
MEDIATIONS
FIMS UNDERGRAD
ACADEMIC JOURNAL

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A LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Mediations is the student-led Faculty of Information & Media Studies undergraduate academic journal. After a four year hiatus, we are bringing it back to showcase the incredible work that comes from the undergraduate students in FIMS. We are honoured to spearhead the resurrection of this journal because we believe in the importance of sharing knowledge and celebrating student accomplishments.

From papers on the VHS to Spotify, Mediations takes us through the ages of media and seeks to represent the diverse individuals and perspectives in our faculty. In FIMS, we acknowledge the role we play in shaping our communication and information technologies, just as much as they shape us. Everything down to music videos and Amazon's 1-Click checkout mediate our lives. Mediations is thoughtfully compiled of exceptional student course work that exemplifies this phenomenon.

On behalf of the Editors, we thank you for your continued support of this publication and your acknowledgement of student work. We are lucky to have such insightful papers in this journal and we sincerely hope that you recognize the incredible efforts of these authors. Thank you to Sandra Smeltzer and Romanye Smith Fullerton, our faculty advisors, for their support, assistance, and guidance throughout this process.

Welcome to Mediations. We are back and here to stay.

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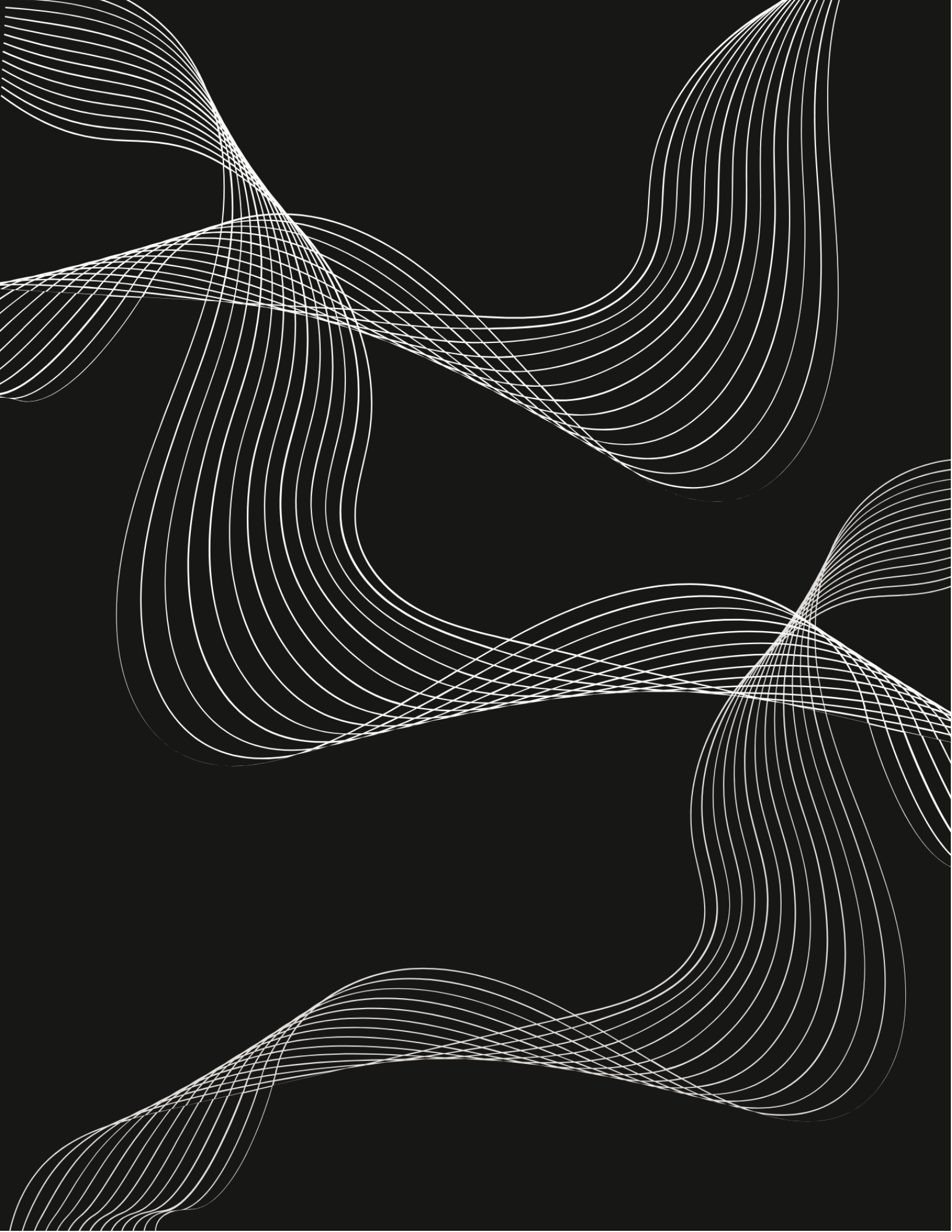

Spotify: The Friendly Data Infiltrator

Brooke Bischoff

Western University

MIT 2200: Mapping Media and Cultural Theory

Professor Joanna Redden

April 4, 2024

Abstract

This paper critically examines how Spotify leverages big data to control and shape music consumptions within cultural, ethical, and social implications. While Spotify is regarded as a safe and user-friendly mainstream music streaming experience, algorithmically, it fosters control on users via their listening experience. By applying Spotify's application features to critical data studies, it will be analyzed how Spotify uses big data to disregard organic music discovery and listening, to discover more about users to then subject them to third party exploitation, and to harmful social integration tools. Consequently, even a platform centered around leisure can negatively affect user agency, prompting reflection on whether users in a digital space will ever be able to accomplish freedom of browsing and internet usage.

Listen to music while you study, ensure the music on aux appeals to everyone's tastes, create new playlists, and most importantly, give Spotify your data in the process. Users have become the product of the business. If the user is not technically paying for a service, they are subjected to pay through their data and the insights these data sets provide. With this being said, this same concept has become applicable to Spotify. By analyzing Spotify and applying the application's features to critical data studies, the platform uses big data to change and create implications for the music industry and music listening for the worse.

To begin, Spotify is a music platform and service that launched in 2008 (Spotify 2024). With "more than 602 million users, 100 million tracks, 5 million podcasts titles, and 350,000 audiobooks a la carte" (Spotify 2024), Spotify can be thought of as a revolutionary music platform that looks to, "unlock the potential of human creativity by giving a platform for creative artists and the opportunity for billions of fans to enjoy this artistship" (Spotify 2024). As Spotify

has become an application that can be used in every facet of life such as partying, studying, exercising, and so forth, it has often been overlooked amidst a world of surveillance capitalism and datafication. Due to its perceived innocuousness of just being a music platform, users spend subconsciously ample amounts of time on the app making it one of the most significant platforms globally for data sourcing and applicability of integrated structures. As mentioned, understanding how Spotify uses big data is relevant as data "shapes and is shaped by a contested cultural landscape in both creation and interpretation" (Dalton and Thatcher, 2014 pg?). The ways in which big data can influence the way we spend our time, what we think about, what we consume and why we do so, raises concerns about how even something as apparently harmless as Spotify can affect an entire industry and society as a whole, through cultural, ethical, and social implications.

Spotify integrates big data to create convenience and efficiency for users, yet, in doing so, this process abstracts users from the experiences of traditional listening processes and music culture. Widely appreciated features of Spotify include its ability for users to create playlists, listen to what they want to listen and when. However, by supplying Spotify with these insights, the company capitalizes on their information by compartmentalizing their usage into certain types of listening. As a result, users are encouraged not to explore other potential music interests: "once organized around self-made playlists, Spotify's interaction design has come to re-organize music consumption around behaviours and feeling states, channeled through curated playlists" (Vonderau 2019, 5). Now, users have been afforded the ability to skip out on the work it takes to make a playlist, figure out their music taste, find new music, etc. At any given point of the day, users can log onto Spotify and have pre-made playlists or recommended music for them based on the data sets that Spotify has collected on users' listening. For example, Spotify's "Daylist

Playlist" is a curated playlist of music fitting in a certain "vibe" based on what historically a user usually listens to at that time of day. With this high degree of personalization, big data is inclined to shape users' Spotify experience. More specifically, users'music experience with the integration of big data creates more efficiency and convenience for the user to have their tastes pre-tailored to. This convenience takes away the "magic" of the music industry, allowing users to find new music on their own, be exposed to different music genres that they may like, as well as put in the work, personality, and thoughtfulness of curating a playlist.

Further, as big data allows Spotify to determine users' personalities, interests, and more through listening habits, Spotify can exploit this information by capitalizing on data for thirdparty purposes, which is ethically problematic. As information can be seamlessly gathered regarding what age, gender, occupation, when music is being listened to, and more, Spotify profits from this data by selling and partnering with third-party organizations. As a result… taking away from users the ability to just listen to music. Within curated playlists by Spotify for users, Spotify can slip in, lead users to listen to new music that Spotify is in partnership becoming subjected to ads that pop up between songs influencing users to subconsciously hear about a brand. As Vonderau (2019) contends, "this present situation—where music has become data, and data, in turn, has become contextual material for user targeting at scale - the big tech oligopoly can use cultural content as a loss leader and promotional medium in efforts to drive sales elsewhere" (5). Some may call these actions of Spotify a way to expand one's music knowledge and become exposed to new and relevant brands, but seen from a critical data studies point of view, Spotify's methods of personalization can create bias and shifts in mass culture based on the data the company chooses to use for personalization and what this means for exploiting this data to outside sources and partnerships.

Finally, through the integration of current socio-technical structures such as the ability to connect with friends in an online capacity, big data integration can subconsciously influence what users like to listen to based on behaviours observed through social media. It is uncommon for an online platform to solely offer a service without also integrating the ability to connect with friends within the online space and service. Spotify's main purpose is to be a listening platform, however, features such as the "friend feed" allow users to follow and interact with friends, making music listening a less solitary practice. As Marika Luders (2021) describes, "Users can subscribe to or follow friends, playlists curated by others or artists' pages. Friend feed notifies followers about the music played, changes to playlists or new favourite artists, tracks or albums" (995). Even though this can be a beneficial tool to create a community-oriented experience in music, it is applicable to apply concepts of Micheal Foucaut's Panopticon. Drawing on Foucault's ideas regarding governmentality and power, Pollard (2019) describes attempts , "to make all deviance visible such as through the notion of the Panopticon, a circular prison where each inmate is made open to the scrutiny of a central watchtower". Through the thought of potentially being watched, people are subconsciously driven to moderate their behaviour in an attempt to appease those around them or the area they are in. This same notion can be applied in the example of Spotify. As Spotify can connect users to users through big data as well as integrate this coveted social structure in society, users are subjected to feeling watched during their music streaming experience understanding that whatever they do on the platform appears on friends' feeds. Users may not listen to a certain artist they enjoy or a song due to fear of being shamed for their music tastes by friends viewing their listening patterns and habits. This practice can deter users from entertaining their interests for fear of being judged and monitored. With

patterns of data capitalization and infiltration, users have become subjected to even having music controlled by platforms, third-party sources, and social structures.

