the Canadian advertisement was the only one, beside the advertisement from the United States, that focused on product's attribute of strength in the headline. It was also the only one that shared product packaging with the U.S. advertisement, featuring the recognizable gold band around the lid, as seen in *Figure 3*.



*Figure 3.* Pantene Pro-V Advertisement – Canada (“Untitled Image – Canada,” 2015)

### **Market with Most Amount of Adaptation**

The Pantene Pro-V advertisement for Germany was the most adapted in the sample. While still featuring the solid white background and gold accents that have been standardized across the sample group, many more of the elements in this specific advertisement were adapted for the German audience. Beginning with the headline, “O’Zopft is,”—translated into “It is tapped,”—which as mentioned earlier refers to the tapping of a keg at the Oktoberfest celebration in Germany, also known as Wies’n. In *Figure 4* on the next page, the model is not only a different person, but this new model has been further adapted by being dressed in a traditional German dirndl with braided hair, which is common attire for Oktoberfest. The body copy continues on to discuss a contest where audience members can submit pictures of themselves with



their best Oktoberfest braids for a chance to win an exclusive set of Pantene Pro-V Oktoberfest products, while the other advertisements focus on a certain attribute of the product, such as strength or the reparative nature of the product. At the bottom right of this advertisement, the special Oktoberfest edition of the products are featured, swathed in a white and blue checkered-pattern ribbon, which is representative of the colors of the state of Bavaria, where the celebration is held each year. Each of these elements were reviewed in order to determine the degree of standardization, and ultimately the advertisement as a whole serves as a good example of an advertisement that would fall closer to the adaptation end of the continuum.

Figure 4. Pantene Pro-V Advertisement – Germany. Translation (Top to Bottom): “It is tapped! Show us your perfect Oktoberfest pigtail and win the No. 1 conditioner worldwide\*! Secure your chance at an exclusive Pantene Pro-V Oktoberfest set! Style your hair like Pantene Pro-V’s Oktoberfest pigtail and join with your photo! Join now.” (“Untitled Image – Germany,” 2015)

## V. Discussion

For the sampled advertisements, it was found that the multinational company Procter & Gamble practiced a moderate level of international advertising standardization. Certain elements are more often standardized than others, including background and colors. As proponents of standardization often cite as support for their position, similarities in appearance such as these allow the company to maintain a consistent image and identity throughout the world (Papavassiliou & Stathakaopoulous, 1997, p. 504). It can be said that while certain elements are adapted, the overall essence of the Pantene Pro-V advertisements remains intact. All of the sample advertisements have a sleek appearance with one or more female models who highlight attributes of one or more of the 21 products in the Pantene Pro-V collection (McMaster, 2014). The cohesive look of the advertisements with this approach enables Procter & Gamble to successfully brand the Pantene Pro-V line in the mind of consumers around the world.

The ease with which advertisements can be standardized among countries may also have to do with similarities between the countries. For example, out of the five sample advertisements, the advertisement from Canada received the highest score for degree of standardization against the one from the United States. While there may be a number of other factors involved, the standardization could be attributed to the similarities between the countries, such as each country’s market-oriented economic system, pattern of production, and high standard of living.

However, opponents of standardization are quick to point out the differences between countries, and even regions within the same country, and stress the importance of adaptation for this reason (Papavassiliou & Stathakaopoulous, 1997, p. 504). As seen from the results, the most commonly adapted elements were the

model/spokesperson(s), headline, product packaging, and general layout of the advertisement. As discussed earlier, there does not appear to be a template for the layout of Pantene Pro-V advertisements, with each advertisement in the sample group featuring models, copy, and products visuals of different shapes, sizes, and colors in different locations within the advertisement. The headlines also differ in language and meaning. The advertisements from Argentina and France focus on the reparative nature of the Pantene products, while advertisements from the United States and Canada focus on the added strength the product offers. Despite some similarities, each advertisement has a different approach or wording to convey the information, and none are translated word-for-word. It can be assumed that these elements were adapted to best suit their target markets based on research and consumer insights, instead of making the somewhat dangerous, simplistic assumption that all consumers of Pantene Pro-V products are the same in their wants and needs.

