2022
VOL.14(2)

stream

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION

RESURGENCE

Dialogues and Practices
Conference Proceedings from Simon Fraser University, University of Calgary and CCA.

stream

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION

2022, VOL.14(2)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

It is our pleasure to have a combined conference proceedings issue this December. These conference proceedings consist of Contested Freedoms (SFU); Visions of Change (UCalgary); and Transitions (CCA) all held in 2022.

Our warm thanks to all of our peer reviewers, and to our guest editors Byron Hauck (Simon Fraser University) and Xenia Rebola de la Cruz (University of Calgary) and to all of the authors for their assistance in producing this issue.

Stream: Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication
2022, Vol 14(2), 1–12

https://journals.sfu.ca/stream

Facebook's Facelift Turns Faceplant

Hannah Block
School of Communication
Simon Fraser University

Abstract:
More than an attempt to delineate its subsidiaries, the rebranding of Facebook Inc. to Meta Platforms Inc. strategically exploits the communication tactic of rebranding. The rebrand of the global technology conglomerate ignores critiques and instead utilizes the communication tactic as a conduit for freedom from actively abandoned responsibilities via disownership and a shifting of public attention. Concealing and evading corporate social responsibility in this way can be characterized as an act of social, regulatory, and political deception. Actions comparable to such historical cases as Philip Morris Companies and Dow Chemical underscore the long-term, highly strategic work of brand maintenance, while this public deception illustrates the paradox of rebranding—making visible the previously invisible—progressing contested freedom. Such evasion of responsibility has become acceptable in modern-day communication and public relation practices, with Facebook leveraging this normalization and complacent social acceptance. Committed to the future, Meta must be equally indebted to its past and confront its missteps; otherwise, its cosmetic rebrand will remain superficial—ultimately progressing a double standard agenda—promoting and advancing freedom in the online space while a conflicting internal corporate desire for freedom from responsibility persists. A successful facelift or an unexpected faceplant, Facebook's rebranding to Meta Platforms Inc. strategically leverages the transitional properties of the communication tactic—seeking liberation from corporate social responsibility.

Keywords:
Facebook; Meta; rebrand; deception; corporate responsibility.

Corresponding Author: Hannah Block – hannah_block@sfu.ca

Synonymous with economic success, brand is the cornerstone of a company's public image and identity—foundational features in today's reputation-obsessed society. The pervasiveness of this identity-based fixation informs and guides corporate practices. Facebook Inc.'s recent (late October 2021) rebranding to Meta Platforms Inc. is a timely example of the employment of this profit-driven, success-based practice.

Commonly classified as a phenomenon (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006; Schmeltz & Kjeldsen, 2016), the strategic communication tactic of rebranding can be characterized equally as an act of social, regulatory, and political deception when combined with the disregarding of corporative obligations. Suggesting discomfort and unsettledness, this deception stems from a systemic corporate inability to confront social, moral, ethical, cultural, political, and economic responsibilities; opting instead to conceal and evade them by way of rebranding, reinforcing utopic associations.

A form of name change, rebranding "entails a major change that completely redefines the organization" (Schmeltz & Kjeldsen, 2016, p. 314). Considering corporate branding is a "systematically planned and implemented process of creating and maintaining a favourable image and consequently a favourable reputation" (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006, p. 807), corporate rebranding has the potential to "wipe out the positive mental images that the brand usually stimulates" (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006, p. 807). Theoretically, then, there is equal opportunity to "wipe out" negative brand associations—a plausible motivator for Facebook's rebrand to Meta. This proposition is validated by Laurent Muzellec's and Mary Lambkin's (2006) rebranding model in which "rebranding is conceptualised as a change in an organisation's self-identity and/or an attempt to change perceptions of the image among external stakeholders" (p. 820). Branding, and thus rebranding, directly influence corporate equity and perceived value.

Social media and the virtual public sphere thrive as a site of budding discontent, with Facebook at its core (Dahlberg, 2020), facing public scrutiny stemming from accusations of the "spread of misinformation and hate speech, and its potential to be harmful for teenagers and children" (Huddleston, 2021, para. 3), coupled with "fallout from the Facebook Papers" (Anderson, 2021, para. 2)—internal documents "provid[ing] an unprecedented view into how executives . . . weigh trade-offs between public safety and their own bottom line" (Lima, 2021, para. 4). Given this social, political, and academic dissatisfaction, Facebook's rebranding to Meta as a direct attempt to avoid (further) public vilification is irrefutable. CEO Mark Zuckerberg states otherwise, suggesting the rebranding "reflects the company's

increased focus on building a virtual world, known as a metaverse" (Huddleston, 2021, para. 2), and "to more clearly define the corporate entity that comprises a suite of apps including Instagram, WhatsApp, Messenger, Oculus, Workplace, Portal, Calibra—and, yes, Facebook" (Rooney, 2019, para. 1). However, as Muzellec and Lambkin (2006) caution, the accuracy of publicly communicated reasons for rebranding varies. Considering "[i]mage related problems are the third most important factor" (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006, p. 809) driving rebranding, Facebook's rebrand to Meta suggests an attempt to dissociate and disown fundamental "quality problems" (Dahlberg, 2020, p. 70) and lingering responsibilities.

Claiming to "give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" (Kato, 2021, p. 189), Facebook, now Meta, offers "the next evolution of social connection" (*Welcome to Meta*). As progressive thinkers with a prestigious new name, the systemic corporate practice of rebranding by way of concealing and displacing responsibility as a viable conduit for addressing what is otherwise profound social, regulatory, and political deception presents as a central argument, while the historical dissociative behaviour to escape social, moral, ethical, cultural, political, and economic obligations raises questions related to ethics and underlying corporate motives.

Key Case Studies

Philip Morris | The Altria Group

Whether rebranding to evade responsibility, to more clearly distinguish the social platform from its parent organization, or to demonstrate advancement, Zuckerberg's actions can be likened to that of Philip Morris Companies, maker of one of the world's top-selling cigarette brands, Marlboro. In 2001, Philip Morris Companies underwent a similar rebranding following 12 years of strategizing and high-level consulting with public relations firms. "[T]he world's largest and most profitable tobacco seller" (Smith & Malone, 2003, p. 553) rebranded to The Altria Group in an attempt to separate its tobacco brand from its holding company (which also includes Kraft Foods and Miller Brewing among others) as brand recognition was "almost entirely negative, associated only with tobacco" (Smith & Malone, 2003, para. 2), exhibiting the "negative transfer value" (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006, p. 812) of tobacco on its sub-brands. Like Facebook, Philip Morris seized this rebrand as an opportunity to "distance the corporation and its other operating companies from negative publicity" (Smith & Malone, 2003, para. 3), further substantiating the image-related driver of rebranding Muzellec and Lambkin (2006) present. These comparable actions illustrate the systemic strategic communication practice of rebranding to avoid responsibility and dilute negative associations.

Rebranding to create "distance between the corporate brand and their product brands" (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006, p. 809) enabled Philip Morris to place a "greater emphasis on . . . [its] brand portfolio" (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006, p. 811), thereby attempting to emerge from its previously siloed brand image and associations (i.e., tobacco), while simultaneously signifying "cultural development" (WARC, 2001, para. 2) within the corporation. This indicates a further likeness to the intentions and architecture of Facebook's rebrand to Meta—suggesting its name change reflects its commitment to the metaverse future (*Welcome to Meta*).

Emphasizing the highly strategic nature and underlying motives of rebranding, author Deborah Doane, in her chapter for *Brands and Branding*, warns: "When you are buying a brand, whose brand are you really buying? Few consumers know that Kraft Foods is owned by a tobacco company" (Doane, 2009, p. 187). This sub-brand disconnect presents a further parallel between Facebook's rebrand to Meta and Philip Morris' rebrand to The Altria Group. The public reintroduction of entities demonstrates to users (past, present, and future) that Facebook Inc. (now Meta Platforms Inc.) encompasses a host of subsidiary social platforms—thereby repositioning the company as a parent organization comprised of more than just the popular social media platform (Facebook).

Such long-term, highly intricate, and costly rebranding schemes illustrate the degree of strategic corporate communication strategies these global actors have access to—to dissolve negative brand associations and obfuscate public knowledge.

Dow Chemical | Union Carbide

Lending itself to a multi-generational exploration, Dow Chemical's acquisition of Union Carbide is a prime example of the most common form of rebranding. The 2001 merger was highly strategic—illustrating Dow's awareness of the professional weight of brand identity. "Dow Chemical abandoned the Union Carbide name because of an internationally known scandal . . . Union Carbide is now considered a subsidiary of Dow rather than an integral part of the parent name" (Chapman, 2020, para. 17). Merging in this way enabled Dow Chemical to acquire Union Carbide's "valuable assets" (Chapman, 2020, para. 17) while avoiding a potentially brand-tarnishing acquisition. The historic 1984 methyl isocyanate gas leak in Bhopal, India, which killed thousands, shattered the chemical corporation's brand identity—forever associated with the world's worst industrial accident (Tremblay, 2011).

This permanent, negative brand association again underscores the importance of Dow Chemical's strategic efforts when acquiring the tainted brand two decades ago. Like Zuckerberg's denial of accusations against Facebook of wrongdoings, Union

Carbide (now owned by Dow Chemical) "as recently as May 2003 denied any responsibility for the disaster" (Doane, 2009, p. 187). Extracting the value from Union Carbide and then quietly disposing of the brand name and associated obligations through strategic acquisition and rebranding tactics enabled Dow Chemical to maintain its public-facing image.

Comparison

Although different forms of corporate machinations, whether one examines Facebook, Philip Morris Companies, or Dow Chemical, the underlying public deception is the same. These historical instances reveal the highly strategic work of branding and rebranding, often resulting in forms of social, political, and/or regulatory deception. The deceptive evasion of social, moral, ethical, cultural, political, and economic responsibilities has become acceptable in modern-day communication and public relation practices, with Facebook leveraging this normalization and complacent social acceptance.

The fundamental paradoxical condition of rebranding surfaces here: corporate presentation, or rather re-presentation—as brands rebrand—introducing their 'new' brand as clean, innocent, and undefined, when, as Kartik Kalaignanam and S. Cem Bahadir (2012) suggest: "Corporate brands are strategic assets for organizations" (p. 456). For such corporations as Facebook, Phillip Morris, and Union Carbide that recognize the vitality of rebranding and the lasting impacts of their choices due to modern society's digital archive and media-fueled amplification, a further paradox presents itself: simply rebranding to address responsibilities, electing to overlook and displace public-facing obligations.

Media operates as a digital archive—making it challenging, if not impossible, for companies to completely dissociate from their original brand(s). Rebranding is therefore more comparable to updating one's social media profile picture—encouraging users/consumers to 'forget' about the old (looks, habits, behaviours, interests, etc.) and to begin to engage with the 'new', 'improved' version/self. Line Schmeltz's and Anna Karina Kjeldsen's (2016) work on "understanding corporate name change as strategic communication" (p. 309) is highly relevant here.

Facebook's corporate rename and rebrand satisfies the elements of "how to choose a new name" as set out by Schmeltz and Kjeldsen (2016). The name Meta benefits users and the company itself insofar as it provides clear delineation between the corporate entity and its portfolio of social subsidiaries. For its users, consumers, and the general public, the new name creates value—"reflect[ing] the company's increased focus on building a virtual world, known as a metaverse" (Huddleston,

2021, para. 2). Equally sensitive to key audiences, "Meta" evokes an emotional response—targeting and appealing to those interested in the construction of a new, virtual world. Further functionalities of the name change include inherently supporting the company's goal of constructing a metaverse while simultaneously acting as a form of subliminal manifestation: "By changing name, an organization can signal and create a desired future status in the organizational field and in some cases, attempt to either enter into new fields, or change the field to which it belongs" (Schmeltz & Kjeldsen, 2016, p. 314).

Given the nature of rebranding as a form of strategic communication,

> [c]hoosing a new name therefore becomes a question of balancing the expectations of the different stakeholders, either by meeting as many expectations as possible, or by targeting the choice of new name at a specific group of stakeholders perceived to hold the most crucial power over the organization. (Schmeltz & Kjeldsen, 2016, p. 315)

The latter is true in the case of Facebook's rebranding to Meta. In selecting its new name, the California-based tech company clearly chose to target a specific group of stakeholders: its users—those that "hold the most crucial power" (Schmeltz & Kjeldsen, 2016, p. 315). Because, ultimately, in the absence of its users, the social networking platform would become obsolete, an undesirable environment for advertisers. With this, the basic structure of the cyclical processes and environment that technology giants like Facebook have established would deteriorate. Therefore, it can be concluded that the social media conglomerate's new name, Meta, focuses its highest consideration on the interests of its predominant stakeholders: its users.

Nevertheless, rebranding persists as a band-aid solution for corporations to evade their wrongdoings while subsequently providing an opportunity to exploit public dopamine responses associated with new and undefined brands. These actions of temporary escape and evasion of responsibility can be interpreted as strategic corporate communication behaviours to sustain value in areas of companies that are still viable, while hiving off persisting issues.

Discussion

Highly "filtered and curated" (Bucher, 2017, p. 39), social media platforms serve as virtual storyboards for modern day life. Deeply ingrained in the everyday, this omnipresent infrastructure is suggestive of the embeddedness and weight these

platforms carry. Operating within the subconscious as a digital archive, this inescapable societal integration and citizen indebtedness by way of necessity implies that strategic corporate communication rebranding efforts that disregard social responsibilities cannot simply reconfigure a popular brand/company. Thus, Facebook's rebranding to Meta, like Philip Morris Companies to The Altria Group and Dow Chemical's acquisition of Union Carbide, is more comparable to a makeover—a cosmetic illusion—attempting to cover up and conceal imperfections and resituate the tainted brand. These corporate concealments and deep societal infiltrations are recognized in Taina Bucher's 2017 article "The algorithmic imaginary: Exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms" where she surveys how "social media users . . . encounter the workings of algorithms in their everyday life" (p. 30)—discussing awareness and user expectations and understanding.

This formative nature of social media is evident in the current public realm, beyond individual user experience. Corporate instances include Lush Cosmetics' recent decision to log off of select social platforms:

As of November 26th, 2021, we're saying goodbye to Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok until these platforms can provide a safer environment for their users. The serious effects of social media . . . are being ignored by these platforms . . . We wouldn't ask our customers to meet us down a dark and dangerous alleyway – but some social media platforms are beginning to feel like places no one should be encouraged to go. Something has to change. (Lush, Social Departure)

Committed to continued connection, Lush has pledged to "build better channels of communication elsewhere, as well as use the older tried and tested routes" (Lush, Social Departure).

Curating its digital soapboxes with intent, the soap maker's strategic departure from select social platforms directly challenges Facebook's rebrand. Lush's global public maneuver illustrates the consequences of abandoned obligations, exemplifying the impermanence of rebranding as a viable form of responsibility management.

Such "logging off" is also demonstrative of resistance and immanent critique—further underscoring Meta's embeddedness in society and corresponding citizen immersion in the social platform's highly complex virtual system. This codependency emphasizes the ease with which the multinational technology conglomerate can take advantage of the fundamental societal structure it has created.

Looking Ahead

Committed to the future, Meta must be equally indebted to its past and confront its missteps otherwise its cosmetic rebrand will remain superficial, again indicative of social, regulatory, and political deception—ultimately advancing a double standard agenda. Asserting its dominance in society, the rebrand blatantly ignores democratic-oriented critiques and, instead, utilizes the strategic communication tactic as a vehicle for evasion, disownership, and a shifting of public attention, rather than addressing fundamental internal issues—a conditioned, historical, corporate structural act.

The "primary goal of rebranding is to reflect a change in the organisation and/or to foster a new image" (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006, p. 819). However, many view Facebook's rebrand as merely a "foolish attempt to distract from the criticism the company has recently faced" (Yohn, 2021, para. 1). Contradictory to the objective of rebranding then, the renaming of the global tech giant involves little, if any, "substantive change at the company" (Yohn, 2021, para. 1). Although decades apart, Philip Morris held a similar belief: "that a name change might solve a multitude of problems" (Smith & Malone, 2003, para. 2). With insufficient infrastructure, the intentions of Facebook's rebrand falls short—existing instead as a form of public manipulation with the potential to cause further harm given today's delicate global, social, and political climate.

Mediatization situates citizens' orientation of sense and meaning making in the world. Fueled by social media, this constitutes a world of 'vibrating life', where living in a state of constant unsettledness, on the precipice of crisis has become 'normal'. Social media attempts to produce "liveness"—"the experience of immediate connection through media" (Lupinacci, 2021, p. 274)—contributing to an ongoing state of instability and anxiety. Given society's fundamental experience of the world as mediatized, Facebook plays a critical role. Its rebrand has served as a catalytic site for the production of "liveness" in the virtual space, with the vision of "bring[ing] the metaverse to life" (*Welcome to Meta*), enabling users to "socialize, learn, collaborate and play in ways that go beyond what we can imagine" (*Welcome to Meta*). But how can citizens and users be expected to readily indulge themselves, their connections, and their relationships in this new metaverse? Why is society expected to be trusting of and committed to this new and unknown virtual world while the owner of the virtual space itself cannot be trusted? This paradoxical demand further underscores the elements of social, regulatory, and political deception present in Facebook's rebrand.

Corporations, therefore, need to critically consider how their user/consumer requirements and expectations morph during the rebranding process. Expecting users to effortlessly adapt due to the "deeply interconnected nature of infrastructures and organizational processes" (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, pp. 57-58) fails to recognize their role in today's mediatized environment. In this sense, social media (Facebook) also impacts digital wayfinding (Ingold, 2000). A way of finding and making way through space, wayfinding attempts to capture world processes and social life in action. Central to modern day meaning making, this construct has come to fundamentally rely on social media and is therefore affected due to lack of trust and transparency, coupled with unavoidable reliance on these virtual platforms.

It is equally necessary to consider the risks of rebranding. Aside from being "very costly" (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006, p. 803), indicating that corporations opting to rebrand must, at the minimum, be in a semi-secure financial state, "[c]hanging a brand's name . . . suggests the loss of all the values that the old name signifies . . . potentially nullif[ying] those years of effort" (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006, p. 804). Is this what Facebook intended with its rebrand? Did the company and parent organization of social subsidiaries seek to cut ties with all that its old name represents? As Schmeltz and Kjeldsen (2016) identify: "original brand name can carry an almost iconic status and emotional attachment . . . which risks being lost if changed" (pp. 312-313). Here then, it can be determined that Facebook was aware of, and ultimately desired, this loss of original brand associations.

A successful facelift or an unexpected faceplant, Facebook Inc.'s rebrand to Meta Platforms Inc. is a prime example of modern strategic communication tactics and its ecosystem. Furthermore, the multinational technology corporation's effort to rebrand as an escape from responsibility is analogous to the fundamental service its social platforms offer its users: an opportunity to escape into a virtual "metaverse"—temporarily disowning real-world responsibilities.

Marketed as a virtual Mecca, Facebook's rebrand to Meta amplifies the coexistence of brand, public image, and identity. Given this interdependency, the conscious rebrand thrives as a site of social, political, and regulatory deception; the social connection innovator actively works to dissociate from persisting social, moral, ethical, cultural, political, and economic responsibilities and obligations in this rebranding economy.

References

American journal of public health, 93(4), 553–556.
https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.93.4.553

Anderson, M. (2021, October 28). *Facebook Inc.: A look at other corporate rebranding efforts*. AP News. https://apnews.com/article/meta-zuckerberg-facebook-philip-morris-0c2dd2cf2898a1b5f82ae6813989a011

Beer, J. (2021, October, 21). *Facebook's reported name change reinforces its image as the new Big Tobacco*. Fast Company. https://www.fastcompany.com/90688287/facebooks-reported-name-change-reinforces-its-image-as-the-new-big-tobacco

Bucher, T. (2017). The algorithmic imaginary: exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(1), 30-44. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086

Chapman, L. (2020). Ensuring a cohesive rebranding strategy for a B2B merger/acquisition. TREW Marketing. https://www.trewmarketing.com/smartmarketingblog/ensuring-a-cohesive-rebranding-strategy-around-a-b2b-merger-or-acquisition

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). How we live with media. *The mediated construction of reality* (pp. 57-79). Cambridge: Polity.

Dahlberg, L. (2020). Facebook's response to its democratic discontents: Quality initiatives, ideology and education's role. In M. Stocchetti (Ed.), *The digital age and its discontents: Critical reflections in education* (pp. 69–94). Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-4-4

Deschamps, T. (2021, November 23). *Why Lush Cosmetics is exiting the 'dark and dangerous alleyway' of social media*. CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/amp/1.6259350

Doane. (2009). *An Alternative Perspective on Brands: Markets and Morals*. In The Economist: Brands and Branding (pp. 234–245). http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/pdf/research/books/nation_branding/Brands_And_Branding_-_Rita_Clifton_And_John_Simmons.pdf

Evans, P. (2021, October 28). *Facebook is now Meta, but critics say same old problems remain*. CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/facebook-metaverse-1.6228377

Gringarten, Fernández-Calienes, Gringarten, Hagai, Fernández-Calienes, Rául, & Taylor & Francis. (2019). *Ethical branding and marketing: cases and lessons*. Routledge. https://sfu-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/m5r6de/01SFUL_ALMA51305408710003611

Huddleston Jr., T. (2021, October 21). *A Facebook name change could be a great idea — or a terrible one. Just look at Google, Apple and more*. CNBC.

https://www.cnbc.com/2021/10/21/facebooks-reported-name-change-7-rebrands-that-worked-or-didnt.html

Ingold, T. (2000). *The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203466025

Kalaignanam, K., & Bahadir, S. (2012). Corporate brand name changes and business restructuring: is the relationship complementary or substitutive? *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 41*(4), 456–472. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-012-0321-6

Kato, T. (2021). Brand loyalty explained by concept recall: recognizing the significance of the brand concept compared to features. *Journal of Marketing Analytics*, *9*(3), 185–198. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/10.1057/s41270-021-00115-w

Lima, C. (2021, October 26). *A whistleblower's power: Key takeaways from the Facebook Papers*. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/25/what-are-the-facebook-papers/

Lupinacci, L. (2021). 'Absentmindedly scrolling through nothing': Liveness and compulsory continuous connectedness in social media. *Media, Culture and Society. 43*(2), pp. 273-290. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720939454

Muzellec, L., & Lambkin, M. (2006). Corporate rebranding: destroying, transferring or creating brand equity? *European Journal of Marketing*, *40*(7/8), 803–824. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/10.1108/03090560610670007

Rooney, J. (2019). Facebook Unveils New Corporate Identity, Logo To Distinguish Itself From The App And Position Itself As More Transparent. *Forbes.Com*, N.PAG. https://www.forbes.com/sites/jenniferrooney/2019/11/04/facebook-unveils-new-corporate-identity-logo-to-distinguish-itself-from-the-app-and-position-itself-as-more-transparent/?sh=540e6b6d70b5

Schmeltz, L., & Kjeldsen, A. K. (2016). Naming as Strategic Communication: Understanding Corporate Name Change through an Integrative Framework Encompassing Branding, Identity and Institutional Theory. *International Journal of Strategic Communication, 10*(4), 309–331. https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2016.1179194

Smith, E. A., & Malone, R. E. (2003). Altria means tobacco: Philip Morris's identity crisis.

Too much time scrolling? Instagram now urging teens to 'take a break'. (2021, December 7). CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/instagram-teens-1.6276190

Tremblay, J. F. (2011). Union Carbide acquisition shadows Dow at London Olympics. *Chemical & Engineering News, 89*(47), 7. https://doi.org/10.1021/cen-v089n047.p007a

WARC. (2001, November 16). *Philip Morris Rebrands to Shrug Off Tobacco Associations*. https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/philip-morris-rebrands-to-shrug-off-tobacco-associations/10134

Welcome to Meta. (2021). Meta. https://about.facebook.com/meta/

We're logging off until social media is safe for all. (2021, November 26). Lush. https://www.lush.ca/en/social-departure.html

Yohn, D. L. (2021, November 2). *Facebook's Rebrand Has a Fundamental Problem*. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2021/11/facebooks-rebrand-has-a-fundamental-problem

Stream: Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication
2022, Vol 14(2), 13–28

https://journals.sfu.ca/stream

Forest as Medium: Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Cinematic Liberation

Karen Zhiyi Ren
Department of East Asian Studies
McGill University

Abstract:
Due to its geographic location and tropical climate, the forest is a recurring element and a representative space to depict historical traumas and social movements in Southeast Asian cinema. Thai filmmaker, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, also incorporates the mysterious jungle in his cinematic world as a significant narrative motif. Therefore, this paper investigates how the forest is an artistic medium that interconnects the film narratives and the liberation protests locally and globally across Apichatpong's cinematic world from three perspectives. First, I argue that in *Tropical Malady* (2004), the forest mediates between Apichatpong's personal homosexual experience and the transmission of Thai cultural-specified queer consciousness and suffering. The unnerving forest in this film hence delivers Apichatpong's call for gay liberation and equal rights. Moving further from this subcultural depiction to a national identification, I suggest that the forest in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010) brings in the Thai historical trauma and violence, namely the communist resistance in the Isan area. The precarious jungle then represents Apichatpong's political calling against the military dictatorship in order to regain freedom in Thai society. Finally, I analyze Apichatpong's latest film, *Memoria* (2021), regarding its staging of the 2021 Colombian Protest against corruption and the 2021 Thai Protest against the reforming of the monarchy. The contemplating "transnational" forests thus relate to the political issues in both countries. Together with the film crew's public demonstration at Festival de Cannes, Apichatpong's films speak to the idea that digital media can serve as promotors in liberation movements.

Keywords:
Apichatpong Weerasethakul; Thai cinema; protest movement; media theory; cinematic apparatus

Corresponding Author: Karen Ren – zhiyi.ren@mail.mcgill.ca

Due to its geographic location and tropical climate, the forest is a recurring element and a representative space in Southeast Asian cinema (Chulphongsathorn, 2021, p. 182). From the black-and-white forested long takes in the films of Filipino auteur Lav Diaz (*Melancholia*, 2008) to the haunted rainforest on the Malaysian-Singaporean border in Boo Junfeng's film installation (*Mirror*, 2013), the forest becomes a powerful and complex cinematic assemblage. Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul also incorporated the mysterious jungle, where the boundaries between humans, animals, spirits, and forces are blurry, in his cinematic world. In his films, through specific aesthetic choices, the forest is not simply a mere background for human stories but the main drive of the narrative (Boehler, 2011, p. 291). As Chulphongsathorn (2021) suggests, the entangled nature of the histories of Southeast Asia invites us to think of the notion of trauma from an ecological perspective (p. 185). Therefore, this paper investigates how the forest is an artistic medium that connects personal and historical identities, society and nature, the past and the present, as well as the local and the global, across Apichatpong's cinematic world. This paper first explores how the forest interconnects Apichatpong's personal homosexual experience, and the transmission of Thai cultural-specified queer consciousness and suffering in *Tropical Malady*. Moving further with this subcultural emphasis, the forest in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* hence brings in the Thai historical trauma, namely the communist resistance in the Isan area, which allows the jungle to deliver Apichatpong's political calling against atrocity. Finally, this paper analyzes Apichatpong's latest film, *Memoria,* regarding its connection with both Colombian and Thai political conflicts, where the forest has evolved to interconnect the transnational societal trauma from South America to Southeast Asia, and from the past to the present.

Call of Freedom: The Queer-Conscious Forest

Apichatpong Weerasethakul grew up in Khon Kaen, north-east Thailand, where his parents worked as physicians. He studied architecture at the local university before completing an MFA in Filmmaking at the Art Institute of Chicago, which allowed him to be exposed to traditional Eastern ideologies, as well as Western culture (Marrero-Guillamón, 2018, p. 17). Many of Apichatpong's early films deal with the representation of queerness in Thailand. Before the late 1990s, homosexuality had been underrepresented in Thai cinema. Most of the queer arts in Thailand began centrally to engage questions of rights, privations, and national belonging at the turn of the century. However, the queer representation in Thai cinema remains limited because homosexual love stories always end similarly and tragically, suggesting their diminished personhood and social disapproval. *Tropical Malady*, therefore, stands out

in these films, which establishes homosexuality as the "primary figure of subjectivity" (Fuhrmann, 2016, p. 127). In this film, same-sex relations are present in everyday life in Thailand, from public toilets to the army, the market, the cinema, or even public exercises.

Despite the increasing LGBT visibility globally, homonegative attitudes persist in Southeast Asia in the 2000s (Manalastas, 2017, p. 30). Expressing one's sexuality in public, especially homosexuality, was still considered inappropriate in Thai society. However, the two characters in *Tropical Malady*, Tong and Keng, are always keen to show their desire not only to each other but also to the audience. The expression of their homosexual desires is also always connected with the jungles. One example is the scene after the soldiers found an unknown corpse in the forest. As Tong goes to shower, the camera starts to dolly and film Keng in a long shot. He blends into the trees as he sits still and bites his nails with the sounds of the insects echoing in the background. The emergence of this queer character and the jungle begins to appear. With a quick cut to a medium shot, the next one minute and a half focus solely on Keng's face and body. Keng smiles directly into the camera, turns away a few times but always flirtatiously glances back. The shadows of the trees and the sound of nature continue to surround him, which merges his desires into the jungle he situates in, turning the jungle into the witness of his sexuality. Keng's direct gaze at the viewer also imitates a desirous exchange between him and the audience. Also, Keng's gesture of sitting under the trees parallels how Buddha attains enlightenment under the trees (Rigg, 1995, p. 34). The trees' religious significance thus allows the audience to comprehend this scene self-reflexively, transmitting Keng's amorous homosexual consciousness to the real world.