Ultimately, the landscape for music and music consumption has had to adapt to technological advancements in society. However, through these advancements, creative mediums and outlets has been exposed to errors of human greed such as creativity for profit rather than for pleasure. Even though Spotify is seen as a “friendly” and non-threatening application compared to other platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, users are still subjected to the process of big data which is constraining engagement with music, becoming a target for third-party sources, as well as the limiting exploration of music tastes and genres. Simple pleasures, such as enjoying music, have become exploited and corrupted through the cultural, ethical, and social implications big data creates and is observed through critical data studies. This then begs the question, which pleasure will be next to be corrupted by the advancement of society's want for control?

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The VHS: Rewinding Technological, Social, and Economic Transformations

Kathleen Brophy

Western University

MIT 2500B: The Meaning of Technology

Professor Thomas Streeter

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Abstract

The essay explores the VHS as a nostalgic artifact and transformative technology. Beginning with personal childhood memories of VHS tapes and communal movie nights, the discussion extends to the broader technological shifts introduced by this medium, such as the transition to personal and portable devices. Drawing on Julia Cho's analysis of landline phones ("How the Loss of the Landline Is Changing Family Life") and Raymond Williams' "Structures of Feeling," the essay examines how the decline of the VHS and rise of internet-based technologies have shifted media consumption, illustrated by changes in film distribution and audience engagement. Additionally, the essay discusses how the VHS laid the groundwork for modern streaming platforms and attention economies. In the end, while the VHS is now obsolete, its legacy endures in the ways we experience and value media today.

One of the earliest gifts I remember receiving was a box of VHS tapes. Despite being hand-me-downs from an older cousin, this collection of movies quickly became my greatest childhood memories. The initial tapes marked the beginning of our family's growing collection, stored in the basement and neatly arranged on shelves beside the TV. Some are still there, collecting dust since we parted with our VHS player years ago. When the shelves eventually became full, my family started to visit the video rental store, instead of adding more tapes to our stash. We became regulars at this little shop, the local treasure trove for children's films. As simple as it seems, the VHS and these experiences left a mark on me. I now cherish the memories of spending weekends fixated on the TV screen; my gaze captivated by Disney princesses. Maybe it was the innocence of youth, or maybe it was a sign of the times, but life felt simpler back then. Movie nights proved this, gathering us in the basement, devoid of distractions

from cellphones or smartwatches. All eyes were focused on the TV, prompting shared laughs and conversations afterwards, creating the magical experiences that defined these genuine times.

The VHS, one of my childhood technologies, coexisted with other devices, such as the landline phone. These tools operated without the need for the internet, distinguishing them from their modern replacements like smart TVs and cellphones, which depend on stable connections. Looking back, the rise of the internet and internet-based technologies marked a leap in innovation, though it also coincided with complex social changes. In her article, "How the Loss of the Landline Is Changing Family Life," Julia Cho (2019) highlights the role of home phones as central points in households, which once brought families together into one, shared space. This sentiment extends to the VHS, which drew families, including mine, together to the TV. Cho explains how the emergence of modern devices altered communication within the home; the independence afforded through smartphones, tablets, and portable laptops means that relatives can manage their communications, among other tasks, on their own. In the context of the VHS, personal devices have even impacted the prized tradition of movie nights. With the decline of childhood technologies and the rise of individualized devices, the convenience of watching movies from the bedroom has replaced the communal atmosphere of crowded sofas. While movies may now go without interruption from parents or siblings, the loss of this gathering point has accounted for disconnection among families. Collectively debating the best character or predicting what will come next is long gone. Smartphones, as Cho describes in her article, have introduced "new silences" as we spend less time together and more time alone, communicating with each other online—can't sharing our Letterboxd profiles be sufficient?

Unlike the children of the 2000s, Gen X and Millennials witnessed both the beginning and the end of the VHS. At its rise in the 1980s, the VHS marked significant shifts in how media was consumed. Previous generations relied on scheduled TV programs or cinema showtimes,

having to plan their leisure hours. Thus, the emergence of technologies like the VHS gave more control over what, when, and how media was consumed. This decentralization challenged traditional structures dominated by broadcasting networks and cinema chains (Park, 2004). In turn, these changes affected social patterns and interactions. As previously mentioned, the rise of the VHS created new establishments such as video rental stores. These gathering points became bustling hubs for browsing and exchanging movie recommendations (Scheible, 2014). Now, we reminisce about Blockbuster Video, where the opportunities were seemingly endless. In addition, the VHS proliferated the number of movie genres. Filmmakers were no longer constrained to catering to a homogenous (e.g., White, suburban) audience. Niche genres reached outside of mainstream channels. People started tuning into their favourite content and no one was forced to watch ABC's "Movie of the Week"; media was individualized. This transformation in structures and social feelings toward media can be understood through Raymond Williams' concept of "Structures of Feeling," in which he argues that changes in material conditions can prompt significant shifts in common thought patterns (1978).

Williams also examines industry structures and broader economic forces, highlighting how each influences and reinforces the other. The introduction of VHS technology, for instance, transformed the business models of the film industry. Before then, TV programs and cinemas depended on advertising slots and box office sales. In contrast, the VHS enabled the sale and rental of physical copies of content. This change developed new business models, such as revenue-sharing agreements between filmmakers and rental stores, direct home video releases, and new licensing deals for content distribution. Further, the VHS had democratic effects. As audiences were presented with new options, competition intensified as producers and distributors vied for their attention. The economic effects of the VHS have been amplified in the modern era of media. In the 2000s, audiences witnessed more viewing options, which mirrors the current

abundance of content available across popular streaming platforms such as Netflix, Prime Video, and Crave. The VHS contributed to the acceleration of attention economies, where competitors treat audience attention as scarce commodities to be exploited. In brief, the effects of the VHS transcend its technological advancements, also serving as a precursor to the economics of content consumption that we see in our modern media landscape.

In sum, the VHS holds a special place in our memories, marking nights spent gathered around the TV, sharing one-of-a-kind experiences with our families. Now relegated to the shelves of our basements, VHS tapes serve as tangible reminders of these times. As new devices emerge to replace the old, social interaction within the home has undergone significant shifts; the individualism of personal gadgets replacing collective memories. Nonetheless, it was the VHS that cleared the path for these developments, bringing media into our homes for the first time and giving rise to new content genres that disrupted entire business models. As we continue to navigate the ever-changing landscape of new technologies and media, it is crucial to acknowledge the role of the VHS in creating the social fabrics and attention-based economies of the present era.

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Consuming Guilt: Modern Consumption as Sin

Jenna Farmer and Spencer Ridpath

Western University

Dr. Atle Mikkola Kjøsen

MediaCom 3216: Culture of Consumption

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Abstract

In modern consumer behaviour, a recurring pattern of indulgence and rationalization can be observed, which we term the "guilt-reparation cycle." In this cycle, consumers, after making hedonistic, attempt to compensate for their perceived irresponsibility by engaging in more 'rational' consumption. However, the cycle does not end here, as consumers inevitably return to hedonistic consumption. We argue that this cycle is driven by mechanisms of intense guilt and self-licensing. This paper examines the dynamics of this cycle, questioning the necessity of guilt stemming from hedonistic purchasing behaviour and exploring its potential origins, primarily through an application of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Further, it considers how this cycle has become increasingly harmful in an era of hyperconsumption and heightened ethical awareness.

After making a hedonistic purchase–defined here as an unnecessarily indulgent, desirefuelled purchase–consumers today often repent their hedonism through purchasing behaviours they perceive as more 'rational.' For instance, after indulging in takeout, a consumer might promise to make a trip to the grocery store to prepare healthier and more affordable meals in order to compensate for perceived irresponsible consumption. However, this rational purchase is rarely the end of hedonistic consumption. Instead, it becomes part of a cycle, that we call the guilt-reparation cycle, in which indulgent purchases and 'rational' reparations continuously reinforce each other.

Several studies (Kivetz and Simonson, 2002; de Witt Hubert et al., 2012; Khan and Dhar, 2006) propose potential drivers of this cycle between indulgence and rationalization. First, a study by Kivetz and Simonson (2002) offers insight into why people may make rational purchases to offset hedonistic ones. The study shows that choosing luxuries often triggers

feelings of guilt (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002, p. 157). This guilt creates a perceived need to 'earn' the right to indulge by pairing these luxuries with responsible or 'virtuous' actions (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002, p. 157).

While this guilt explains the cycle's rationalization phase, other studies explain how consumers eventually return to hedonistic purchases. Specifically, de Witt Hubert et al. (2012, pp. 490–491) and Khan and Dhar (2006) cite self-licensing: the permission consumers give themselves to indulge after a perceived act of self-control. Together, these studies contend that mechanisms of guilt and self-licensing underpin the guilt-reparation cycle.

This paper considers two elements of this cycle: first, it argues that modern consumers still link pleasure-seeking consumption to inherited notions of sin, which explains their feelings of guilt; and second, it examines how this association is increasingly harmful in an age marked by a combination of hyper-consumption, heightened ethical awareness, and ubiquitous advertising.

The idea of hedonistic consumption as a vice or sin appears in the Old and New Testaments. According to Christian teachings and beliefs, it all begins with the original sin, where Adam's self-indulgence in the forbidden fruit damns all humans to be born sinners (Genesis 3, New International Version). Other passages explicitly address the dangers of hedonistic consumption. For example, James 4:3 warns, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend it on your pleasures," while Proverbs 21:17 state, "Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich" (New International Version). Modern consumption remains linked to sin, reflected in the language used to refer to indulgent vs. rational purchases: guilt vs. responsibility; hedonic vs. utilitarian, and vice vs. virtue (Khan & Dhar, 2002, p. 260). For instance, a McDonald's sandwich ordered via UberEats is deemed a luxury (a vice), while a homemade sandwich is seen as rational and virtuous. Indulgent purchases are positioned, through language, as sin.

In addition, the weight of guilt present in the guilt-reparation cycle suggests a strong moral influence on consumers. Negative emotions tied to indulgence are not inherent to hedonic consumption, but rather influenced by other factors, potentially moral narratives surrounding sin. Bernard Mandeville (1732/2017) and Jeremy Bentham (1789/2000) offer alternate viewpoints on self-interested actions that show private vices need not provoke guilt. Mandeville's poem, "The Fable of The Bees," tells the story of a bee colony, living in harmony and working together to uphold their hive. As illustrated in the lines "[t]hus every part was full of vice, yet the whole mass a paradise," the bees' function successfully as a collective while each bee simultaneously possesses individual vices (1732/2017, p. 7). While the bees lived "in luxury and ease" under this system with vices, they complained about the corruption of this selfishness and idealized a society without it (p. 4). One day, the god Jove comes and fulfills their wishes, removing "the bawling hive of fraud…"—their vices—in order to make the hive completely 'virtuous' (p. 8). When the hive has their personal vices taken away, however, their society collapses (pp. 8-12). The central message of the poem is encapsulated in its final

> stanza: So vice is beneficial found, when it's by justice
> lopped and bound; nay, where the people would be great, as
> necessary to the state, as hunger is to make them eat.
> Bare virtue can't make nations live… (p.12)

Here, Mandeville argues that vice, like hunger for eating, is essential for a society to thrive. He suggests that vices such as greed are beneficial; as when controlled by justice, these vices fuel individual ambition and desire, contributing to the strength and prosperity of both the individual and consequently the state. The line "Bare virtue can't make nations live" communicates this point succinctly (p. 12). We argue that Mandeville therefore rejects the need for guilt when acting upon vices, which we extend to hedonistic consumption. Mandeville's

perspective is arguably too extreme, as it potentially removes all sense of guilt from selfindulgent actions. Certainly

some vices, while legal and economically stimulating, are not entirely beneficial and should not be indulged without caution.