These differences between countries provide advertisers with a unique set of challenges and opportunities. In the sample, the advertisement from Germany, with its Oktoberfest theme, was the most adapted compared with the one from the United States. While it is not uncommon for advertisers to launch advertisements with the seasons and holidays, adapting the advertisement for Germany may have been more necessary to connect with the German target audience, as Germany has more differences with the United States in terms of economies, culture, and language than the other countries.

## VI. Conclusion

Based on its success, practicing a moderate level of standardization appears to have enabled Procter & Gamble and its Pantene brand to find balance between establishing and maintaining a brand image and catering to consumers of different countries, cultures, and backgrounds. However, there are limitations to this research that prevent the findings from being generalized. Just because one multinational company practices a moderate level of international advertising standardization does not automatically mean that an advertisement at that level well caters to target consumers. There are many factors that must be taken into consideration when creating an advertisement and even then, it may not always resonate well with the target audience. The point of this research was to focus on the idea of a standardization-adaptation continuum that previous researchers suggested and to look at the degree to which five advertisements by one multinational company across various global markets were standardized.

## Acknowledgements

The author is thankful to Don Grady, associate professor and associate dean at Elon University, for his supervision and advice, without which the article could not be published. The author also appreciates numerous reviewers who have helped revise this article.

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## Appendix A

Table: 1 Results based on the Harris and Attour (2003) model

Element	Secondary Element	Points Awarded	France	Germany	Canada	Argentina	
<b>Picture (40)</b>	Visual Background (20)	Local (10)					
		Different (20)	0	0	0	0	
	Model(s)/Spokesperson (10)	Local (5)					
		Different (10)	10	10	10	10	
	Modifications (10)	Minor (5)		5	5	5	0
		Major (10)					
<b>Text (32)</b>	Headline (10)	Same Language/Different Meaning (3)				3	
		Translated/Same Meaning (6)					
		Completely Different (10)	10	10		10	
	Subhead (6)	Same Language/Different Meaning (2)					
		Translated/Same Meaning (3)					
		Completely Different (6)	6	6	6	6	
	Body Text (10)	Same Language/Different Meaning (3)					
		Translated/Same Meaning (6)					
		Completely Different (10)	0	10	0	0	
	Slogan (6)	Same Language/Different Meaning (2)					
		Translated/Same Meaning (3)					
		Completely Different (6)	0	0	0	0	
	<b>General Layout (10)</b>						
Minor Differences (5)							
<b>Product Placement (6)</b>	Major Differences (5)		5	5	5	5	
	Difference in Size (1)				1	1	
	Difference in Number (1)		1	1		1	
	Replaced by Local (2)			2		2	
	Other Differences (2)		2				
<b>Product Packaging (6)</b>					0		
	Difference in Size (1)						
	Difference in Number (1)						
	Replaced by Local (2)		2	2		2	
<b>Color(s) (3)</b>	Other Differences (2)						
	Color v. B/W (1)		1	1	1	1	
	Different Color (3)						
<b>Size of the Advertisement (3)</b>	As Original & Extra Section (1)		1		1		
	Different Size (3)			3		3	
<b>TOTAL (100 = completely standardized)</b>			43	55	32	41	
<b>Degree of Standardization</b>			57	45	68	59	

# Motives for Engaging with the Kardashians' Reality Television Family

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## Abstract

*Reality television has been around for more than a half-century, dating back to the hidden cameras in *Candid Camera* in 1948. Today, one of the most popular reality television shows is *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, an inside look at a celebrity family based in Los Angeles. This study explored why college-aged women feel a personal connection to the show and why they've been following the family for nearly a decade. Based on six interviews conducted with interested viewers, the study found that these women watch the series to escape reality, participate in surveillance, and feel personal connectedness.*

## I. Introduction

Reality television is nothing new in today's society. From the start of hidden cameras in *Candid Camera* in 1948, to putting civilians in a controlled setting in *The Real World* in 1992, the lifestyles and personalities revealed in reality television are endless. Now, anyone can get a behind-the-scenes look at the life of an Alaskan fisherman or what it's like to be a sister wife. Celebrity families are on top when it comes to today's most popular reality television content (IMDb, 2014).