Later in the film, Tong and Keng spend most of their time alone in the forest, happily chatting or sleeping on each other's lap. The camera always portrays them in a long shot with deep focus, juxtaposing their sexual desires in the foreground and the jungle in the background. While Keng and Tong travel back and forth between the city and the village, work and relaxation, houses and forests, their relationship becomes quotidian. Apichatpong refrains from expressing the current struggles around homosexuality explicitly (Fuhrmann, 2016, p. 128). Keng and Tong's open and public queerness thus becomes the embodiment of a Thai lifestyle, enthusiastic but also subtle. As Apichatpong discloses in an interview, even though his parents' jobs allow them to travel internationally, he is still most at home in the villages surrounded by forests, where he realized his homosexuality as a child (Rich, 2013, p.89). His self-identity arises from the jungles that he lives within. Intriguingly, the first appearance of Tong parallels Apichatpong's attachment to the forest. In a long shot, Tong blends into the jungle and slowly appears on screen as he walks toward Keng. Furthermore,

Apichatpong confessed that these two men's story is quite autobiographical (Lee, 2013). He mashed his own love story with inspiration from the stories of Noi Inthanon, a writer of jungle adventure books from his youth, to create this film narrative. Tong and Apichatpong hence both "emerge" from the forest that witnessed the development of their desire and sexuality. The forest in the first half of *Tropical Malady* thus is a silent observer of Keng and Tong's relationship, as well as Apichatpong's own self-identifying journey as a gay man, mediating between personal recollections and the Thai, public homoeroticism.

After around fifty minutes, this romantic storyline between Keng and Tong abruptly ends. The second part begins, clearly marked with a black shot, credits, and a title. The film now follows a young forest ranger, Keng, searching for a tiger spirit, Tong, in the jungle. When Tong re-emerges in the jungle, his naked body and face are tattooed with Buddhist-rooted *sak yant* designs conventionally applied to male bodies as a protective measure (Fuhrmann, 2016, p. 140). From a Theravadin Buddhist perspective, being gay results from bad karma (Cheng, 2017, p. 368). As Apichatpong admits, despite his international perspective, he holds a more Buddhist view of his own sexuality (Rich, 2013, p. 90). Because of Apichatpong and Tong's parallelism, the Buddhist inscription on Tong's body becomes the director's self-redemption. He wishes to reduce the weakness caused by the queerness both for himself and Thai society. As areca palm trees, which are originated from Southeast Asia and widespread in Thailand, surround and hide Tong, he seems concealed and defenceless. This mise-en-scene not only implies Apichatpong's own struggle growing up as a gay man but also suggests the invisibility of the gay community in Thailand. Tong's nakedness uncovers the queer body while the protective tattoos signal the wish to reduce the vulnerability of queer bodies in a hostile Thai political climate. The jungle that embraces Tong thus embodies Apichatpong's own reconciliation with his identity and a call for social and political inclusion.

During the soldier's search, as Keng walks deeper and deeper into the forest, he gradually gets absorbed into the jungle. After a few encounters with the tiger spirit, the soldier loses his uniform and weapon. He starts to live like an animal and gains the ability to communicate with animals, while slowly losing his identity as a human. The framing turns from mostly medium shots and tracking shots at the beginning to mostly long shots and even extreme long shots as the soldier drifts away from his "humanity." The camera also spends more time portraying the mysterious forest statically as the story progresses. Keng has been isolated in the forest where he cannot find a way out. The forest thus hides Keng and further reproduces the sense of "lost" among the audience. The audience is actively searching for Keng on screen. However, sometimes we cannot locate him because the forest has dominated the

screen and created a long distance between the camera and the protagonist. This invisibility produced by the forest thus helps the audience to better understand the loneliness queer people in Thailand are facing. While we cannot find Keng on screen, it is even harder for many queer people like Keng to find their self-identities or a community they belong. Furthermore, throughout the second part of the film, there is no background music or dialogue. The three-dimensional soundscape is filled with natural sounds such as the birds' calling, insects' chirping, and monkeys' howling that make the forest somewhat uncanny. Many elements of the soundtrack are recorded with a microphone held very close to the object, which creates a sense of disorientation because we cannot tell where each sound comes from (Lovatt, 2013, p. 67). In *Ambient Media*, Paul Roquet (2016) describes that ambient sound can function as the echo of the isolation and uncertainty of the emerging social situation. In the case of *Tropical Malady*, the confusing and even scary ambient sound can be seen as the echo of queer people's fear and misplacement in Thailand. Keng's personal isolation in the forest also parallels queer people's isolation in Thai society. The unnerving forest this scene designs hence imitates the suffering and isolation of same-sex couples in Thailand. The audience then becomes an active spectator, who is able to experience these complex emotions self-reflexively.

Even though the first half of the film tries to refrain from portraying the hardships queer people face directly, through the creation of a disorientated and bounded cinematic forest that buries Tong and Keng's desire, the second half of the film dedicates to elaborating on this pain's full range. In the end, the tiger spirit "devours his soul," as Keng recognizes himself in it and surrenders his spirit, flesh, and memories to it. As Keng stares directly at the camera again, the audience is encouraged to identify with him introspectively and feel his pain. With the juxtaposition of the panning shot of the gloomy forest and Tong's desolate voice, "I miss you, soldier," the film ends in a melancholic way. While the disorienting sound of nature continues to echo in the background, Apichatpong uses his forest, visually and audibly, to transmit the on-screen character's confusion and agony to the audience. The story of Keng and his animal–spirit–human counterpart portrays existential suffering. While Thailand is viewed as the tourist heaven for same-sex couples, the reality for locals is that the law, and often public sentiment, is not so liberal (Yongcharoenchai, 2013). The queer community in Thailand is still facing discrimination affecting their social rights and job opportunities, even though the tourism authority has been promoting Thailand as a gay-friendly country (Kamjan, 2014). The immersive and experiential forest in *Tropical Malady* thus allows the audience to understand the harm of these discriminations more vividly. The forest, therefore, delivers the call for equal rights from Apichatpong's filmic world to Thai society and the mass.

Forest as Historical, Social, and Political Resistance

As Zhang (2002) suggests, the visual beauty of the local landscapes has become an important selling point of non-Western films to the Western audience. The forest in Thailand has been seen as an exotic landscape among the west. Thailand is also eager to "promote" a convincing sense of "Thainess" to the outside world. As 21st-century Thai cinema increasingly seeks to appeal the international audiences, the filmmakers embed marvellous nature, peaceful spirituality, and sensual pleasures in a self-exoticizing way by incorporating Thailand's famous tourist attractions, such as the beach and the palm, in their films (Harrison, 2005, p. 324). As we can see from *Tropical Malady*, Apichatpong's films, on the other hand, defy this traditional Thai filmmaking by portraying the uncivilized and even sometimes upsetting jungles. Filmed on 16mm film rather than digital, while the majority of the films in the 2010s were filmed in a photochemical manner (Utterson, 2017, p. 231), Apichatpong's *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, further challenges the boundary of filmmaking through his use of the forest.

First, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past* is set in Isan, which is in the northeast part of Thailand. Isan is a site of conflicted signification in Thai culture. As a principally rural and agricultural province, Isan signifies the "rural utopia" and "cornerstone of Thai heritage," because of its rich natural resources (Boehler, 2011, p. 293). On the other hand, the rural space of the Isan jungle also signifies as anti-nation because of the region's historical association with communist resistance and its ties to various ethnic minorities in Thailand, such as the Chinese and Laotians (Szymanski, 2017. P. 49). In the Thai government's official discourse, communism is seen as the external other and a major enemy of the Thainess (Thongchai, 1997, p. 169). Isan served as a hiding place for members of the Communist Party who fled from state repression to the North-Eastern jungles (Szymanski, 2017, p. 62). The primitive forest in *Uncle Boonmee* thus becomes the opposite of "Thainess" which invites the audience to engage with Thailand's history directly without any decoration. Hence, the forest in this film does not serve to appeal to the Western audience but is a signifier of the brutal Thai history. It becomes the linkage between the past lives and real lives, the marginal places, and the national center, as well as the historical trauma and contemporary society.

Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past opens with a five-minute mysterious scene of the water buffalo. The buffalo unleashes itself and escapes to the forest, surrounded by vegetation. The camera follows the buffalo but always keeps a distance from it by using long shots. The camera remains in the forest until its owner comes to get it. The way the hunters are dressed marked this sequence set in ancient

times, implying that this is one of uncle Boonmee's past lives. The distance between the camera and the on-screen character evokes a sense of voyeurism among the audience. The camera and the audience are both contemporary, modern intruders to this ancient forest. In another point-of-view shot, a monkey ghost stares directly into the camera. Its glowing red eyes stare intensely at us for fifteen seconds and interrogate our voyeuristic position in a world we do not belong to (De Cock de Rameyen, 2021, p. 172). The opening scene thus marks the forest as a place of "otherness" that does not follow real-life rationales. The cinematography and mise-en-scene isolate the Isan jungle from modern society and set it as a separate sphere resonating from the past. Considering the continuous deforestation in Thailand (Chulphongsathorn, 2021, p. 183), the forest's social uses as the nostalgic remembrance of the past and the cautionary reminder of the future start to appear.

The camera never turned away from the forest throughout the film. From the dinner scene where Boonmee's son and wife come back as a monkey ghost and a spirit, to Boonmee checking out his orchard, the forest always surrounds the on-screen characters. Intriguingly, while the camera is pointing at the human beings, the scenes are entirely devoid of point-of-view shots, which depersonalizes the narrative and makes the protagonists a part of the jungle that they situate within. This cinematography thus defies the traditional human-centred narrative, where animals, ghosts, and far-off sounds in the forest all become the drive of the camera movement. As Szymanski (2017) suggests, the active presence of the forests outside the veranda fragments recomposes the character-driven action (p. 56). For example, in the dinner scene inside the veranda, the camera cuts from a long shot to a medium shot and to a close-up of the characters as they are speaking. However, the scene quickly cuts to a few static shots of the mountains and bushes, shifting away from the human-centric scenes, signifying that humans and nature are equally important motifs in this film. Therefore, while in *Tropical Malady*, the forest is a silent observer that embodies the quotidian queerness, the forest in *Uncle Boonmee* extends its significance to become a storyteller that narrates the story of the traumatized Isan in the film.

The Isan communists were forced to disappear during the Thai military invasion. The Communist Party has been banned since the 1980s (Sinpeng, 2014, p. 450). Most of its members had been arrested, executed, or exiled. Even their photos had been destroyed and burned. However, Isan's agony is still felt by the widows and descendants of the disappeared communists (Szymanski, 2017, p. 48), despite the reigning royalist regime's attempts to silence and censor this history in the name of national unity and the protection of "Thainess." As a child, Apichatpong became intimately familiar with the region and its history after his parents relocated their medical practices to the province out of solidarity with its leftist organizing. He

witnessed the psychological and physical harm of the occupation. Women were raped and many villagers were threatened by the military, fled their homes, and hid in the jungle (Weerasethakul, 2008). Many of them never returned. As Guattari (1989) writes in *The Three Ecologies*, "it seems evident that, unless a politically coherent stance is taken by collective praxes, social ecology will ultimately always be dominated by reactionary nationalist enterprises hostile to any innovation, oppressing women, children and the marginalized" (p.64). Apichatpong explicitly reflects his wish to take the "politically coherent stance" in order to challenge the royalist political regime in *Uncle Boonmee*, especially through the scene of Boonmee's "dream of future."

This dream consists of ten still photos taken inside the jungle in a future society that is ruled by an authority able to make anybody disappear, paralleling the Thai government's wish to erase communist history. This dream is also not localized to Boonmee's psyche. Boonmee never identified if he was one of the soldiers, the ape, or the photographer in this dream. Therefore, this dream implies the "collective" memories embodied in this land. The jungle that buried numerous disappeared victims who never made their way out thus becomes the embodiment of the Thai political regime. Boonmee reveals in his monologue alongside the photos that "I was afraid of being captured by the authorities because I had many friends in this future. I ran away. But wherever I ran, they still found me." His monologue thus recreates the proliferated fear and torture the villagers and the communists went through, which links the cinematic world and the real world with intense emotions. The forest that witnesses the violence both in the 1980s Isan and Apichatpong's 2010 recollection thus mediates between the brutal past embedded in the site and the narratives produced by the filmmaker. It then "transmits signals" from the fictional to the nonfictional world, which propagates Apichatpong's plea for reflections on this violent history in contemporary society. Instead of erasing this history, the Thai government should at least acknowledge the victims and provide help with Isan's economic difficulties that are largely caused by its unstable political state historically (Huttasin, 2015, p. 105).

Through the reconstruction of the images of the disappeared, *Uncle Boonmee* further urges the socius to reterritorialize the memories of the people who disappeared. It encourages the audience to unpack the war-torn history of Isan. This film thus goes beyond merely pointing out the conflicts between nation and anti-nation, geopolitical center and margin, royalist and communists. It also suggests that the trauma of disappearance becomes collective subjectivity that is embodied in the past of Thailand. The re-occurring appearance of the soldiers in Apichatpong's films from *Tropical Malady* to *Uncle Boonmee* is no coincidence. The constitutional

monarchy and military dictatorship are long-existed political problems in Thailand after World War II. As Pathmanand (2008) discusses, the Thai coups d'état of 1991 and 2006, which overthrew the democratically elected governments of Chatichai Choonhavan and Thaksin Shinawatra, respectively, were staged for similar reasons: attacks on the military and threats to the institution of the monarchy. Both coups killed numerous civilians who were protesting peacefully. Democracy becomes "increasingly fragile and precarious" in Thailand. It seems evident that what disappeared with the military occupation is not only the communists in Isan but also democracy in the whole Thai society.

These images of the soldiers are also juxtaposed with the forest, where a number of monkey ghosts hide inside the jungle and stare at the camera directly. The monkey ghosts thus become the representation of the "disappeared" including the communists, the villagers, the civilians who got killed during the coups, as well as the democracy of Thailand. The visibility of the soldiers and their guns contrasts with the invisibility of the monkey ghost, which turns the forest they situate within into a complex embodiment of individual, historical, and national pain. Before the camera arrives in the city towards the end of *Uncle Boonmee*, it brings the audience to the top of the mountain and looks over the forest while sunlight slowly covers it. This shot lasts for fifteen seconds, which leaves the audience time to contemplate and reflect on the traumas that the forest incorporates through a moment of peace. The forest that raises and protects many generations of Thai people hence extends its message and hope to the audience: to confront totalitarianism in order to regain democracy.

Apichatpong's political demands embedded in his forest seem to become true step by step in recent years. The dissolution of the Future Forward Party in late February 2020 has triggered a series of demonstrations against the government of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha (Tonsakulrungruang, 2021). The protesters, organized under the name Free Youth, announced their three core demands: dissolution of the House, ending intimidation of the people and drafting of a new constitution (Bangkok Biz News, 2020). LGBT activists also demonstrated at the Democracy Monument to voice for the legalization of same-sex marriage in addition to the three demands (Thairath, 2020). These demands echo the calling for the normalization of queerness in *Tropical Malady* and the stress for democracy in *Uncle Boonmee*. Furthermore, as Alexander (2021) suggests, among these protesters, the Isan youth contributes a lot more than expected in this protest, driven by a desire to promote agency and address the historical political inequality of the Isan people. The political struggles buried inside the Isan jungle throughout the region's long history has finally been revealed to the mass. Even though the protest was forced to end due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Apichatpong did not stop his reflection on the Thai

political situation and further stretched his cinematic forest to examine the transnational political regime.

Forest as Medium: A Novel, Transnational Forest

Apichatpong's latest film, *Memoria* (2021), is set in Colombia. It is his first feature film made outside of Thailand and his English-language film debut. This film continues the explorations of the natural environment in his earlier Thailand-set films (Lindahl, 2021). The forest continues to communicate between the living and the dead, the past and the present, the terrestrial and the other. Most importantly, the forest also becomes transnational and transgresses political messages between Colombian and Thai society. In April 2021, hundreds of thousands of Colombians took to the streets in a nationwide strike to oppose the Iván Duque government's policies of increasing taxes, corruption, and health care reform, as well as his record of violence against social leaders (Garcia Cano, 2021). As Progressive International states, "an atrocity is unfolding in Columbia." Similar to the Thai protest, this demonstration in Columbia also confronts the problematic government. Moreover, the indiscriminate and excessive police violence against largely peaceful protests has also led to dozens of civilian deaths, arbitrary arrests, and disappearances (PAX, 2021). Thailand and Columbia thus share similar trauma and suffering alongside their fight for democracy.

Premiered at the 74th Cannes Film Festival on 15 July 2021, *Memoria* becomes a public call for help and peace as the cast and crew showed up holding the S.O.S Columbian flag (Cajamarca, 2021). Intriguingly, the forest depicted in *Memoria* once again connects to the "disappeared." Jessica, the protagonist of the film, accidentally enters a small village situated inside the deep forest. In this Colombian jungle, she finds Hernan, who mystically disappeared from the city, and regains her lost memories of her past lives, which are largely filled with the recollections of the Colombian conflict between the government of Colombia, far-right paramilitary groups, crime syndicates, and far-left guerrilla groups (Vargas, 2012, p. 205). As Jessica pieces out her traumatic memories, the repeating static shots of the forest that envelop her constantly remind the audience of the Isan jungle. The transnational forest in this film thus communicates the social conflicts in Columbia and Thailand.

As the leading actress, Tilda Swinton mentions in an interview, during the filmmaking process, Apichatpong recognized the reverberation of trauma as someone from Thailand, loud and clear to be picked up in Columbia (Kohn & Lindahl, 2022). Apichatpong's recent book on *Memoria* gathers the memories he collected while making this film, in the form of photographs, a personal diary and sketchbook,

research notes, treatment excerpts, and email correspondence. In this book, he mentioned the location where he shot the majority of the forest scenes is in a village called Pijao. Pijao is a municipality in the southeastern part of the department of Quindío, Colombia. The book documents the traumatic events Pijao experienced: the 1997 coffee crisis, the earthquake of 1999, the 2001 guerrillas attack, and the impending volcano (Weerasethakul, 2021). "The town was absolutely stigmatized, even people from here used to advise visitors to go away," a communications specialist born in Pijao, Mónica Flórez, recalls (Cittaslow, 2015). Pijao's historical trauma thus is very similar to Isan's. Pijao is where the Colombian conflicts started while Isan is where the communist resistance began. They are both stigmatized because of this. Furthermore, the mountains in Pijao have a lot of indigenous burials and tombs. During the guerrilla attack and earthquake, many villagers were forced to walk through the jungles to run away. The forest in Pijao, therefore, also embodies a sense of grief and agony like the Isan forests.

In the scene where Jessica and Hernan share their memory of the guerrilla attack, Apichatpong adopts a similar three-dimensional soundscape as in *Tropical Malady* where he blurs the location of each sound source. The sounds of the forests, including the wind, insects, and beasts, and the sounds of the people, such as conversations, cries, and shouts, are mixed together to confuse the audience's perception. This sound effect's uncertainty thus functions as "an ambient medium coming between audiences and the world of the story" (Roquet, 2016, p. 144). It not only recreates the fear and confusion people felt during the 2002 guerrilla attack but also reminds the audience of the ongoing violence and suffering in Colombia. At the same time, Apichatpong did not forget about the challenges his own country is facing. The 2020 Thai protests died down due to government suppression and internal divisions, without any demands responded. Apichatpong also faced trouble from Thai censors in terms of his political advocates. His 2015 film *Cemetery of Splendour*, which also touches upon the Isan political issues, was not allowed to be released uncut in Thailand (Chen, 2022). At the end of *Memoria*, Apichatpong once again points his camera at the forest. In a few long shots and crane shots, the forest in Pijao looks almost the same as the Thai forests in his previous film. The Pijao forest thus becomes the new medium for Apichatpong to voice his political standing regarding Thailand. *Memoria*, therefore, not only calls for reflection on Colombia's political conflicts but also on the Thai people's unsolved demands for democracy. Apichatpong's cinematic forest hence promotes the longing and fights for liberation both locally and internationally. The globalized forest thus allows Apichatpong to conceptualize his films as "a resistance to fixity and certitude, a history without dates, a map without place-names, and a documentary without facts" (Teh, 2011, p. 609).

Conclusion

In conclusion, as Apichatpong explains in an interview, "emotions are revealed by the jungle, it becomes a kind of mindscape. Sometimes it is a character. It is also a stage" (Boehler, 2011, p. 279). In *Tropical Malady* (2004), the forest embodies Apichatpong's personal memories of his homosexuality. It then redefines "love," depicts humans-animals-ghosts-souls transmigration and references the premodern cosmologies of the region. Through the incorporation of the echoing sound of nature that produces a sense of disorientation, this film further allows the audience to relate to the confusion and alienation the Thai LGBT community is facing. The forest that witnesses Tong and Keng's joy and pain, therefore, transmits the urge for equality from Apichatpong's cinematic world to Thai society. Meanwhile, the green forest in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010) is haunted by its political implication more extensively, where the location of the story was a violent battlefield between the Thai state and the communist. The Isan jungle that buries the countless "disappeared," therefore, mediates between the traumatic history embodied in this region and the uncanny cinematic narratives. The "othered" forest thus publicizes Apichatpong's call for historical reflection, as well as the fight for democracy and against totalitarianism.

Memoria (2021) shifts its gear to the Colombian forest and advocates Apichatpong's political standpoint internationally. The parallel social conflicts and historical trauma in Thailand and Colombia also enable the forest to travel across the states as a "transnational medium." This film's engagement with the 2021 Colombian protest explicitly and the 2021 Thai protest implicitly continues to demonstrate Apichatpong's resistance toward global social power. As John Durham Peters (2016) argues, media are, more elementarily, "vessels and environments, containers of possibility that anchor our existence and make what we are doing possible" (p. 2). The forest in Apichatpong's films thus is the container and a storyteller of Apichatpong's tropical dreams that contains humans and non-humans, environmental past and political present, and the local and the global, which allows him to voice his multicultural political demands louder and clearer.

References

Alexander, S. (2021). Sticky rice in the blood: Isan people's involvement in Thailand's 2020 anti-government protests. Critical Asian Studies, 53(2), 219-232.

Bangkok Biz News. (2020, July 18). *'เยาวชนปลดแอก' เปิดแถลงการณ์ข้อเรียกร้องฉบับเต็ม ['Free Youth' released full declaration]*. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/politics/890036.

Boehler, N. (2011). The jungle as border zone: The aesthetics of nature in the work of Apichatpong Weerasethakul. *ASEAS-Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, *4*(2), 290-304.

Cajamarca, I. (2021, July 17). *'Memoria', La Película rodada en Colombia, fue galardonada en el Festival de Cannes*. Diario La República. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from https://www.larepublica.co/ocio/memoria-la-pelicula-rodada-en-colombia-fue-galardonada-en-el-festival-de-cannes-3203494.

Chen, N. (2022, January 13). *The story behind Memoria, Tilda Swinton's mediative new film.* Dazed. Retrieved October 19, 2022, from https://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/55229/1/memoria-film-review-apichatpong-weerasethakul-director-interview-2022.

Cheng, F. K. (2017). Resilience of Buddhist sexual minorities related to sexual orientation and gender identity. *International Journal of Happiness and Development*, *3*(4), 368-383.

Chulphongsathorn, G. (2021). The cinematic forest and Southeast Asian cinema. *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, *60*(3), 182-187.

Cittaslow. (2015, August 12). *Pijao (Colombia) - what's the hurry?* Cittaslow International. Retrieved October 17, 2022, from https://www.cittaslow.org/news/pijao-pijao-colombia-whats-hurry.

Darlington, S. M. (2007). The good Buddha and the fierce spirits: Protecting the northern Thai forest. *Contemporary Buddhism*, *8*(2), 169-185.

De Cock de Rameyen, J. (2021). Narrative Difference: Jacques Rancière, Gilles Deleuze and Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives. *Film-Philosophy*, *25*(2), 165-186.

Fuhrmann, A. (2016). Three. Tropical Malady: Same-Sex Desire, Casualness, and the Queering of Impermanence in the Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul. In *Ghostly Desires* (pp. 122-159). Duke University Press.

Garcia Cano, R., & SuaRez, A. (2021, May 7). *Corruption, economic woes spark deadly protests in Colombia*. CTV News. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/corruption-economic-woes-spark-deadly-protests-in-colombia-1.5419013?cache=.

Guattari, F. (1989). *The three ecologies*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Horn, E. (2018). Air as medium. *Grey Room*, *73*(Fall), 6-25.

Harrison, R. (2005). Amazing Thai film: The rise and rise of contemporary Thai cinema on the international screen. *Asian Affairs*, *36*(3), 321-338.

Huttasin, N., Mommaas, J. T., & Knippenberg, L. W. J. (2015). Towards tourism development of the Isan region, Northeastern Thailand.

Kamjan, C. (2014, September 17). *Gays still face a battle, report says*. Bangkok Post. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/432629/gays-still-face-a-battle-report-says.

Lee, A. (2013, August 22). *Mixing memory and desire: The films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul*. Los Angeles Review of Books. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/mixing-memory-and-desire-on-the-films-of-apichatpong-weerasethakul/.

Kohn, E., & Lindahl, C. (2022, January 4). *'memoria': Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Tilda Swinton embrace the 'divine opportunity' of their meditative Oscar entry*. IndieWire. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from https://www.indiewire.com/video/memoria-apichatpong-weerasethakul-tilda-swinton-interview-1234679425/.

Lovatt, P. (2013). 'Every drop of my blood sings our song. There can you hear it?': Haptic sound and embodied memory in the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul. *The new soundtrack*, *3*(1), 61-79.

Manalastas, E. J., Ojanen, T. T., Torre, B. A., Ratanashevorn, R., Hong, B. C. C., Kumaresan, V., & Veeramuthu, V. (2017). Homonegativity in southeast Asia: Attitudes toward lesbians and gay men in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, *17*(1), 25-33.

Marrero-Guillamón, I. (2018). The politics and aesthetics of non-representation: re-imagining ethnographic cinema with Apichatpong Weerasethakul. *Antípoda. Revista de Antropología y Arqueología*, (33), 13-32.

Pathmanand, U. (2008). A different coup d'état? *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *38*(1), 124-142.

PAX. (2021, May 12). *SOS Colombia, violence must end, international pressure needed*. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from https://paxforpeace.nl/news/overview/sos-colombia-violence-must-end-international-pressure-needed.

Peters, J. D. (2015). The marvelous clouds. In *The Marvelous Clouds*. University of Chicago Press.

Progressive International. (2021, May 5). *SOS Colombia*. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from https://progressive.international/wire/2021-05-05-sos-colombia/en.

Rich, B. R. (2013). 12. Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Tropical Maladies. In *New Queer Cinema* (pp. 88-91). Duke University Press.

Rigg, J. (Ed.). (1995). *Counting the costs: economic growth and environmental change in Thailand*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Roquet, P. (2016). *Ambient media: Japanese atmospheres of self*. U of Minnesota Press.

Sinpeng, A. (2014). Party banning and the impact on party system institutionalization in Thailand. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, *36*(3), 442-466.

Szymanski, A. (2017). Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives and the Ecosophic Aesthetics of Peace. *Nocturnal Fabulations. Ecology, Vitality and Opacity in the Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, 48-78.

Teh, D. (2011). Itinerant Cinema: The Social Surrealism of Apichatpong Weerasethakul. *Third Text*, *25*(5), 595-609.

Thairath. (2020, July 24). *4 มหาวิทยาลัยในโคราช นักเรียน ประชาชน แสดงพลังทวงคืนประชาธิปไตย [4 universities in Korat, students, people show their power to reclaim democracy]*. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from https://www.thairath.co.th/news/local/northeast/1896816.

Tonsakulrungruang, K. (2021). Future Forward: The Rise and Fall of a Thai Political Party: Duncan McCargo and Anyarat Chattharakul (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2020).

Utterson, A. (2017). Water buffalo, catfish, and monkey ghosts: the transmigratory materialities of Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives. *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *15*(2), 231-249.

Vargas, J. F. (2012). The persistent Colombian conflict: subnational analysis of the duration of violence. *Defence and Peace Economics*, *23*(2), 203-223.

Weerasethakul, A. (2008). *Animate projects*. Animate Projects. Retrieved July 25, 2022, from https://animateprojectsarchive.org/films/by_artist/w/a_weerasethakul.

Apichatpong, W., Contreras Gallego, M., & Swinton, T. (2021). *Memoria*. (G. Marchini Camia & A. Brady-Brown, Eds.) (Ser. Decadent editions). Fireflies Press.

Winichakul, T. (1997). *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*. University of Hawaii Press.

Yongcharoenchai, Chaiyot. "The two faces of Thai tolerance". *Bangkok Post*. 8 September 2013

Zhang, Y. (2002). *Screening China: critical interventions, cinematic reconfigurations, and the transnational imaginary in contemporary Chinese cinema* (Ser. Michigan monographs in Chinese studies, vol. 92). Center for Chinese Studies.