Utilitarianism perhaps finds a middle ground, as it defines morally sound actions as those which provide "the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers" (Driver, 2009, sec. 1). Jeremy Bentham (1789/2000) followed this definition, and equated "happiness" with outcomes such as benefit, advantage, good, and—notably for our purposes—pleasure (p. 14). Bentham therefore advocated for decisions and actions which provided the greatest pleasure for the greatest number. Relating this to consumption, Bentham would likely not wholeheartedly support hedonistic purchases, but also would not condemn them.

From Bentham's ideas, we derive our definition of a rational purchase, which is essential as we juxtapose the rational with the hedonic in our discussion. A rational purchase, for our purposes, is the purchase of a product intended to provide utility. As mentioned, Bentham defined utility as the ability of an object to "produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness" or to prevent the opposite (1789/2000, p. 14). Thus, a rational purchase is not limited to necessities that support basic subsistence but also includes purchases that bring pleasure and happiness. Since Bentham emphasizes judging utility by weighing how an action provides pleasure versus pain, an essential element of a rational purchase is an effort to maximize utility through actions such as evaluating alternatives to ensure the chosen option offers greater usefulness, taking into account factors like quality, durability, and overall value (1789/2000, p. 15). Since a rational purchase involves minimizing pain, wealth and value must be taken into consideration in addition to pleasure. An individual's financial situation, in relation to the cost of

an item, can significantly influence their overall utility; a purchase that creates financial strain may ultimately reduce happiness despite the product's pleasure provision.

Bentham argues that an action aligns with the principle of utility "when the tendency it has to augment the happiness of the community is greater than any it has to diminish it" (1789/2000, p. 15). While this might suggest that the community should supersede the individual, Bentham acknowledges that the interest of the community can be expressed as "the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it…" and states that an individual is a party whose interest should be considered (1789/2000, p. 15). Therefore, in the case of ordering takeout, if it brings pleasure to the individual and others involved (e.g., workers and delivery driver), Bentham would not necessarily see it as problematic. Hence, Bentham's view on pleasure-seeking behaviour contrasts with the guilt-reparation cycle: if pleasure is the outcome of a moral decision, no reparation is needed.

Mandeville and Bentham both challenge the guilt-laden approach to consumerism observed in the guilt-reparation cycle, though from different standpoints. Mandeville argues self-interest is inherently beneficial, while Bentham believes it is beneficial if it maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain. Neither view suggests a need for guilt or moral reparations for hedonic purchases. Yet, guilt persists in the cycle. What explains this? Why can one not, like Mandeville and Bentham, see hedonistic consumption as morally neutral or even beneficial, rather than inherently sinful?

A potential explanation can be found in Max Weber's classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* where he links Calvinist beliefs, particularly that of predestination—the idea that only a select few are 'elected' by God for salvation—to the rise of capitalism (1901/2001, pp. 59-61). Calvinists viewed material success from productive work as a sign of being chosen for salvation, while pursuing wealth for its own sake was seen as immoral (Weber, 1901/2001, p. 157). Following this belief, many Calvinists started businesses that amassed

wealth, which they would then reinvest back into the business rather than spending it. As such, they demonstrated material success and therefore being one of God's elect (p. 116).

Weber, writing at the beginning of the 20th century, argued that the beliefs and economic activities of the Calvinists contributed to the growth of capitalism, proposing that its roots are linked to these Calvinist values and other protestant beliefs (pp. 102-125). While capitalism has evolved greatly since its beginnings and even since Weber's time, if the Calvinist ideas of virtues can be tied to the origins of capitalism, it then seems plausible that their ideas of vice and sin may also remain entwined in capitalism. A significant vice to Calvinists was hedonistic consumption—whether indulging in luxuries or simply sleeping more than strictly necessary—that was worthy of "absolute moral condemnation" (p. 110).

Given the intertwined relationship between consumption and sin, what are the implications? As society's patterns of consumption have evolved, the guilt-reparation cycle has arguably become harder to avoid and more psychologically damaging.

Firstly, the number of consumer goods that can be viewed as indulgent has increased significantly since the Industrial Revolution (McKendrick, 1982, pp. 1, 19). As the scope of luxury goods broadens, the more difficult they are to avoid. In addition, as they become accessible to more and more consumers, their ontology changes – what were once luxuries become 'decencies' and then become 'necessities' (McKendrick, 1982, p. 1). It is possible that, if one still holds some of the Calvinist ideas of sin, even though our perception of goods has changed, our guilt has not. Consumers often feel guilt for indulgent purchases despite what counts as indulgent in a contemporary context.

Secondly, it can be argued that there is no escaping consumption today, as our culture has come to revolve around it. Anthony Giddens observed that in our society, "we have no choice but to choose" (1991, p. 81). While consumers may choose what to purchase, opting out of

consumption altogether is rarely a real option. For instance, while consumers have the choice between ordering takeout or shopping at a grocery store to make food at home, they must choose between those options.

To use our earlier example, ordering takeout can be costly and may involve underpaid workers, but the alternative of grocery shopping is not perfect either. Shopping at the larger, and often more accessible, grocery chains such as Loblaws often means supporting corporations that ultimately care most about profit, and benefit from rising food inflation that is harmful to many people (The Canadian Press, 2024).

Today, the prevalence of ethical considerations in modern consumption further amplifies consumer guilt. Ethical consumption is when "people base their purchasing decisions on their moral evaluation of objects for sale, the ways they are produced and distributed, and the companies that offer them" (Carrier, 2008, pp. 31–32). Ethical consumption also functions as a signaling device in the market, where purchases communicate individuals' morals and values to others (Carrier, 2008, p. 32).

Since everyone exists in the capitalist mode of production, it is extremely rare for individuals to sustain themselves independently, meaning without recourse to the market. The 'compulsory choice' forces us to consume, and then ethical consumption creates the pressure of purchases reflecting and communicating our morals and character. Often, the more a consumer reflects on their choices, the more likely they are to experience guilt which pulls them into the guilt-reparation cycle.

Another key factor amplifying the harmful effects of the guilt-reparation cycle is advertising. By using emotional and rational appeals—sometimes simultaneously or at different times for the same product—advertising has blurred the lines between hedonic and rational products to persuade consumers to buy them. One emotional appeal strategy involves

emphasizing the pleasure a product provides rather than its practical use (Moore and Li, 2012, p. 107). This helps consumers picture themselves in the moment of consumption and imagine how enjoyable the experience would be (Moore and Li, 2012, p. 107). Rational appeals, on the other hand, focus on using "detailed information or compelling and logical arguments" to convince the consumer to purchase the product (Zhang et al. 2014, p. 2106). When consumers are constantly exposed to these appeals—especially when both strategies are used simultaneously or at different times for the same product—it can arguably become confusing. It makes it difficult for consumers to distinguish which purchases are hedonic and which are ostensibly necessary. For example, if a burger was promoted based on price and its nutritional value, as long as the price seemed reasonable for the nutrients a customer receives in exchange, it could be a guilt free purchase as everyone needs to eat to survive. However, if a consumer saw the same burger in a McDonald's ad with an entire spread of the brand's food, then guilt may be back on the table because…

Advertising companies employ whichever strategies will maximize sales and revenue for them, often appealing to our hedonistic side (Moore and Li, 2012, pp. 1-2). This approach creates profit for them, but also produces the byproduct of guilt within us as ads provide often incomplete or biased information. Since consumers only realize a product's true utilitarian value after purchase—when it is too late—they make amends for our irrationality by purchasing products presented to us as rational.

It seems there is no escape from the guilt that surrounds consumerism, yet, at the same time, there is no escape from consumerism itself. Individuals must constantly choose consumer goods, with advertising making these choices even more difficult. More often than not, any choice they make leads us into the guilt-reparation cycle. Perhaps, in this cycle, consumption has supplanted God as the invisible deity that consumers both sin against and look to for sanction.

The guilt-reparation cycle between indulgence and reparation arguably influences consumption patterns today. While it is important to consider the impact of purchases, there is no need for guilt that drives a need to atone for indulgence. An association between consumption and sin, potentially inherited from Calvinist beliefs, may explain this guilt, however. Recognizing this cycle is crucial. When left unnoticed, it can harm psychological well-being. When identified, it prompts reflection: consumers must question whether post-purchase guilt stems from personal values or societal constructs of what is "good" or "bad," "virtuous" or "sinful." And perhaps, in reflection, salvation can be found.

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The Dual Edge of Convenience: *Amazon's "1-Click" Feature and the Paradox of Consumer Sovereignty*

Emma Honey

Western University

MEDIACOM 3216F 001: Culture of Consumption

Dr. Atle Mikkola Kjøsen

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Abstract

Amazon's "1-Click" shopping feature revolutionized digital retail by streamlining the purchasing process, enhancing convenience, and reducing transactional friction. Drawing on theories of consumer sovereignty, behavioral economics, and digital platform capitalism, this paper explores how "1-Click" technology undermines consumer autonomy by limiting deliberation, reinforcing habitual consumption patterns and leveraging cognitive biases. The following analysis will examine Amazon's use of patents, intellectual property strategies, and algorithmic personalization to shape market competition and influence consumer choice. While "1-Click" enhances efficiency, it paradoxically diminishes consumer agency by removing frictions from the buying process, encouraging impulsive purchases without time for reflection or comparison, thus challenging traditional economic notions of rational decision making. As digital commerce evolves, addressing transparency, algorithmic bias, and ethical concerns will be crucial in understanding the bounds of consumer sovereignty in online marketplaces.

Amazon, a global leader in digital retail, has redefined how consumers engage with online shopping. Among its many innovations, the "1-Click" shopping feature has transformed e-commerce by introducing unparalleled simplicity and speed in purchasing. This patented feature, launched in 1999, eliminated the traditional multi-step checkout process by storing payment and shipping information, allowing consumers to complete purchases with a single click (Hartman et al., 1999). Its influence extended beyond Amazon, shaping the standards of convenience across the entire digital retail landscape (Madrigal, A.C, 2018). However, as groundbreaking as "1-Click" is, it raises critical questions about its impact on consumer sovereignty. How does Amazon's "1-Click" shopping feature both empower and manipulate consumer sovereignty in the context of digital retail spaces? While Amazon's "1-Click" shopping feature embodies the ideals of consumer sovereignty by streamlining the purchasing

process and providing instant accessibility it simultaneously undermines consumer autonomy through mechanisms of manipulation, such as impulse-driven design and predictive algorithms (Verplanken and Sato, 2011). This duality highlights the complexities of digital consumerism, where convenience often comes at the cost of genuine choice and agency.