Networks such as E!, MTV, VH1, and Bravo have TV schedules filled with shows exploring the lives of celebrity families. More widely known programs like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives* have outperformed others in ratings for years, reaching up to almost 3 million viewers, according to Nielsen ratings ("I Am Cait," 2015). However, contrary to previous season premieres, season 11 of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* had a record low of only 1.9 million viewers, according to Nielsen (Maglio, 2015). The Bravo network keeps finding new cities and more real housewives to put in the spotlight. But what makes these programs stand out in the ratings, and why are viewers still interested after all this time?

For most reality television production companies and networks, their target audience remains between 18- and 25-year-olds, mostly college students (Reality TV, 2008). This research study aimed to uncover why this demographic is so interested in the Kardashian family and what keeps drawing them back to the screen? This study explored the concepts of voyeurism and social comparison and how they relate to reality television as well as to age, gender, ethnicity, social status, or socioeconomic status of viewers.

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**Keywords:** reality television, Kardashians, celebrity family, social comparison, power of connectedness  
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This undergraduate project was conducted as a partial requirement of a research course in communications.

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## II. Literature Review

To better understand the popularity of reality shows, one must first explore what defines reality television. Then, one must look to the audience to find the motives for watching reality TV so intensely, such as parasocial interaction. These answers are key in understanding why reality television is so successful, especially when it comes to celebrity families like the Kardashians.

### ***Defining Reality-Based Television***

Because the literature and research on reality television was limited even after decades of its increasing popularity, a 2003 University of Arizona study attempted to define this topic. Varied categories for reality television included talk shows, nonfiction narrative programs, broadcast news programs, and local news programs. News programs fall under reality-based television because viewers see the majority of the content as nonfiction. (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003).

The researchers asked 112 Tucson, Arizona, residents awaiting jury duty to complete a grouping task. In the exercise, the participants organized 48 television programs into groups on the basis of similarity, using whatever criteria they deemed appropriate. The list included programs like *Friends*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*, *Today Show*, *Wheel of Fortune*, *Cops*, *The Real World*, and *Survivor*. The researchers found the following definition of *reality-based television programming*: programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur. Several factors contribute to this definition, including those on reality TV portraying themselves, without a script, filmed at least part in their living or working environment, and primarily for the purpose of viewer entertainment (Nabi et al., 2003).

### ***Para-Social Interaction***

In a 2009 study by Laken, para-social interaction was defined using three characteristics. First, this interaction between the viewer and the celebrity must be mediated. Mediation can occur through a wide range of media, including the Internet, cellular applications, magazines, television, and film. Second, the relationship must be one-sided. The viewer recognizes a relationship or connection to the celebrity, but the celebrity does not have any kind of relationship with the viewer. Last, but the most important in this study, this interaction between viewer and celebrity is seen as “mimicking real-life friendships.”

Laken explored how this relationship is formed by conducting a survey with 536 college students and created a 10-item Likert scale on parasocial interaction to measure the level of parasocial interaction. The scale focused on the intensity of the viewer's relationship with celebrities only. The study concluded that the viewer “acquires a history and a set of shared experiences with the celebrity through mediation, which create a bond. This bond is symbolized by allusions that lack meaning to the casual observer” (p. 7). The study found that with time, the viewer feels that he or she knows the celebrity better than others do and “appreciates his or her values and motives more than others do” (p. 7).

### ***Voyeurism***

A study by media psychologist Baruh (2010) used a panel of 18-year-olds to explore voyeuristic and social comparison tendencies of viewers while watching reality television. Voyeurism is attributed to someone seeking the inaccessible, what he or she cannot see in a mostly mediated way. When voyeurism is pathological, that person or viewer has a strong urge to be sneaky and seek out the unseen views, such as when the characters on a show engage in sexual behavior, etc. This power imbalance is pleasurable to these voyeurs, and they continue to watch because of the sexual gratification. This type of voyeurism is less common. Survey responses show that most people just want to satisfy their “inner nosy person.”