Stream: Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication
2022, Vol 14(2), 29–47

https://journals.sfu.ca/stream

Sweet Smell of Censorship: The Artistic Productivity of the Censor-Auteur Relationship in Classical Hollywood's *Film Noir* Cycle

Tamar Hanstke
The Department of Theatre & Film
The University of British Columbia

Abstract:
The common perception among film studies scholars and mainstream filmgoers alike is that censorship inhibits artistic expression. Many will say that censorship is directly antithetical to creative freedom, and as a result, films created outside of censorship restrictions will be fuller representations of a unique artistic vision than those that were modified to fit such restrictions. This line of thinking is logical, but it is also, in fact, impractical in the face of both historical and contemporary filmmaking contexts in North America. The Motion Picture Production Code, a censorship code enforced in Hollywood between 1934 and 1968, is one of the most explicit examples, but censorship continues in Hollywood to this day in more insidious forms, such as the Motion Picture Association film ratings system. With this contemporary context in mind, this essay examines the 1940s cycle of *Films Noirs* released in Hollywood during the era of the Production Code, examining how filmmakers working under the Code developed symbiotic relationships with the censors that allowed cinematic art to flourish under censorship. In particular, the essay will look at canonized auteur directors Fritz Lang and Howard Hawks, and how the censors can be seen as a productive force in the creation of some of these directors' most iconic *Films Noirs*. This line of thinking is then expanded to consider modern-day censorship, and how the circumstances of 1940s Hollywood compare to contemporary North American filmmaking.

Keywords:
Censorship; film noir; cinema; Hollywood, auteurism.

Corresponding Author: Tamar Hanstke – hanstke@student.ubc.ca

If an average person in North America was asked whether censorship could ever be artistically productive, it would not be surprising to hear them say, no, any artistic productivity that might occur under censorship would be less significant in comparison to what could have been accomplished without restrictions. As Catha Paquette, Karen Kleinfelder, and Christopher Miles (2022) eloquently put it, "for many, the words 'art censorship' suggest a simple binary transaction: one person creates a work of art, and another prevents it from being viewed" (p. 1). It logically follows that if censorship involves prohibiting access to some aspects, or even the entirety, of a piece of art, that artwork and its artist are not reaching the same height of creative expression as an artwork that remains untouched by external forces. This is a major reason why, in contemporary North America, censorship is widely seen as one of the greatest inhibitors of a free society. This belief is supported by such highly publicized events as the annual Banned Books week, which encourages readers to seek out books that have historically been censored in schools and libraries.

As a result, it is difficult to think of any popular examples of artistic censorship producing something positive; but this is in large part because we have rewritten the narratives of possible examples, allowing ourselves to believe that any work of art created under censorship was successful despite these limitations, rather than because of them. This thought process is especially prominent in discussions of film, where auteurism, the theory that the director of a film has the same creative influence and control as the author of a novel, still holds great weight. Directors canonized as auteurs are seen to possess a unique artistic vision that can be witnessed in all their films, and any kind of outside interference, such as from censors or production studios, is widely viewed as a violation of the director's creative process.

In this essay, I will be discussing several films from the cycle of *Films Noirs* in the Golden Age of Hollywood, focusing particularly on examples directed by canonized auteurs Fritz Lang and Howard Hawks. These auteurs are regularly praised for subverting the Motion Picture Production Code that imposed censorship in Hollywood from 1934 to 1968. This praise suggests that these directors were at constant odds with the censors, fighting to get their Code-subverting stories onto the big screen. In contrast to this narrative, I argue that the *Film Noir* cycle exists as a paragon of artistic expression that was born out of an often symbiotic censor-auteur relationship, and ultimately reveals censorship to be an influential part of both historical and contemporary cinematic landscapes that necessitates cooperation from filmmakers rather than absolute resistance.

Censorship on South Street: Some Examples of Censorship and Criticism in Western Film History

While anti-censorship sentiments have taken on many different forms in the history of scholarly film studies and mainstream film fandom alike, these beliefs always remain present in the field. Today, they often manifest in fans championing the artistic autonomy of their favourite creators, such as the years-long #ReleasetheSnyderCut campaign. In 2017, Zack Snyder's widely anticipated superhero film *Justice League* was released to a mixed reception after Snyder had to leave the film mid-production due to a personal tragedy (Rivera, 2021, para. 5). After Warner Bros. finished the film without Snyder's involvement, Snyder revealed that he had been privately working on his own cut of the film, prompting intense fan interest in seeing the director's original vision for *Justice League*. Some fans even went so far as to view Warner Bros.' choices in crafting the theatrical cut as a sign of "malicious intent" on the part of the studio executives (Rivera, 2021, paras. 2-4). Long-time fans of Snyder, who gravitate to his auteurist style of visually excessive blockbusters such as *300* and *Sucker Punch,* held onto "a fervent belief that the *real* movie . . . was out there somewhere" (italics in original) (Rivera, 2021, para. 2). After a viral social media campaign to get Snyder's preferred cut released, *Zack Snyder's Justice League*—running a total of 242 minutes, compared to *Justice League's* 120 minutes—was released to streaming platforms in 2021.

While Snyder's fans were not explicitly accusing Warner Bros. of censorship, the anti-censorship belief that censoring a piece of art involves the removal of something integral to that piece of art closely parallels the intensity with which fans demanded a release of the Snyder cut: in their eyes, restoring the two hours of missing content was what was needed to fix the disappointing theatrical release. While Jesse Hassenger (2021) acknowledges that *Zack Snyder's Justice League* is still somewhat "unsatisfying", they write, "to the #SnyderCut faithful, Snyder's version of *Justice League* isn't just a curiosity or a footnote. It's the very picture of unfettered artistic freedom, the work of a visionary finally freed from cowardly compromise, as demanded by his most dedicated acolytes" (para 2). In this, *Zack Snyder's Justice League* is a paragon of artistic freedom, the ultimate antithesis of artistic censorship. As a result, the narrative quality of the new cut as compared to the theatrical cut is less important than the simple fact of having the 'complete', Snyder-supervised version of the film widely available to fans. In analyzing Snyder's history of releasing director's cuts of his films, Hassenger muses how, "[Snyder's] various expanded cuts are a window into his methods and fixations" (para 1). In this way, Hassenger applies an auteurist lens to Snyder's tumultuous directing history, turning his various conflicts with production studios into a compelling facet of his artistic identity. *Zack*

Snyder's Justice League allows for a happy ending to Snyder's artistic legacy, for now; but even if Snyder does encounter another studio conflict in the future, this will only add to the auteurist reputation his fans have ascribed to him.

While these Snyder fans may not realize it, their campaign to release the Snyder cut builds on a long-standing tradition of anti-censorship efforts among film audiences. In the early 1980s, for example, Mark McKenna (2020) describes how Britain experienced a moral panic over the so-called 'video nasties', a group of extremely graphic horror films that had recently been released on the then-new medium of VHS (p. 1). The widespread public concern over the potentially detrimental social impact of these films led to a system of film censorship that continues in Britain to this day. Even more influential than that initial moral panic, however, is the horror cult film fandom born out of British film viewers' desires to seek out these taboo films, creating a "period" that is now "increasingly remembered as a golden age for exploitation movies" for "an audience who were hungry for uncensored tales of sex and violence" (p. 2). Like Snyder's fans, then, these horror buffs were less interested in the objective quality of the banned films than with the principle of seeing a piece of art in its complete, uncensored form.

McKenna (2020) goes on to explain, however, that horror fans and scholars' emphasis on censorship in their discussions of the video nasties has obscured many other realities of this historical phenomenon:

> I would suggest that the motivations to censor the video nasties were more complex than the narrative of moral panic would have us believe and were determined more by economic considerations than by any concern over the content of the films. The Video Recordings Act, just like the Motion Picture Production Code before it, can be seen as the culmination of a lengthy process of negotiation between representatives of the industry and those speaking with the voices of cultural authority. (p. 24)

In essence, the representatives of the film industry—specifically, the representatives of the major American film studios—saw incoming British censorship as an economically advantageous opportunity to take control of the burgeoning home video industry in Britain, which had previously been dominated by independent distributors. After the implementation of The Video Recordings Act (VRA), whose membership included all the major American studios, these independent distributors were largely priced out of the home video market they had helped to create, as many could not afford the £1000 certification fee to release their films under the VRA (pp. 22-25).

Similarly to the contemporary Snyder case, then, this event saw major American film studios interfering in the artistic freedom of film directors. McKenna (2020) further reveals that, both during the 1980s and in more contemporary discourses on the video nasties, film viewers and film scholars generally do not acknowledge the role of the film studios in these censorship efforts. Instead, they focus on the "disreputable" nature of the early independent distributors of horror films in Britain, and how these players should have been held more responsible for the 1980s controversies (p. 13). This popular perspective takes all focus, and thereby responsibility, away from the major studios and their involvement in the ensuing censorship acts. In this way, McKenna (2020)'s previously quoted comparison of the VRA to the American Motion Picture Production Code is particularly prescient, and has great relevance to the discussion of *Films Noirs* occupying the remainder of this essay.

The Censor Always Rings Twice: Competing Cases for the *Film Noir* as Product of Censorship, or Product of Auteurism

Today, the *Film Noir* occupies a privileged place in popular culture that has been denied to many of the classical genres of Hollywood's Golden Age. While the Musical and the Western, for instance, have gone through many periods of revision and are currently rare in the cinematic landscape, the original cycle of *Films Noirs* is widely believed to have ended in 1958 (Conard, 2005, p. 1), was rapidly revised into *Neo-Noir* in the late 1960s, and has remained a mainstay on the big screen ever since. Part of the appeal of the *Film Noir* is how difficult it is to classify: is it a genre, a production cycle, or an artistic movement? This is an ongoing, and seemingly unsolvable, debate within *Noir* scholarship (Varmazi & Kaya, 2019, pp. 145-147). The ambiguity of this group of films can further be seen in popular film critic Roger Ebert (1995)'s iconic piece "A Guide to Film Noir Genre", which begins with the words, "Film noir is . . . " (para. 1), followed by a list of ten descriptions. These numbered descriptors include: "1. A French term meaning 'black film,' or film of the night" (para. 2); "2. A movie which at no time misleads you into thinking there is going to be a happy ending" (para. 3); "4. Cigarettes. Everybody in film noir is always smoking . . . ." (para. 5); "8. Movies either shot in black and white, or feeling like they were" (para. 9); and, "10. The most American film genre, because no society could have created a world so filled with doom, fate, fear and betrayal, unless it were essentially naive and optimistic" (para. 11).

Ebert's list reveals two things. Firstly, there is a distinctly cultural element to the appeal of the *Film Noir,* which initially appeared on American film screens while WWII was raging. WWII radically challenged that "naïve and optimistic" American

disposition, and the hopelessness of *Noir* narratives directly reflect the existential character of the American people during this increasingly dire period of history and its aftermath. Accordingly, many post-WWII *Films Noirs* feature traumatized WWII veterans, such as Fred Zinneman's 1948 film *Act of Violence,* and Edward Dmytryk's 1947 film *Crossfire. Crossfire* struck such a strong chord with film audiences and the film industry alike that it was nominated for Best Picture at the Oscars, and it was not a unique case: John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*, Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* and *Sunset Boulevard,* and Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce,* all canonical *Films Noirs,* were also nominated for Best Picture during the 1940s and early 1950s.

The second thing that Ebert's list reveals is that making a list of common narrative themes and visual motifs in *Films Noirs* only serves to further complicate the issue of what the *Film Noir* is. While many canonical *Noirs* feature all of the elements on Ebert's list, some present only half, or even less. Even the stereotypical image of the *Noir's* hardboiled private investigator, embodied in the public imagination by such actors as Humphrey Bogart in Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* and Hawks' *The Big Sleep,* is not a constant in the cycle: many *Noirs* feature criminal protagonists who would view Bogart's private investigator type as their antagonist. Because these criminal protagonists would see a Bogart-style P.I. in a negative light, so then would the audience for these criminal-led films. This dynamic allows the *Noir* cycle to occupy a particularly morally ambiguous narrative space, asking viewers to take on different moral outlooks with each new film they watch.

This ambiguity may be part of the reason why modern-day auteur directors and their fans are so drawn to *Neo-Noir. Neo-Noir* is the revisionist genre that has lovingly paid homage to classical *Films Noirs* since the end of the Production Code's reign, and which has allowed *Noir* to maintain a vivid presence in the popular imagination to this day. Unlike the Musical or Western, which have strict stylistic features that must be adhered to, classical *Noir* and *Neo-Noir* provide filmmakers with a lot of creative freedom to experiment without leaving the realm of *Noir*. For example, in 1995, Carl Franklin directed the classically styled *Neo-Noir* film *Devil in a Blue Dress,* focusing on the African-American experience in 1940s Los Angeles; while in that same year, acclaimed auteur Wong Kar-Wai transplanted the *Noir* aesthetic to the neon streets of 1990s Hong Kong with *Fallen Angels*. Other directors, however, are more faithful in their 'generic' adaptation: Paul Thomas Anderson, Shane Black, and Nicolas Winding Refn are just a few examples of contemporary auteur filmmakers who have directed *Neo-Noir* films that adopt most of the stylistic characteristics of classical *Noir* with minimal revisions. In fact, many of these directors' films follow Ebert's list even more closely than some of the classical films they draw inspiration from. Of the revisions they do make, the only major ones are

the addition of colour photography, and an influx of graphic sex and violence. Even this sex and violence, however, is not an entirely new feature for the genre: rather, what was implicit in the *Film Noir* becomes explicit in *Neo-Noir.*

The reason for this difference is the Motion Picture Production Code, enforced in Hollywood between 1934 and 1968. Today, it may be difficult to understand why Hollywood studio executives agreed to abide by the Code's rules, and thereby allow censorship of their filmmakers' art, for over three decades; but in the early 1930s, most of the American populace did not see cinema as an art form. In 1915, the Supreme Court had decided that films were not protected by the First Amendment the way previously deemed 'legitimate' art forms, such as painting or poetry, were (Gilbert, 2013, p. 6). As Hollywood's output became increasingly violent and sexually explicit moving into the 1930s, the industry was concerned about the possibility of government-enforced censorship. The major studios feared that such censorship would cut into their profit margins, and so, as they did much later in Britain during the video nasties scare in the early 1980s, they chose self-censorship over external, governmental censorship. This self-censorship began when Hollywood initially adopted the Code in 1929, and after a few more years of rebellion on the part of some of the major studios' executives, all the major studios agreed to strictly enforce the Code beginning in July of 1934.

This mid-year adoption created a stark before and after between the films released in the first half of the year, which represented taboo social issues such as abortion, premarital sex, interracial relationships, and governmental racism against Indigenous peoples; and those released in the latter half, which could not explicitly address any of these issues. Indeed, after July of 1934, a film could not be screened in American movie theatres at all without receiving the Code's seal of approval. Viewed from a contemporary perspective, the original text of the Code acts as a time capsule of conservative morality in the early 1930s: it includes the expected provisions limiting nudity and violence, and further bans depictions of such then-contemporary social taboos as homosexuality and miscegenation (Hayes, 2009). As a result, the Code had a very clear, tangible cost of preventing Hollywood from offering positive—or in most cases, any—representations of critical social issues that may have benefitted from the cinematic spotlight.

The impact of the Code on the *Film Noir's* development remains a common debate in *Noir* scholarship. Scholars generally date the classical *Film Noir* cycle's birth as occurring in 1941, with the release of John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon,* and ending in 1958 when Orson Welles released *The Touch of Evil* (Conard, 2005, p. 1). This timeline indicates that the *Film Noir* cycle's entire lifespan was carried out under the

watchful eye of the Production Code. Despite this fact, *Noir* scholars hesitate to consider their object of study to be a direct product of censorship. For example, Sheri Chinen Biesen (2015) describes how, in the production of *Noir* films*,* "Hollywood studios walked a fine line between appearing to comply with Hays Office Production Code censorship while simultaneously pushing the envelope of its moral constraints" (p. 1). Her choice of words reveals how much *Noir's* appeal derives from the idea that the film studios and filmmakers involved in creating *Noir* were constantly seeking ways to bypass the censors. Within such a narrative, this cycle of films is more artistically admirable and compelling than other classical Hollywood film genres because its makers successfully subverted the Code, effectively tricking the censors into approving films that were darker and more mature than anything else released during this period. This version of history affirms deeply held beliefs that censorship is an entirely negative force, and that nothing worthwhile could ever come out of limiting artistic expression. Nonetheless, this is a false narrative: it simultaneously gives too much credit to the power of Golden Age directors, and not enough credit to the savvy of the censors.

The desire to attribute so much creative power to Golden Age directors has close ties to the prevalence of auteur theory, a development that can be witnessed in both scholarly and popular film discourses. Auteur theory originated in the 1950s in articles published in the film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema,* written by such figures as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, who later became known as auteurs themselves. These authors and future filmmakers believed that certain Hollywood directors of the 1940s and '50s were being unfairly appraised by serious film writers, or were being ignored by these writers altogether. They sought to correct this perceived oversight by conceiving of individual film directors as 'authors' of their films, in the same sense that novelists are authors of their written works (Wollen, 2009, p. 455). In this way, *Cahiers du Cinema*'s articles on auteurism paved the way for such modern phenomena as #ReleasetheSnyderCut, which would not have happened if fans were not invested in Snyder as an auteur with a unique artistic vision that was misrepresented by Warner Bros.' initial cut of *Justice League.*

This auteurist reframing of film studies discourse, beginning as a study of individual films and graduating into a study of 'authors' and their bodies of work, remains highly influential, and is a major reason why, today, a casual filmgoer might say they want to see a new film specifically because it was directed by Quentin Tarantino or Sofia Coppola. Auteur theory assumes that auteurist directors have a unique creative vision, and thereby certain pet themes and aesthetic qualities, that can always be recognized in their films by an astute viewer (Wollen, 2009, p. 457). So, for example, one viewer may go see every new Tarantino film because they have

previously enjoyed his metatextual sense of humour and his revisionist approach to depicting historical events, while another viewer may prefer Coppola's predispositions to hazy cinematography and female-centric narratives.

In this way, auteurist directors are conceived to have great creative influence and control over the production of their films, allowing their fans a generally predictable experience with each new work. This is, clearly, a creative circumstance that directly contradicts the power of the Production Code in the Golden Age of Hollywood. This essay examines several *Films Noirs* with directors hailed as auteurs by *Cahiers du Cinema,* particularly Fritz Lang and Howard Hawks, to uncover how it is that these filmmakers gained such a strong reputation for creative control while simultaneously being so restrained by 1940s censorship restrictions.

Anatomy of an Unhappy Ending: Film Noir and Censorship-Mandated Conclusions

If we turn back to the scholarly resistance to the idea of the *Film Noir* being artistically indebted to the Code, one seemingly logical argument is that *Noir's* most iconic narrative and stylistic features are blatant subversions of the Code. If this is true, it would indicate that these films could have been even greater achievements if their directors had no content limits at all. One relevant example of an iconic narrative feature is the unhappy endings present in most *Noir,* identified by Ebert (1995) in his earlier referenced "A Guide to Film Noir Genre" (para. 3). These endings exist in stark contrast to the happy endings of other Golden Age genre films. Indeed, many *Noirs* end with the death of their protagonist, while other films allow the protagonist to live but punish them for their misdeeds--or even for the misdeeds of others, such as in the ending of auteur John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon,* where the private investigator protagonist, played by Humphrey Bogart, believes himself morally obligated to turn his client, played by Mary Astor, over to the authorities for her crimes despite the fact that he has fallen in love with her. *Noir's* dark denouements are distinctive because they offer an experience that appears more emotionally and intellectually challenging than the tidy resolutions so commonplace in other films of the era.

While these endings can inspire viewers to place *Noir* on a pedestal for subverting the Code in ways that other genres of the era did not, they are actually just as much a result of the Code as the happy ones. One of the "General Principles" of the Code reads as follows: "No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin" (Hayes, 2009). This principle may seem surprising in light of the *Noir* cycle, in which many notable films feature criminals as protagonists, and actively invite viewers to feel sympathy for them.

Nonetheless, it is the unhappy endings that allow these films to remain acceptable under the Code. Auteur Nicholas Ray's 1948 film *They Live By Night* is one example of a *Noir* that is sympathetic to its youthful criminal protagonists; however, the brutal death of one of them before the end credits cements the Code-enforced message that crime does not pay. While viewers may relate to the humanity of a cinematic criminal, they must never condone the criminal acts themselves.

One might argue that even with this stipulation in place, some dark endings in *Noir* do subvert the Code and are superior for it. One seemingly good example of this is Fritz Lang's 1945 film *Scarlet Street*. Lang initially made a name for himself directing silent films in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s, and then took up work in Hollywood to escape the political tensions in Germany that ultimately led to WWII. On Lang and *Scarlet Street,* Peter Wollen (2009) writes, "the auteur theory has led to the revaluation of the second, Hollywood careers of [Fritz Lang] and other European directors; without it, masterpieces such as *Scarlet Street . . .* would never have been perceived" (p. 456). Wollen's statement indicates the strong influence of *Cahiers du Cinema* on Lang's and *Scarlet Street's* contemporary popularity. Film critic Dennis Schwartz (2019)'s examination of the film, originally written in 2005, provides further insight into why this "uncompromising" narrative is still so significant today: "*Scarlet Street* is a bleak psychological film noir . . . It sets a long-standing trend of a criminal not punished for his crime; this is the first Hollywood film where that happened" (para. 1). As Schwartz mentions, this film is particularly notable because it features a protagonist, played by Edward G. Robinson, who murders a woman and pins the crime on the victim's criminal boyfriend; this boyfriend is ultimately found guilty for the killing, and legally put to death. Despite these horrific crimes, Robinson's protagonist is never caught. As the film ends, he is seen homeless and mentally unstable, forever haunted by memories of the two people he 'killed'. *Scarlet Street* is considered a masterpiece for many reasons, but particularly for this morally complex ending that defies the Code-mandated convention of cinematic criminals dying or going to prison by the conclusions of their narratives.

On the other hand, Lang's 1953 film *The Blue Gardenia* is a clear example of a narrative that has been altered to meet the standards set by the Code. The narrative follows a woman, played by Anne Baxter, who drunkenly defends herself against sexual assault, flees, and wakes up the following morning to the news that her assailant is dead. Not remembering whether she killed him or not, she assumes she did, and spends the rest of the film trying to evade suspicion from the police. Near the end of the film, she is caught and arrested, but the police later discover that she merely knocked her attacker unconscious, and someone else committed the murder after she left the scene. The protagonist we have sympathized with throughout the

runtime gets her happy ending; however, she achieves it through a narrative loophole that undercuts much of the tension built up throughout the film. In comparing *Scarlet Street* and *The Blue Gardenia*, there appears to be a case for the Code's restraint of moral complexity, in which some films managed to avoid censorship and were able to present more challenging material, while others were censored and ultimately harmed by these content restrictions. A parallel can also be drawn to modern-day movements such as #ReleasetheSnyderCut, with Snyder fans perceiving Snyder's director's cuts to be more authentic representations of his artistic vision, and thereby superior to the studio-approved theatrical releases. In the case of Lang, *Scarlet Street's* morally ambivalent conclusion is more in keeping with the silent films he directed in Germany before coming to America, and thereby appears as a less compromised manifestation of Lang's artistry than *The Blue Gardenia.*

My rebuttal to this thinking hinges on the assumption that the chaotic, morally grey worlds of *Noir* are limited by the Code, rather than being born out of it. During and after the social traumas of WWII, American filmmakers were compelled to explore the social unrest and resulting criminality emerging in their country, and discovered that they could explore it quite extensively so long as criminals were ultimately punished—bringing the *Film Noir's* unhappy endings into play. Turning back to the second Lang example, *The Blue Gardenia's* ending is understandably unsatisfying to some viewers, but it is nonetheless evidence of the Code's flexibility: even though the final product may appear to be narratively compromised, the intent of the artist is upheld, with the audience sympathizing with an apparent criminal and believing that justice has been served when she is freed at the end of the film. This affirms Nora Gilbert's (2013) characterization of the censor-artist relationship as being "less in contest than in collaboration" (p. 1). *The Blue Gardenia* is an example of this kind of "collaboration" between the Code and Lang, with both working together to create a product that meets the morality clauses of the censors and upholds the artistic integrity—and, later, the auteur status—of the director. While it can be argued that the ending would be stronger if the main character were guilty and still ultimately exonerated of her 'crime', this remains a compelling example where minor compromises on both sides resulted in a picture that meets the needs of both collaborators.

This carries over to the issue of *Scarlet Street*. The ending, in which the protagonist wanders the streets with the voices of his victims endlessly ringing in his ears, is absolutely in keeping with the moral standards of the Code: his mental collapse effectively serves as punishment for his crimes, and these final images of a broken, haunted old man certainly do not, as the Code cautions against, "inspire [the audience] with a desire for imitation" (Hayes, 2009). Most importantly, the idea that

Scarlet Street sneakily bypassed the censors does not consider one of the most overlooked facets of the Code's enforcement, which is that the censors were people, just like the filmmakers. While their goal was to enforce the moral tenets of the Code, they could still appreciate a good story, and recognize something that was in the spirit of the Code's principles even though it approached them from an unconventional angle. In this case, the censor board was not deceived by Lang, but rather seems to have recognized that the protagonist's fate is just as dire a punishment as death or imprisonment would have been. The fact that both *Scarlet Street* and *The Blue Gardenia* are directed by the same man, who is now hailed as one of the great auteurs of 1940s Hollywood, is further evidence of the creative flexibility of the censor-artist relationship in this era, with each side employing different approaches with each new film they worked on together.

This inherent subjectivity of the Code can further be seen in the revelation that Billy Wilder's seminal 1944 film *Double Indemnity*, which currently ends with its criminal protagonist, played by Fred MacMurray, dying of a gunshot wound while desperately trying to escape arrest, was originally intended to end with him dying a state-sanctioned death via gas chamber (Pelizzon & West, 2005, p. 211). The ending was changed because of potential conflict with the Code, with censor Joseph Breen referring to the scene as "unduly gruesome from the standpoint of the Code" (Pelizzon & West, 2005, p. 233). This is notable because the state-sanctioned death of a murderer logically aligns with the moral standards of the Code, seemingly more-so than the messy and grisly end of dying by gunshot, and even more-so than the life of mental instability bestowed on *Scarlet Street's* main character. This proves that the censors assessed films on an individual basis and made choices that directly resulted in some of the very best endings to be found in the genre, particularly in *Scarlet Street* and the final release of *Double Indemnity*.

Interestingly, scholars such as Chinen (1995) use language suggesting that Wilder and author Raymond Chandler, who worked with Wilder to adapt James M. Cain's original novel of *Double Indemnity*, tricked the Code into allowing the final version of the film to be released: "as Wilder and Chandler ingeniously discovered [while writing the screenplay for *Double Indemnity*], the Code could be manipulated to their own satisfaction" (p. 47). Indeed, Wilder and Chandler themselves, frustrated by the difficulties of getting Cain's violent and sexually charged story approved by the censors, might have liked to think that they performed this kind of "manipulation." Nonetheless, the words of author Cain himself, recorded in David Hanna's article "Hays Censors Rile Jim Cain" (as cited in Chinen, 1995, p. 47), reveal the true symbiosis that occurred between filmmakers and censors in *Double Indemnity's* creation:

> [Wilder's *Double Indemnity*] does not depart from my story in any of the parts to which the Hays office took exception . . . The murder is committed in exactly the same way that it is accomplished in the book, down to the smallest detail… the reaction of the preview audience was one of admiration, with no indication that one of them expected to go out and commit a murder. Indeed, I heard a number of remarks to the effect that it was a dreadful warning of the utter impossibility of getting away with murder.

As quoted earlier, one of the primary mandates of the Code was that "the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin", and that films depicting criminality must not "inspire [the audience] with a desire for imitation" (Hayes, 2009). Despite Cain, Chandler, and Wilder's pride that the sordidness of *Double Indemnity's* original novel was translated to film with minimal censorial revisions, the preview audience Cain describes proves that the final film effectively aligned with the Code's moral mandates, and therefore never required further revisions.

Kiss Me Deadly—Just Fade to Black First: *Film Noir*, Censorship, and the Sex Problem

Alongside the *Film Noir's* predisposition to unhappy endings, one of its most distinctive narrative and stylistic features is its subtle allusions to sex. Because the Code mandated that "excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures are not to be shown", and "passion should be treated in such manner as not to stimulate the lower and baser emotions" (Hayes, 2009), screenwriters and directors found ways to suggest sex without explicitly depicting it. Reminiscent of Ebert's list, Doré Ripley (2016) hones in on the smoking of cigarettes as a frequent feature in *Noir* that "can convey a subtle and not-so subtle sensuality while adhering to the production code (p. 4). In a similar vein, Chinen (1995) writes how, "[the Code's] rigid framework of specific taboos about individual words and actions made it quite possible to paint a portrait of psychological criminality [in *Noir*] without using prohibited words and without showing censorable deeds" (p. 47). Clearly, visual and aural sexual innuendo is an essential feature in *Noir*, where many narratives revolve around a man committing a crime for love, or lust, of a beautiful woman. Without at least an inference of sex, audiences cannot believe that the protagonists of such films as Tay Garnett's 1946 *The Postman Always Rings Twice* would commit murder to get the girl. Sex is thereby just as integral to *Noir* as violence, but the Code forced filmmakers to be more covert about the former aspect than the latter.