Consumer sovereignty, as defined within digital marketplaces, refers to the consumer's assumed autonomy and freedom to choose goods and services that best align with their needs and desires, shaping the supply and demand within free market economies. Rooted in Adam Smith's classical liberalism, the concept portrays consumers as "market sovereigns," whose purchasing decisions drive production and distribution (Reisch, 2011). However, behavioral economics, such as the work of Thaler and Sunstein on *Nudge Theory,* complicates this ideal by pointing out how often consumers deviate from this supposed rationality. Factors like one's personal cognitive bias, and preference for heuristic mental shortcuts undermine the assumption of fully informed rational decision-making (Reisch, 2011). In the context of Amazon, nudge theory presents itself through personalized recommendations, predictive algorithms, and the "1-click" shopping feature. Digital platforms leverage immediacy and convenience to bypass processes of debate by the consumer. Amazon's "1-Click" purchasing system exemplifies this manipulation by eliminating moments of friction where consumers might reconsider a purchase. This mechanism relies on the psychology of instant gratification and taps into impulsive tendencies, which are heightened when the consumer is presented with an abundance of choice (Reisch, 2011 Edgar and Sedgwick, 1999). This example is a display of the structural dynamics within digital platforms that reflect a tension between supposed consumer sovereignty and the overarching algorithms that guide consumer behavior. This observation contradicts the neoliberal principle on which the theory of consumer sovereignty stands. In the school of neoliberalism, consumers are seen as continually 'voting' with their purchasing choices, positioning the market as a kind of democratic forum. However, this idealized vision overlooks

the structural limitations and asymmetries in knowledge, power, and access that constrain meaningful consumer agency (Borna et al., 2024). Digital platforms such as Amazon reinforce the illusion of autonomy by offering personalized recommendations and algorithmically curated experiences that nudge consumer behavior in subtle yet powerful ways (Edgar and Sedgwick, 1999). Digital consumerism thus operates through a paradox: it simultaneously appeals to the consumer's desire for agency while enabling forms of manipulation that serve the profit imperatives of platform capitalism.

The "1-click" ordering system, patent No. US 59604111999, by Amazon in 1999 introduced a system that stores payment and shipping details, allowing users to complete purchases with a single click (Hartman et al., 1999). This innovation laid the groundwork for what is now commonplace in today's e-commerce landscape. The broader implications of this patent lies in the corporate tendency to straddle the line between protecting intellectual property and stifling competition all in the pursuit of becoming a monopoly. With that, the patent gained widespread attention. The 1-Click patent was critical to Amazon's success, yet it also sparked considerable controversy over whether its core innovation – streamlining the checkout process into a single click – met the legal threshold of non-obviousness, a key requirement for patentability. The debate intensified when Amazon took pointed legal action to enforce the patent against Barnes and Noble. Due to the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office's (USPTO)'s limited expertise in the then-nascent tech industry, it granted overly broad patents- an oversight that Amazon strategically leveraged to its advantage. The company continued to use this strategy until the patent's expiration in 2017 (Wells, 2001).

The 1-Click patent played a crucial role in establishing Amazon's brand identity, showcasing how patent exclusivity can enhance a company's reputation. Known for its user friendliness and speed, Amazon's brand was closely tied to the 1-Click feature, which became a key selling point for customers. Even after the patent expired, Amazon retained a trademark on

the term "1-Click," preventing competitors from using it to describe their similar features (United States Patent and Trademark Office, 2012). However, there is a risk that the term could become so common that it loses its trademark protection (a phenomenon known as genericide) (Wells, 2001). By the time the patent expired in 2017, half of Amazon app users were regularly using 1-Click. The exclusivity provided by the patent gave Amazon two decades to build strong brand recognition and link the technology directly to its name. For example, Amazon's Go stores have been described as the "physical manifestation" of 1-Click checkout, emphasizing its convenience-focused branding (Madrigal, 2018).

When the 1-Click patent expired in 2017, it opened the door for new companies to adopt similar technology, significantly shaping the e-commerce industry. Fast checkout systems became a standard tool to improve conversion rates across platforms (Clearco, 2021). For instance, numerous companies have started offering similar services, and major payment platforms like Apple Pay and ShopPay launched fast checkout features after the patent was no longer in effect.

Its legacy continues across e-commerce platforms, displaying how transformative the development of this technology and the maintenance of intellectual property is in shaping the digital economy. The psychology of impulsive purchases is a phenomenon in both on and offline retail spaces. Traditionally speaking, the checkout line in any given physical store leverages product proximity and emotional triggers. Items like candy or magazines, placed strategically near payment counters, lay the perfect trap for unplanned purchases right at the customer's approach to the cashier. This tactic capitalizes on the short-term impulsivity that occurs in moments of waiting and boredom (Verplanken and Sato, 2011).

In the digital sphere, platforms like Amazon replicate and amplify these tactics through personalized algorithms and recommendations. Amazon's use of predictive analytics creates a virtual 'checkout line' by suggesting items based on a user's browsing history, past purchases,

and demographic data. This strategy heightens the already raised impulsivity at checkout by presenting products in an emotionally charged, contextually relevant way, often accompanied by a subtle, “Customers who bought this also bought” or “Only a few left in stock” sentiment. These techniques tap into the consumer tendency to rely on shortcuts or emotional responses rather than deliberate evaluation (Verplanken and Sato, 2011). The constant visibility of tailored suggestions ensures that the digital storefront stays ever evolving and relevant to the individual. Unlike the temporary physical proximity of a checkout line, Amazon’s strategies ensure psychological proximity, as users find themselves presented with eerily curated options aligned with all the things they did not realize they needed.

While Amazon’s strategies are impressive, they are not alone in their efforts to shape consumer behaviour. Competing platforms like Alibaba, eBay, and Walmart similarly employ personalization algorithms and targeted advertising to drive sales, each adapting its approach to different consumer needs. For example, platforms with stronger social media integration, such as Facebook Marketplace and Instagram Shopping, leverage social influence and peer recommendations to a greater extent, capitalizing on the human tendency toward imitation and social proof, in this case, product reviews, influencer endorsements and visibly engagement metrics; likes, comments (Borna et al. 2024). This taps into a fundamental aspect of cultural adaptation, where consumers align their choices with trends and behaviors modelled by others.

These platforms, whether Amazon or its competitors, rely on layered architectures that enable seamless interactions between business processes, applications, and infrastructure. Modular designs allow third-party developers to enhance functionality, contributing to the overall consumer experience. For instance, Shopify’s "headless architecture" allows retailers to differentiate their storefronts while maintaining standardized backend systems (Wulfert and Karger, 2022, pg. 6). The integration of cloud-based services ensures scalability, enabling these

platforms to handle peak demand while remaining agile enough to respond to shifts in market behavior. This layered framework is central to the way digital platforms shape the future of e-commerce, enabling them to not only serve immediate consumer needs but also to continuously adapt to evolving digital commerce trends.

Consumers have the right to understand how these algorithms function and how their data is being used to shape their online experiences. However, the complex nature of these algorithms, often protected as trade secrets, makes it difficult for consumers to gain meaningful insight into their workings (Wulfert and Karger, 2022). Bias is another major concern. Algorithms are trained on data that reflects our existing societal biases, amplifying said biases in their recommendations. It stands as a clear pipeline towards discriminatory outcomes, limiting access to certain products and services based on factors like race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Borne et al., 2024). The increasing reliance on data-driven personalization raises serious privacy concerns. The constant collection and analysis of consumer data, often without explicit consent or adequate safeguards, erodes individual privacy and creates opportunities for misuse (Borna et al., 2024).

Traditional economic theories assume that consumers exercise rational choice, evaluating costs and benefits before making a purchase. However, "1-Click" technology exploits cognitive biases—such as the tendency toward instant gratification and heuristic decision making—by removing any friction from the purchasing process (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). By limiting moments of hesitation, Amazon effectively bypasses the consumer's opportunity to compare alternatives, creating a closed-loop consumption cycle in which we see past preferences dictate future choices. This practice aligns with Galbraith's "revised sequence" theory, wherein corporations, rather than consumers, determine the market's supply and demand (Galbraith, 1967, pg. 263). Ultimately, the illusion of effortless purchasing masks a significant

shift in power: consumers are nudged toward pre-selected options while their autonomy in making informed, independent purchasing decisions diminishes.

Amazon's "1-Click" shopping feature epitomizes the dichotomy at the heart of modern digital consumerism. On one hand, it empowers consumers by simplifying the purchasing process and prioritizing convenience, aligning with the ideals of consumer sovereignty. On the other hand, it subtly manipulates consumer autonomy through predictive algorithms, impulse-driven design, and the strategic use of behavioral nudges. This tension reflects broader trends in e-commerce, where digital platforms balance the promise of agency with strategies that maximize profit. As this landscape evolves, questions about transparency, bias, and privacy demand greater scrutiny. Addressing these challenges will be essential to ensure that convenience-driven commerce remains ethical, equitable, and sustainable in the future.

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How the Queer Gaze in Lucy Dacus' "Night Shift" Music Video Challenges the Male Gaze

Sophia Melluso

Western University

MIT 3201: Sexuality and the Media

Dr. Andie Shabbar

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the presence of the queer gaze in Lucy Dacus' 2023 music video for "Night Shift" and how it is used to challenge Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. The paper looks at the positive implications of Dacus and her director, Jane Schoenbrun, depicting lesbian desire through a queer perspective. This paper explains the music video's use of *The Wizard of Oz* imagery as an ode to queer culture, furthering Dacus and Schoenbrun's narrative of multi-faceted queer relationships existing beyond the male gaze's objectification. This paper analyzes costumes, makeup, and romantic interactions to understand how "Night Shift" aligns with queer looking relations. Overall, this paper argues that "Night Shift" has positive implications for the queer community by representing lesbian desire as meaningful, rather than sexualized.

Lucy Dacus is a queer female artist who is known for her alternative solo music style and her role in boygenius, a band comprised of Dacus and two other queer female artists. In 2023, Dacus released a music video for her most popular song, "Night Shift," directed by Jane Schoenbrun. Using a *Wizard of Oz* theme, the music video shows longing, self-discovery, and desire through a queer lens. Dacus stars as the main character who works a mundane job at a *Wizard of Oz* fan convention and watches as queer couples in costume kiss in front of her, while her expression suggests that she longs for that same connection. After finding a red sparkly boot, she enters the party dressed as a witch and finds a woman dressed as Dorothy, who had lost her boot. They are drawn to each other and kiss on the dance floor, providing Dacus with the romantic connection she desired. I argue that this music video employs the queer gaze to reject Laura Mulvey's (1999) theory of the male gaze. This rejection occurs by portraying lesbian desire through a queer lens, looking beyond the male/female gender binary that Mulvey

emphasizes, and avoiding elements of hypersexualization and objectification that are implicit in the male gaze. Mulvey (1999) coined the term 'male gaze' to explain how Hollywood cinema constructs female characters as images for male characters and the male audience to look at and project their erotic fantasies onto. Dacus and Schoenbrun work to limit the potential of a fetishizing lesbian relationship that would typically adhere to the male gaze. This music video has positive implications for the queer community by representing lesbian desire as something meaningful and romantic that can be achieved, rather than merely a spectacle for men.