Baruh's study also determined that voyeurism can be measured using participants in a survey and ranking their answers on a percentage scale (100 being most voyeuristic tendencies and 0 being least voyeuristic). Possible answers included never, rarely, sometimes, frequently, and always. Each of the five available answers had a different percentage weight. Questions ranged from “You can see your friend's texts over her shoulder. Do you read them?” all the way to more specific questions regarding television, like “I enjoy watching programs that reveal private moments between celebrities.”

The voyeuristic appeal of reality television comes from the negotiation of reality and the possibility

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of seeing moments when those contrived curtains fall and honest selves are revealed. After measuring viewers' voyeuristic tendencies, it could be easy to infer why they enjoy endless hours of reality television. They understand that some reality is scripted and forced in a certain setting, but the anticipation to see a true moment unfold keeps them coming back for more (Baruh, 2010).

### ***Defining and Measuring Social Comparison***

Like voyeurism, social comparison tendency is another potential reason people are drawn to watch reality television. Those audience members who feel the need to evaluate themselves should have a higher tendency to watch reality television (Baruh, 2010). Evaluating oneself could mean many things. This could mean an individual watches reality TV to see how significant others interact with one another. It could mean that someone watches to see how those who are wealthier deal with their social status or how to obtain that social status. In Baruh's study, after watching 18 reality television programs, an online panel of 18-year-olds and older were asked a series of questions regarding social comparison and voyeurism tendencies. The study found that reality television programs that showed more private details of a person or family's life had higher views from voyeurs in direct correlation with their social comparison tendencies.

Another study (Ramdhany, 2009) found the same result with 178 adolescents rather than adults. The lower the life satisfaction of the students, the more they watched reality television. Age didn't play a huge factor in this study, but gender did. Girls needed more peer acceptance; therefore, they watched more reality television. They believed everything they saw as real and would implement that new knowledge in their daily lives.

### ***The Power of Connectedness***

If it's not voyeuristic tendencies that are keeping reality TV ratings high, then what other factors play a role in keeping viewers' eyes glued to the screen? Patino, Kaltcheva, and Smith (2012) focused on what they called "connectedness," the "level of intensity of the relationship(s) that a viewer develops with the characters and contextual settings of a program in the para-social television environment" (p. 289). Connectedness is measured on a 9-item, 4-point scale from "strongly-disagree"/"strongly-agree." The authors believed that someone's psychographic and demographic characteristics played a role in how connected they were with reality television. Their study found that 1,098 young people, ages of 12-18, more often than not, viewed celebrities and participants on reality television shows as opinion leaders and role models.

Based on the literature review, this research created the following research question:

- RQ1. To what extent do voyeuristic tendencies or social comparison tendencies drive female college students to continue to watch *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*?
- RQ2. What other motives may have contributed to female college students following the show and on social media?

## **III. Method**

For this study, the current author selected six female, college-aged students, who individually participated in an interview, lasting 45 minutes to one hour, to discuss the Kardashian family, their presences on social media, and their reality television show. The method of interviews has both strengths and weaknesses. The major strength of this qualitative method is to give the researcher the chance to stratify the multiple interviews and find the similarities and differences between each interview, and that the interviews give the participants a chance to explain their answers rather than be limited to certain answers in a survey. It also has shortcomings. The researcher could have had an influence on the answers in the interviews, and the interpretation of what was said during the interviews could have a degree of bias (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

The author screened sampled students to select only those who expressed a great interest in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and revealed that they follow the family's day-to-day life. All six selected participants grew up or came from a predominantly white neighborhood. Two of the six participants came from upper-class families, while the other four from upper-middle class families. One participant had divorced

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parents, and the rest had parents who were together. All participants had an immediate family of five members or smaller. All participants were between the ages of 20 and 22. They were all enrolled as full-time students at a small private university in the Southeast. Participant living conditions and locations varied as well as majors and on/off campus employment.

The author took brief notes and tape-recorded the session during each interview, while each interview was held in a private study room. At each interview, participants were asked their name, year in school, grade point average, and major. Then they were asked open-ended questions about both the Kardashians show and their family in general. They were asked to elaborate on why they were interested in the lives of the Kardashians and why they feel a specific way about the show. Other interview questions included the following: Do you feel do you know the exact reason for your interest in the show?; Do you think the show touches on any moral or societal issues? By accident? On purpose? How often do you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with the actions on the show? Do you see any member of the Kardashian family as a role model? An inspiration? What social media platforms do you follow the Kardashians on? What are your favorite aspects of the show? These questions were either borrowed or inspired by Corrie-Metcalf's (2005) study on the appeal of reality television. All participants were promised confidentiality in order to get the most honest responses.