As a result, one could argue that these films would be more effective if they could have clearly depicted the sexual relationships they now only subtly suggest. When discussing James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and its two film adaptations, one a *Film Noir* and one a *Neo-Noir,* Robert Porfirio (1985) notes that many *Noir* fans "were never very satisfied with Hollywood's first attempt [at adapting the novel], for it gutted the novel of . . . the sex and violence . . . [which] is a hallmark of James M. Cain". He goes on to say of Bob Rafelson's 1981 *Neo-Noir* adaptation, "with the constraints of the Production Code no longer in contention, it appeared as if the time had finally arrived for a film to acknowledge an older Hollywood tradition with a modernity that would be fully consistent with its literary source" (p. 102). This dialogue suggests that the morally ambiguous worlds created in *Noir* necessitate a frank outlook on sex, and the restrictions of the Code restrained their filmmakers' ability to construct effective, realistic narratives. I counter that *Film Noir* is not harmed by the necessary choice of innuendo over graphic depiction, and that *Neo-Noir* is not an improvement on its classic predecessor just because it was not impacted by censorship. Returning to Porfirio's article, his explanation of why the 1981 adaptation of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was set to succeed is followed by a breakdown of why it does not, noting that it "deliver[s] on the sex and violence" but is "surprising[ly], less effective in capturing the mood of the book" than Garnett's 1946 effort (p. 102). This sums up why the best *Noir* films are so effective: they know how to capture a mood, even when that mood initially appears difficult to convey because of censorship limitations.

Turning to a second example, auteur Howard Hawks' 1946 film *The Big Sleep* has an infamous scene where private investigator Philip Marlowe, played by Humphrey Bogart, approaches a female clerk, played by Dorothy Malone, in a bookstore, and when the prolonged encounter ends with the clerk putting a closed sign on the door and taking off her glasses, the implication of sex cannot be misunderstood or ignored. This scene could not be more effective if the depiction was more explicit, and there is no possibility that the censors overlooked the implications of the scene. Nonetheless, they allowed it to appear in the final film, creating a classic moment that is widely appreciated for its sly, sensual depiction of sexuality. Further, it actively contributes to Hawks' later canonization as an auteur. In discussing Hawks' auteur status and the recurring narrative features of his filmography, Wollen (2009) writes how, "man is woman's 'prey.' Women are admitted to the male group only after much disquiet and a long ritual courtship, phased round the offering, lighting and exchange of cigarettes, during which they prove themselves worthy of entry" (p. 459). Accordingly, the female clerk is the one who dominates the encounter with Marlowe, artfully communicating her attraction to him with physical gestures rather than words, and ultimately succeeding in seducing her "prey." While this scene does not

include the cigarette exchange that is so characteristic of both Hawks and *Noir* in general, it is an excellent example of Hawks' approach to representing relationships between men and women: an approach that can clearly be seen to derive from the Code's mandates on appropriate ways to depict sexual relationships.

Turning back to *Neo-Noir*, auteurs Lana and Lilly Wachowski's 1996 film *Bound* is an example of a *Neo-Noir* that closely follows the narrative and aesthetic conventions of classic *Noir*, yet it infuses the formula with explicit sex scenes that emphasize the sensuality and brutality of *Bound's* distinct story world. In watching this film, these explicit elements seem appropriate, because the Wachowskis had the liberty to conceive of and tell their story in a sexually direct manner. Many of their subsequent projects, such as *The Matrix Reloaded* and their Netflix television series *Sense8,* similarly include graphic sex scenes that are integrated into the larger narratives of these works. Conversely, to consider such graphic sex scenes appearing in Hawks' *The Big Sleep*, or indeed any of Hawks' films made under the Code, is unfathomable: because there was never even a possibility that such a scene could exist in his Golden Age oeuvre, his distinctive directorial style developed accordingly.

Out of the Past and Into the Conclusion

These examples evidence a fact that becomes clearer the more *Films Noirs* a viewer consumes: stories are developed under specific cultural conditions and molded to meet the standards of those conditions, and in the case of *Noir*, its films were specifically molded to meet the standards of the Code. The Code was therefore not something arbitrarily imposed upon a fully established film cycle, but an intrinsic part of *Noir's* birth and subsequent development. Even if we accept this fact, however, it is tempting to ask why it really matters: was not the end of the Code the end of censorship in Hollywood? The fact that no similar system has been enforced in North America since 1968 must be evidence that, regardless of what good things may have come out of the Code, it was ultimately a negative force in artistic creation. Even the earlier referenced #ReleasetheSnyderCut campaign only evokes Hollywood's history of censorship, rather than serving as an explicit example of contemporary censorship.

In reality, there is actually a similar system of censorship that took over in North America as soon as the Code was dismantled, and remains in place today: film ratings systems, enforced nationally by the Motion Picture Association (MPA) in the United States, and enforced provincially in Canada through local boards located throughout the country. While any film can conceivably be released in North American theatres, certain ratings almost guarantee that mainstream theatres will not play the film. For example, in the United States, most theatres will not play a film the MPA has rated NC-17/No Children Under 17, as this rating severely limits the

potential theatre audience, and thereby the potential profits for screening the film. These economic factors often compel filmmakers to make cuts that will bring their work down to a lower rating that will not dissuade theaters from screening their films. Kirby Dick's 2006 documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* further reveals how insidious the MPA ratings system can be, with MPA board members giving higher ratings to films with queer content and films that graphically depict female sexual pleasure; two of the exact things banned by the original Code. Because economic concerns and profit-driven production companies pressure many filmmakers to tailor their films to fit the standards set by the ratings board, filmmakers today operate under an admittedly less severe, but still highly analogous system to filmmakers working under the Code.

As a result, the Code's impact upon classical Hollywood filmmaking is of great importance to contemporary scholars, audiences, and filmmakers alike. North American filmmakers still face a form of censorship in the guise of film ratings boards and economically minded production companies, and more severe censorship laws are in place in many other countries across the globe, with the video nasties scandal and resulting long-term film censorship in Britain serving as just one example. If it is not possible to escape artistic censorship completely, the Golden Age of Hollywood provides a model for how artists can develop their unique visions and disseminate them to a wide audience, not in spite of, but rather in tandem with existing censorship or censorship-like limitations. Indeed, such limitations may even inspire artistic innovations, such as the iconic narrative and stylistic features of *Noir* that continue to be adapted into *Neo-Noir,* and allow for the formation of powerful artistic reputations, as happened with Lang, Hawks, and more recently, Snyder. This, finally, tells us why the *Film Noir's* debt to the Code matters: if artistic censorship is inevitable, *Noir* offers a prime example of how artists can make the best of their situation, working with censors to create art that still inspires admiration, imitation, and debate nearly a century later.

References

Biesen, S. C. (1995). Censorship in film: Censorship, film noir, and double indemnity (1944). *Film & History, 25*(1), 40-52. Retrieved Oct. 28, 2022.

Biesen, S. C. (2015). Censoring and selling film noir. *Between, 5*(9), 1-21. Retrieved Oct. 28, 2022, from https://doi.org/10.13125/2039-6597/1386.

Clarance, L., Delahaye, L., Duncan, T., Friedlander, P., Hill, G., Holland, C., Nayar, D., Rosen, M., Straczynski, J. M., Toll, J., Wachowski, L, & Wachowski, L. (Executive Producers). (2015-2018). *Sense8* [TV series]. Anarchos Productions; Javelin Productions; Studio JMS; Georgeville Television; Venus Castina LLC; Elizabeth Bay Productions; Unpronounceable Productions.

Conard, M. T. (2005). Introduction. *The philosophy of film noir*. University Press of Kentucky.

Curtiz, M. (Director). (1945). *Mildred Pierce* [Film]. Warner Bros.

Dmytryk, E. (Director). (1947). *Crossfire* [Film]. RKO Radio Pictures.

Ebert, R. (1995, Jan. 30). *A guide to film noir genre*. RogerEbert.com. https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/a-guide-to-film-noir-genre.

Franklin, C. (Director). (1995). *Devil in a blue dress.* [Film]. TriStar Pictures.

Garnett, T. (Director). (1946). *The postman always rings twice* [Film]. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Gilbert, N. (2013). Introduction: The joy of censorship. *Better left unsaid: Victorian novels, hays code films, and the benefits of censorship* [eBook edition] (pp. 1-14). Stanford University Press.

Hassenger, J. (2021, March 19). All of Zack Snyder's director's cuts are windows into his obsessions. *Polygon*. https://www.polygon.com/movies/22340032/zack-snyder-directors-cuts.

Hawks, H. (Director). (1946). *The big sleep* [Film]. Warner Bros.

Hayes, D. P. (2009). *The motion picture production code.* The Motion Picture Production Code. Retrieved March 12, 2018, from productioncode.dhwritings.com/multipleframes_productioncode.php.

Huston, J. (Director). (1941). *The maltese falcon* [Film]. Warner Bros.

Lang, F. (Director). (1945). *Scarlet street* [Film]. Universal Pictures.

Lang, F. (Director). (1953). *The blue gardenia* [Film]. Warner Bros.

McKenna, M. (2020). A very nasty business: complicating the history of the video nasties. *Nasty business: The marketing and distribution of the video nasties* (pp. 7-30). Edinburgh University Press. Retrieved Nov. 26, 2022.

McKenna, M. (2020). Introduction: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . . *Nasty business: The marketing and distribution of the video nasties* (pp. 1-6). Edinburgh University Press. Retrieved Nov. 26, 2022.

Paquette, C., Kleinfelder, K., & Miles, C. (2022). Introduction. In C. Paquette, K. Kleinfelder, and C. Miles (Eds.), *In and out of view: Art and the dynamics of circulation, suppression, and censorship* (pp. 1–23). Bloomsbury Visual Arts. Retrieved Nov. 26, 2022, from http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501358685.ch-00I.

Pelizzon, P. V., & West, N. M. (2005). Multiple indemnity: Film noir, James M. Cain, and adaptations of a tabloid case. *Narrative*, *13*(3), 211-237. Retrieved March 12, 2018.

Porfirio, R. G. (1985). Whatever happened to the film noir? The postman always rings twice (1946-1981). *Literature Film Quarterly*, *13*(2), 102-111. Retrieved March 12, 2018.

Rafelson, B. (Director). (1981). *The postman always rings twice* [Film]. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Lorimar Productions.

Ray, N. (Director). (1948). *They live by night.* [Film]. RKO Radio Pictures.

Ripley, D. (2016). Editor's introduction: The infinite night. *Interdisciplinary humanities*, *33*(1), 3-10. Retrieved March 12, 2018.

Rivera, J. (2021, March 12). Releasing the Snyder Cut won't end the calls to #ReleasetheSnyderCut. *Polygon*. https://www.polygon.com/22327290/snyder-cut-hbo-max-release.

Snyder, Z. (Director). (2006). *300* [Film]. Legendary Pictures; Virtual Studios; Atmosphere Entertainment MM; Hollywood Gang Productions.

Snyder, Z. (Director). (2017). *Justice league* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures; DC Films; RatPac-Dune Entertainment; Atlas Entertainment; Cruel and Unusual Films.

Snyder, Z. (Director). (2011). *Sucker punch* [Film]. Legendary Pictures; Cruel and Unusual Films.

Snyder, Z. (Director). (2021). *Zack Snyder's justice league* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures; Access Entertainment; Dune Entertainment; DC Films; Atlas Entertainment; The Stone Quarry.

Schwartz, D. (2019, Aug. 5). *Scarlet street*. Dennis Schwartz Movie Reviews. https://dennisschwartzreviews.com/scarletstreet.

Varmazi, E., & Kaya, F. (2020). Debates about the generic ontology of film noir. *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies, 12*(1), 145-152. Retrieved Nov. 26, 2022, from https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs_00019_1.

Wachowski., L, & Wachowski, L. (Directors). (1996). *Bound* [Film]. Dino De Laurentiis Company; Spelling Group.

Wachowski, L., & Wachowski, L. (Directors). (2003). *The Matrix Reloaded* [Film]. Village Roadshow Pictures; NPV Entertainment; Silver Pictures.

Wilder, B. (Director). (1944). *Double indemnity.* [Film]. Paramount Pictures.

Wilder, B. (Director). (1950). *Sunset boulevard.* [Film]. Paramount Pictures.

Wollen, P. (2009). The auteur theory [Howard Hawks and John Ford]. In L. Braudy and M. Cohen (Eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (pp. 455-470). Oxford University Press.

Wong, K. (Director). (1995). *Fallen angels.* [Film]. Jet Tone Productions.

Zinnemann, F. (Director). (1949). *Act of Violence* [Film]. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Stream: Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication
2022, Vol 14(2), 48–62

https://journals.sfu.ca/stream

Awareness and Hope Through Criolo's Decolonial Project "*Etérea*" (2019)

Gabriel Juliano
School of Interactive Arts & Technology
Simon Fraser University

Abstract:
"*Etérea*" (2019) is a contemporary media art project conceived by Criolo, a Brazilian rapper; it consists of a song, music video, and a making-of documentary. In conjunction with a group of performers, the rapper pays homage to Brazilian queer culture while bringing awareness and questioning the prejudice against this marginalized group. As Criolo is a Brazilian artist well-known for his politically charged productions, through "*Etérea*" (2019), the rapper exposes hegemonic colonial ideologies that still damage the queer community as he displays the performers' capacity to produce knowledge and represent themselves. Employing critical media art analysis supported by Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2019) theory of knowledge production in the Global South and Eve Tuck's (2009) studies for ethical decolonial research, I critically read "*Etérea*" (2019) as a Global South project of LGBTQIA+ activism. Although it brings awareness to violence from LGBTQIA+ phobia, this project operates as a political fight against perpetuating colonial hegemony, when living in Brazil – the country that kills queer people the most – surviving turns into a state of resistance. Consequently, it exposes violence against a marginalized community while the performers emphasize their bodies' political significance and existence as anti-colonial forms of resistance. Ultimately, the project focuses not on the damage. Instead, it reveals the artists as agents of their beings and producers of art practices that generate representation, love, hope, and a sense of community.

Keywords:
Decolonization; Global South; Brazil; queer subjectivity; contemporary media-arts

Corresponding Author: Gabriel Juliano – gjuliano@sfu.ca

Introduction

In this paper, I analyze a media arts project called "*Etérea*" (2019), conceived by the Brazilian rapper, singer, songwriter, and actor Kleber Cavalcante Gomes, known as Criolo (*b.* 1975). "*Etérea*" (2019) consists of a song, a music video, and a making-of documentary. For the visual media's making, the rapper invites queer artists to perform as they wish and express their bodies as political forms of LGBTQIA+ resistance – in other words, Criolo gives the stage to queer artists in the visual media as he invites them to dance and speak for themselves. Only at the end of the documentary the rapper gives a speech that projects hope for the queer community.

To guide the media's critical read, I pose a series of questions: How does "*Etérea*" (2019), created by a non-queer rapper, point to Queerphobia without perpetuating prejudice? How ethically is this work done, and to which extent is his approach counter-hegemonic and decolonial? What can scholars and other artists learn from him? To answer the inquiries, I borrow from Boaventura De Sousa Santos' decolonial thoughts on Global South artists (2019) and Eve Tuck's studies of decolonial praxis and ethics in academia (2009).

This paper forms part of my Ph.D. research, in which I investigate how Brazilian artists counter hegemonic conventions of representation and propose alternative historical narratives to transform epistemologies and dominant damaging ontologies, such as race, class, and gender

Theoretical Framework

According to the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, historically, what is produced as knowledge by colonized populations was made invisible and silenced or acted as non-existent (Santos, 2019, p. 121). However, Global South artistic practices oppose hegemonic colonial ideals as they expound on knowledge production (Santos, 2019). They usually inquire about liberation and emancipation; they act as part of a community – these artists work with groups, collaborating with others, not exploiting the *other* (ibid., p. 118). They are activists as they consider transforming what is concreted by colonialism as monstrous, blasphemous, or non-existent into an aesthetic with value, which should be gazed at, considered, and appreciated (ibid., p. 120). Saying so, I state that Criolo's artworks operate as decolonial practices of LGBTQIA+ activism. As the artworks function as vectors of resistance and knowledge

production, he strengthens the resistance against oppression, discrimination, and domination (ibid., p. 118).

It is crucial to mention that Western imperialism has historically dictated what counts as epistemologies and ontologies, such as gender and sexuality. Walter Mignolo (2020) positions coloniality as a concept that semiotically encompasses the colonization of dimensions like "languages, memories, and space" (p. 613); therefore, decoloniality turns into a practical, theoretical and/or methodological alternative that liberates place, mind, and body (Mignolo, 2020). Through imperial ideologies, colonial systems imposed during colonization what counted as valid forms of bodies and who was seen as humans – which, in practice, got reduced to White Europeans and White European descendants (depending on the skin complexion and ethnicity). In Brazil, as in most of the territories in the Americas, Indigenous populations and enslaved peoples had their modes of living discredited by colonialism (Nascimento, 1989). Their epistemological and ontological worldviews got demonized and persecuted, as their bodies were only reduced to objects for the colony's profits (ibid.). Saying so, Global South artworks, such as from the queer community, subvert damaging colonial ideologies (Santos, 2019). Queer art operates as anti-colonial narratives of struggle (Halberstam, 2011, p. 88). According to Judith Halberstam (2011), "queer studies offer us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems" (ibid., p. 89). By exposing colonially marginalized bodies as able bodies and producers of knowledge (Santos, 2019), queer artists de-construct the diverse forms of oppression from colonialism through their artistic practice.

For the critical media analysis of "*Etérea*" (2019), I also borrow from Eve Tuck's "Suspending Damage: a letter to Communities" (2009). In this open letter, Tuck asks scholars to reconsider their research practices. Tuck asks people to avoid documenting oppression and its effects on marginalized communities solely as it perpetuates the problematic trope of "broken people" (Tuck, 2009, p. 409). Even though places of struggle, or communities from the margins of global society, are recognized as producers of some knowledge, they should not be exploited or mistreated. According to the scholar, damaged-centred research documents pain or loss from an individual, community, or tribe (ibid., p. 413). An alternative attitude would be researching for desire (ibid., p. 416). As this kind of research documents wisdom and hope, it powers up the marginalized groups and their practices of living hood in the research. It shifts the focus from the damage of colonization to the possibilities of decolonization. Desire as theory seeks to inform by transmitting wisdom and aesthetics; it functions as an ethical approach.

Examples of damage-centred research would be some biology or other natural sciences-oriented studies from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which the concept of *otherness* got perpetuated through political agendas. Many of those scholarships backed up colonial ideologies and heteronormativity (Richardson, 2012). For instance, Sarah Richardson (2012), in her article "Sexing the X: How X Became the Female Chromosome," presents the political problematics of the chromosome X studies in the early twentieth century and how these early researches led to sexist and homophobic statements within biology scholarships until more recent feminist waves in Science and Technology fields (Richardson, 2012) – such as with Donna Haraway's (1988) and Shaowen Bardzell's (2010) feminist scholarships in the Science and Technology Studies' field.

On the other hand, Paulo Freire's scholarship on "critical pedagogy" (2000) could be considered a transformative practice that desires knowledge emancipation. Freire presents a form of pedagogy and education that conceptualizes the educator as the facilitator of knowledge instead of an *oracle*-like entity. He advocates against the "piggy banking" (Freire, 2000) model of education in which students are seen as empty vases for the educator to fill in with content. On the contrary, his pedagogy promotes *speaking with* instead of *speaking to*, so educators promote the production of knowledge from students and lead them to become critical thinkers of their own reality (ibid.). His positioning flattens the abysm of hierarchy between educators and students and promotes political transformation through pedagogy (ibid.).

Even though in her open letter, Tuck writes to researchers, her research approach could be incorporated into artmaking. Extrapolating the boundaries of Tuck's target, it is possible to observe Criolo's work under her lens as a non-damage-centred art practice; therefore, the rapper might be seen as an artist with an ethical approach to his creations since he brings light to a socio-political issue – queerphobia – but still projects hope through his practice (as further explained).

Political Activism in "*Etérea*" (2019)

By employing Peirce's (1958) semiotic analysis, it is possible to unveil the connotation from "*Etérea*'s" (2019) diverse signs; that is, one can understand what and how the signs connote to its denoted objects according to his 'second trichotomy' theory (Pierce, 1958). In short, this semiotic lens proposes signs as icons, indexes, or symbols. While an icon refers to the object by resemblance, an index refers to the object it denotes by affectedness – that is, by indicating a relationship to the object. Lastly, symbols denote the object by socially constructed meanings that rule the interpretation of the sign. That being said, I borrow Peirce's (1958) lens to read the

diverse signs of the song lyrics and the video visuals to interpret them and, thus, critically analyze these media artifacts.

One can read the song lyrics (translated to English), from minute 00:00:17 to 00:01:26:

An almost straight bullet

Ethereal, mass, complex

of not understanding

An almost straight bastard

Ignore and love for complexity

Afraid of seeing himself

It is necessary to open discussions

It is necessary to break patterns

Breath of Soul, to love without gates

Love accepted, without impositions

Singulars, plural

If it hurts you to hear

It hurts me in the flesh

But if there's a way, for my way of loving

Who gives you the right to come and shut me up?

I am all love, fear and pain to be eradicated

Through a semiotic analysis (Peirce, 1958) of the lyrics, through the segments "an almost straight bastard, ignore and love for complexity, afraid of seeing himself," Criolo poetically uncovers the relation of hate and ignorance, and that fear is connected with violence. That is, he states some self-identified straight (cis-gender,

heterosexual) people perpetuate hate against queer people as they are afraid of 'seeing' themselves in a non-conforming body – self-identify or have empathy with an LGBTQIA+ person. Right after, the rapper claims that "it is necessary to open discussions" on gender and sexuality so that society breaks with damaging patterns of hate and violence. Then, he indexes that people should have the right to be themselves and have their love accepted without colonial restrictions (Mignolo, 2020), as he states, "Breath of Soul, to love without gates, love accepted, without impositions. Singulars, plural." Here, Criolo projects a transformative, decolonial positioning that queer bodies should be accepted, such as any other hetero-normative body are accepted without impositions (Santos, 2019).

Through the segment "if it hurts you to hear, it hurts me in the flesh," the rapper points to the physical violence generated by prejudice, as further explained in the section "LGBTQIA+ phobia in Brazil" of this paper. Lastly, Criolo states that nobody has the right to silence queer people because of their identity or sexuality. There must be an end to the fear and hate against them as it generates physical violence, as he writes, "but if there's a way, for my way of loving, who gives you the right to shut me up? I am all love, fear and pain to be eradicated." The rapper's stance, throughout these segments, echoes the claims of Santos' understanding of a Global South art producer – one who operates as a vector of resistance to transforming colonial epistemologies (Santos, 2019).

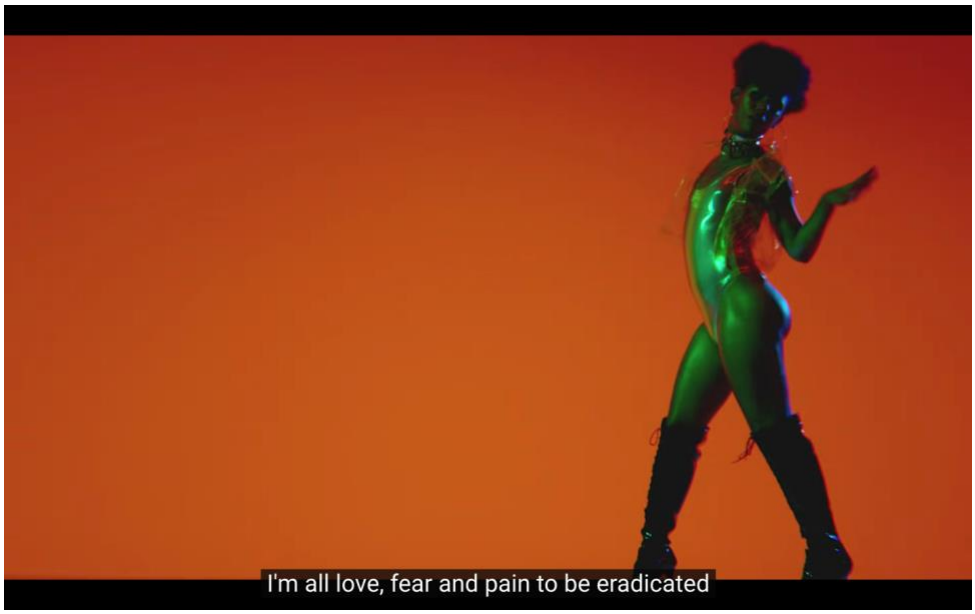

Figure 1 – '*CRIOLO – Etérea*' YouTube video[1]

Through the segment "if it hurts you to hear, it hurts me in the flesh," the rapper points to the physical violence generated by prejudice, as further explained in the section "LGBTQIA+ phobia in Brazil" of this paper. Lastly, Criolo states that nobody has the right to silence queer people because of their identity or sexuality. There must be an end to the fear and hate against them as it generates physical violence, as he writes, "but if there's a way, for my way of loving, who gives you the right to shut me up? I am all love, fear and pain to be eradicated." The rapper's stance, throughout these segments, echoes the claims of Santos' understanding of a Global South art producer – one who operates as a vector of resistance to transforming colonial epistemologies (Santos, 2019).

[1] In this screenshot of the music video (minute 00:01:18), one of the performers, Ákira, dances in front of the screen. The subtitles points to the lyrics: "I'm all love, fear and pain to be eradicated."

Figure 2 – '*CRIOLO – Etérea*' (doc), YouTube video[2]

[2] *Note.* Screenshots (00:02:33-2:35 on top and 00:02:01-00:02:06 on the bottom) of the making-of documentary. On the top, the performer D'Avilla is interviewed. On the left side of the picture, he is wearing his long boots up while his name and Social Media profile name appears overlaying the screen; on the right side, he is seen sat on a block, legs crossed, in a relaxed posture. The subtitles indicate D'Avilla was saying: "The opposite of death is desire." On the bottom, the performer Juju ZL (XL) is interviewed. On the left side of the picture, Juju ZL (XL) is seen sat on a block, relaxed, speaking; on the right side, she is seen standing up while her name and Social Media profile appears overlaying the screen. The subtitles indicate the performer said "If my body was already a political act…"

Criolo, as an activist and Global South artist, denounces the existence of hate and oppression under which the LGBTQIA+ community suffers (Santos, 2019). With the performers' assistance, the rapper puts light on hegemonic colonial violence and hate. However, he projects liberation and hope to this marginalized community by emphasizing people's rights and bringing visibility to queer aesthetics (Mignolo, 2020; Santos, 2019, p. 123). As Mignolo (2020) writes, "coloniality of knowledge goes hand in hand with coloniality of being. Hence, decoloniality of knowledge goes hand in hand with decoloniality of being" (p. 616). Ultimately, the project focuses not on the damage. Instead, it reveals the artists as agents of their beings and producers of art practices that generate representation, love, hope, and a sense of community.

Queerphobia in Brazil

Overall, queer art counters and pushes the limits of normalizations of sexuality and gender; it subverts oppressive heteronormativity standards (Halberstam, 2011). The media artifacts under analysis in this paper articulate the political power of queer subjectivities and, thus, critique capitalism and heteronormativity (ibid.). It reflects the current social fragility of the population while projecting queerness as a valid and aesthetic possibility of being. While "*Etérea*" (2019) is beautifully constructed – as the videos are visually pleasing, the performances are eye-catching, and the lyrics are profound – it brings light to the violence and damage the Brazilian queer community suffers. This project operates as a political fight against perpetuating colonial hegemonic ideology (Santos, 2019; Mignolo, 2020) as, when living in Brazil – the country that kills queer people the most – surviving turns into a state of resistance. The article "Grupo Gay da Bahia publishes report on deaths from LGBTphobia in 2018", from *Revista Lado A* (n.d.), points out that, according to data, Brazil records in "the ranking of countries that kills the most LGBTs in the world." Because of that, "more LGBTs are killed in Brazil than in countries where there is the death penalty for homosexuals, such as some places in Africa and the Middle East."

On the Brazilian Federal Supreme Court's website (n.d.), one can read the many efforts the congress members have made so far to diminish discrimination. Even though late, the Court, in 2019, has criminalized homophobia and transphobia. Queerphobia' has been recognized as a form of prejudice similar to 'racism' in Brazil through the Court's interpretation of the Law Against Racism, nº 7716/89. Nevertheless, as no legislation includes crimes against the LGBTQIA+ community, this population is still fragile – the Human Right to life cannot be taken for granted. According to the online article "June: LGBT Pride Month" (In Portuguese: *Junho: Mês do Orgulho LGBT*) created in June 2022 by the "Observatory of Deaths and Violence against LGBTI+ in Brasil" (In Portuguese: *Observatório de Mortes e Violência LGBTI+*

no Brasil), it is evident the growth in numbers of recorded violent deaths of this marginalized population.

In Brazil, since 2010, the total fatalities per year have crossed the mark of 200. In 2017 and 2018, there were 445 and 420 LGBTQIA+ violent deaths. The report *Violent Death of LGBTI+ Observatory in Brazil – 2020*, created by the Non-Profit Organization "Grupo Gay da Bahia," shows that despite the declining numbers, the total number of deaths must not be seen as final. It is worth mentioning that this organization has a primary mission to guarantee the right to life for the LGBTQIA+ community in Brazil. The Non-Profit also points to a considerable underreporting from the "dismantling – from 2018 onwards – of investments in public policies and campaigns to encourage reporting and protection of victims" (Gastaldi et al., 2021, p.10).