Mulvey's theory of the male gaze relies on the existence of an essentialist male/female binary which does not account for diverse looking relations, such as a queer female spectator looking at a female character. The term 'looking relations' originates from how black female spectators "contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent" Hollywood cinema (hooks, 1992, p. 128). It is relevant in the discussion of the male gaze, as this gaze does not consider how women can also be attracted to women. Thus, when queer women look at media made for the male gaze, they take on an oppositional perspective, creating a different looking relation than what the director intended to produce. Further, the male gaze denies scopophilic pleasure to female spectators as they are forced to identify with the sexualized depiction of the onscreen female character, rather than fulfill their human drive to look at others in a lustful way (Mulvey, 1999). Thus, under Mulvey's theory, on-screen displays of lesbian sexuality are coded solely for male pleasure, rather than seen as meaningful representations or a point of desire for the queer female audience. Consequently, as Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman (1995) point out, there is no space in Mulvey's theory of the male gaze to account for and to understand queer looking relations. Rather, queer desire is often sexualized and objectified, which has been evident throughout the history of music videos. For example, t.A.T.u.'s music video for "All The Things

She Said", focuses on lesbian sexuality from close-up angles in slow-motion clips, which positions it for the male viewer's pleasure (Freeman, 2019). Dacus and Schoenbrun, however, employ the queer gaze by using non-revealing costumes and makeup inspired by *The Wizard of Oz*, which remove elements of hypersexualization that are often associated with onscreen lesbian relationships seen through the male gaze. Many of the characters who are shown kissing have prosthetic noses, coloured face paint, or large, whimsical costumes that cover their bodies and their hair. Mulvey (1999) references close-ups of a woman's legs or her face as elements of eroticism, but these features are covered up in the music video, which denies the opportunity for objectification. The "Night Shift" music video therefore rejects Mulvey's theory by portraying lesbian relationships that are not targeted toward the male gaze and thereby allows for queer looking relations and scopophilia.

One could argue that the use of *The Wizard of Oz* costumes and themes in the music video aligns with heteronormative assumptions of queer sexuality by framing queer relationships as fictional and unusual. However, Dacus and Schoenbrun's choice to center the music video around the theme is actually a further rejection of Mulvey's male gaze. *The Wizard of Oz* has notions of the queer gaze embedded in its storyline and has become a symbol of queerness amongst the LGBTQ+ community for its celebration of oddness (Pugh, 2008). In L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy is transported to a country filled with nature and bright colours that sharply contrasts with the dull setting of Kansas. She encounters Munchkins and various other unique characters that she has never seen before. These characters can be classified as 'the other,' similar to how queer people are viewed within the male gaze. Dorothy accepts the other and embraces the new world that she has come across. This story can be read as a metaphor for rejecting fixed notions of sexuality and gender to embody a more fluid identity (Robbins,

2018). Dacus' experience in the music video mirrors that of Dorothy's as she steps away from her unfulfilling job to enter the *Wizard of Oz* party where she is faced with people in costumes of diverse gender and sexual identities. The juxtaposition between these whimsical costumes with the banality of the community center is jarring and resembles the similar contrast between Kansas and Oz. In both Dacus and Dorothy's cases, this switch in scenery can be seen as disorienting and unfamiliar at first, but, overall, ends up being a liberating change. Their experiences can represent a step away from Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and its restrictive, binary characteristics, and the transition toward the fluid principles of the queer gaze.

Despite the existence of the queer gaze, Evans and Gamman (1995) argue that there is no specific 'lesbian gaze,' but that lesbian directors and audiences bring their own cultural experiences and knowledge into looking relations. As a queer artist and a queer director, Dacus and Schoenbrun inform the cinematography and messaging in the music video with their own experiences and identities. The artist and director have the ability to control how gender and sexuality are portrayed, and Dacus and Schoenbrun chose to construct a meaningful representation of lesbian desire that appeals to a queer female audience. Their influence is evident through the song lyrics and how they connect to the narrative of the video. Specifically, the line "Pay for my coffee and leave before the sun goes down, walk for hours in the dark feeling all hell" (Dacus 1:47). This line portrays the emotional aspects of experiencing the ending of a relationship, rather than reducing lesbian relationships to a purely physical and sexual encounter. The "Night Shift" music video, thus, communicates an intimate and romantic portrayal of lesbian desire without being overtly sexualized or exaggerated. Both the lyrics and plot of the music video construct a multi-faceted, realistic notion of queer sexuality that the queer female audience can relate to and identify with.

As argued above, Mulvey's (1999) theory of the male gaze relies on binary ways of thinking whereas the queer gaze is characterized by its multiplicity and fluidity. Central to the male gaze is a male/female gender binary where men are active spectators and women are passive figures to be looked at by men (Mulvey, 1999). This way of thinking forces people into a role and denies them agency. On the basis that identity is fluid, the queer gaze refuses to assume that one's identity informs their looking relations in an essentialist way (Evans & Gamman, 1995). Dacus' "Night Shift" music video disrupts Mulvey's binary and aligns with principles of the queer gaze by making female characters central to the storyline of the video, rather than reducing them to a passive, sexualized role. Evans and Gamman (1995) highlight how everyone employs a different gaze when they are watching cinema based on their personal experiences and cultural influences. Dacus reiterates this point by using imagery and lyricism that affords queer women the ability to be active spectators and take on a looking relation that Mulvey would typically reserve for male spectators. In "Night Shift", Dacus sings "Am I a masochist, resisting urges to punch you in the teeth, call you a bitch and leave?" (Dacus 1:10). This line shows Dacus taking on an active role in her relationship where she displays emotions and makes decisions for herself. Her actions thus reject the male gaze by challenging Mulvey's fixed categories of men as active and women as passive, whilst embodying the fluidity of the queer gaze.

Media portrayals, like Dacus' "Night Shift" music video, that display lesbian relationships as meaningful and emotional and show women as active spectators that exercise agency over their looking relations have important implications for societal values. This type of representation is crucial for fostering positive attitudes around the queer community. Due to the concise format of music videos, there is typically no room for a profound representation of sexuality, especially, lesbian sexuality (Freeman, 2019). However, music videos are powerful

tools that communicate acceptable behaviours and ideals to audiences (Freeman, 2019). Thus, it is necessary that artists and directors use imagery and lyricism that communicate a nuanced portrayal of lesbian relationships so that audiences will view them as emotional, multi-faceted experiences that extend beyond hypersexuality. Dacus' "Night Shift" music video challenges the constraints of short-form music videos by delivering a storyline of lesbian desire that emphasizes the emotional and romantic aspects of a queer relationship, rather than showing a sexualizing and objectifying depiction based on stereotypes of lesbian sexuality. *The Wizard of Oz* theme throughout the video is an ode to queer culture, which furthers the principles of the queer gaze that Dacus highlights in the music video. Dacus representing lesbian desire as something beyond a spectacle for the male gaze will encourage people to view it in a more positive light.

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The Internet and the New Media Age: Must the Digital Public Space be a Public Sphere to Foster Democracy?

Lea O’Flaherty

Western University

Dr. Atle Mikkola Kjøsen

MIT 3100: Information & The Public Sphere

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Abstract

This paper critiques the academic rhetoric insisting that public spaces must "transcend" or level up to the status of Jürgen Habermas' Public Sphere and challenges the idea that if a public space is unable to meet the Public Sphere's outdated criteria, it is not viable for the formation of democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville's foundational pillars to inspiring democracy highlight the formation of public opinion as a key feature, and I assert this to be possible in spaces like the internet, despite academic rhetoric dismissing them as unfit for the Public Sphere. Rather than dismissing the internet's democratic potential, this paper argues for a re-evaluation of how democracy functions in the digital age, beyond the confines of the traditional public sphere. Through cases like the Black Lives Matter movement, the internet proves instrumental in shaping public opinion and fostering democratic action despite not fitting the rigidity of Habermas' democratic theory.

Define democracy. Can such ambiguity be distilled into a few principles? Alexis de Tocqueville articulated a definition of democracy in his work *Democracy in America* which, since the 19th century, has played a significant role in shaping how society understands the political concept. Democracy, Tocqueville believed, "depends upon the circulation of information, common sites for the formation of public opinion, and an individual character that embraces volunteerism through associations, both formal and informal" (Kahn 2024). Of these three pillars, Tocqueville's second stands out: a democratic society aims to empower its people and, as such, allowing the space for public opinion to be formed is paramount (Kahn 2024); how are the public's needs to be addressed without the necessary discursive arenas allowing the public to opinionize what their needs are?

Habermas theorized the concept of the public sphere to understand how and under what conditions public opinion is formed (1991), i.e., Tocqueville's key pillar. Habermas asserts that a

public sphere, the breeding ground that facilitates the conception of public opinion, exists under three conditions: 1) a public sphere is a domain of common concern where private people come together to discuss common interests, not private matters, through rational-critical debate; 2) it is inclusive, thus all citizens are allowed access (Gripsrud 2020); and 3) social status is bracketed meaning citizens are to disregard their ethnicity, gender, class, etc. when deliberating public matters (Fraser 2021). The criteria constituting the very vehicle that—according to Habermas—allows for the conception of a public opinion are problematic when analyzed in present times as these superannuated criteria are conducive only to the simplicity of the media that dominated at the time of the public sphere's emergence: printed press. In this media age, the speed and volume at which information was disseminated to the public were confined by the capacity limitations of human labour and the physical printing machine while the content pushed through was factchecked, edited, and less sensationalized pre-commodification of the news (Habermas 1991). The printed press could not evade spatial and temporal bounds like the internet, nor did it afford the ability for just anyone to publish content freely as one can in the digital space, regardless of its accuracy, appropriateness, or sensitivity (Sadiku 130). Moreover, the scope of information circulated through printed papers focused on "decrees, arrangements, other matters… suitable for the public" (Habermas 1991); the content feeding the public and thus feeding public opinion was not littered with clickbait or personal stories archetypal of social media, thereby affording a streamlined discussion about general public matters. The printed press as it existed to conceive the public sphere was made to inform, not to entertain which is a fundamental difference between the media environments of 18th-century England and today (Sadiku 2023). Yet, these criteria cemented on a public that emerged at the juncture of a specific socioeconomic time dominated by a rudimentary medium of communication are used as the standard to dictate whether the formation of public opinion is legitimized. Where, then, does the internet stand in

helping to facilitate the formation of public opinion, thereby empowering democracy? If the digital public space's complexities cannot fit the narrow criteria of an 18th-century public sphere, can the internet spur legitimate democratic action?

Academics like Zizi Papacharissi suggest not. In her article, "The Virtual Sphere" (2018), Papacharissi explores the internet's suitability to becoming a public sphere. She frames the internet's public space as invaluable *until* it has fulfilled the criteria of a public sphere, arguing that "the internet presents a public space, but does not yet constitute a public sphere" (Papacharissi 2018); the digital public space merely "hold[s] the promise of reviving the public sphere" in its current form (Papacharissi 2018). Why must the public sphere be revived? Why must "this relatively new medium… manage to transcend from public space to a public, virtual sphere" (Papacharissi 2018)? Why can the digital public space not exist as it is without the expectation of rising to something greater? The language Papacharissi uses to describe digital public spaces suggests the internet's inadequacy in fortifying democracy without first metamorphosing into a public sphere. Not only is this transcendence impossible given the time specificity in which Habermas' public sphere arose and its subsequent confining structural criteria, but framing a public space as the mere underdeveloped subordinate to a public sphere undermines its ability to inspire public participation. The internet's structure emboldens and rewards discourse that ultimately cannot meet the criteria of a public sphere, and that is *okay*; the digital public space need not conform or be altered for democracy to be empowered.