Transcribed interviews went through two rounds of qualitative coding used by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). Here the researcher went through the transcribed text first to find similar themes; then went back to the text for a second look to see if any new ideas or concerns appear. These themes were used to capture and explicate the participants' motives.

## IV. Findings

### *Viewing Habits*

Asked how long they spent watching television per week, all but one participant answered that they watched television at least 10 to 15 hours per week, and at least 8 hours on social media outlets for pop culture and entertainment news.

The participants said they had kept up with the Kardashian show since high school, starting with its third season and catching up with the first and second seasons through reruns on E!. One participant expressed less interest in the show in recent seasons, but she still follows certain family members like Kylie Jenner and Khloe Kardashian on social media and in tabloids. Another participant said she would rather follow the family on social media outlets like Snapchat because it "makes them seem more like real people." Another participant said she doesn't follow the family on social media at all and would rather watch them on television.

Once the interview established whether the participant followed the Kardashians on mostly the show, social media, or both, other interview questions were asked to explore the key research questions.

### *Voyeurism*

Similar studies mentioned in the literature review showed participants watching reality television shows with voyeuristic tendencies. These tendencies could include getting pleasure from seeing intimate sexual relations on reality television or other intimate moments that the viewer believes to be the realest moments of the show. In this study, voyeurism was the least discussed topic with participants. When asked about their favorite parts of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, no participant displayed voyeuristic tendencies, nor did they mention anything relating to voyeurism when asked about whether they believed they got pleasure from seeing the family's most intimate moments. One participant commented:

*"What do you mean by intimate? Because if you mean sexual, then no, I don't find those parts of the show any more interesting than the next, but if you mean intimate as in moments that are really personal or close to them, then yes. I think those moments are really interesting because that's when the show becomes more real."*

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### **Personal Connectedness**

Most of the participants' answers fell in this category. Asked why they stayed connected to the show after so many seasons, all participants stated that they felt connected to the family and their stories. One participant commented:

*"I think I'm so in tune to their lives because I've grown up with them. Kendall and Kylie [Jenner] were around my age when I started watching and so I could relate to their stories. It's like we've watched them change and grow over the years that we feel like we've changed and grown alongside them."*

Another participant commented:

*"Even though I can't relate to their lifestyle, because they're so wealthy, I can still relate to how they feel in certain situations. They go through things that all of us have gone through before: break-ups, fights with your siblings, not getting along with your parents, trying to be independent. They might handle things differently than I would, but I can still relate to how they feel, and honestly, I feel for them, not just with them."*

Differently from what Patino et al. (2012) found about the power of connectedness in relation to viewers seeing the characters as role models or opinion leaders, the current study could not find any link between connectedness and their feelings toward the characters as their role models. One participant stated:

*"I don't see the Kardashians as role models at all (laughs). I don't look up to them for advice on life or how to handle a relationship. If anything, I look up to them for maybe beauty tips or inspiration for style choices, but that's it. I think I'm at a time and place in my life where I've really found out who I am as a person, and reality television stars like them don't really phase me as far as being role models or anything."*

Participants also felt connected to the family because of their presence on social media. Almost all of the Kardashian and Jenner clan have Instagram accounts, and some can be found on Snapchat and Twitter as well. All participants in this study mentioned that the family's interaction with their fans seemed genuine and personal, stating that when they post intimate moments or events in their lives on Snapchat or Instagram, it makes them seem more like "real people." Participants felt less connected when any Kardashian would post a "selfie" rather than a picture from a wedding or red carpet event. A "selfie" has no context, whereas a picture from a private event lets viewers get a sneak peek into their daily lives.