Reception

In Brazil, since 2010, the total fatalities per year have crossed the mark of 200. In 2017 and 2018, there were 445 and 420 LGBTQIA+ violent deaths. The report "Violent Death of LGBTI+ Observatory in Brazil – 2020", created by the Non-Profit Organization Grupo Gay da Bahia, shows that despite the declining numbers, the total number of deaths must not be seen as final. It is worth mentioning that this organization has a primary mission to guarantee the right to life for the LGBTQIA+ community in Brazil. The non-profit also points to a considerable underreporting from the "dismantling – from 2018 onwards – of investments in public policies and campaigns to encourage reporting and protection of victims" (Gastaldi et al., 2021, p.10).

"*Etérea*" (2019) has been well-received worldwide at art-related festivals and institutions. In 2019, Criolo was nominated for the music as best song in Portuguese at the Latin Grammy Awards. The music video was a finalist at the m-v-f Music Video Festival awards in 2019 in the categories of best wardrobe, best choreography, and best music video with a social message. It also got exposed in "Elements of Vogue: a case study of radical performance" exposition in the Museo Universitario del Chopo in Mexico City, curated by Universidad Nacional del Mexico's Filmoteca. The music video got selected for several film festivals screenings worldwide, including Outfest 2020 (Los Angeles, USA), Moinho Cine Fest 2020 (Porto, Portugal), Choreoscope 2019 (Barcelona, Spain), Trans Film Fest 2019 (Stockholm, Sweden), Pornfilmfestival 2019 (Berlin, Germany), Napoli Film Fest 2019 (Naples, Italy), Scottish Queer Int'l Film Fest 2019 (Glasgow, Scotland), VISIBLE Festival de Cine LGBTI+ 2019 (Panama City,

Panama), Courts Critiques (Montreal, Canada). The making-of documentary was also selected for screening in several festivals, most of which were abovementioned.

This media project has been appreciated and recognized in academia and cinema circuits for its counter hegemonic socio-political stance (Mignolo, 2020). As previously stated, colonial modes of production and philosophies lead to a binary understanding of the world; on the flip side, queer subjectivities project a counter-hegemonic, decolonial perception of sexuality and the body (Halberstam, 2011). Queer-ness, for colonial and capitalist understandings, might be seen as a failure (ibid.). Indeed, because it counters colonial narratives of body dominance and oppression, it can be seen as a failure in the eyes of the oppressors. Moreover, this form of subjectivity indicates a progressive inclination to develop a kind of epistemology that is not oppressive and is anti-capitalist (ibid.). Therefore, it has many pedagogical potentials for transforming damaging epistemologies.

As it turns out, the mainstream Brazilian audience has not received Criolo's project the same way in academia and cinema circuits, as previously mentioned. As written by Borges & Rodrigues (2021) in the G1 journal, the mayor of Criciúma city (state of Santa Catarina, Brazil) announced the resignation of a public school teacher after they screened "*Etérea*" to 14 to 15-years-old teens in an art class. Potentially, the teacher screened Criolo's work for pedagogical purposes as it can promote transformative epistemological and decolonial understandings of sexuality and gender (Mignolo, 2020; Santos, 2019). The mayor of the city said the teacher screened an erotic video for the students (Borges & Rodrigues, 2021). In his own words, the mayor said that this 'stuff' must not happen in schools under his watch and that he does not allow this kind of attitude inside the classrooms (ibid.). The city's Worker's Union announced legal support to the teacher (ibid.). A few citizens have protested; people have written (graffitied) on the walls of Criciuma's cathedral that homophobia is a crime. Further, Criolo also shared a public note (Borges & Rodrigues, 2021) stating that:

> [O]nce again, since its release, the clip and the documentary of the song "*Etérea*" opened space for debate in Brazilian society, after the regrettable dismissal of a teacher after showing the project in the classroom. Both the clip and the doc, without any kind of restriction by YouTube guidelines, have already been shown at several film festivals and art, music and dance institutions around the world, such as the Filmoteca of the National University of Mexico.

I want to posit that, at the moment this paper is written (2022), Brazil is currently under a far-right, conservative government. In addition, the majority of the population has conservative values. The Religion and Public Life glossary at Harvard Divinity School's website (n.d.) collocates Brazil as containing the largest Roman Catholic population in the world. This conservatism reflects upon the population *modus operandi* and how cultural production is perceived. According to Stuart Hall (1986), society configures its meanings through culture as people can interpret it. However, through conservative a lens, queer cultural productions are still perceived the same way as the colonial understandings of body oppression (Mignolo, 2020).

Conclusion

At the end of the making-of documentary, from minute 00:06:51 to 00:08:08, the rapper gives a speech claiming:

> No more deaths, enough cruelty, no more killings. Come here, no more! If you have your fears, fight against them, don't transfer them to another body that wants to be free and spread love into the world. […] Those are wonderful people; and they fight every day to SURVIVE. […] It is possible to build a fair society, to build an environment of love and respect. Evil is not going to defeat good. Fear won't defeat freedom.

Scholars can learn from Criolo how to ethically present a problem that does not necessarily affect them directly. Nevertheless, "*Etérea*" (2019) is an ethical decolonial project of queer activism by a non-queer artist. Utilizing De Sousa Santos (2019) and Eve Tuck (2009) concepts, one sees that Criolo, as a Global South artist and ethical knowledge-creator (Tuck, 2009), collaborates with others instead of exploiting the *other* or promoting *otherness* (Santos, 2019). After all, it would have been easier for the rapper not to address any socio-political issues the queer community suffers from hegemonic social structures, as conventions of gender and sexuality do not directly affect heterosexual, cis-gender men. On the contrary, by addressing these issues and trying to transform what was conceptualized as unworthy by colonization (ibid.), Criolo became a clear queer activist. In creating the productions, he understood he could not speak for himself. By knowing the reach of his productions, he steps back and gives space to others to represent and speak for themselves and still denounce violence. He then created an art project that functions as a vector of resistance (ibid.) and defies hegemonic conventions of gender and sexuality; it brings awareness to the genocide against the LGBTQIA+ population. Though as it is ethically approached, it proposes hope and love.

References

Bardzell, S. (2010). Feminist HCI: taking stock and outlining an agenda for design. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (*CHI '10*). Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 1301–1310. DOI:https://doi-org.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/10.1145/1753326.1753521

Borges, C. (2021). *Criolo lamenta demissão de professor de SC que exibiu clipe com temática LGBTQIA+: "É necessário quebrar os padrões" (Translation: Criolo regrets dismissal of SC professor who showed LGBTQIA+-themed clip: "It is necessary to break the standards").* G1. Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://g1.globo.com/sc/santa-catarina/noticia/2021/08/26/criolo-lamenta-demissao-de-professor-de-sc-que-exibiu-clipe-com-tematica-lgbtqia.ghtml

Borges, C., & Rodrigues, P. (2021). *Prefeito de Criciúma demite professor por exibir clipe de música de Criolo com temática LGBTQIA+ em aula de artes (Translation: Criciúma mayor fires teacher for showing LGBTQIA+-themed Criolo music video in art class).* G1. Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://g1.globo.com/sc/santa-catarina/noticia/2021/08/26/prefeito-de-criciuma-demite-professor-por-exibir-clipe-de-musica-de-criolo-em-sala-de-aula.ghtml

"Catholic Church in Brazil, The" in *Religion and Public Life's Glossary at Harvard Divinity School*'s website (n.d.). Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/catholic-church-brazil

Criolo. (Feb 14, 2019). *CRIOLO – Etérea* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/anBTZLoWhJg

Criolo. (Feb 14, 2019). *CRIOLO – Etérea* (doc) [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/77u1lCDshzE

Freire, P. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* 30th anniversary ed. New York: Continuum.

Gastaldi, A. B. F., Mott, L., De Oliveira, J. M. D., Ayres, C. L. S., Souza, W. V. F., & Da Silva, K. V. C. (Eds.). (2021). *Observatório de Mortes Violentas de LGBTI+ no Brasil - 2020: Relatório da Acontece Arte e Política LGBTI+ e Grupo Gay da Bahia (Translation: Observatory of Violent Deaths of LGBTI+ in Brazil - 2020: Report of the Happens Art and Politics LGBTI+ and Gay Group of Bahia).* 1. ed. – Florianópolis: Editora Acontece Arte e Política LGBTI+. ISBN: 978-65-994905-0-7

Grupo Gay da Bahia publica relatório sobre mortes por LGBTfobia em 2018 (Translation: Grupo Gay da Bahia publishes report on deaths from LGBTphobia in 2018). (2019, January 26). *Revista Lado A*. https://revistaladoa.com.br/2019/01/brasil/grupo-gay-da-bahia-publica-relatorio-sobre-mortes-por-lgbtfobia-em-2018/

Halberstam, J. (2011). *The Queer Art of Failure*. DURHAM; LONDON: Duke University Press. Accessed August 10, 2021. doi:10.2307/j.ctv11sn283.

Hall, S. (1986). *The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees*. Journal of Communication Inquiry, 10 (2), p. 28-44.

Haraway, D. (1988). "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575-99. doi:10.2307/3178066.

Homofobia pode ser enquadrada como crime de racismo (Translation: Homophobia can be framed as a crime of racism). (n.d.). Tribunal de Justiça do Distrito Federal e dos Territórios. Retrieved August 5, 2022, from https://www.tjdft.jus.br/institucional/imprensa/campanhas-e-produtos/direito-facil/edicao-semanal/homofobia-pode-ser-enquadrada-como-crime-de-racismo

Junho: Mês do Orgulho LGBT – Observatório de Mortes e Violências LGBTI+ no Brasil (Translation: June: LGBT Pride Month – Observatory of LGBTI+ Deaths and Violence in Brazil). (n.d.). Retrieved August 4, 2022, from https://observatoriomorteseviolenciaslgbtibrasil.org/orgulho-lgbt/junho-2022/

Mignolo, W. D. (2020). On decoloniality: Second thoughts. *Postcolonial Studies*, *23*(4), 612–618. https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2020.1751436

Nascimento, A. D. (1989). “Brazil, Mixture or Massacre? Essays in the Genocide of a Black People.” Majority Pr; 2nd Rev ed. Edition. ISBN-10: 0912469269.

Peirce, C. S. (1958). “The Icon, Index and Symbol,” in *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Electronic Edition, Volume 2: Elements Of Logic, Book 2: Speculative Grammar, Chapter 3.

Richardson, S. (2012). “Sexing the X: How X Became the Female Chromosome.” Journal of Women in Culture and Society, vol. 37, no. 4

Santos, B. D. S. (2019). “Towards an Aesthetics of the Epistemologies of the South, Manifesto in Twenty-Two Thesis.” In B. D. S. Santos & M. P. Meneses (Eds.), *Knowledges Born in the Struggle*. (pp. 117–125). 1st ed. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429344596

STF enquadra homofobia e transfobia como crimes de racismo ao reconhecer omissão legislativa. (n.d.). Supremo Tribunal Federal. Retrieved August 5, 2022, from http://portal.stf.jus.br/noticias/verNoticiaDetalhe.asp?idConteudo=414010&ori=

Tuck, E. (2009). “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities.” *Harvard Educational Review* 79 (3). (pp. 409–428). https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15

Stream: Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication
2022, Vol 14(2), 63–71

https://journals.sfu.ca/stream

Robert Mapplethorpe: Representing a Fetishized Aesthetic

Marcus Young
Department of Communication, Media and Film
University of Calgary

Abstract:
Homoerotic photography has operated to liberate queerness through the camera's ability to pronounce ideas and experiences that were prohibited within heteronormative discourse. Photography reproduces experiences which enable the spectator to share in the narratives embedded in them. The photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe relay queer experience by means of illustrating sexual fantasy to the public; however, I propose a possible counter-reading of his images, as I draw on the notion of fetishism, and how homoerotic photography perpetuates a dangerous fascination towards the Other. I problematize the fetishistic nature of gazing upon the Other within the highly celebrated artworks of Mapplethorpe. In approaching the intersections evident in Mapplethorpe's photographs, I primarily consider the ideas surrounding visuality and race, and sexuality's manifestation through photography. A malleable way of looking at gender identity is depicted in Mapplethorpe's photographs, especially through the lens of technological expression: photography as storytelling. The present work contributes to existing literature by means of complicating our consumption of art, particularly Mapplethorpe's work whose images are regarded as icons within queer culture. Understanding this will allow us to consider how we see representation from repression as we reflect on our historic practices of consumption. This analysis will use a visual discourse analysis in examining the exhibition of power in Mapplethorpe's homoerotic images. The current work critically looks at "change" through the lens of photography, and how the camera has operated to represent queer communities through sexual artistic expression.

Keywords:
Mapplethorpe; homoeroticism; race; queer; photography

Corresponding Author: Marcus Young – marcus.young@ucalgary.ca

Introduction

Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs suggest a desire for the male body and its parts; visual pleasure that is best defined through tactility: representations of tenderness like the soft phallus (and floral portraits), and representations of hardness through the naked male body are elements essential to sexual intercourse. For Waugh (1966), queer history is strongly intertwined with sexual photographic depiction for they narrate intimacies that could not be spoken publicly. Underlying Mapplethorpe's artistic composition are aesthetic images that narrate experience of being a queer man. In the 1980s, the queer body was a rejected body. The AIDS crisis branded it as a symbol of societal disgust. The revelatory nature of photography is something that helped queer people express their identity, as being queer required one to hide over the course of the United States' homophobic climate, and as Sedgwick (2008) tells us, "[being in] the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression" (p. 71). I find that to photograph is to share with others one's experience, and in Mapplethorpe's work, queer desire is given a voice. What Mapplethorpe offered in his photographs, which were produced in the 1980s, is an aestheticization of the queer body, turning it into something desirable. The innovation in Mapplethorpe's art was to exoticize the body, and this leads to a harrowing interaction with the racialized form.

Literature review

Beneath the visually pleasing composition of Mapplethorpe's images is a fetishization of the Other through the racialized body as symbol of pleasure. In this problematic framing, we are pierced by its visceral nature. The problematic image confronts us of fantasy that is culturally embedded: the Other as exotic. The guilt we might experience in looking also opens us to reflect on how beauty shrouds the problems linked to race and privilege. Queer culture pushes to uplift marginalized voices, working to destroy heteronormative boundaries in place which have ostracized many who identify outside the gender binary. Historically, queer photographs have operated to depict expressions of identity and sexual fantasy, and Mapplethorpe's images narrate a particular queer identity: one that framed the male body as a mythological source of power (Mercer, 2013, p. 178). In his artistic corpus, Mapplethorpe often featured the Black man: the aestheticized, muscular, and physically robust figure which he de-personalized by focusing on physical composition. The male form has, throughout time, symbolically embodied power, and particular social values (Bordo, 1999, p. 41). Much like the construction of values projected by Greek antiquity's nudes (Asen, 1998, p. 53), I argue that Mapplethorpe

privileged the muscular body as a reflection of communal value, taking away the individual identities of his subjects. In Mapplethorpe's photographs, the queer gaze is mobilized through the notion of sexual desire, intentionally subverting heteronormativity's constructions of what we find traditionally attractive, such as the male-to-female gaze (Whited, 2018, p. 215). I find this subversive framing to be a provocative strategy for queer artistic representation: where one gazes, one objectifies; and in objectifying, we are confronted with our own power over what the image represents. Mapplethorpe both beautified and fetishized the queer body, and in his controversial practice, he reconstructed the queer body as a site of attraction, starkly reminding us of queerness' deviance from traditional heteronormative appeal. In this deviance, Mapplethorpe's photographs are turned into activist objects, or artefacts that have the power to mobilize marginalised communities (Warner, 2002).

On racialized bodies, we find the intersection between fantasy and the non-White Other to be a site of pleasure for homoerotic artists, and this trend is not unique to Mapplethorpe's work. Artists before him, such as Willem von Gloeden, privileged the "dark-skinned Arab-Latin Sicilian beauties" (Ellenzweig, 1992, p. 43) to tell a story of Grecian playfulness and nudity. The fascination of artists towards the non-White Other gives a sense of fantasy that may offer, for the spectator, an amusing and novel site of eroticism. Racialized bodies also provide sexual and pleasurable qualities that are distinct from one race to another, argues Bordo (1999), who notes of the "Black penis" and the "Jewish penis" (p. 43) as having attributes that are unique to each population. The generalisation of attributes such as girth, size, and appearance for the racialized body connects to "gay male culture," which encompass "sexual icon[s] and object[s] of parody" (Bordo, 1999, p. 43). These authors suggest that racial attributes can inform the spectator of particular fantasies that, though aren't always realistic, offer something for the viewer to ground their interaction of that image. Arousal is prompted by racial icons that assist in our engagement with the photograph, and such leads us to stereotype races into sexual categories or attributes that we may find appealing.

The existing literature on homoerotic photography and the racialized body will lend to this essay's framing of Mapplethorpe's work as site of fetishized pleasure, where pleasure is inspired by our historical view of the male body, the gaze, sexual kinks, and a fascination over the non-White form as a source of racialized pleasure. These complicate our engagement with Mapplethorpe's images as icons of queer culture and the dangers they possess when fetishizing race and the Other as objects of homoerotic fantasy and admiration. This scholarship provokes our reading of Mapplethorpe's work as representative of queer desire.

Methodology

This essay is a visual discourse analysis and will focus on how Mapplethorpe's photographs construct and convey power through the artistic composition of his images. This research will examine Mapplethorpe's photographs by identifying the dominant themes in the text through an analysis of the photographs' details, which include the models' poses, lighting, props, and overall setting. This analysis will also review ways of seeing through the artist's vision of homoerotic depiction and sexual tension; this will be assisted by looking at the correlations between the themes evident in Mapplethorpe's photographs and how they interact with one another. And lastly, as a discourse analysis, this essay will review whose voices are made silent in the portrayal of racialized bodies, and whose are dominant.

A visual discourse analysis as an approach will help us understand how visual texts produce ways of seeing and how Mapplethorpe's photographs act as representative of queer culture and homoerotic desire. This method of studying the artist's visual texts will inform the reader of how knowledge on race and gender is portrayed in his photographs and how power is constructed through the queer body. Our experience of social reality is affected by what is perceived by our senses. Mapplethorpe's work, as visual devices, have the power to create and narrate a particular vision for queerness. A visual discourse analysis will aid our interpretation of such devices in an attempt to review our perception of the male body and its role in queering gender and sexual attraction. Gill (2018) argues that discourse analysis dissects "language and social constructions," and it positions texts (which include visual objects) as non-neutral entities (p. 23). Discourse analysis then, as method to this essay, views Mapplethorpe's photographs as partial towards a particular framing of queerness and same sex attraction. By studying his photographs through this lens, we are afforded a critical look into visual depiction that favours the eroticized Black body as site of queer expression that complicates race and privilege.

Analysis

Mapplethorpe's photograph of *Ken Moody* from 1985 presents the Black model arched and submissive, exposing his impressive musculature for us to behold. In the nude, though hiding the phallus, he poises his chin astutely and looks up. He poses as if someone else is present and looking down on him. In this depiction, Mapplethorpe presents beauty combined with repression: the model's muscled body is exposed, but his racial identity is looked down upon. There is much to say on the favouring of the muscled body: traditional symbolic value, referencing Greek antiquity, is assigned to

the aestheticized male body for we have historically viewed the hardened physical form as admirable (Ellenzweig, 1992, pp. 24-25). On the opposite side of this perception, the male nude is seen as a "homoerotic spectacle" (Davis, 1994, p. 51), objectifying the person and turning him into a de-personalized ideal – a mere object of sexual desire and visual pleasure. In the same photograph, a glistening stiletto heel sits upon the model's back and glutes, as if stepping on him. No person is seen wearing the shoe, thus creating an illusion of weightless pressure atop the Black man; however, we can read this image's symbolic meaning through the dynamics of capital, race, and power. Let us assume that the stiletto heel symbolizes upper-class status: this photograph then becomes a commentary on Black slavery, racializing the aesthetic body through an artistic allegory. The Black model is posed in submission, almost prostrate. He arches his back to support and balance the stiletto heel, perched on his lower back. Owens (1992) proposes that in posing for a photograph, "mimicry" (p. 201) is politically deployed. Drawing on Owen's thoughts, the way Mapplethorpe captured the Black model also serves as a commentary on social submission and the pleasure that can be derived from wielding power – Mapplethorpe referenced real social dynamics in his representation of sexual pleasure. We see a dichotomous performance within the photograph: a piece of clothing contrasted against a completely nude man. In queering this image, we could say that there is victory in femininity that has now received power through Mapplethorpe's framing of the heel; however, what we often forget is the effect of our gaze: the hypersexualised Black model is subjected to our ocular pleasure through his lack of clothing, submissive pose, and the homoerotic appeal of muscular nudity that represents queer desire but also fetishizes upon the racialized body. Power is demonstrated in this photograph through the exposition of the male and muscular body; however, in the interplay of race, the Black body is made submissive to Whiteness. The fetishistic framing imposed on Mapplethorpe's Black model proposes power that is subverted: despite the muscular male body occupying social power, when this body is non-White, it becomes an object of pleasure and visual consumption.

Another *Ken Moody* photograph from 1984 presents the Black model with his eyes closed, holding a single white orchid above his head. He lifts it with both arms, angled to feature his beautiful biceps, and is peacefully posed. His bare chest invites us to stare deeply at his centred body in the photograph. He is illuminated as a geometric visual spectacle through Mapplethorpe's manipulation of light. Seemingly innocent, this photograph calls our attention to the homoerotic message signalled by his bare torso and chest, exposing his broad shoulders and massive physique. Mapplethorpe employed a particular formula which encapsulated the overtly sexual essence of his images: "Black + Male = Erotic/Aesthetic Object" (Mercer, 2013, p. 174). Further, Foucault (1977) marks the male body as occupying power, and there is

attraction that forms when the dynamic of authority and its values are present. For Ahmed (2006), to queer something is to divert from its traditional path, thus labelling the subject in question as "deviant" (p. 554). This view changes how we might perceive how the homoerotic body depicts power. In Mapplethorpe's photographs, the Black male body is subjected to the spectator's gaze as opposed to the one projecting power. Mapplethorpe imposed a racialized frame in reading the male body by queering it; in other words, he twisted the idea of the male body occupying a space of power. The Black body is victim to a racist configuration of desire. Ahmed complicates Foucault's reading of the male body through subversion.

The aestheticization of the beautiful Black body endorses its own fetishistic purpose: Mapplethorpe takes the model and manufactures peacefulness and erotic appeal. Two polar natures are presented to us: the harsh, hardened, and physical body, opposite the lush, soft, and gentle orchid which he holds. The body is queered through this blurring of how power is conveyed – the Black male body's embodiment of power is feminised through the orchid as visual signifier. The interplay between the muscular, hardened, model and the fragile, soft, orchid produces a queer translation of masculinity through tactile engagement. Through this image, queerness is depicted through duplicity: hardness and softness both embodied within a singular artistic document. But such embodiment becomes problematic as the Black body is made site of sexualized and racialized pleasure. A Freudian reading can be applied: the Black man symbolizes the "fantasy of the big Black willy – that Black male sexuality is […] somehow 'more'" (Mercer, 2013, pp. 190-191). Queer art has made hopeful how we see the queer body, but in its course to promote queer desire, especially in Mapplethorpe's sadomasochistic sense, race is made a factor in this objectification. Foucault's conception of the male body is relevant when matched with a queer reading: queerness shifts how we perceive the construction of power.

Another example which illustrates the fetishization of desire is Mapplethorpe's photograph titled *Ken Moody and Robert Sherman* from 1984. This print focuses on the tension between the explicit distinction between White and Black bodies. The photograph is a tight headshot of two models, a White man and a Black man, where both show their side profiles. The Black model is in the background, and in the foreground is a White model who, through Mapplethorpe's play on lighting, makeup, and artistic composition, starkly captures your attention. The Black model remains behind him as an afterthought. Mapplethorpe's key work is monochrome photography. In this specific portrait, he highlights the strong binary of light and dark through shadows and the racialized bodies of his models. This final example shows how the Black body, when sharing the same space with a White body, recedes to the background. Though this picture focuses on their heads and hides their physiques,

the colour contrast between the two headshots narrates a story of racial and social privilege. Mapplethorpe turned the White model into a literal sculpture. Through make-up and lighting, the artist photographed the chalk-like portrait of his White model, turning him into a Greek statue. Except for his open eyes exposing his pupils, we almost see an inanimate stone figure that reads a certain rigidity and serves a purely aesthetic purpose. This reminds us of the values assigned to the Greek muscular body, preserved as white statuary: "the [Greek] nude is an imitation of the human body, but it imitates a universalised and idealised body" (Asen, 1998, p. 53). The idealization of the White body as aesthetically revered shows a crack in our history's viewing of the male body and whose bodies are superior to others. Mapplethorpe's Black model has his eyes closed, and without the gleaming lights that gently touch his glistening skin and face, he almost disappears. Here, the Black model is passive and aloof. The White model is awake and alert. The visual composition of this image and the tension of race is critically illustrated by the double portrait of Mapplethorpe's Black and White models.

There is more to what an image proposes, for it is an expression of the artist's imagination and aspiration which, for us, is not always clear. Barthes (1980) tells us that the photographer creates for us a "little simulacrum" (p. 9) in which we are faced with a particular reality or interpretation of it. In our encounter with the photograph, however, we can look at them with cause to be critical, placing them under interrogation and reflection. As Silverman (2015) points out, engaging with the camera and its product allows us to reflect not just on what it visually captures, but what it means for us as we try to make sense of what we physically perceive (p. 18-19). Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs illustrate both beauty and objectification, and his representation of the queer body invites us to reconsider how we see the marginalised person as well as our fantasies. In his provocative images, what is perhaps most disturbing is the nude image's ability to shock us with what it represents. With looking, we share in the environment which Mapplethorpe provides: a homoerotic, provocative, and even pornographic illustration. In complicating this dynamic, we ask: how has queer photography disempowered the Other? We can respond by problematizing the dynamics of race and class which are evidently expressed by Mapplethorpe's images, as the carnal and sexually charged fantasies imposed on his models echo racial subjugation. This subjugation, I argue, legitimises ways of looking, or means in which we construct realities. For Mapplethorpe, this reality is moulding sexual desire out of a fetishized group. The glorified nature of the artist, in one view, uplifts the queer community through liberated sexual expression; however, in its obverse, the commodification of the racialized and aestheticized body has caused us to see race as a factor of attraction, leading us to a dark and narrow path of perversion. In reflecting upon Mapplethorpe's

images, we are invited to peer into the life and nature of sexual fantasy where pleasure is problematic, and where representation invites us to view queerness in a provocative way. What we see in Mapplethorpe's work is a unique avenue for queer emergence, as it has blurred the distinction between representation and repression – who does it privilege, and in its hope to further queer visibility, does it challenge our understanding of queer life?

Conclusion

What I have found is exoticism which challenges us to think of the ways we look at nude photographs. Mapplethorpe's images operate as provocations. The fetishized body draws us in because of its formal composition and illustrates for us what queer desire can be: on one on hand, a valorization of the body-beautiful, and on the other, a fascination towards the exotic. We are both confronted with the dangers of fantasy, whilst also bringing an underground community into the light through the beautification of the rejected queer body. The homeotic photographs of Mapplethorpe are devices of queer visibility and site of reflection, for the fetishized body is symbolic of both desire and fantasy over another. There is value in studying Mapplethorpe's work, for it contributes to the shift in how we view queerness, adding to the works of other queer artists in the 20th century. In turning the queer body artistic and visually striking, Mapplethorpe has paved way for us to renew how we see queer identity, turning it into an icon of desire.

References

Ahmed, S. (2006). Orientations: Towards a queer phenomenology. *GLQ*, *12*(4), 543-574. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/202832.

Asen, R. (1998). Appreciation and desire: The male nude in the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe. *Text and Performance Quarterly 18*(1), 50-62. https://doi.org/10.1080/10462939809366209.

Barthes, R. (1980). *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography*. Hill and Wang.

Bordo, S. (1999). *The male body*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Davis, M. D. (1994). Personality versus physique. *Art Journal*, *43*(2), 88-92. https://doi.org/10.2307/777492.

Ellenzweig, A. (1992). *The homoerotic photograph: Male images from Durieux/Delacroix to Mapplethorpe*. Columbia University Press.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Penguin.

Gill, R. (2018). Discourse. In M. Kackman and M. C. Kearney (Eds.), *The Craft of Criticism: Critical Media Studies in Practice* (pp. 23-34). Routledge.

Mercer, K. (2013). *Welcome to the jungle: New positions in black cultural studies*. Routledge.

Owens, C. (1992). *Beyond recognition: Representation, power, and culture*. University of California Press.

Sedgwick, E. K. (2008). *Epistemology of the closet.* University of California Press.

Silverman, K. (2015). *The miracle of analogy or the history of photography, part 1*. Stanford University Press.

Warner, M. (2002). *Publics and counterpublics*. Zone Books.

Waugh, T. (1966). *Hard to imagine: Gay male eroticism in photography and film from their beginnings to Stonewall*. Columbia University Press.