Papacharissi fosters an academic rhetoric that is holding its breath for the digital public space to evolve into a fully formed public sphere with the "yet"-s, "whether"-or-not-s, and questions of "manag[ing] to transcend" (2018), but I argue this transcendence simply cannot occur if we retain Habermas' criteria of a public sphere. Examining the criterion of bracketing

social status, the algorithms that give life to social media make it such that zero-degree culture cannot be achieved. As of 2024, the average 2.5 hours per day users spend engaging with TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, etc. make up more than one-third of their total daily internet usage (Kemp 2024). A platform's success is marked by its ability to attract and retain users, so these platforms are incentivized to cultivate algorithms that promote highly tailored content to ensure digital participants continue devoting their attention and perpetually return. According to Zarouali et al.'s research (2020), individuals react better to content on their social media timelines "when they are congruent with their own self-concept" which is essentially "the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object". This suggests that individuals prefer to consume content and engage with it more willingly when the content reflects themselves in some capacity. Whether that relatability is established via similarities in age, gender, sexual orientation, vocation, etc., individuals like content more when they can see themselves in it. This relatability is thus a coveted feature platforms strive to adopt and as such, platforms add "personality-congruent targeting" to their black-box algorithms (Zarouali et al. 2020). Personality-congruent targeting observes users' online behaviour to infer their personality traits and other social identity markers to deliberately personalize the content on their social media feeds (Zarouali et al. 2020; Swart 2021). This personality-congruent targeting, in turn, maximizes the platform's engagement as it appeals to users' implicit preference of seeing themselves reflected in what they consume. With over one-third of internet activity transpiring on platforms that intentionally manipulate content to appeal to the very status markers that are to be shed in the public sphere (Kemp 2024), bracketing social status and creating a level of "zerodegree culture" on which to deliberate public matters cannot happen so long as algorithms disseminate much of the content we consume (Fraser 2021). Given an algorithm is the very

feature that powers new media technologies (Gran 2020), a digital space void of this feature is virtually unimaginable.

The digital space's inherent inability to serve as a place where participants' social status is bracketed is not the only criterion of a public sphere its architecture is unequipped to fit; the discussions that occur in cyberspace are far from concentrated on public concern. To Habermas, the public sphere hosted 'a body of "private persons" assembled to discuss matters of "public concern" or "common interest"' to bridge the gap between what the public body wants—its opinions, needs, and interests—and how the state operates (Fraser 2021). In fact, a main critique of the public sphere was that many important matters of private life were "delegitimized" (Fraser 2021), deemed "not a matter of common concern… decided through discursive contestation" and thus held "no proper place in the political public sphere" (Fraser 2021). Evidently, the public sphere would not be swayed from forming a consensus on *common* concerns, thus private matters were quickly stifled. This is not the case in the digital space. Interspersed between content that applies broadly to the general public is content relevant only to creators' private lives, yet it exists in this public space receiving attention, engagement, and warranting discussion. Within minutes of opening TikTok, I can be made privy to a stranger's $500 Shein haul or learn the intimate details of how someone caught their cheating ex-partner. Neither are topics that would catch fire in Habermas' public sphere. But online? Users love it. A topical example of such private matters inciting mass attention and deliberation is the Brooke Schofield and Clinton Kane drama that took TikTok by storm. In a 14-part series called "Who TF Did I Marry?" (2024), Schofield recounts how she was lied to and manipulated by her infamous exboyfriend. This series outlining events uniquely experienced by Schofield garnered over

10,000,000 likes, over 50,000 comments, and a whopping 113,400,000 views (2024).

Engagement or deliberation on such a private matter should conceivably never transpire in the

public sphere; topics regarding domestic or marital concerns were suppressed in Habermas' idealized public sphere since intimate relational problems were deemed too personal, too singular (Fraser 2021). In the new media age, however, we cannot as easily limit deliberation to matters of public concern because the very design of these gathering spaces, the purpose of a coffeehouse versus a platform application, is fundamentally different. The bourgeoisie of the dominant public sphere deliberately entered a physical space, a salon or coffeehouse, with the intention of debating public opinion (Habermas 1991). Internet users are able to enter the digital space and be entertained, to dissociate from reality (Sadiku 2023). The process of partaking in rational-critical debate online is thus not many participants' sole motivation when engaging with the digital public, but rather a byproduct or a secondary goal contradicting the public sphere's intended purpose.

Clearly, the digital public space born in this new media age where content is delivered online does not and systemically cannot fit the structural criteria of the public sphere as outlined by Habermas. So I beg, why is academic rhetoric so concerned with the digital public space's eclipse into a public sphere? Why are we stuck analyzing the internet's contributions to democracy through a framework that is anatomically too limiting to account for how discourse is shared today? Papacharissi makes clear her view on a public space's ability to enrich democracy versus that of a public sphere as she writes:

> It should be clarified that a new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere. As public space, the internet provides yet another forum for political deliberation. As public sphere, the internet could facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions. A virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy. (Papacharissi 2018)

Again, the virtual space can never be a public sphere, or "virtual sphere" since fundamentally, the virtual space and the criteria of a public sphere are not compatible. Aligning the two is like trying to fit a square joint into a circle fitting. I argue we need to leave behind the idea that a public sphere is the only avenue through which democracy can be enhanced and that a public space should be capped at its ability to merely spark democratic discussion. Tocqueville characterizes democratic health by the presence of "common sites for the formation of public opinion" (Kahn 2024), but he does not overly concern himself with the how. What is important to Tocqueville is that public opinion may be formulated at all. The internet is absolutely a site for the formation of public opinion and to deny the digital public space of this power is to give more importance to theoretical structural criteria than to modern democratic action. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is a salient example of how the internet can band a public together, unified by a shared public opinion, to make systematic change. Although the BLM movement started with the hashtag in 2013, its scale erupted in 2020 "following the state-sanctioned murders of several unarmed Black Americans" (Tanksley 2022). Graphic videos of these murders—notably the tragic death of George Floyd at the hands of police—went viral across the digital space, subsequently sparking discussions of deeply serious topics on a widespread scale. Conversations about the unlawful killings of black people, police brutality, and other systemic issues oppressing Black Americans were finally brought to a wider public's attention thanks to comment sections, live streams, hashtags, story posts, and every other feature unique to the internet's construction that allows for mass reach. The infrastructure of new media age technologies made it possible to "host and make visible these narratives" of "resistance, activism and counter-storytelling" on an unprecedented scale (Tanksley 2022). This movement was not limited to online discourse; supporters backing this public opinion took to the streets to protest the racism experienced by Black people and with more than 26 million people estimated to have

participated in BLM protests, "it is the largest protest movement in American history" (Ray et al. 2024). Again, it was the internet's unique architecture that played a vital role in organizing and spurring one of the largest demonstrations of political participation in American history. This is precisely why I am not convinced that the gravity of this movement should be understood to have only "enhanc[ed] discussion" rather than truly having "enhanced democracy" since it did not come to be through a public sphere (Papacharissi 2018), but rather transpired largely thanks to the internet through the virtual space. The very architecture that aligned 26 million people, that banded them in support of a common cause, might not fit nicely into the criteria of a public sphere but it unquestionably worked to form a public opinion, millions of people strong. No, the internet cannot transcend to a public sphere, but it surely holds merit in empowering democracy; the political participation the internet facilitated surrounding the BLM movement proves this.

Whether a public space meets the criteria of a public sphere should not be the rule in deciding if a form of communication empowers or curtails democracy, especially when this supposed one-size-fits-all criteria is far too specific and limiting to the period in which the public sphere emerged to sufficiently encompass public discourse today. Despite the digital public space's clear structural inability to transcend into a public sphere, there still exists academic writing that asserts the internet must be a public sphere to make meaningful contributions to democracy. I offer that we lose the "transcendence" rhetoric and look beyond Habermas' superannuated criteria of a public sphere as clutching this framework so tightly disparages the significant strides the internet indeed makes in bolstering democracy in its current form. The #blacklivesmatter movement is a groundbreaking formation of public opinion facilitated by the digital space without it having conformed to the criteria of Habermas' public sphere. This raises the question of whether such a revolutionary political demonstration and unprecedented human rights movement deserves to be discredited simply because it emerged in a digital public space

that has not yet transcended to a public sphere. I fear if we indeed discount such instances of democratic action, we will not take advantage of the power the internet currently holds to empower democracy while we wait for the digital public space’s impossible transcendence into a public sphere.

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Empowering or Performing? The Duality of the Girl Boss Movement on Social Media

Sophia Ratanshi

Western University

Mediacom 4036F 001: Special Topics in Media and Communication Studies

Hustle and Flow: Screen-Capita

Dr. Warren Steele

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Abstract

This essay discusses the “Girl Boss” archetype on social media, particularly through Instapoetry. Platforms like Instagram enable entrepreneurial women to build personal brands, blending empowerment with performative activism and commodification. Drawing from Seth Godin's concept of storytelling, this essay explores how influencers navigate authenticity while capitalizing on engagement. Through my personal experiment of running a “Girl Boss” Instapoetry account, I engaged with these dynamics firsthand, crafting motivational content while analyzing how influencers create “Girl Boss” centered narratives. While the “Girl Boss” movement fosters ambition and connection with like-minded individuals, it also perpetuates Hustle Culture, ultimately selling empowerment as a product. By critically examining the dual role of the “Girl Boss,” this essay explores the blurred lines between empowerment, commodification, and monetization.

Social media has become a vibrant space for entrepreneurial women to thrive and a platform for digital storytelling. Platforms like Instagram allow individuals to build personal brands, connect with audiences, and monetize their creativity. Among many, an emerging narrative is the “Girl Boss" archetype, defined as a woman who embodies ambition, independence, and resilience while leveraging platforms like Instagram to inspire and monetize her following. As a content creator, I undertook a project to explore this potential by developing a Girl Boss Instapoetry account. I have engaged in creating content designed to motivate and connect with my audience, sharing motivational content through videos, graphics, and advice-based stories on this platform. While this experience was empowering, analyzing more established accounts highlighted for me the complex duality of the Girl Boss archetype—one that blends genuine empowerment with performative activism and monetized narratives. This

essay explores (1) the Girl Boss archetype, (2) the role of performative activism and monetization and (3) how this fosters community building and empowerment, arguing that the Girl Boss movement exists at the crossroads of these dynamics. Drawing on Seth Godin's concept of storytelling, this analysis unpacks how Instapoets embrace this duality of being authentic while generating a profit along the way.

(1) The term "Girl Boss" was coined and promoted by Sophia Amoruso, founder of Nasty Gal and author of the best-selling book *#GIRLBOSS* (2014). In her memoir, Amoruso shares her transformation from selling vintage clothing on eBay to becoming a Chief Executive Officer

(CEO), framing the Girl Boss as a figure of ambition, resilience, and independence. In the text, Amoruso defined a Girl Boss as someone who “takes control of her life in a way that is daring and entrepreneurial” (p. 23). The Girl Boss identity is strongly connected to neoliberal feminism, a perspective that emphasizes personal success and hard work, particularly within a system driven by competition, money, and financial achievement over social change and humanitarian aid (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 48). In this sense, the Girl Boss is depicted as hyper-productive, career-driven, and unapologetically ambitious, often rejecting traditional gender roles and prioritizing professional success over personal and family life. Often, a typical Girl Boss is unmarried, child-free, and instead, in a relationship with her career. This image, while aspirational for many women, sets unattainable standards for many women, promising the idea that success is solely a matter of individual effort and incompatible with other potential pursuits such as having a family or a vibrant social life. The Girl Boss's reliance on Hustle Culture—a glorification of tireless productivity—complicates its promise of empowerment and motivation for her audience. A Hustle Culture lifestyle, which is central to the Girl Boss identity, glorifies

productivity, risk-taking, and entrepreneurial ambition, encouraging individuals to "grind" relentlessly to achieve success. This culture demands aggressive ambition and positions economic success as a marker of self-worth. As Rosalind Gill (2016) notes, "Hustle culture is a double-edged sword—it motivates but also exhausts, as individuals strive to meet unsustainable ideals of success" (p. 121).