### **Social Comparison**

After all participants stated that they don't see the Kardashians as role models, they were asked if they compared themselves to any of the family members or ever got jealous or felt inferior when watching the show or looking through their social media. One participant stated that every time she saw Kylie Jenner on Instagram, she would automatically get jealous of how small her waist looked. Another participant agreed, but further commented that even though she got jealous, she knew that wasn't a realistic body type she could achieve. When asked if that made her feel inferior she stated:

*"We all know they [the Kardashians] have make-up artists and personal trainers and hair stylists and skin care specialists waiting on them hand and foot, and we, as normal civilians, just don't have that. I can get jealous all I want of Kylie's figure, but I know she didn't get that way alone. They have a lot more resources to look the way they do, and I get that. That's why I don't get too worked up over it or try to look like them because it's not realistic, and I hope other people see that, too."*

Most participants, as previously stated, have smaller families or they don't have any siblings at all. When asked if she compared her own family to the Kardashian and Jenner clan, one participant, an only child, said she always watched and wished she had more siblings or even a sister, but never thought her home life was "terrible or anything like that." Another participant said, "The Kardashians are so out-there and crazy that there's no way I could even compare them with my family. We're nothing alike." No participants felt the need to evaluate themselves based on the Kardashians' way of living.

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## **Surveillance**

Surveillance can be defined as the act of watching reality television to see how a certain part of society works and interacts. This issue was examined by asking how real or genuine they perceived *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* to be. It can be noted that this category also overlaps with voyeuristic tendencies in the way that some viewers watch reality television simply for the pleasure of finally getting to see the curtain drop and a true, genuine moment revealed. All participants agreed that they understood the role producers play in setting up situations to happen on the show, but they also all believed that the characters' feelings and reactions were all real. One participant stated:

*"I know some people watch the show because they want to see what it's like to live like the Kardashians, and for the most part, I think their show is very real in that way. I'm very media literate and I know that the producers could sometimes tell them to sit down and talk about a certain subject, but I think their feelings and reactions in those situations are real. I don't think people should assume this is how all wealthy people live, but I know people will. People will always generalize parts of society, but I don't watch for that aspect. I watch to catch a glimpse into a lifestyle I'll never have."*

When asked if after watching the show they had a better sense of living a wealthy lifestyle, all participants agreed. They did not agree, however, that the Kardashians were comparable to other reality television families that were wealthy or celebrities. One participant stated, "The Kardashians are a rare breed. They're loud and not afraid to talk about things and be blunt with one another. I don't think you can watch the show and assume that's how all rich families act."

## **Diversion**

In this study, participants explored diversion for "emotional release" or "escape from routine." One participant stated that, along with watching for personal connectedness, she watched the show if she needed to improve her mood. When asked if this was her go-to show to escape a bad mood, she stated:

*"Not always, but there's so much humor in [Keeping Up with the Kardashians] that it's easy to forget about all your problems and stress and schoolwork for a little bit. I mean, most of the time when you turn on E!, especially in the mornings, reruns of the show are always playing. It's easy to sit back and relax and enjoy the family's outlandish behavior because it's mindless television. You don't need to think too hard to watch it."*

One participant noted that she usually watches the show when she needs a break from studying or homework. She stated that she doesn't watch the show right when a new episode airs, but she will catch up by watching it online. When participants were asked if they felt antsy or upset when they miss an airing of a new episode or season premiere, all said no. One participant commented:

*"They're [the Kardashians] everywhere these days. Even if I miss an episode or a premiere, I know exactly what happened on the show just by scrolling through Twitter or looking at pop culture websites. Other girls my age are bound to be talking about it, too, so there's so many different outlets where I can catch up even without watching the show, so I don't worry."*

## **Youthful Vulnerability**

A concern for the younger generation naturally came up in interviews even without being asked. Most questions involving social comparison or personal connectedness led to unexpected responses from participants that included some sort of talk about the "younger generation"-- considering all the participants were ages 20 to 22, it's easy to assume they're talking about pre-teens and teenagers.