Whited, B. (2018). Masculine exposure: Transgressive representations of the male nude in contemporary dance and editorial fashion photography. *Queer Studies in Media and Pop Culture*, *3*(2), 213-226. https://doi.org/10.1386/qsmpc.3.2.213_1

Stream: Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication
2022, Vol 14(2), 72–89

https://journals.sfu.ca/stream

The Subculture of Hijabi Fashion Influencers: Defining Modesty in Islam Beyond a Binary Lens

Asma Bernier
Department of Communications, Media and Film
University of Calgary

Abstract:
Modesty is practiced by people regardless of their class, sexuality, gender, race, or religion. However, modesty remains a contentious topic as there exists immense variability in the definitions and understandings of it, especially in relation to Islam. Veiled Muslim women often practice modesty through their clothing, hijab (an Islamic head-covering), and behavior. This paper examines performance and visual enactment within photographs uploaded on Instagram by a sample of veiled Muslim women influencers including Nawal Sari and Rawdah Mohamed. Visual rhetorical analysis is used to examine the captions and the clothing, pose, background, symbols, colours and textures present in the photos and videos. Considering the various definitions of modesty, this paper aims to understand how hijabi influencers define Islamic modesty on Instagram, a visual social media platform. Through their online performances, these hijabi influencers demonstrate that they neither oppressed by their male counterparts, nor is modesty a homogenous set of practices that grant veiled Muslim women's autonomy. Rather, veiled Muslim women resist aspects of the Islamic doctrine and challenge Western beliefs toward the veil, which establishes a more complex way of viewing Islamic modesty beyond a binary perspective (Western versus Islamic beliefs).

Keywords:
Hijabi influencers; visual enactment; self-representation; modesty; resistance

Corresponding Author: Asma Bernier – asma.bernier1@ucalgary.ca

Introduction

The Islamic veil, or 'hijab', faces multiple competing discourses in Western society (Droogsma, 2007). These discourses follow a dichotomous structure; the veil is a signifier of oppression or liberation (Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014). Therefore, veiled Muslim women within the West face gendered experiences of racialization (Goodwin, 2020). The existing literature on veiled Muslim women focus on Western representations of this marginalized group. These discussions assert that the Islamic veil is a visual marker of Islam, a religion that is often viewed as "backward" and "barbaric"; therefore, veiled Muslim women face complex forms of oppression (Droogsma, 2017; Ternikar 2009). This influences anti-veiling attitudes that are highly saturated in political discourses (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010). Research suggests that the negative representations of veiled Muslim women influence dominant discourses and, consequently, public attitudes (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010). Western tensions toward the hijab associate the oppression of veiled Muslim women with Islamic modesty. This differs from both the lived experiences of hijabi women and Islamic interpretations of the hijab. However, there are current gaps in literature regarding the politics of self-representation and Islamic modesty coming from the voices of veiled Muslim women.

Some veiled Muslim women in the West integrate fashion trends in their pious lifestyles. This is typically practiced through self-representation online. Recent studies focus on how hijabi women practice modesty in Islam by exploring fashion trends and styling their hijab in alternative ways (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan & Harun, 2016; Shirazi, 2020). These practices are often performed by hijabi fashion influencers online through their content, such as photos and videos. The goal of this research paper is to examine the subculture of hijabi influencers and understand how they define Islamic modesty through their fashion-related content. More specifically, this study will focus on the hijabi influencers Nawal Sari and Rawdah Mohamed. Through the application of visual rhetoric, two fashion-related images from each influencer will be analyzed to further understand how hijabi influencers define modesty in Islam through their clothing and style. Visual rhetoric will aim to uncover how traditional practices of Islamic modesty are both incorporated and maintained through different fashion trends. Moreover, this study examines how modest fashion practiced by hijabi influencers both subvert tensions around the veil and contribute to current discourses through their performances. Performance is understood as a "situated communicative practice" and is "the nexus of language and identity" (Bauman, 2000). Therefore, I use performance in this context to understand the ways veiled Muslim women self-represent their identities through photographs, which I argue are performative acts. The rationale behind this research is the evident lack of

veiled female scholars and gaps within the existing literature. As a veiled Muslim woman scholar, I intend to add valuable contributions to this sub-field in communications scholarship. I aim to examine how fashion-forward veiled Muslim women operate in the West through the meanings they develop regarding the veil.

Literature Review

The veil is a religious garment that many Muslim women wear to cover their hair, neck, and chest (Al-Saji, 2010; Droogsma, 2007; Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014; Najmabadi, 2005; Ternikar, 2009). Hijab enforces modest apparel of Muslim women and translates to "curtain" or "barrier" (Al-Saji, 2010; Droogsma, 2007; Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014; Najmabadi, 2005; Ternikar, 2009). Existing scholarship on the veil suggest that because it is a visible marker of Islam (Al-Saji, 2010; Droogsma, 2007; Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014), it acts as a visual indicator of difference within Western societies (Droogsma, 2007). This acknowledged difference contributes to the oppression that veiled Muslim women face (Droogsma, 2007). Veiled women face competing discourses in Western societies; many of these discourses view the veil through a negative lens (Al-Saji, 2010; Droogsma, 2007). The discourses surrounding the veil differ based on social, political, and cultural climates within a given area (Droogsma, 2007; Hoodfar, 1993; Shirazi, 2020). Based on current scholarship, there exists two main discourses regarding the Islamic veil; the veil is viewed as oppressive and liberating (Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014). The West views the veil as an oppressor and veiled Muslim women as oppressed, which is perpetuated through media representations (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010; Droogsma, 2007). On the contrary, veiled Muslim women, particularly those situated within Western societies, view their veil as liberating (Droogsma, 2007). These competing discourses often cause tensions, which impacts the lived experiences of veiled Muslim women (Droogsma, 2007).

Negative discourses surrounding the veil exists prior to the attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11); however, post 9/11 representations of the veil became increasingly negative and perpetuates old-fashioned Orientalism (Byng, 2010; Satiti, 2017). Orientalist tropes are pervasive in Western media representations of veils and hijabi women (Satiti, 2017). This enforces Western beliefs that Islam follows barbaric traditions as forces its women into submissive and oppressive lifestyles (Satiti, 2017; Hoodfar, 1993). The post 9/11 world influenced anti-Muslim and anti-veiling sentiments, which is reflected in public attitudes (Ogan et al., 2013). These attitudes are evident in the political ideologies of individuals and societies (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010). For instance, anti-veiling attitudes influenced proposed veil bans in places like Quebec and France (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010). This is because the veil is viewed as a "threat towards the secular tradition and freedom value" (Satiti, 2017, p. 189). Many

of these veil bans force hijabi women to unveil themselves in public spaces to conform with the hegemonic ideologies in society (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010). Anti-veiling attitudes are influenced by white-savior ideologies, where dominant cultures attempt to "liberate" oppressed veiled Muslim women (Al-Saji, 2010). However, these attitudes are also influenced by the frustrations that Western men hold through their inability to *see* the veiled woman (Fanon, 1969). Proposed veil bans are justified by the desire to promote both anti-sexism and secularism and influenced by the fetishization of the Other, or the veiled Muslim woman (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010; Fanon, 1969). Anti-veiling attitudes provide the dominant culture with the opportunity to reinforce Westernized standards of beauty and illustrate the "liberated" white woman as an ideal (Al-Saji, 2010; Zine, 2002). Essentially, Al-Saji (2010) explains that the representations of hijabi women constitute a "negative mirror in which western constructions of identity and gender can be positively *reflected"* (p. 877). Hijabis are portrayed as oppressed, which evidently further marginalizes and 'Others' them (Al-Saji, 2010; Satiti, 2017). Although dominant discourses in Western media view veiled Muslim women without agency, the lived experiences of veiled women provide alternative views and understandings of the Islamic veil (Droogsma, 2007).

Droogsma (2007) conducted a study that aims to represent the voices of multiple veiled Muslim women living in the West. Through a snowball sampling method, Droogsma (2007) gathers several veiled Muslim women to undergo a series of in-depth interviews. These interviews highlight that veiled Muslim women experience the veil in different ways (Droogsma, 2007). Although each woman has their own unique lived experience, a common theme across the interviews is that veiled women view their hijab in a positive and liberating manner (Droogsma, 2007). Although these women are challenged by negative media representations of the veil, they claim that their veil protects, liberates and strengthens them (Droogsma, 2007). Many of the respondents claim that they find enjoyment in challenging competing discourses by "breaking stereotypes" (Droogsma, 2007). One of the respondents claims she is actively breaking stereotypes by studying to be a lawyer (Droogsma, 2007). This contradicts the confined representations of hijabi women that are developed by the West (Droosgma, 2007). Moreover, Droogsma's (2007) study revealed six common ways that the hijab functions for veiled Muslim women, such as "behaviour check, resisting sexual objectification, affording more respect, preserving intimate relationships, and providing a source of freedom" (Droosgma, 2007, p. 301). Many veiled Muslim women feel protected in their modest attire as it covers their body and resists the gaze (Droogsma, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

Edward Said (1979) developed the theory of "Orientalism" to explain how the West discursively produced the "Orient" to both justify the "superiority" of the West and politically and culturally control the Middle East. Said (1979) defines Orientalism as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 3). The Orient is typically spoken for and written about by European (or American) scholars (Said, 1979). This distinction between the "Orient" and the "West" constitutes a dichotomy that is reproduced through stereotypical representations. This reinforces Western power and domination, essentially reinforcing hegemonic ideologies (Said, 1979). In his work, Said (1979) describes the Orient as "almost a European invention", where "exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes," and "remarkable experiences" exist (p. 1).

Applying a Foucauldian notion of discourse, Said (1979) discusses how Western societies discursively maintain superiority of the West over the East and reinforce "Oriental backwardness" (Said, 1979, p. 7). Said (1979) explains that there are three main conditions to identify, or speak about, the relationship between the Orient and the Occident. These are: 1) the Orient is not just an idea or creation, 2) cultural, social, and historical ideas cannot be understood or discussed without the awareness of power dynamics, and 3) "the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths" (p. 6). This constitutes a dominating relationship between the West and veiled Muslim women. There are dehumanizing "images, themes," and "motifs" of veiled Muslim women define Western women as "liberated" and "beautiful". The Orientalization of veiled Muslim women take place even when the subjects are born and/or live in the West. As Orientalist discourses present false or exoticized representations of the Orient, it is expected that a form of re-representation should emerge from "Orientals" themselves. This thesis proposes hijabi influencers as active agents who can complicate Orientalist power dynamics through visual performances of modest fashion. There is a link made between the veil, clothing, and modesty during these acts of self-representation.

Frantz Fanon (1969) explores the veil in relation to clothing. He suggests that the attire of a group in society is distinctive and signifies multiple meanings (Fanon, 1969). These meanings rely on the politics within a society (Shirazi, 2020). Clothing is a form of identity expression that facilitates an association between individuals and a social group (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan & Harun, 2016; Shirazi, 2020). In this case, veiled Muslim women are publicly identifying themselves as Muslim through the wearing of the veil (Droogsma, 2007; Hassan & Harun, 2016; Shirazi, 2020). Fanon (1969) suggests that the veil, in particular, "generally suffices to characterize Arab

society" (p. 43). The veil, for example, can empower the wearer and give her autonomy (Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014; Shirazi, 2020). Therefore, veiled Muslim women are interested in the visual representations of themselves by exploring clothing and style (Shirazi, 2020). Hassan and Harun (2016) identify veiled Muslim women who creatively style their hijab and respond to fashion trends as "fashion-conscious". These women are referred to as *hijabistas,* which are veiled women who engage in fashion and religious focused lifestyles (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan & Harun, 2016). Veiled Muslim women engage in playful practices with Islamic modesty (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan & Harun, 2016), which contradict dominant misconceptions that veiled Muslim women are oppressed by their veil. These online practices are situated within the creative industry where hijabi influencers engage in creative labour, which consists of the production and distribution of content resulting in the commodification of cultural content (Gill & Pratt, 2008)

The emergence of creative industries has been studied by cultural theorist, Rosalind Gill, and academic scholars such as Stuart Cunningham and Andy Pratt. Cunningham (2002) asserts that the creative industry is a recent area of study within academic and industry discourses. The creative industry differentiates from the culture industry as it can "capture significant 'new economy' enterprise dynamics that such terms as 'the arts', 'media', and 'cultural industries' do not" (Cunningham, 2002, p. 54).The creative industry allows for "activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through generation and exploitation of intellectual property" (p. 54). Creative industries prioritize technological innovations which enable interactivity and convergence (Cunningham, 2002). Gill and Pratt (2008) borrow the term 'informationalization' from Hardt and Negri (2000) to discuss the extent of influence that technological advancements and practices have on this kind of labour. This places emphasis on content creation and online distribution as sources of profit (Cunningham, 2002). Creative labour is "insecure, casualized or irregular labour and is often defined as 'precarious' (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 2). Moreover, creative labour involves self-representation, self-expression, and self-actualization that exist in this form of labour, which is linked to "work as play" (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 15). This causes a deep interconnection between work and every-day life that is hard to separate, and results in the capitalist colonization of all areas of life (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Considering that the internet enabled the emergence of "participatory economy", "free time becomes free labour" (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 17). Therefore, pleasure and self-exploitation are two key features of creative labour, often resulting in "embodied experiences" where individuals engage in the "materialization in the subject's flesh" (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 19). This refers to creative labour as an embodied experience. The concept of creative labour reveals the potential contradictions of hijabi

influencers' visual performance as the same practices that may allow them to articulate a voice and engage in complex practices of translation that challenge orientalism may also contribute to commodify their bodies and practices.

Methodology

Using a purposive sampling method, I collected a sample of four images, two images from Nawal Sari and two images from Rawdah Mohamed. The purposive sampling method ensures that the object of study efficiently captures my research goal. I developed a set of criteria to assist with the selection of my sample. This criterion includes the recency of the image (2-4 months), influencers presence in the image, and relation to fashion and modesty. These images are derived through the influencers' public Instagram profiles.

Data will be collected through in-depth analyses of the fashion-related images. The chosen method of analysis for this study is visual rhetoric. Visual rhetoric is a fitting method as it will fully capture the goal of this research project. This is because hijabi influencers are engaging in online performances, considering that they are dressing up in unique outfits, posing for pictures, and posting these same images on Instagram for the public eye. Performance is understood through Bauman's (2000) definition as "the act of expression" which is "put on display, objectified, marked out to a degree from its discursive surroundings and opened up to interpretative scrutiny and evaluation by an audience" (p. 1). Performances allow for identification through style, aesthetic, and self-reliance (Bauman, 2000). Therefore, performance should not be overlooked as "mere aesthetic embellishment layered upon some independently constituted social reality" (Bauman, 2000, p. 4). Considering their online audiences are large, these hijabi influencers are continuously developing content. By using visual rhetoric, I will focus on the visual components of each image. However, I will place emphasis on the clothing and body language present in the images. Hijabi influencers explore modest fashion and fashion trends in the West through different styles, colours, fabrics, and accessories (El-Bassiouny, 2018). Therefore, I will build an analysis around the types of clothing and accessories the influencers are wearing, what patterns, colours, and textures are present, and how this communicates meaning in the context it is performed in. I will understand how these influencers are pairing different garments together to maintain modesty and how they integrate fashion trends in their pious lifestyle. I aim to recognize the body language of the influencers and how it further constitutes a performance, for example, I will discuss meaning around the pose, direction of gaze, and placement of hands. Altogether, these factors will uncover how hijabi influencers engage in the rhetorical strategy of visual enactment as they embody ideologies through clothing and style.

Visual enactment "can be seen in the way in which a challenge to an existing belief system and the presentation of an alternative are performed in some detail for viewers, primarily via the dimension of visibility" (Foss & Foss, 2020, p. 141). This study focuses on the ways in which veiled Muslim women define modesty in Islam through their fashion content online. I hope to find out how the wearing of different outfits online constitute a performance and how hijabi influencers contribute to discourses surrounding Islamic modesty. Through my analysis, I aim to demonstrate how the subculture of hijabi influencers communicate meanings around veils, Islamic modesty, and veiled Muslim women. Clothing can influence social change and resistance to competing discourses through its "rhetorical code or syntax of dress" (Foss & Foss, 2020, p. 127). This is because "the practice of dressing functions as a visual rhetorical text" (Foss & Foss, 2020, p. 127). Visual rhetoric will support this studies goal by understanding how veiled Muslim women conform to Islamic modesty while exploring fashion, and how these practices communicate meaning around modesty and potentially resist dominant discourses.

By employing visual rhetoric as the method of analysis, I must acknowledge the limitations within this approach. The purpose of this study is to analyze how this subculture defines modesty in Islam through their fashion-related Instagram pictures; however, it should be noted that the influencers' intentions may differ from the interpretations of images. Visual rhetoric analyzes how visual imagery communicates rhetorical perspectives and meanings (Foss, 2005). To do this, the researcher must interpret the image and understand the context it is performed in. This is done as the researcher views images and pays close "attention to their nature, function, or evaluation" (Foss, 2005, p. 150). This enables the researcher to build a rhetorical theory and further understand underlying symbolism and ideologies of the image (Foss, 2005). Essentially, the findings and understandings derived from visual rhetoric rely on the interpretation of the researcher. In this case, the hijabi influencers may not be aware of the rhetorical performances they engage.

Analysis

Nawal Sari and Rawdah Mohamed, the sample of hijabi influencers, are highly integrated within the high-fashion industry and have a large social media presence. Nawal Sari is an Arab-Australian influencer based in Sydney, Australia. She is verified on Instagram, meaning that she is authenticated by Instagram as an influencer. Being verified on social media offers users a sense of power and allows their followers to trust them. Sari also models for luxurious brands such as Gucci. She uses her platform to contribute to online discourses surrounding modesty, modest fashion, and veiled Muslim women practicing modest fashion. Rawdah Mohamed is a

Somali-Norwegian creator, model, and healthcare professional based in Oslo, Norway. Like Sari, Mohamed is also verified on Instagram and models for high-fashion brands. She has been featured in fashion magazines, like Vogue Arabia, and is and editor for Vogue Scandinavia. Mohamed often engages in online activism and stands up for the rights of veiled Muslim women. She started a 'hands off my hijab' movement during the proposed France hijab ban. Sari and Mohamed do not live in Muslim countries, rather they live in countries that are more influenced by Western fashion. Considering this, the ways the define and perform modesty online may differ than those who live in Muslim countries, where the production of fashion is not directly linked to the West. These influencers are included in this study based on both their online practices surrounding modesty and Islam, their immense popularity and presence online, and my familiarity with their work. Photos and videos of these influencers will be examined through a visual rhetorical lens, which will assist in revealing patterns or inconsistencies in definitions of modesty.

Figure 1 - Screenshot of Nawal Sari's photo that was uploaded on her Instagram on November 2021

There is a level of sophistication that Sari embodies from the way she is dressed to the way she is posing and smiling into the camera. Her outfit is complete, and every garment and accessory match one another. The public eye is first drawn to the loud colours and patterns that Sari is wearing. Sari's outfit is loose-fit, yet it sits perfectly on her body. Since the dress is shorter, she wears white tights to conceal her skin. By concealing her skin, Sari demonstrates to her audience that Western fashion can be modified to stay consistent with religious practices of modesty. Sari wears white heels with black detailing to maintain simplicity. A mint-green blazer is paired with a calf-length dress. The base tone of the dress is dark yellow with a multi-coloured tulip print. The tulips vary in size and colour; there are white, turquoise and navy-blue tulips scattered across the fabric of Sari's dress. Sari is wearing a blue and silver Gucci beret on top of her black hijab. To compliment the beret, a Gucci bag that

is also blue and silver is hanging from her wrist. In her hands, she holds a teacup. Gucci is an Italian luxury brand that is timeless, chic, and engages in different aesthetics. Such aesthetics include vintage, Y2K (year 2000), and dark academia. By incorporating this brand in her performance, Sari demonstrates a form of wealth. There is also a negotiation of modesty as Sari is attempting to remain stylish, trendy, and embody cultural capital by wearing a Gucci bag. Majority of her outfit is from Gucci, a company Sari models for, which indicates that she engages in the notion of "work as play" through self-representation and self-exploitation (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 19). Her work online, which constitutes creative labour, is casual and integrated within her every-day life. This can be seen as an exploitative; Sari is gaining economic power by commodifying herself. She also engages in self-representation by exploring her identity online through fashion interests as a veiled woman. She exists in this in-between space of traditional symbols, experimental attire, mainstream fashion, and modest practices.

Traditional symbols of modesty in Islam consist of all black attire (Shirazi, 2020). Veiled Muslim women would pair black hijabs with long, loose, dress-like garments called *abayas* (Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014; Shirazi, 2020). Just as this traditional way of dressing is perceived as modest, Sari demonstrates that old-fashioned Western clothing also practices modesty. Sari maintains that wearing Western attire can also achieve modesty. By wearing loud colours and patterns, Sari challenges dominant misconceptions of what hijabi women look like. This illustrates resistance to the belief that veiled Muslim women are oppressed by Islam and modest practices (Al-Saji, 2010). Although empowering, this performance demonstrates a more nuanced form of modesty and Islamic practices within a Western society. Through the incorporation of mainstream and high-fashion clothing and fashion trends, Sari demonstrates that she is fashion conscious (Hassan & Harun, 2016).

Figure 2 - Screenshot of Nawal Sari's photo that was uploaded on her Instagram on October 2021

The first notable feature in this image is the effortless pose that Nawal Sari engages her body in. Sari's body language and full attire differs completely from Figure 1. Here, Sari's outfit and body is more relaxed. One of Sari's arms is resting on a wooden fence while the other is raised near her head and gently holding a plaid-patterned shoulder purse. Her head is slightly lifted upward and slanted to the side, which asserts confidence. Sari's outfit consists of muted tones and patterns. The loose-fit skirt is mostly white in colour, but small red and grey flowers are scattered across the fabric. The theme of modesty is further performed through Sari's loose, knitted white sweater. The sweater provides an oversized fit for Sari to hide both her hands in the sleeves. The combination of the sweater and skirt is offering a stylish and modest presentation. Sari pairs a small, plaid and black shoulder purse to both complete and add uniqueness to her outfit. Her black hijab completely conceals her hair and neck while also contrasting with the lighter tones of her outfit. Covering her eyes are a pair of sunglasses that reflects the details of the sky and grass she is looking at.

Through her performance, Sari embodies the idea that veiled Muslim women can engage in leisurely practices. Dominant discourses negatively categorize and represent veiled Muslim women as oppressed (Droogsma, 2007). However, veiled Muslim women can exist outside of these competing discourses and experience a leisurely lifestyle where modesty is maintained through simple, yet trendy attire. Sari demonstrates to her audience that veiled Muslim women can be playful and trendy. The liberation achieved through her appearance is a sign of detachment from popular beliefs surrounding veiled women, such as hyper-femininity and traditional clothing (black abaya and black hijab). This performative image also indicates that Sari is promoting Western consumerism, which is seen through the clothing she is wearing. Sari's performance entails levels of integration within the Western fashion industry while still following the Islamic rulings of modesty. She is following mainstream fashion brands and selecting pieces that are unique and modest. Sari covers her hair, neck, chest, and ears while also concealing the shape of her body (Al-Saji, 2010; Droogsma, 2007; Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014; Najmabadi, 2005). Through the pose, outfit, and caption of her photograph, it can be inferred that Sari holds agency.

Figure 3 - Screenshot of Rawdah Mohamed's photo that was uploaded on her Instagram on November 2021

Blue and white are prominent colours that make up Mohamed's outfit. Mohamed's body is turned to the side and her gaze is focused on the concrete ground while her eyes are covered by large sunglasses. This allows the audience to focus on the clothing and how it is styled. Mohamed is demonstrating comfort in the way she is sitting effortlessly on the concrete bench. Her fingers, stacked in bold rings, frame her face. She looks almost as though she is about to pull the blue hoodie forward. She wears long grey socks to cover her ankles, and both her jeans and blue puffer jacket are baggy and long, which works to conceals the shape of her body. Mohamed is playful in her appearance as she is not dressing feminine, and her hijab is covered by the hood of her jacket. With the hijab being covered by a hat, Mohamed pushes her Muslim identity aside and focuses on simply existing without having to face the conflicting discourses surrounding her hijab. By doing this, Mohamed momentarily experiences a gaze that is not directed toward her veil. She frees herself from outsider assumptions of her identity and places focus on her outfit.

By exploring more masculine attire, Mohamed steps away from expectations or features of veiled Muslim women identities. The masculinity in the colours and baggy attire rejects stereotypical representations and the confined "costume" of veiled Muslim women (Shirazi, 2020).

This photo constitutes a performance as Mohamed knows she is being photographed and positions her body and clothing in a way that directs the gaze to her outfit. Her body language indicates both comfort in her identity but also resistance to societal constraints toward her veil. Although she embraces modesty, Mohamed is attempting to escape the limits that the hegemonic society places on her. She subverts the tension surrounding the veil and Muslim women by being loud in her fashion decisions. The first thing that the viewer may notice about Mohamed's performance is the clothing and the last noticeable feature would be the veil. This blends the differences between the veiled woman and the West. Mohamed performs the idea that all veiled Muslim women embody different experiences and represent

themselves through fashion. By doing this, Mohamed holds power in her performance as she is controlling the narratives around her as a veiled Muslim woman. Rather than completely practicing the Islamic traditions of modesty or integrating within the West, Mohamed finds her own way of maintaining piety and fashion.

Figure 4 - Screenshot of Rawdah Mohamed's photo that was uploaded on her Instagram on September 2021

According to Hassan and Harun (2016), "Muslim women have become braver in experimenting the way they dress, by mixing and matching what they wear." (p. 483). Mohamed is communicating confidence in her Muslim, female identity. Through this performative photograph, Mohamed is casually walking the streets in a full glam outfit. She holds her phone in her hand, which illustrates authenticity in the overall performance. This is because the photo is candid; her body language sets up the image in a way that viewers cannot tell it is performative. Her zebra-print hijab challenges traditional notions of the veil. As mentioned previously, the hijab is often viewed as a simple, black fabric that covers the hair and chest (Shirazi, 2020). Rather than perpetuating the traditional, and often hegemonic, understandings of the veil, Mohamed engages in a playful performance as she experiments with different fabrics and style. The combination of different fabrics, such as the black sequence dress, brown fur coat, white platform boots, and blue/white patterned shoulder bag, demonstrates randomness. However, it is apparent through her strut and lifted chin that the mixing of statement pieces is intentional. Fashion conscious individuals often wear unusual and "original" clothing to adhere to a unique fashion style that enhances their self-representation (Hassan & Harun, 2016, p. 483).

In this photograph, Mohamed confidently wears her hijab in the streets. Through her body language, she asserts confidence and demonstrates comfort in her veil while exploring extravagant styles. Figures 3 and 2 explore modest fashion trends in a more simplistic manner, which allow both Mohamed and Sari to demonstrates an authentic and leisure identity. A common theme across all four images is the

avoidance of the colour black. The influencers seem to be aware of the negative connotations toward black when associated with veiled Muslim women. This awareness influences their decision to wear bold colours and explore a variety of fashion styles (Hassan & Harun, 2016). Through these creative styles, the hijabi influencers illuminate themes of liberation and embrace their Islamic lifestyles.

Exploring different fashion styles "online and offline means that content inevitably promotes choice" (Lewis, 2015, p. 249). The outfit in Figure 1 consists of layered looks, which conceals both Sari's body shape and skin. By experimenting with layering clothes, Sari demonstrates that meeting religious obligations, such as Islamic modesty, can be done in alternative ways (Lewis, 2015). She embodies the belief that modesty in Islam is not limiting, rather modesty can be maintained through minor modifications of outfits and exploration of different styles, colours, and trends. These themes are also seen in Figures 2, 3, and 4. In each image, the influencers challenge the dominant belief that veiled Muslim women are oppressed. This is done through their individualized styles and the modification of trendy fashion to adhere to Islamic modesty. Both hijabi influencers wear "modern and traditional outfits" while practicing their faith (Hassan & Harun, 2016, p. 477).

The influencers engage in a form of creative labour, which becomes integrated within their daily lives (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Although this labour allows for self-representation and self-actualization, it contributes to the commodification and exoticization of veiled Muslim women. As these influencers pose for the camera, wear stylish clothing, and advertise for different brands, they negotiate their modest lifestyles. Modesty is maintained through clothing and refraining from practices that bring high levels of attention on oneself. The influencers may believe that their practices are revealing a level of agency and inspiring other modest/veiled women, which is true to an extent. However, their agency is also being compromised and they are further exoticizing their veil and modest lifestyles through self-exploitative practices.

Conclusion

This study rhetorically analyzed images from Nawal Sari and Rawdah Mohamed. These influencers explore modest fashion, Islamic modesty, and fashion trends on their platforms. The bulk of their online content is related to modest fashion. This analysis offered insight on how visual elements of an artifact, like clothing, pose, background, and logos, can communicate meaning. This research demonstrates that the influencers are continually negotiating the definitions of

Islamic modesty. This is because their practices contrast with dominant views of veils and modesty and do not completely align with the Islamic doctrines of modesty.

The findings of these analyses indicate commonalities, for example, each veiled Muslim woman demonstrates that modesty and Islamic identities are not limiting or oppressive. Every outfit illustrates individual styles that explore bold colours, patterns and accessories (Hassan & Harun, 2016). The boldness of style contradicts the belief that veiled Muslim women must conform to an all-black costume (Shirazi, 2020). Veiled Muslim women engage in identity construction every-day throughout the clothing they wear and the way they present themselves to the public. The meanings around the veil differ while each woman holds their unique lived experiences (Droogsma, 2007). With the emergence of hijabi fashion, more veiled women are exploring ways to enhance their appearance (Hassan & Harun, 2016). Sari and Mohamed wear bold outfits, which further increases their visibility; however, the gaze often shifts from the veil to the outfit. Through their unique styles, these fashion influencers define Islamic modesty as something that can be practiced within Western societies through incorporation of different styles, trends, and high-fashion brands.