Instagram amplifies the Girl Boss, Hustle Culture narrative by offering a platform for individuals to showcase their achievements and lifestyles. Girl Boss influencers often curate aspirational content, posting images of luxury, productivity, and independence. These posts celebrate the rewards of Hustle Culture—fancy cars, designer wardrobes, and lavish vacations—while masking the labour and privilege that often underpin such success. Many Girl Bosses, including Instapoets, use these platforms to blend personal storytelling with professional branding, creating a compelling but commodified image of empowerment. Although in my own experience of being an active Instapoet I did not monetize my work, I emulated these ideas of Hustle Culture and all of its underlying characteristics. Blending the work of an Instapoet and influencer, I posted content that displayed *what looked like* accomplished goals to motivate others to follow my account with the idea that listening to my advice could lead them to similar success. As audio to accompany my poetry and non-poetry content, I would insert trending music clips aligned with the Girl Boss narrative, such as lyrics that conveyed messaging regarding independence and productivity.

(2) Instagram's structure promotes Girl Boss influencers to engage in performative activism—acts of advocacy that prioritize aesthetics, optics, and monetization over genuine social change. Performative activism serves as a branding tool insofar as it allows influencers to align themselves with popular social causes, thereby enhancing their public image and

commercial appeal (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Instapoetry exemplifies this duality by fostering a platform that allows users to post the content they wish, enabling users to create their own narratives, stories, and worldviews through the "vibe" or theme they establish. Content creators are also allowed to become entrepreneurs on the app, selling themselves or their brand. Defined as "a form of digital poetry deeply entangled with social media's platformization" (Soelseth, 2022, p. 96). Instapoetry allows creators to blend artistic expression with self-branding. For instance, Rupi Kaur's work combines themes of self-love and resilience with strategic marketing, positioning her poetry as both art and product in the form of her books or performances. For other Girl Boss Instapoets or influencers, this blend of empowerment messaging and strategic self-promotion can manifest through motivational quotes, feminist excerpts, or poetic stanzas that resonate with audiences while subtly promoting their respective products or services. Seth Godin's concept of storytelling illustrates how this performativity operates. It is all in the storytelling. According to Godin (2005):

> Marketing = storytelling, and everything an organization does supports the story… a company either tells a story that people care about, or their story disappears… it's the story, not the good or service you actually sell…The best stories don't teach people anything new…the best stories agree with what the audience already believed and makes the members of the audience already believes and make the members of the audience feel smart and secure when reminded how right they are in the first place (p. 22).

Instapoets craft narratives that strives to resonate with their audience's existing beliefs creating a sense of emotional validation. This strategy transforms poetry into a commodity that sells not just words but the emotions and identities they evoke. Rupi Kaur, for example, draws on her intersectional identity as an immigrant to share her personal story—one that evokes both sympathy and inspiration, underscoring her journey toward success. As Brooke Erin Duffy

(2017) observes, “[t]he aspirational narratives of influencers often translate into commodified relationships with audiences, where empowerment becomes a product to be sold” (p. 87). Instapoets often generate income through book sales, branded partnerships, and merchandise. As Mackay and Knox (2024) argue in their Introduction to *Reading Instapoetry*, "The practices of the platform become as important as the practices of the individual author" (p. 3). This dependence on Instagram's algorithms underscores the performative nature of Girl Boss activism, where visibility and engagement metrics largely dictate creative decisions. Illouz's (2017) concept of "emodities" provides a critical lens here, suggesting that emotional narratives in storytelling are commodified to create identities that are monetized (p. 3). Something is classified as an emodity when a product or, in this case, identity appeals to an audience’s emotions, causing them to invest in it to continue to experience these feelings. In other words, audience members are not buying the product itself but, instead, the emotions that come with it. However, this commodification of emotion raises questions about authenticity. By monetizing an identity and narrative, the emphasis is placed on profits over purpose and dilutes the genuineness that followers seek. Abidin and Thompson (2020) argue that digital influencers present their entrepreneurial work as empowering, while also reinforcing consumerism as a key to personal fulfillment. This tension between authenticity and monetization highlights the duality of the Girl Boss movement: while it inspires audiences, it also pushes the commodification of empowerment.

(3) Despite its performative elements, the Girl Boss movement can foster genuine empowerment and community building. Social media enables marginalized voices to share their stories and create networks of support. As a salient example, Kaur’s stanzas on taboo topics such as sexuality, violence, and discrimination resonate with her audience. Her stories and worldview

enable her audience to reflect on their own lives. On her tour, Kaur takes storytelling to the next level. As Gill and Orgad (2018) state, “Digital media provides opportunities for women to engage in activism and entrepreneurship, creating a hybrid space where empowerment and profit coexist” (p. 21). The Girl Boss movement has fostered real empowerment and community building among women. Social media platforms like Instagram enable diverse voices to share their stories, creating spaces for connection and collaboration. For many followers, Girl Boss Instapoets and influencers are role models, demonstrating that ambition and independence are attainable goals. Their poetry provides words of inspiration or affirmation, enabling the followers to feel what they desire most: acceptance and being understood.

This sense of community is amplified by parasocial relationships, where followers develop emotional connections with influencers (Abidin & Thompson, 2020). The exchange is crafted through storytelling, where followers admire the creator's advice and messages while engaging in their content. Meanwhile, creators simultaneously interact with their audience and solicit them to join their fostered online community. By sharing personal stories and engaging with their audience, Instapoets create a sense of intimacy and authenticity. However, achieving authentic empowerment requires navigating the tensions between commodification and community. As Godin (2005) notes, “[t]he only way your story will be believed…is if you tell the truth and live the story you are telling” (p. 34). By aligning their actions with their narratives, Girl Boss influencers can thus transcend the limitations of performative activism and foster meaningful impact.

When fulfilling the requirements of my project to create and post content aligning with the narrative I wished to present, namely the Girl Boss archetype, I was forced to live the story I told. Because my content was authentic and a true reflection of myself, I needed to embody my

brand messaging and showcase the accomplishments I encourage my audience to strive for through my advice. Rosalind Gill (2016) emphasizes the value of these digital networks stating, "[w]hile neoliberal feminism is critiqued for its focus on individuals, it has also enabled the creation of networks that support collective female advancement" (Gill, 2016, p. 135). These networks often take the form of Instagram groups, later translating to in-person events where women can share advice, resources, and opportunities. For instance, conferences like the Girlboss Rally, an event for motivated women to connect, share ideas, and gain advice through workshops and speeches focused on success and self-improvement, provide mentorship and professional development for aspiring entrepreneurs. In-person or online, Instapoets create intimate spaces for dialogue and support. Najwa Zebian's workshops, for example, focus on healing and empowerment through storytelling, offering participants tools to navigate their challenges. Similarly, Rupi Kaur's poetry tours, where she reads her books aloud, offer a forum for her to continue to build her community and bring her audience together in one place. She sells herself and her thoughts in a stadium filled with all the readers who resonate with her words. Additionally, for marginalized communities, the Girl Boss movement offers a platform to amplify underrepresented voices. Gill and Orgad (2018) contend that through digital media, women are able to engage in both entrepreneurial and activist efforts, merging personal empowerment with financial gain. This hybrid space enables women from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences, challenge stereotypes, break the glass ceiling through words and build supportive networks. However, achieving genuine empowerment requires a balance between transparency and inclusivity. Girl Boss influencers must navigate the fine line between inspiring their audiences and exploiting their trust. By prioritizing authenticity and accountability, they can ensure that their impact transcends branding, leaving a legacy of empowerment for future generations.

The Girl Boss as an Instapoet Presence exemplifies the duality of Instagram's potential: a space for both empowerment and commodification. While its narratives often align with neoliberal ideals of individual success focused on money and corporatization, they also create opportunities for connection and collective growth. By thoughtfully navigating these dynamics, Girl Boss influencers can strike a balance between authenticity and monetization, while contributing to broader conversations around empowerment. By genuinely sharing their stories, they build parasocial relationships with their followers while profiting from their poetry. Drawing on my own experience as a Girl Boss Instapoet, I focused on legitimate empowerment and community building. However, for larger content creators, embracing the duality explored in this essay can help Girl Boss influencers leverage their platforms to promote empowerment while navigating the challenges of a profit-driven digital landscape. Through transparency, inclusivity, and community building, the Girl Boss movement can continue to evolve as a force for positive change.

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Social Activism in the Digital Age: A Cybernetic and Complexity Theory Approach to the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter Movements

Gracie Thrush

Western University

Mediacom 4037: Cybernetics, Complexity, Chaos

Nick Dyer-Witheford

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Abstract

Scholars continue to debate the role of digital platforms in shaping social movements, weighing their ability to amplify activism against the constraints of algorithmic control and digital surveillance. This paper argues that cybernetic frameworks and complexity theory provide digital activists with strategies to navigate the nonlinear and decentralized nature of social media to their advantage. Drawing on the works of Norbert Wiener and Talcott Parsons, this research paper illustrates how digital platforms function as more than just tools for activism, they are dynamic systems shaping movement strategies. Using #MeToo and Black Lives Matter as case studies, this paper explores how feedback loops, emergent behaviours, and algorithmic infrastructures influence digital activism's success.

Since the rise of social media in 2010, many forms of activism have expanded beyond traditional methods- such as in person protests, pamphleteering, and grassroots organizing- to incorporate global communication through online platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and X (formerly known as Twitter). Social movements have utilized the intersection of human interaction and machine processes to create larger waves of social change. To understand how these movements gain momentum and influence, it is essential to examine the nature of communication itself. As Norbert Wiener (1989) argues, communication is the central phenomenon of society, and it must be understood through analyzing the messages that circulate within it. This can be accomplished through studying the content, patterns, and feedback mechanisms of information exchanged between individuals, groups, and systems. In the digital age, communication is more active in our everyday lives than ever through social media and online interaction. Social media is a dynamic system with many self-organizing parts.

Complexity theory, alongside cybernetic concepts, propels a deeper understanding of this system. In the discussion which follows, I will dissect the elements of digital activism through a cybernetic framework which ultimately suggests positive social change through the understanding of the interaction between digital platforms (machine) and their users (human). Additionally, concepts from complexity theory, like nonlinear and emergent systems, act as critical tools for understanding intricate details of digital activism. This paper will refer to two activism case studies, both resulting in successful outcomes: the #MeToo movement and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Three core concepts emerge from Norbert Wiener's development of cybernetic theory: control, feedback and merging of human and machine (Rid, 2016). Understanding cybernetic theory is crucial to our understanding of activism in the digital age because of the way in which humans interact with it. Entropy, a fundamental scientific concept, describes the universal tendency toward disorder, uncertainty, and occasionally catastrophic outcomes. Cybernetics posits that control, the first core concept, is essential for combating entropy (Rid, 2016) - a challenge frequently encountered in the chaotic and decentralized nature of digital activism. Social movements rely on structured strategies to maintain coherence across platforms and counteract the chaos inherent in online platforms.