Although all participants agreed they didn't see the Kardashians as role models, they all expressed concern or interest for the younger generation because it could be influenced by how the Kardashians live their lives. One participant explained:

*"I'm not really influenced by them, I would say, but I could definitely see how younger*

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*girls could be impacted by them. I mean, look at Kylie Jenner. She was named one of the most influential teens this year. She's everywhere. She's got a huge following, but she started sexualizing herself on social media at only like 16 years old. That's crazy."*

Other participants had similar comments, while mentioning the Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge: "It went viral so fast. All the teenage girls were doing it to look like her, to have her lips. I'm pretty sure she even sent out a statement where she said she had no idea how influential her small lip injections would be. Well, now she does." When asked why she thought only teenage girls were trying it, the same participant said:

*"I think it all has to do with the place they are in their lives. As college women, we've kind of found our place and our niches and our paths and how we want to define ourselves. For middle schoolers and high schoolers, it's a different story. They're at that stage where you can really still be molded and highly influenced by others around you and what you see on television. It's a time where you're trying to define who you are and if all you see on social media and television is skinny waist, fat a\$\$, small legs, then there's this pressure put on that that's what you need to look like."*

Another participant expressed an interest in the younger generation but in a more positive light. About the possibility that the Kardashians could be seen as role models, she said not for herself, but "definitely for the younger girls." She highlighted Kylie Jenner's new campaign against bullying and Kendall Jenner's aspirations to become a model. She commented:

*"Kylie and Kendall have always had a camera in their face, ever since they were little. They had to grow up fast, at least that's what it looked like to me. Now they're using their influence toward more positive things. Kylie has dealt with so much bullying because of fame that she wants to help others going through similar situations. Kendall has wanted to be a model for so long and now she's doing it and encouraging other women to work hard and follow their dreams. Yeah, they can be a little too revealing for my taste on social media, but I think they're doing more good than harm at this point."*

When asked why they thought this younger generation was so invested in the show and the family, most participants credited it to Kylie and Kendall. They believed that 20-year-olds are so invested because they've grown up with the family, but they felt teenagers got connected through the spotlight Kylie and Kendall have been in. Participants felt this age group (about 15- to 18-years-olds) is still searching for role models and inspiration for their lives, whereas college-aged women most likely are not.

## V. Conclusion

The current study aimed to answer to what extent voyeuristic tendencies and social comparison tendencies drive college-aged women to follow a celebrity family on television. Participants in this study felt that most of their reason for watching *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* was purely for entertainment purposes or to stay up-to-date with the family's lives.

The participants did not regard the Kardashians as their role models or inspirations, but they think the younger generation might feel that way, as Patino et al. (2012) found in their study about adolescents. These participants believe they don't need to compare themselves to the Kardashians because they feel like they are at a time and place in their life where they are content in their own skin, unlike how girls in high school or middle school might feel. Therefore, the participants feel their main reasons for watching *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* are based on entertainment value, escaping reality, and feeling connected with the family.

For college-aged women, the show is mainly for entertainment. The family is outlandish enough to be entertaining but real enough to get personal and share their true feelings and reactions on screen. The Kardashians have been doing this for more than seven years now, and they've mastered it. That's how they keep people coming back. They know what viewers are looking for, but that's also why they get so much flack for putting marriages or break-ups on television because people automatically assume it's just for publicity and ratings. Based on this research, reality television stars in general should realize how influential they might be on their audience members and use that for the greater good.

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The concern all the participants had for other audience members, especially young teenage girls, can be interpreted through what Davison (1983) found in his study, the third-person effect. The college students might feel the topic of the question at hand had a greater effect on others than on themselves.

Regardless of influential power, it seems the Kardashians are keeping their large audience thanks to their level of connectedness with their viewers. By sharing their most intimate moments in all aspects of media, the family is able to build that relationship with their followers. As Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007) found, the more realistic a reality television show can be, the more viewers keep up with it and the more they feel they can relate to it, even if the characters are wealthier or their 18-year-old daughters already have their own houses and clothing lines. It's a connection to the feelings and hardships portrayed on the screen.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to extend many thanks to Glenn Scott, associate professor at Elon University, for his guidance, inspiration, and advice, all of which were influential during the research process and publication of the article. The author is also thankful to Byung S. Lee, associate professor at Elon University, for his supervision and help of revision for this article. Lastly, the author thanks Carly Davenport, her roommate and friend, for her help with the article's early drafts.

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