The codes of modesty in Islam are simultaneously practiced and compromised in the influencers' visual performances. This is demonstrated through the apparent distance from traditional notions of Islamic modesty, like wearing simple attire. Instead, the adornments of the hijabi influencers' outfits attract attention and illustrate that modesty can result from stylish performances. Therefore, this study reveals that the influencers contribute to complicate mainstream views of veiled Muslim women and their modest fashion practices.

Finally, as the researcher, I believe it is important to discuss both the limitations and implications of this research. The sample size is small and although it fits the scope of this research, it does not represent the entire subculture of veiled Muslim women. As mentioned, the lived experiences and the definitions around veils and female Muslim identities vary (Droogsma, 2007). Therefore, the modest practices of Sari and Mohamed influence their individual definitions of the veil. Although there are clear similarities in these definitions, I cannot assume that this represents the entire subculture. This study is significant as it illustrates that although veiled Muslim women face competing discourses in the West (Droogsma, 2007), they are brave in claiming their identity and establishing hyper-visibility through their fashion statements. Veiled Muslim women experience a "refreshing contemporary feeling of elegance and vitality" by combining fashion interests and trends with their religion (Hassan & Harun, 2016, p. 477).

References

Al-Saji, A. (2010). The racialization of Muslim veils: A philosophical analysis. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, *36*(8), 875–902. https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453710375589

Bauman, R. (2000). Language, identity, performance. *Pragmatics*, *10*(1), 1-5. DOI: 10.1075/prag.10.1.01bau

Byng, M. D. (2010). Symbolically Muslim: Media, Hijab, and the west. *Critical Sociology*, *36*(1), 109–129. https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920509347143

Cunningham, S. (2002). From Cultural to Creative Industries: Theory, Industry, and Political Implications. *Media International Australia.* 102(1), pp. 54-65. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/10.1177/1329878X0210200107

Droogsma, A, R. (2007) Redefining Hijab: American Muslim Women's Standpoints on Veiling, *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 35(3), 294-319.* DOI: 10.1080/00909880701434299

El-Bassiouny, N. (2018). The Hijabi Self: Authenticity and Transformation in the Hijab Fashion

Phenomenon. Journal of Islamic Marketing. Vol. 9. No. 2. pp. 296–304.

Fayyaza, W., & Kamal, A. (2014). Practicing Hijab (veil): A source of autonomy and self-esteem for modern Muslim women. *The Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences.,* 22(1). Knowledge Bylanes.

Fanon, F. (1969). Algeria Unveiled. In Duara, P. (Ed.). (2003). *Decolonization: Perspectives from now and then*. ProQuest Ebook Central https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca

Foss, K. A., & Foss, S. K. (2020). An explication of visual enactment in Advanced Style:
Fashioning a challenge to the ideology of old age. Western Journal of Communication, 84(2), 123-147. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/10.1080/10570314.2019.1658892

Foss, S. K. (2005) Theory of Visual Rhetoric. *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, methods and media.* pp. 141-152.

Gill, R., & Pratt, A. (2008). In the Social Factory?: Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work. *Theory, Culture & Society.* 25(7-8), *pp. 1-30.* DOI: 10.1177/0263276408097794

Goodwin, M. (2020). Gender, race, and American Islamophobia. *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Gender*, 463–474. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351256568-31

Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2000). *Empire.* Cambridge. MA: Harvard University Press.

Hassan, S. H., & Harun, H. (2016). Factors influencing fashion consciousness in hijab fashion consumption among hijabistas. *Journal of Islamic Marketing*, *7*(4), 476–494. https://doi.org/10.1108/jima-10-2014-0064

Hoodfar, H. (1993). The veil in their minds and on our heads: the persistence of colonial images of Muslim women. *Resources for Feminist Research,* 22(3), 5-18. https://ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/veil-their-minds-on-our-heads-persistence/docview/194879317/se-2?accountid=9838

Lewis, R. (2015) Uncovering Modesty: Dejabis and Dewigies Expanding the Parameters of the Modest Fashion Blogosphere, Fashion Theory, 19:2, 243-269, DOI:10.2752/175174115X14168357992472

Mohamed, R. @rawdis (2021). "Feeling blue." Photo. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CWQ-rPns01H/?igshid=NWRhNmQxMjQ=

Mohamed, R. @rawdis (2021). "It feels like Prada." Photo. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CUNudSbs0Uh/?igshid=NWRhNmQxMjQ=

Najmabadi, A. (2005). Women's Veil and Unveil. In *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (pp. 132-155). Berkeley: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520931381-008

Ogan, C., Willnat, L., Pennington, R., & Bashir, M. (2014). The rise of anti-Muslim prejudice. *International Communication Gazette*, *76*(1), 27–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048513504048

Sari, N. @nawalsari (2021). Photo. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CWfecniPpEd/?igshid=NWRhNmQxMjQ=

Sari, N. @nawalsari (2021). "Testing out my new film camera." Photo. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CVsCeg5vWJf/?igshid=NWRhNmQxMjQ=

Satiti, U. L. N. (2017). Representation of Muslim Women in the Western Media. *Journal Ilmu Komuniskasi,* 14(2), 189-202.

Shirazi, F. (2020). Hijab, Islamic Fashion and Modest Clothing: Hybrids of modernity and religious commodity. In Howe (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Gender (*1st Ed.). (pp. 407-422). Routledge. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/10.4324/9781351256568

Ternikar, F. (2009). Hijab and the Abrahamic Traditions: A comparative analysis of the Muslim veil. *Sociology Compass.,* 3(5), p. 754-763. DOI: 10.1111/j.1751-9020.2009.00237.x

Zine, J. (2002). Muslim women and the politics of representation. *American Journal of Islam and Society*, *19*(4), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v19i4.1913

Stream: Interdisciplinary Journal of Communication
2022, Vol 14(2), 90–118

https://journals.sfu.ca/stream

Online Reputation Management: A Quantitative Analysis of French Hospitals

Pablo Medina Aguerrebere[a], Eva Medina[b], Tony Gonzalez Pacanowski[c]
a: Faculty of Communication, Arts, and Sciences; Canadian University Dubai
b: School of Communication and Psychology; University of Alicante
b: School of Communication and Psychology; University of Alicante

Abstract:
Social media have become an essential tool for improving hospitals' corporate communication strategies. These platforms help these organizations to dynamize their brands and reinforce their strategic positionings in the health market. But it also represents different risks related to patients' privacy and fake news disseminated about companies. This paper aims to analyze how French hospitals manage Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as well as their corporate website to promote their brand reputation. To do that, we conducted a literature review about online corporate communication in health organizations as well as a quantitative analysis based on 48 brand performance indicators that allowed us to analyze how the best 106 French hospitals managed their websites and their corporate profiles on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube for branding initiatives. We concluded that most French hospitals used their corporate websites for disseminating journalistic content: Facebook and Twitter, for sharing patients' and doctors' experiences in the hospital, and YouTube, for publishing marketing content about medical treatments and research projects. Finally, we proposed three practical recommendations: a) hospitals need to create a Social Media Unit within the Corporate Communication Department; b) Social Media experts must ban journalistic and marketing approaches and implement a true corporate communication approach; and c) this Social Media Unit defines plans, protocols as well as brand performance indicators to professionalize this activity.

Keywords:

French Hospitals; corporate communication; brand; reputation; social media.

Corresponding Author: Pablo Medina Aguerrebere – pablo.medina@cud.ac.ae

Introduction

Managing corporate communication in a professional way constitutes a challenge as well as an opportunity: implementing initiatives that allow organizations to achieve particular communication objectives is a difficult exercise that helps organizations become more credible brands. Many hospitals resort to social media platforms to improve their corporate communication initiatives. On the one hand, using these platforms can trigger different reputation problems related to patients' privacy or fake news published about hospitals; but, on the other hand, social media also help experts in communication to implement a digital transformation in hospitals, optimize their internal processes and improve patients' satisfaction. In France, most public and private hospitals have integrated social media in their corporate communication strategies to reinforce their brands as well as their strategic positionings in the health market. Public hospitals are funded by public authorities and focus especially their activities on journalism and events, meanwhile private hospitals face a higher economic pressure that leads them to develop marketing initiatives allowing them to have enough economic resources. Some hospitals have even recruited experts in this area and have created a Social Media Unit within their Corporate Communication Department, such as Hôpital Européen Georges Pompidou (AP-HP) or Polyclinique Santé Atlantique (Elsan). However, hospitals can still improve the way they use social media platforms to establish better relations with stakeholders. This paper aims to analyze how French hospitals manage their corporate websites as well as their social media platforms to disseminate brand-related content. In other words, we tried to answer this question: Which branding initiatives do French hospitals implement on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as well as on their corporate websites to promote their brands? To do that, we conducted a literature review about corporate communication in health organizations, social media, patients and health professional's perceptions about these platforms, corporate reputation, and finally, the French hospital market. Then, we analyzed how the top 106 French hospitals managed their social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) as well as their corporate websites to implement branding initiatives. We based our analysis on 48 brand performance indicators. Finally, we defined three main conclusions as well as three managerial recommendations allowing hospitals to improve their performance when using social media for branding purposes.

Hospitals' Reputation Management Through Social Media

Communication plays an essential role in society because it helps organizations and companies to influence public opinion (Lasswell & Blumenstock, 1939). Healthcare organizations implement corporate communication initiatives to promote their brands and influence their internal and external stakeholders, such as employees, patients, public authorities, or media companies (Brent, 2016). Thanks to these initiatives, health organizations promote their scientific credibility and become a reference in terms of public health (Chan et al., 2016). Private and public hospitals resort to corporate communication to achieve different communication objectives. However, both institutions can still enhance their communication initiatives to become more credible organizations. To do so, they should conduct three main activities: interpersonal, internal, and external communication (Medina Aguerrebere, 2019). First, hospitals should promote interpersonal communication to help health professionals improve their relations among them, as well as with patients and their relatives (Jahromi et al., 2016). When doctors establish rich communication relations with patients, it helps patients to be more satisfied and adhere to the treatment (Peterson et al., 2016), which positively influences their perceptions about doctors, the hospital, and its services (Archiopoli et al., 2016). Second, hospitals must resort to internal communication to efficiently manage their relations with employees and improve their sense of belonging to the institution (Welch & Jackson, 2007). Thanks to internal communication, hospitals can share with employees some strategic information such as organizational goals, medical protocols, or internal policies (Rodrigues et al., 2016) and promote corporate values such as the organization's brand identity (Jahromi et al., 2016). Third, hospitals also need to implement external communication initiatives to reinforce their relations with external stakeholders, such as media companies, public authorities, and patients' associations (Medina et al., 2020), and this way build a reputed brand in a collective way along with them (Pelitti, 2016; Yeob et al., 2017).

Healthcare organizations integrate interpersonal, internal, and external communication initiatives to enhance their relations with stakeholders (Rodrigues et al., 2016). Nevertheless, many of these organizations can improve the way they implement these communication initiatives. In each country, these organizations' communication strategies are influenced by legal frameworks, cultural elements, political situations, and economic challenges. Hospitals consider these elements to develop professional communication strategies. When hospitals manage corporate communication in a professional way, they can reinforce their brand and accelerate achieve their business objectives (Cua et al., 2017). To do that, these organizations

implement protocols, plans, and key performance indicators allowing them to monitor this activity (Esposito, 2017). In other words, the professional management of corporate communication (interpersonal, internal, and external initiatives) positively influences hospitals because it improves patient's wellbeing and empowerment (Weberling & McKeever, 2014), it enhances the hospital' credibility as source of scientific information (Attai et al., 2016), and it helps the organization to establish richer relations with stakeholders, such as patients, employees and media companies (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017).

According to Ruiz-Granja (2015), using social media for corporate communication purposes has become a priority for many hospitals. These organizations implement within their corporate communication department a social media unit specialized in branding and engagement with stakeholders (Blomgrem, et al., 2016). Social media platforms allow health organizations to promote medical education initiatives and reinforce their relationships with patients (Fernández-Luque & Bau, 2015). Nevertheless, to do that, the social media unit needs an annual budget as well as qualified employees able to work in an integrated way and according to plans, protocols, and key performance indicators (Rando Cueto et al., 2016). In other words, hospitals need to understand the implications of implementing a social media unit from an economic, management and human resource perspective.

Thanks to social media, hospitals can achieve four communication objectives. First, reinforcing public health initiatives: social media help hospitals to disseminate medical information to different people in different countries at the same time (Matarin Jimenez, 2015). Second, optimizing collective decision-making processes: health professionals and patients use social media for defining medical decisions related to treatments or prevention (Lim, 2016). Third, implementing knowledge management processes: social media platforms allow hospitals to better understand patients' perceptions, which facilitates health professionals' activities (Bubien, 2015). And fourth, improving patients' health literacy: hospitals use these platforms for reinforcing patients' skills when reading health-related content (Abramson et al., 2015).

Doctors use social media platforms for strengthening their relationships with patients and encouraging them to adhere to medical treatments (Sedrak et al., 2017). Some doctors refuse to use these tools for different reasons, such as privacy, lack of skills in this area, lack of knowledge about corporate communication, etc. However, these tools remain important because it allows doctors to reinforce patients' self-confidence when dealing with medical information and internal protocols at the hospital (Yeob et al., 2017). These platforms help doctors to promote a dialogue with

patients, which is essential to better satisfy these last ones' expectations (Visser et al., 2016). Even if many doctors already use actively these platforms, they need to be trained on how to use them in a corporate way; that is why, more and more hospitals publish corporate guidelines and propose different learning sessions to help doctors achieve this objective (Peluchette et al., 2016). Some health authorities also develop learning programs to help hospitals implement courses and seminars allowing doctors to better communicate with patients on social media (Haluza et al., 2016). When designing their social media presence, hospitals prioritize three main criteria to make these platforms more dynamic: a) sharing visual information based on doctors' advices and patients' needs (Basch et al., 2015); b) proposing a social support allowing doctors to better interact with patients (Miller et al.,2019); and c) disseminating accurate information based on doctors' criteria and adapted to patients' literacy skills (Epstein et al., 2017).

Patients use social media for sharing medical information and health-related experiences (Sedrak et al., 2016); however, these platforms allow patients to conduct many other activities. Many patients resort to these platforms for establishing an emotional support network allowing them to communicate with people suffering from the same disease (Myrick et al., 2016). Thanks to social media, patients perceive doctors in a different way: communication becomes more symmetric and relationships with them are more kind (Smailhodzic et al., 2016). These platforms positively influence patients' behaviors, especially when it comes to search medical information on the Internet and interacting with health professionals and nurses before, during and after the appointment at the hospital (Namkoong et al., 2017). Social media can even determine patients' decision-making processes: treatments, prevention, and appointments (Glover et al., 2015). That is why, many hospitals promote their social media platforms and encourage patients to participate in them (Jiang & Street, 2016). Some hospitals even encourage patients' relatives to participate in these online dialogues and share their experiences (Badr et al. , 2015). When hospitals use social media for educational purposes and prioritize patients' needs in terms of information and emotional support, they can improve patients' well-being (Medina et al., 2020). In this case, social media become a medical tool that hospitals integrate into their internal processes for reinforcing patients' empowerment (Rando Cueto et al., 2016), which positively influences patients' perceptions of the hospital's reputation (Blomgren et al., 2016). To do that, hospitals need to invest in this area, recruit experts in social media platforms and help health professionals change their mentalities about social media, which constitutes a true challenge for these organizations.

Social media have become an essential tool for organizations interested in implementing branding initiatives (Costa-Sánchez & Míguez-González, 2018). A brand refers to different tangible and intangible assets that allow the organization to create an added value determining stakeholders' perceptions about the company (Esposito, 2017). This added value refers to meaningful content that helps stakeholders improve their lives: health education, treatments, research, etc. Branding an organization is a collective process that companies carry out along with their stakeholders, otherwise they cannot build a credible brand (Prochaska et al., 2017). The first step to implement this collective process consists of defining the hospital's brand architecture: identity, values, mission, vision, values, and culture. The *identity* refers to the main reasons why the founders decided to create the company (He & Balmer, 2013). *Corporate values* are tangible concepts directly related to the identity that help employees to better understand the company's goals (Sheehan & Isaac, 2014). The *mission* defines the company's objectives in the midterm (Cady et al., 2011). The *vision* specifies the organization's objectives in the long-term and constitutes a motivational element for employees (Singal & Jain, 2013). Finally, the *corporate culture* refers to the unique way in which employees behave in the company to help this last one become a unique organization (Ivanov & Sharman, 2018). Hospitals need to define, implement, and promote these values internally and externally so that they become unique organizations; unfortunately, in many cases, these branding elements are showcased on corporate websites, but are not implemented.

The professional management of these corporate elements (identity, values, mission, vision, and culture) allows organizations to reinforce their identity and this way promote their reputation (He & Balmer, 2013). Reputation refers to the organizations' corporate legitimacy for conducting its professional activities (Blomgren et al., 2016). In order to promote this intangible value, organizations engage with their stakeholders through offline and online initiatives (Ivanov & Sharman, 2018). One of the most important ones consists of disseminating accurate, updated information on social media platforms (Yeob et al., 2017). Even if using social media also constitutes a reputational risk (negative comments, fake news), these platforms have become a priority for all experts in health corporate communication (Lagu et al., 2016). These organizations focus especially on three platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Thanks to Facebook, hospitals can promote health education initiatives with patients (Glover et al., 2015) and establish a new communication channel allowing patients and doctors to constantly interact (Lee et al., 2015). Twitter is a powerful platform useful for helping hospitals reinforce their public visibility and achieve different communication objectives related to reputation and awareness (Rando Cueto et al., 2016; Park, Reber, Chon, 2016). Finally, YouTube

allows hospitals to disseminate visual content related to treatments, diseases, health education and corporate elements (Balasooriya-Smeekens et al., 2015).

French hospitals resort to social media platforms to promote their brands and improve their relations with internal and external stakeholders. In 2017 in France, there were 3,089 hospitals: 1,389 public hospitals and 1,700 private hospitals. In other words, that year the French hospital system proposed 408,245 beds to patients *(Ministere des Solidarités et de la Santé*, 2018). These last ones resort to social media to interact with doctors, and to do that efficiently they respect the local legal framework related to patients' and doctors' rights, they analyze French people's perceptions about these platforms and they integrate cultural values present in the country (multiculturalism, respect, etc.). In 2020, 89% of French people utilized the Internet, and 60% used social media platforms (Hootsuite & We Are Social, 2020). Concerning young people, most of them had a personal account on Instagram (81%), *Snapchat* (74%), or Facebook (Diplomeo, 2018). In addition, some people had also an account on *Carenity*, the first social media platform created in the country in 2011 for patients and health professionals[3]. Social media have become a common platform for both patients and health professionals. In fact, in 2018, 33% of French people utilized Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for sharing medical information and health-related experiences; moreover, 45% of people considered that patients' testimonies on social media were a true added value content for health professionals and researchers (Odoxa, 2018). These data show how important is for French hospitals to professionally manage social media platforms as a corporate communication tool: implement a Social Media Business Unit, recruit experts in this area, develop an annual content plan, implement an evaluation system, etc.

Methodology

In order to better understand how hospitals, implement communication initiatives on social media platforms, we carried out a quantitative analysis about hospitals in France. We focused on this country because the French health system is considered as one of the best ones in the world: governance, health financing, performance, people's level of health (World Health Organization, 2015). To better understand how French hospitals use social media, we analyzed "The World's Best

[3] Source: https://www.carenity.com/

Hospitals 2020", an official ranking published by *Newsweek* and *Statista* about the best hospitals in 21 different countries, including France[4]. This ranking is based on recommendations from medical professionals (doctors, hospitals managers, health care professionals), results from patients' surveys and, key medical performance indicators. This ranking identified the 106 best hospitals in France (see Appendix A).

For each hospital included in this ranking, we evaluated how they managed four platforms: a) corporate website, b) Facebook, c) Twitter, and d) YouTube. Most hospitals use websites as their main corporate communication platform on the Internet (Lee et al., 2015). However, they also integrate other platforms: Facebook, the most important social media used by people and companies[5]; Twitter, a useful platform based on dynamic applications allowing companies to implement branding initiatives (Park et al., 2016); and YouTube, the most important social media platform for sharing videos and disseminating scientific content in a visual way (Kotsenas et al., 2018).

From 1st March to 25th March 2022, one author carried out a quantitative analysis consisting of analyzing all hospitals' websites and corporate profiles on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube according to the 48 indicators considered. Subsequently, a second author checked the database to validate the quantitative results. Finally, the third author integrated these results with the literature review to develop some practical recommendations for French hospitals. Concerning the 48 indicators, we chose them based on our literature review: our qualitative analysis about all the scientific publications allowed us to identify some trends followed by health organizations when promoting their brands on social media. Based on these trends, we developed our 48 indicators, which related to three main areas a) identity, b) communication activities, and c) patients' engagement (see Table 1).

Even if we tried to use the same indicators across all platforms, we also considered different metrics proposed by each social media. When analyzing each indicator, we only considered the information that we could immediately identify (Homepage, About Us section, etc.): in other words, we did not analyze content for

[4] More information about this methodology on: https://d.newsweek.com/en/file/459993/wbh2020-methodology-v2.pdf. Document retrieved on 20th January 2022.

[5] In April 2022, *Facebook* had over 2,93 billion monthly active users; in other words, *Facebook* was the most important social media platform in the world. Document retrieved on 20th February 2022 on: https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/

which we had to do more than one click and browser in different menus. Finally, we only analyzed hospitals' corporate profiles, and not those belonging to particular departments, unions, or employees.

To summarize, we based our methodology on 106 units of analysis (hospitals), four variables (corporate website, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) and three main categories (identity, communication activities and patient's engagement). We used a binary system to analyze all indicators (0= No, 1=Yes), except seven of them: Facebook (11, 12), Twitter (9,11,12) and YouTube (11,12). These last ones were evaluated as absolute numbers. This methodology is adapted to public and private hospitals, but it could also be applied to other healthcare organizations such as patients' associations or public health authorities.

Table 1 – brand performance indicators

Corporate Website	**Facebook**	**Twitter**	**YouTube**
	Identity*		
1. Corporate logo	1. Corporate logo	1. Corporate logo	1. Corporate logo
2. Multilingual website	2. Links to corporate websites	2. Links to corporate websites	2. Links to corporate websites
3. Links to medical departments	3.Hospital's description	3. Hospital's description	3. Hospital's description
4. Find a doctor	4. Milestones	4. Joined date	4. Milestones
5. Find diseases	5. Awards	5. Foundation date	5. Awards
6. Links to research and education departments	6. Brand values	6. Hashtags in the description	6. Brand values
7. Link to the Press Department	7. Mission	7. Health professionals or hospital's building on the main image	7. Mission
8. Links to social media platforms	8. Vision	8. Links to other social media platforms	8. Vision
	Communication Activities*		
9. Videos on the homepage	9. Videos integrated	9. Number of followers	9. Playlists
10. Press releases on the homepage	10. Events	10. Media section with videos	10. Channels
	Patient's engagement*		
11. Patients' platform	11. Number of likes	11. Number of likes	11. Number of subscribers

12. Mobile apps	12. Number of followers	12. Number of followers	12. Number of views

*_Homepage_ in the Corporate Website and Twitter; and _About Us Section_ in Facebook and Youtube.
** _Homepage_ in all platforms.
*** _Homepage_ in all platforms.

Results

Most French hospitals managed their corporate websites as well as several social media platforms for reinforcing their relationships with stakeholders and improving their reputation. However, most of them were not really performant when disseminating brand related elements (mission, vision, values, etc.). Our results are grouped in four main categories: a) corporate website, b) Facebook, c) Twitter and d) YouTube.

Corporate website

All hospitals analyzed had a corporate website, and most of them respected all indicators related to the *brand identity*: link to medical departments (100%), link to research and education sections (96.23%), logo in the homepage (95.28%), links to the Communication Department (86.79%), link to social media platforms (86.79%), search engine for finding doctors (41.51%), multilingual website (11.32%) and search engine for finding diseases (1.89%). Concerning *communication activities*, 53.77% published press releases on their homepage and 27.36% used videos as a corporate communication tool. With respect to *patients' engagement*, only a few hospitals respected these indicators: patient's platform (30.18%) and link to mobile apps (16.04%). Finally, 66.99% of hospitals fulfilled between 4 and 7 indicators (see Table 2). Only 16 hospitals met at least ten indicators : *Hôpital de Mercy* (CHR Metz), *Hôpital Américain*, *Hôpital Claude-Huriez* (CHU Lille), and 13 hospitals belonging to *Ramsay Santé (Clinique de la Sauvegarde, Clinique Saint Vincent, Hôpital Privé Saint-Martin, Hôpital Privé Jean Mermoz, Clinique de l'Union, Hôpital Privé La Louvière, Polyclinique du Bois, Clinique La Croix du Sud, Clinique Belharra, Clinique des Cèdres, Hôpital Privé de La Loire, Hôpital Privé d'Antony, and Hôpital Privé Bois Bernard).*

Table 2 - Indicators distribution

Number of indicators	Number of hospitals
12	0
11	0
10	16
9	5
8	9
7	17
6	21
5	16
4	17
3	4
2	1
1	0
0	0

Facebook

According to our results, 75% of hospitals had a corporate profile on *Facebook*. Even if some of them fulfilled some indicators related to the *brand identity* (links to the corporate website 100%, logo in their main profile image 96.25%, and corporate description 65%), nearly all of them did not take care of these indicators: milestones (2.5%), awards (1.25%), mission (1.25%), brand values (0%) and vision (0%). As to *communication activities*, all hospitals integrated videos on their corporate profile, and 76.25% had a link to the event section. With respect to *patients' engagement, Hôpital Rangueil* and *Hôpital Purpan* (Groupe CHU Toulouse) were the most appreciated hospitals (number of likes and followers) -see Table 3. Hospitals by Number of Followers-. Finally, concerning the ten indicators related to brand identity and communication activities, 58.75% of hospitals respected between 5 and 7 indicators, and the two hospitals respecting the most indicators were *Hôpital Rangueil* and *Hôpital Purpan* (7 indicators).

Table 3 - Hospitals by Number of Facebook Followers

	Hospital	Number of likes
1	Groupe CHU Toulouse: *Hôpital Rangueil*, *Hôpital Purpan*	42,013
2	Hôpitaux du Groupe Elsan : *Clinique Esquirol-Saint-Hilaire*, *Polyclinique de Keraudren*, *Polyclinique de Poitiers*, *Clinique Saint-Pierre*, *Polyclinique Médipôle Saint-Roch*, *Polyclinique de Gentilly*, *Hôpital Privé Saint-Martin*, *Clinique Saint-Augustin* et *Hôpital Privé la Châtaigneraie*.	38,154

Twitter

Even if 60.38% of hospitals used Twitter as a corporate communication tool, most of them were not really performant when using this platform. Concerning *brand identity*, most hospitals respected these indicators: logo in their main profile image (100%), links to corporate websites (100%), date when they joined Twitter (100%), images of health professionals or hospital's buildings as main profile image (60.94%), corporate description (50%), hashtags in the description (39.06%), foundation date (0%) and links to other social media platforms (0%). Concerning *communication activities*, all hospitals had a media section with videos. The most active hospital according to its number of followers was *Centre Hospitalier Universitaire - Limoges Dupuytren* (11,500). With respect to *patients' engagement*, the three most appreciated hospitals were *Hôpital Nord – Marseille* (AP-HM) -21,500 likes-, *Hôpital de la Timone* (AP-HM) -21,500 likes- and *Hôpital Purpan* (CHU Toulouse) -9,414 likes-. As to the number of followers, hospitals belonging to Groupe AP-HP, CHU Bordeaux, Groupe AP-HM and *Centre Hospitalier Universitaire - Limoges Dupuytren* were the most appreciated hospitals (see *Table 4. Hospitals by Number of Followers*).

Table 4 - Hospitals by Number of Twitter Followers

	Hospital	Number of likes
1	Groupe AP-HP : *Hôpital Universitaire Pitié Salpêtrière*, *Hôpital Hôtel-Dieu*, *Hôpital Cochin*, *Hôpital Bretonneau*, *Hôpital Bichat - Claude-Bernard*.	74,500
2	Groupe CHU Bordeaux: *Groupe hospitalier Pellegrin*, *Hôpital Saint-André*	14,200
3	Groupe AP-HM : *Hôpital de la Timone*, *Hôpital Nord – Marseille*	13,900

4	*Centre Hospitalier Universitaire - Limoges Dupuytren*	13,700

YouTube

According to our results, 71.70% of hospitals had a corporate profile on this platform. As to the *brand identity*, most hospitals did not do an effort to disseminate brand-related content: logo (89.47%), links to corporate websites (65.79%), corporate description (63.16%), awards (1.32%), milestones (0%), brand values (0%), mission (0%) and vision (0%). Concerning *communication activities*, 93.42% of hospitals showed playlists and 46.05% proposed also different channels. With respect to *patients' engagement*, the most appreciated hospitals according to the number of views were *Hôpital Robert Schuman* (Groupe Uneos) -6,765,779- and *Hôpital Cochin* (AP-HP) -4,752,331-. These two hospitals were also the best ones in terms of subscribers (see *Table 5. Hospitals by Number of Subscribers*). Finally, concerning the ten indicators related to *brand identity* and *communication activities*, 59.21% of hospitals respected between 4-5 indicators.

Table 5 - Hospitals by Number of YouTube Subscribers

	Hospital	**Number of YouTube subscribers**
1	*Hôpital Robert Schuman (Groupe Uneos)*	17,400
2	*Hôpital Cochin (AP-HP)*	13,000
3	*Hôpital Foch*	8,980
4	*Hôpital Américain*	6,350
5	*Hôpital Bretonneau (AP-HP)*	6,300

Discussion

Most French hospitals resorted to social media to communicate with different stakeholders, especially patients. However, they did not use these platforms as a true corporate communication tool allowing them to achieve particular communication objectives related to reputation, brand identity, etc. Even if all hospitals had a

corporate website, many of them did not use social media platforms: for example, 25% of hospitals did not have a corporate profile on Facebook. Some hospitals did not integrate their corporate website with their social media platforms. Other hospitals linked their websites to social media profiles that did not exist anymore. Finally, some hospitals did not manage social media platforms in an autonomous way: in other words, they did not use their own profiles, but the profile of the hospital group to which they belonged. This was the case, for example, of *Ramsay Santé* (13 hospitals) and *Elsan Santé* (10 hospitals). Many French hospitals were not using these platforms in a professional way, following an annual content plan allowing them to influence stakeholders' perceptions and this way improve their brand reputation. Social media determine hospitals' communication strategies: communication objectives, targets, and brand positioning (Medina Aguerrebere, 2019).

Communication Objectives.

Hospitals recruit experts in social media (Rando Cueto et al., 2016) who manage these platforms for achieving different communication objectives (Kotsenas et al., 2018), promoting the hospital's brands (Noar et al., 2018), and enhancing patients' trust in health professionals (Sedrak et al., 2017). Nevertheless, according to our results, many French hospitals do not follow this professional logic (employees, branding approach, etc.). That is why, for example, on their corporate website, few hospitals had a search engine to find diseases (1.89%) or doctors (41.51%), and only 27.36% used videos to disseminate scientific content; on YouTube, no hospital explained its mission, vision, brand values or milestones; on Twitter, no hospital used links to integrate this platform with other social media or with the hospital's website; and, on Facebook, no hospital described its vision or brand values, and only 1.25% of them made a reference to their awards and missions. This lack of corporate information constitutes a risk for these hospitals because, on the one hand, stakeholders will not understand why these hospitals' brands are unique and, on the other hand, hospitals can destroy their reputation by communicating inconsistent information.

Main and Secondary Targets.

Hospitals train their employees on using social media in a professional manner (Blackstone & Pressman, 2016). This way, employees help hospitals to improve their relations with stakeholders (Medina Aguerrebere, 2019), especially with patients, who have become true opinion leaders able to influence hospitals' public image (Becerra et al., 2015). However, our results proved that most French hospitals do not implement a multi-stakeholders communication approach. As to patients, most French hospitals need urgently to improve how they interact with

them: on their corporate websites, most hospitals did not propose a patient's platform (69.82%) or mobile apps (83.96%) and only 11.32% of them had a multilingual website. On the other hand, French hospitals should also enhance their relationships with journalists. Our results show that 44.23% of hospitals did not publish press releases on their corporate website. Moreover, on Facebook, 35% of them did not provide a corporate description of the company and 97.5% did not even explain their milestones. And, on YouTube, 53.95% did not display channels with scientific and corporate content useful for journalists. These results proved that most French hospitals focus on their own corporate needs, rather than their stakeholders' needs in terms of information and emotional support, which makes it really difficult for these organizations to establish good relations with employees, patients, media companies, etc.

Brand Positioning.

Doctors and patients contribute to building and reinforcing the hospital's brand positioning in an efficient, credible way (Beesley et al., 2016), which is why these organizations train their doctors in interpersonal communication skills (Moore et al., 2018) and involve patients on collective decision-making processes related to their treatments (Peterson *et al*., 2016). Even if most French hospitals implemented basic branding initiatives, such as using the logo on the website (95.28%) or linking *Facebook* with other social media platforms (100%), most of them need to professionalize their branding actions. For example, on *Twitter*, 50% of hospitals did not publish a corporate description, 60.94% did not integrate hashtags in these descriptions and no hospital provided their foundation date. Finally, on *Youtube*, the main social media platform used by organizations for branding initiatives, no French hospital respected at least 6 out of 10 indicators related to communication activities and identity. French hospitals need to evolve from a communication approach based on disseminating basic information to a branding approach focused on influencing stakeholders' perceptions by disseminating meaningful content about the brand.

These results constitute a true added-value content for experts in corporate communication working in hospitals. Tech companies, such as social media, are transforming the global economy and introducing new trends (Srnicek, 2016), that is why hospitals should use these platforms in a more professional way. Despite these interesting results, we can also identify some limitations affecting this paper, such as the lack of information about hospitals' annual communication plans, the difficulty of comparing this study with other papers published about hospitals from other countries, and the lack of content about how patients perceive hospitals' official social media platforms. During the next years, researchers can focus on different topics such

as, for example, how to engage doctors in online communication initiatives, how to measure hospitals' online brand reputation, or how to integrate patients' opinions into hospitals' corporate communication strategies on social media platforms.

Conclusion

Most French hospitals implement corporate communication initiatives based on social media platforms in order to reinforce their relationships with stakeholders and, in this way, improve their brand reputation. Nevertheless, these organizations face several barriers avoiding them to achieve this objective: lack of experience, limited budgets, or privacy constraints. This paper aimed to describe the main actions implemented by French hospitals on their corporate website, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to promote their brands and improve their reputation. After analyzing the literature review and the quantitative results gathered during our fieldwork, we identified three main branding initiatives. First, on their corporate website, most French hospitals implemented a journalistic approach focused on disseminating medical and corporate content related to treatments, diseases, research, and other organizational events (festivals, conferences, etc.). However, websites are not a journalistic platform, but a corporate communication platform, which involves that these organizations need to professionalize their use and focus on more meaningful content that help journalists, but also other stakeholders (patients, employees, public authorities, etc.). Second, Facebook and Twitter are mainly used to disseminate information about health professionals' and patients' experiences in the hospital and create an emotional link with the hospital's brand. Nevertheless, this practice is not enough because both targets need practical content allowing them to reinforce their empowerment and this way have a better image of the hospital. And finally, on YouTube, most French hospitals adopted a "marketing approach" focused on publishing videos about medical treatments and research projects; however, they did not use all the functions proposed by this platform to explain their brand architectures and justify why the content disseminated on these videos was related to the hospital's identity.

This paper aimed to help French hospitals implement more professional communication strategies on social media platforms. When developing our research, we faced different challenges. On the one hand, the ranking developed by *Newsweek* and *Statista* included public and private hospitals; however, both institutions consider communication and marketing differently, follow different protocols and laws, and do not have access to the same budgets for communication. On the other hand, only one author carried out the quantitative analysis consisting of evaluating all hospitals' corporate websites and profiles on Facebook, Twitter and, YouTube

according to the 48 indicators. Then, the two other authors reviewed these results and integrated them with the literature review to propose consistent recommendations to French hospitals. Despite these challenges, we developed a useful theoretical framework that French hospitals should consider developing an unique branding strategy on these platforms. This strategy should integrate five main elements: a) protecting patients' rights, b) building the hospital's brand through disseminating meaningful content, c) prioritizing a public health approach consistent with national legal frameworks, d) training health professionals to become brand ambassadors, and e) focusing on corporate communication rather than marketing or journalism. This approach can help hospitals build more credible brands: when these organizations focus on satisfying stakeholders' needs in terms of information and experiences (corporate communication) rather than promoting medical treatments (marketing), they become social institutions that play an important role in stakeholders' lives.

References

Abramson, Karley; Keefe, Brian; Chou, Wen-Ying (2015) Communicating About Cancer Through Facebook: A Qualitative Analysis of a Breast Cancer Awareness Page. *Journal of Health Communication*, 20 (2), 237-243. Doi: 10.1080/10810730.2014.927034

Archiopoli, Ashley; Ginossar, Tamar; Wilcox, Bryan; Avila, Magdalena; Hillm Ricky; Oetzel, John (2016). Factors of interpersonal communication and behavioral health on medication self-efficacy and medication adherence. *AIDS Care*, 28 (12), 1607-1614. Doi: 10.1080/09540121.2016.1192577.

Attai, Deanna; Sedrak, Mina; Katz, Matthew; Thompson, Michael; Anderson, Patricia; Kesselheim, Jennifer; Fisch, Michael (2016). Social media in cancer care: highlights, challenges & opportunities. *Future Oncology*, 12 (13). Doi: 10.2217/fon-2016-0065

Badr, Hoda; Carmack, Cindy; Diefenbach, Michael (2015) Psychosocial Interventions for Patients and Caregivers in the Age of New Communication Technologies: Opportunities and Challenges in Cancer Care. *Journal of Health Communication*, 20 (3), 328-342. Doi: 10.1080/10810730.2014.965369.

Balasooriya-Smeekens, C.; Walter, F.; Scott S. (2015). The role of emotions in time to presentation for symptoms suggestive of cancer: a systematic literature review of quantitative studies. *Psychooncology*, 24(12),1594-1604. Doi: 10.1002/pon.3833.

Basch C, Basch C, Hillyer GC, Reeves R. (2015). YouTube Videos Related to Skin Cancer: A Missed Opportunity for Cancer Prevention and Control. *JMIR Cancer*, 2, 1(1),e1. Doi: 10.2196/cancer.4204.

Becerra, Elena; Reina, Jesús; Victoria, Juan (2015). Comunicación e imagen de los servicios sanitarios. El caso de los centros hospitalarios andaluces (2004-2013). *Prisma Social. Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, 14, 0-28.

Beesley, H; Goodfellow, S; Hocombe, C; Salmon, P (2016). The intensity of breast cancer patients' relationships with their surgeons after the first meeting: Evidence that relationships are not 'built' but arise from attachment processes. *European Journal of Surgical Oncology*, 42(5), 679-84. Doi: 10.1016/j.ejso.2016.02.001.

Blackstone, Sarah; Pressman, Harvey (2016). Patient Communication in Health Care Settings: new Opportunities for Augmentative and Alternative Communication. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 32 (1), 69-79. Doi: 10.3109/07434618.2015.1125947.

Blomgren, Maria; Hedmo, Tina; Waks, Caroline (2016). Being Special in an Ordinary Way: Swedish Hospitals' Strategic Web Communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 10 (3) , 177-194. Doi: 10.1080/1553118X.2016.1176569

Brent, Ruben (2016) Communication Theory and Health Communication Practice: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same. *Health Communication*, 31 (1), 1-11. Doi: 10.1080/10410236.2014.923086.

Bubien, Yves (2015). Hôpital 2.0: du virtuel au réel. *European Psychiatry*, 30 (8), S74.

Cady, Steven; Wheeler, Jane; DeWolf, Jeff; Brodke, Michelle (2011). Mission, vision and values: what do they say? *Organizational Development Journal*, 29 (1), 63-78.

Chan, Kara; Yu-Ling, Marcus; Huxley, Peter; Evans, Sherrill (2016). Interpersonal communication, community participation and social inclusion among mental health services users. *International Behavioral Health Conference: BeHealth 2016 - Multiplicity in action for better health*, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, January 16th-17th, 2016.

Costa-Sánchez, Carmen; Míguez-González, María-Isabel (2018). Use of social media for health education and corporate communication of hospitals. *El Profesional de la Información*. 27 (5), 1145-1150. Doi: 10.3145/epi.2018.sep.18.

Cua, Santino; Moffatt-Bruce, Susan; White, Susan (2017). Reputation and the Best Hospital Rankings: What Does It Really Mean? *American Journal of Medical Quality*, 32(6), 632-637. Doi: 10.1177/1062860617691843.

Diplomeo (2018). *Sondage : Instagram, réseau social préféré des jeunes en 2020*. Document retrieved on : https://diplomeo.com/actualite-sondage_reseaux_sociaux_jeunes_2020

Epstein, Ronald; Duberstein, Paul; Fenton, Joshua (2017). Effect of a Patient-Centered Communication Intervention on Oncologist-Patient Communication, Quality of Life, and Health Care Utilization in Advanced Cancer. The VOICE Randomized Clinical Trial. *Jama Oncology*, 3(1), 92-100. Doi:10.1001/jamaoncol.2016.4373.

Esposito, Annamaria (2017). Hospital branding in Italy: A pilot study based on the case method. *Health Marketing Quarterly*, 34(1):35-47. Doi: 10.1080/07359683.2016.1275211.

Fernández-Luque, Luis; Bau, Teresa (2015). Health and social media: perfect storm of information. *Healthcare Informatics Research*, 21, 2, 67-73. Doi: 10.4258/hir.2015.21.2.67

Glover, McKinley; Khalilzadeh, Omid; Choy, Garry; Prabhakar, Anand; Pandharipande, Pari; Gazelle, Scott (2015). Hospital Evaluations by Social Media: A Comparative Analysis of Facebook Ratings among Performance Outliers. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 30(10),1440–1446. Doi: 10.1007/s11606-015-3236-3.

Haluza, Daniela; Naszay, Marlene; Stockinger, Andreas; Jungwirth, David (2016). Digital Natives Versus Digital Immigrants: Influence of Online Health Information Seeking on the Doctor–Patient Relationship. *Health Communication*, 1-8. Doi: 10.1080/10410236.2016.1220044.

He, Hong-Wei; Balmer, John (2013). A grounded theory of the corporate identity and corporate strategy dynamic. *European Journal of Marketing*, 47 (3-4), 401-430. Doi: 10.1108/03090561311297391.

Hootsuite, We Are Social (2020). *Digital 2020. Digital Global Overview*. Document retrieved on: https://wearesocial.com/fr/blog/2020/01/digital-report-2020.

Ivanov, Anton; Sharman, Raj (2018). Impact of User-Generated Internet Content on Hospital Reputational Dynamics. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 35 (4), 1277-1300. Doi: 10.1080/07421222.2018.1523603.

Jahromi, Vahid; Tatabaee, Seyed; Abdar, Zahra; Rajabi, Mahboobeh (2016). Active listening: The key of successful communication in hospital managers. *Electronic Physician*, 8 (3). Doi: 10.19082/2123

Jiang, Shaohai; Street, Richard (2016). Factors Influencing Communication with Doctors via the Internet: A Cross-Sectional Analysis of 2014 HINTS Survey. *Health Communication*, 32(2),180-188. Doi: 10.1080/10410236.2015.1110867.

Kotsenas, Amy; Aase, Lee; Arce, Makala; Timimi, Farris (2018). The Social Media DNA of Mayo Clinic – and Health Care. *Journal of American College of Radiology*, 15, 162-166. Doi: 10.1016/j.jacr.2017.09.026.

Lagu, Tara; Goff, Sarah; Craft, Ben; Calcasola, Stephanie; Benjamin, Evan; Priya, Aruna; Lindenauer, Peter (2016). Can Social Media Be Used as a Hospital Quality Improvement Tool? *Journal of Hospital Medicine*, 11 (1), 52-55. Doi: 10.1002/jhm.2486.

Lasswell, Harold; Blumenstock, Dorothy (1939). *World Revolutionary Propaganda: A Chicago Study*. New York: Knopf.

Lee, Joy; Choudhry, Niteesh; Wu, Albert; Matlin, Olga; Brennan, Troyen; Shrank, William (2015). Patient Use of Email, Facebook, and Physician Websites to Communicate with Physicians: A National Online Survey of Retail Pharmacy Users. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 31 (1), 45-51. Doi: 10.1007/s11606-015-3374-7.

Lim, Weng Marc (2016). Social media in medical and health care: opportunities and challenges. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 34 (7): 964–976. Doi: 10.1108/MIP-06-2015-0120.

Matarín Jiménez, Tamara (2015). Redes sociales en prevención y promoción de la salud. Una revision de la actualidad. *Revista Española de Comunicación de Salud*, 6 (1), 62-69.

Medina-Aguerrebere, Pablo; Gonzalez-Pacanowski, Toni; Medina, Eva (2020). Online reputation management by cancer hospitals: A systematic literature review in the USA and Spain. *Profesional De La información*, 29(6). Doi: 10.3145/epi.2020.nov.17

Medina Aguerrebere, Pablo (2019). La promoción de la marca hospitalaria a través de la comunicación interpersonal que mantiene el profesional de la salud en las redes sociales. *Trípodos, 44, 9-23.*

Miller, Carrie; Guidry, Jeanine; Fuemmeler, Bernard (2019). Breast Cancer Voices on Pinterest: Raising Awareness or Just an Inspirational Image? *Health Education and Behaviour*, 46 (2S), 49-58. Doi: 10.1177/1090198119863774.

Ministere des Solidarités et de la Sante (2018). Les chiffres clés de l'offre de soins. Document retrieved on : https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/dgos_cc_2018_02_16_a_web_pages_hd.pdf.

Moore, Philippa; Rivera, Solange; Bravo-Soto, Gonzalo; Olivares, Camila; Lawrie, Teresa (2018). Communication skills training for healthcare professionals working with people who have cancer. *Cochrane Database System Review*, 24 (7), CD003751. Doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD003751.pub4.

Myrick, Jessica; Holton, Avery; Himboim, Itai; Love, Brad (2016). Stupidcancer: Exploring a Typology of Social Support and the Role of Emotional Expression in a Social Media Community. *Health Communication*, 31 (5), 596-605. Doi: 10.1080/10410236.2014.981664.

Namkoong, Kang; Nah, Seungahn; Record, Rachel; Van Stee, Stephanie (2017). Communication, Reasoning, and Planned Behaviors: Unveiling the Effect of Interactive Communication in an Anti-Smoking Social Media Campaign. *Health Communication*, 32 (1), 41-50. Doi: 10.1080/10410236.2015.1099501.

Noar, S; Leas, E; Althouse, B; Dredze, M; Kelley, D; Ayers, J. (2018). Can a selfie promote public engagement with skin cancer? *Preventive Medicine*, 111, 280-283. Doi: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2017.10.038.

Odoxa (2018). *Parler de sa santé en ligne : une pratique loin d'être marginale et qui peut aider la recherche.* Document retrieved on: http://www.odoxa.fr/sondage/parler-de-sante-ligne-pratique-loin-detre-marginale-aider-recherche/

Park, Hyojung; Reber, Bryan; Chon, Myoung-Gi (2016). Tweeting as Health Communication: Health Organizations' Use of Twitter for Health Promotion and Public Engagement. *Journal of Health Communication*, 21 (2), 188-198. Doi: 10.1080/10810730.2015.1058435.

Pelitti, Pamela (2016). Estrategias de comunicación interna y externa de los hospitales públicos bonaerenses de la Región Sanitaria X. *Question. Revista Especializada en Comunicación y Periodismo*, 1 (49), 368-379.

Peluchette, Joy; Karl, Katherine; Coustasse, Alberto (2016). Physicians, patients, and Facebook: Could you? Would you? Should you? *Health Marketing Quarterly*, 33 (2), 112-126. Doi: 10.1080/07359683.2016.1166811.

Peterson, Emily; Ostroff, Jamie; Duhamel, Katherine; D'Agostino, Thomas; Hernandez, Marisol; Canzona, Mollie; Bylun, Carma (2016). Impact of Provider-Patient Communication on Cancer Screening Adherence: A Systematic Review. *Preventive Medicine*, 93, 96–105. Doi: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2016.09.034.

Prochaska, J; Coughlin, S; Lyons, E (2017). Social Media and Mobile Technology for Cancer Prevention and Treatment. *American Society of Clinical Oncology Educational Book*, 37,128-137. Doi: 10.14694/EDBK_173841.

Rando Cueto, Dolores; Paniagua Rojano, Francisco; De las Heras Pedrosa, Carlos (2016). Influence factors on the success of hospital communication via social networks. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 71, 1.170-1.186. Doi: 10.4185/RLCS-2016-1140en.

Rodrigues, Alexandra; Azevedo, Carlos; Calvo, Vitor (2016). Internal Communication In Organizations: Practical Instruments to Help the Shift Change. *Millenium*, 2(1), 105-114

Ruiz-Granja, María José (2015). Análisis comunicacional de páginas web hospitalarias. El caso de los hospitales sevillanos. *Revista Española de Comunicación y Salud*, 6(2), 138-56.

Sedrak, M; Cohen, R; Merchant, R; Schapira, M. (2016). Cancer Communication in the Social Media Age. *JAMA Oncology*, 1, 2 (6), 822-823. Doi: 10.1001/jamaoncol.2015.5475.

Sedrak, M; Dizon, D; Anderson, P; Fisch, M; Graham, D; Katz, M; Kesselheim, J; Miller, R; Thompson, M; Utengen, A; Attai, D (2017). The emerging role of professional social media use in oncology. *Future Oncology*,13(15),1281-1285. Doi: 10.2217/fon-2017-0161.

Sheehan, Norman; Isaac, Grant (2014). Principles operationalize corporate values so they matter. *Strategy & Leadership*, 42 (3), 23 – 30. Doi: 10.1108/SL-03-2014-0021.

Singal, Ajay; Jain, Arun (2013). An empirical examination of the influence of corporate vision on internationalization. *Strategic Change*, 22(5-6), 243-257. Doi: 10.1002/jsc.1937.

Smailhodzic, Edin; Hooijsma, Wyanda; Boonstra, Albert; Langley, David (2016). Social media use in healthcare: A systematic review of effects on patients and on their relationship with healthcare professionals. *BMC Health Services Research*, 16, 442. Doi: 10.1186/s12913-016-1691-0.

Srnicek, Nick (2016). *Platform capitalism*. New Jersey: Wiley.

Visser, Laura; Bleijenbergh, Inge; Benschop, Yvonne; Van Riel, Allard; Bloem, Bastiaan (2016). Do online communities change power processes in healthcare? Using case studies to examine the use of online health communities by patients with Parkinson's disease. *British Medical Journal*, 6:e012110. Doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2016-012110.

Weberling McKeever, Brooke (2014). The Status of Health Communication: Education and Employment Outlook for a Growing Field. *Journal of Health Communication*, 19 (12), 1408-1423. DOI: 10.1080/10810730.2014.904024.

Welch, Mary; Jackson, Paul (2007). Rethinking internal communication: a stakeholder approach. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 12 (2), 177-198. Doi: 10.1108/13563280710744847.

World Health Organization (2015). *France: health system review*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.

Yeob, Jeong: Hawkins, Robert; Baker, Timothy; Shah, Dhavan; Pingree, Suzanne; Gustafson, David (2017). How Cancer Patients Use and Benefit from an Interactive Cancer Communication System. *Journal of Health Communication*, 22 (10), 792-799. Doi: 10.1080/10810730.2017.1360413.

Zerfass, Ansgar; Viertmann, Christine (2017). Creating business value through corporate communication: A theory-based framework and its practical application. *Journal of Communication Management* 21 (1), 68-81. Doi: 10.1108/JCOM-07-2016-0059.

Appendix A. - List of hospitals analyzed

Source: https://www.newsweek.com/best-hospitals-2020/france

Document retrieved on 20th January 2022.

1. *Hôpital Universitaire Pitié Salpêtrière* (AP-HP).
2. *Groupe Hospitalier Pellegrin* (Groupe CHU Bordeaux).
3. *Hôpital Claude-Huriez* (CHU Lille).
4. *Hôpital Lyon Sud* (Groupe HCL).
5. *Hôpital Paris Saint-Joseph*.
6. *Hôpital Européen Georges Pompidou* (AP-HP).
7. *Hôpital Purpan* (CHU Toulouse).
8. *Hôpital de Hautepierre* (CHRU Strasbourg).
9. *Polyclinique Santé Atlantique* (Elsan).
10. *Hôpital Hôtel-Dieu* (AP-HP).
11. *Clinique François Chenieux*.
12. *Hôpital Central – Nancy* (CHRU Nancy).
13. *Hôpitaux Est* (HCL).
14. *Clinique Pasteur*.
15. *Hôpital de la Timone* (AP-HM).
16. *Hôpital Edouard Herriot* (HCL).
17. *Hôpital Rangueil* (CHU Toulouse).
18. *Centre Hospitalier Privé - St Grégoire.*
19. *Clinique de l'Anjou.*
20. *Hôpital Privé la Châtaigneraie* (Elsan).
21. *Hôpital Henri-Mondor* (AP-HP).

22. *Clinique Saint-Augustin* (Elsan).
23. *Hôpital Cochin* (AP-HP).
24. *Hôpital Bretonneau* (AP-HP).
25. *Hôpital Saint-André* (CHU Bordeaux).
26. *Polyclinique de Bezannes* (Courlancy Santé).
27. *CHU Grenoble - Site Nord* (CHU Grenoble Alpes).
28. *Hôpital Privé Saint-Martin* (Elsan Santé).
29. *Hôpital Pasteur* (CHU Nice).
30. *Hôpital Européen.*
31. *Hôpital Privé du Confluent* (Vivalto).
32. *Hôpital Pontchaillou* (CHU Rennes).
33. *Polyclinique du Parc Rambot – Provençale.*
34. *Hôpital Saint-Antoine* (AP-HP).
35. *Clinique Saint-George.*
36. *Centre Hospitalier Universitaire -Dijon-Bourgogne* (CHU Dijon).
37. *Hôpital Saint-Louis* (AP-HP).
38. *Hôpital Privé Jean Mermoz* (Ramsay Santé).
39. *Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Nîmes.*
40. *Clinique Rhena Association.*
41. *Hôpital Bicêtre* (AP-HP).
42. *Hôpital Nord – Marseille* (AP-HM).
43. *Hôpital Jean Minjoz* (CHU Besançon).
44. *Centre Hospitalier Universitaire - Amiens-Picardie*.
45. *Centre Hospitalier Universitaire – Poitiers*.

46. *Clinique Mutualiste Jules-Vernes*.
47. *Nouvel Hôpital Civil* (CHRU Strasbourg).
48. *Centre Hospitalier Universitaire – Angers.*
49. *Clinique de l'Union* (Ramsay Santé).
50. *Hôpital Lariboisière* (AP-HP).
51. *Hôpital Américain*.
52. *Hôpital Bellevue* (CHU Saint-Etienne).
53. *Centre Hospitalier de Valenciennes.*
54. *Hôpital Privé La Louvière* (Ramsay Santé).
55. *Polyclinique de Gentilly* (Elsan).
56. *Pôle Santé Oréliance*.
57. *Hôpital Lapeyronie* (CHU Montpellier).
58. *Hôpital Antoine Béclère* (AP-HP).
59. *Hôpital Louis Pasteur* (Hôpitaux Civils de Colmar).
60. *Institut Mutualiste Montsouris*.
61. *Infirmerie Protestante de Lyon*.
62. *Hôpital de la Croix-Rousse* (HCL).
63. *Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Rouen*.
64. *Polyclinique du Bois* (Ramsay Santé).
65. *Hôpital Morvan* (CHU Brest).
66. *Clinique La Croix du Sud* (Ramsay Santé).
67. *Centre Hospitalier - Universitaire de Caen*.
68. *Hôpital Albert Schweitzer*.
69. *Hôpital Belle-Isle* (Groupe Uneos).

70. *Hôpital Foch*.
71. *Centre Hospitalier Intercommunal*.
72. *Hôpital Saint-Joseph*.
73. *Clinique Belharra* (Ramsay Santé).
74. *Clinique des Cèdres* (Ramsay Santé).
75. *Hôpital Privé de La Loire* (Ramsay Santé).
76. *Clinique Rive-Gauche*.
77. *Hôpital Robert Schuman* (Groupe Uneos).
78. *Médipôle de Savoie*.
79. *Clinique Belledonne*.
80. *Hôpital de La Croix Saint Simon*.
81. *Hôpital Bichat - Claude-Bernard* (AP-HP).
82. *Pôle Santé Léonard-de-Vinci*.
83. *Hôpital Privé Clairval* (Ramsay Santé).
84. *Hôpital Privé des Côtes-d'Armor*.
85. *CHU Gabriel-Montpied* (CHU Clermont-Ferrand).
86. *Centre Hospitalier Universitaire - Limoges Dupuytren*.
87. *Centre Hospitalier - Annecy Genevois*.
88. *Médipôle Lyon*.
89. *Hôpital Renée Sabran* (HCL).
90. *Polyclinique Médipôle Saint-Roch* (Elsan).
91. *CHU Grenoble - Site Sud* (CHU Grenoble).
92. *Hôpital Privé d'Antony* (Ramsay Santé).
93. *Clinique Saint-Pierre* (Elsan).

94. *Hôpital Privé Bois Bernard* (Ramsay Santé).
95. *Polyclinique de Poitiers* (Elsan).
96. *Nouvelle Clinique Bel-Air*.
97. *Hôpital Saint Louis* (AP-HP).
98. *Hôpital Maison Blanche* (CHU Reims).
99. *Hôpital Emile Muller*.
100. *Polyclinique de Keraudren* (Elsan).
101. *Clinique Esquirol-Saint-Hilaire* (Elsan).
102. *Hôpital de Mercy* (CHR Metz).
103. *Clinique du Pré*.
104. *Clinique de la Sauvegarde* (Ramsay Santé).
105. *Polyclinique de Courlancy* (Courlancy Santé).
106. *Clinique Saint Vincent* (Ramsay Santé).

Stream is a peer-reviewed journal for communication studies that focuses on work from top graduate students and emerging scholars in the broad tradition of critical theory. Submissions are welcome from all fields and disciplines that may overlap with communication studies. *Stream* is affiliated with Simon Fraser University (SFU) and was established in 2008.

To submit your paper to *Stream*, visit https://journals.sfu.ca/stream/

Stream is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal (ISSN: 1916-5897).

Cover image by Faris Mohammed Unsplash (https://unsplash.com/photos/nYGVN45DOHg)