The second element within the cybernetic framework is feedback, arguably the most important when discussing digital platforms and digital communication. Rid explains Wiener's concept of feedback as the capacity of a mechanism to utilize sensors to gather data on its actual performance in comparison to its anticipated performance (Rid, 2016). In the context of digital activism, feedback loops demonstrate how user interactions- likes, shares, comments, and hashtags - continuously reshape and reinforce the visibility and reach of activist campaigns,

allowing movements to adapt in a real-time fashion to assist in amplifying and sustaining their cause. The final concept is the interaction between humans and machines, emphasizing that machines are not just passive tools but active participants in communication networks. This interaction is evident in digital activism, where digital platforms act as extensions of human agency, encouraging individuals to organize and connect with others on a global scale. In this context, machines enhance human functionalities to drive social change (Rid, 2016).

The second framework essential in this discourse of digital activism is complexity theory. Complexity theory assists in explaining how systems interact with their environments and analyzes how systems with extensive networks and a vast number of individual components create collective behaviour and information and adapt and evolve within their environments (Bonnici, 2015). Digital platforms as complex systems provide a foundation for analyzing how modern activism operates by underlining the structure of self-organization, emergent behaviours, and adaptability. Actions that appear basic on an individual level, such as sharing a post, using a hashtag, or commenting on the content of another poster, collectively lead to a large-scale, unpredictable impact. These behaviours reflect "adaptive behaviour," where systems evolve based on user behaviour and environmental changes (Mitchell, 2009). Activist movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have demonstrated how these emergent properties amplify their research, enabling large-scale mobilization and societal influence.

Data that is fed into social media platforms are created by its users, not the companies. These companies can control the codes through their own networks but ultimately, the information that users share is done so through autonomous networks (Auerbach, 2023). Activists utilize social media platforms to organize and communicate their causes while mobilizing supporters and leveraging Meganets to connect with like-minded groups. However,

the decentralized nature of these systems presents challenges. Algorithmic biases can sometimes work in favour of misinformation depending on how people interact with specific data or content, limiting the ability to reach their desired demographic (Auerbach, 2023). Complexity theory presents the need for a holistic approach to digital activism; by acknowledging these systems' nonlinear and unpredictable structures, activists can better adapt to challenges and maximize their strategies. Monitoring emergent behaviours and remaining aware of dynamic interplay are crucial for promoting efficiency and effectiveness in activist campaigns.

Talcott Parsons (1977), an influential American sociologist, utilized cybernetic thinking for the social sciences. For Parsons, the belief is was that through practices like feedback loops, cybernetic circuits can encapsulate the complexities of human behaviour and model the interactions of organizations (Kline, 2015). In this context, the social sciences refer to the study of patterned human interactions- such as institutions, norms, and roles, which Parsons viewed as interdependent subsystems within a larger societal framework regulated by communication and control processes akin to those in cybernetic systems (Parsons, 1977). At the core of this framework is communication, which cybernetic theory conceptualizes as the central organizing principle of society (Wiener, 1989). Parsons builds on this concept through his cybernetic hierarchy, using cybernetics as a model to understand how social subsystems interact, exchange information, and regulate one another through feedback and control mechanisms. More explicitly, he outlines that those systems rich in information- such as cultural or symbolic systems- can direct and regulate systems that contain more energy but less information, like physical or behavioural (Kline, 2015). Digital activism, for example, often lacks traditional sources of power, like support from the government or police systems. However, high energy activist campaigns can still influence lower energy systems like individuals' actions and behaviours, impacting the broader social system. From a cybernetic perspective, digital activism

functions as an information rich system: it transmits targeted messages, symbols and narratives that circulate rapidly and widely. These informational flows can guide, regulate, and reshape social behaviour- illustrating how control can be exerted through communication rather than institutional power.

A movement that exemplifies this perspective is the #MeToo social movement that spoke out about sexual violence in the workplace, primarily the entertainment industries. The #MeToo movement began in October of 2017 with a tweet from civil rights activist Alyssa Milano, who encouraged those who had experienced unwanted or inappropriate sexual contact to tweet the phrase "Me Too." Women all over the world began using the phrase as a hashtag and either shared their stories along with it or posted the hashtag to their feeds. #MeToo had soon become to most significant hashtag movement on Twitter in 2017, sparking an international debate on sexual harassment, abuse, and assault (Modrek et, al., 2019). Without Twitter, amongst other social media platforms, to spread awareness, the movement would not have become the most significant public conversation regarding sexual violence.

The #MeToo movement can be critically analyzed through Parsons (1977) framework as a collection of interconnected subsystems. Movement leaders, followers, and victims, continuously working in tandem to influence broader societal structure. These structures include both individuals in elite positions who have committed acts of sexual violence and the institutions that have protected them or overlooked their misconduct. Each subsystem contributes unique feedback to social platforms about experiences or provides support through comments, likes, shares, and posts. High information systems, like individuals posting on social media, influence high energy systems, such as the powerful individuals or institutions being challenged for their actions. This feedback loop continues to reshape public discourse around sexual misconduct and accountability. By framing digital activism through the cybernetic hierarchy that

Parsons discussed, it is evident how movements can demonstrate the interplay between information and energy within complex systems

The success of this movement was insurmountable, and its power today has remained strong. The movement provided people with the confidence to discuss their experiences and encourage others to educate themselves on the topic. Unlike traditional activist movements that rely on centralized leadership, #MeToo emerged organically through self-organizing behaviours, a hallmark of complex systems. Complexity theory suggests that these systems exhibit emergent behaviour where individual actions collectively lead to large-scale, unpredictable outcomes without central control (Mitchell, 2009). The decentralized nature of #MeToo exemplifies this principle. Rather than organizations, individuals drove the movement by sharing their stories online, creating a collective narrative transcending borders and industries. This self-organized structure enabled the movement to adapt and sustain its momentum, reshaping public discourse around sexual violence.

A critical factor in # MeToo's success was the algorithmic infrastructure of platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Social media algorithms amplify content based on engagement, prioritizing topics that resonate with users. For example, Twitter's fast-paced environment enabled users to engage in real time conversations, while its algorithms promoted popular content, accelerating the movement's visibility. Within the first week, research estimates that posts using the hashtag #MeToo reached between six and thirty-four billion user impressions globally (Modrek & Chakalov, 2019). This reach was further amplified by user generated interactions, such as retweets and comments, which fed back into the system and reinforced the movement's standing.

The role of algorithms also reveals a cybernetic factor of digital activism. Feedback loops, one of Wieners' foundational elements of cybernetic theory, are evident in the interaction

between user behaviour and algorithmic processes. Algorithms track user engagement and adapt content structures to influence what individuals see. This process effectively creates a loop where activist content gains traction based on its resonance with audiences (Trilling, 2024). For digital activists, understanding these nonlinear dynamics is crucial. Activists must adapt their strategies to align with platform priorities, as demonstrated by advocacy groups using Facebook's emphasis on live content to boost engagement (McLean et al., 2021). Creating a movement that remains relevant in the present and future is an important component of activism. The goal is to always keep the conversation going, this is known as the eternal return (McLean et al., 2021). However, algorithms are known to preserve biases and limit certain voices, specifically when it comes to political or social discussions. Consequently, this is a sheer example of why understanding complex systems as a digital activist can assist in strategizing to ensure the eternal return.

BLM utilized digital activism to reach a large audience, and it received support and recognition on a global scale. The movement has been around since 2013 and consists of over 50 organizations with a shared vision to end police brutality and fight for Black liberation (Mundt et al., 2018). The movement could be conceptualized as steady, with a large number of followers but did not see as significant of an impact until 2020, when the video of George Floyd’s death as result of police brutality surfaced on Facebook and was then shared amongst millions. The video sparked a global outcry for justice against systemic racism and called for attention to hundreds of other cases of police brutality against people of colour. From a cybernetic perspective, the success of the BLM movement hinges on its ability to exert control within a chaotic environment, which, in this case, is social media. BLM activists brought action through platforms by curating messages, visuals and the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to maintain coherence and create structured control to counteract competing narratives like the #AllLivesMatter and disinformation surrounding the movement.

Cybernetics suggests that feedback loops, once originating in control systems engineering, could reflect the real-world communication pathways that humans used to adapt to their environments in a more sophisticated approach (Kline, 2015). Feedback loops consist of outputs from a system that are fed back as inputs to influence system behaviour (Kline, 2020), and social media is in a constant process of feedback loops. User generated content consists of posts, likes, shares, and external content that comes from news and trends that influence online discussions (Trilling, 2024). During the peak of the BLM movement, information and relevant content were posted and shared at an unprecedented rate, creating powerful feedback loops that amplified the movement's visibility. The circulation of video documentation exposing police brutality was fed back into the 'system' through individuals commenting, sharing, and using the hashtag "BlackLivesMatter. These digital actions influenced more and more discourse around the world, mobilizing thousands of protests, all of which demonstrate feedback loops in action. During this movement, every piece of user-generated content acted as both an output influencing others and an input shaping the movement's trajectory through algorithms.

Both movements proved successful through their outreach, support and influence created in society. Regarding the digital part of the activist movements, the most significant thing both #MeToo and BLM have in common to their success is the use of the hashtag. Through its algorithmic properties, the hashtag has been able to mobilize supporters from dispersed groups in a way that traditional activism was once unable (Dobrin, 2020). Hashtags create an effective and efficient way for people to learn about social causes without digging for information. On

platforms like Instagram and Twitter, with one click, users are exposed to a plethora of other users' postings of information and personal contributions so that interested people can stay informed in real time. Individuals sharing their experiences using a hashtag can elicit responses from others, validating their experiences and encouraging further participation. This creates a positive feedback loop that can amplify the movement's message and contribute to its growth. However, negative feedback loops can also be presented when misinformation or hateful speech gets posted with the same hashtag. Therefore it is crucial to understand the nonlinear nature of social movements to strategize with a plan to pivot in situations where algorithms can take social movement down a hostile trajectory.

Zeynep Tufecki (2017) offers a counter argument to the beneficial effects of cyber protesting. Tufecki's argument lies with the difficulties of navigating the complexities of algorithms. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter are owned by conglomerates that hold the power to control user algorithms, meaning any kind of political content that users are sharing is monitored by companies posing a potential for unnecessary monetization resulting in the silencing of voices. Tufecki suggests that activists' sole communication being within the networked public sphere is dangerous due to the company's ability to structure algorithms (Tufecki, 2017). Though this line of thought remains an accurate concern, the evidence from the success of digital activism outlines the importance of understanding the complexity of social networks in the realm of activism. In other words, the importance of remaining knowledgeable in how technology can work against certain kinds of activism, is crucial to maintain a successful movement.

For the most part, digital activism has reshaped social movements for the better. Online platforms offer a significantly more extensive reach, generating more support for causes that

deserve it. Despite the benefits of instantaneous communication, the decentralized nature of online platforms to which these movements reside on, it is crucial for digital activists to have a critical awareness of the interconnectedness of Meganet platforms with their own algorithmic codes which ultimately will influence the nature of the movements content. digital activism comes with a critical perspective crucial for its success because of its decentralized nature. Complexity theory provides critical insight into these systems underlying, nonlinear and decentralized nature, forcing it to consider a more holistic approach to content strategies. It is important to recognize that these systems can change rapidly through more minor interactions.

Further, cybernetic theory offers a framework for understanding the intricate relationship between humans and machines. We influence each other significantly and it is often important to utilize machines to enhance human capabilities in the realm of activism to strengthen strategy and work towards impactful societal change.

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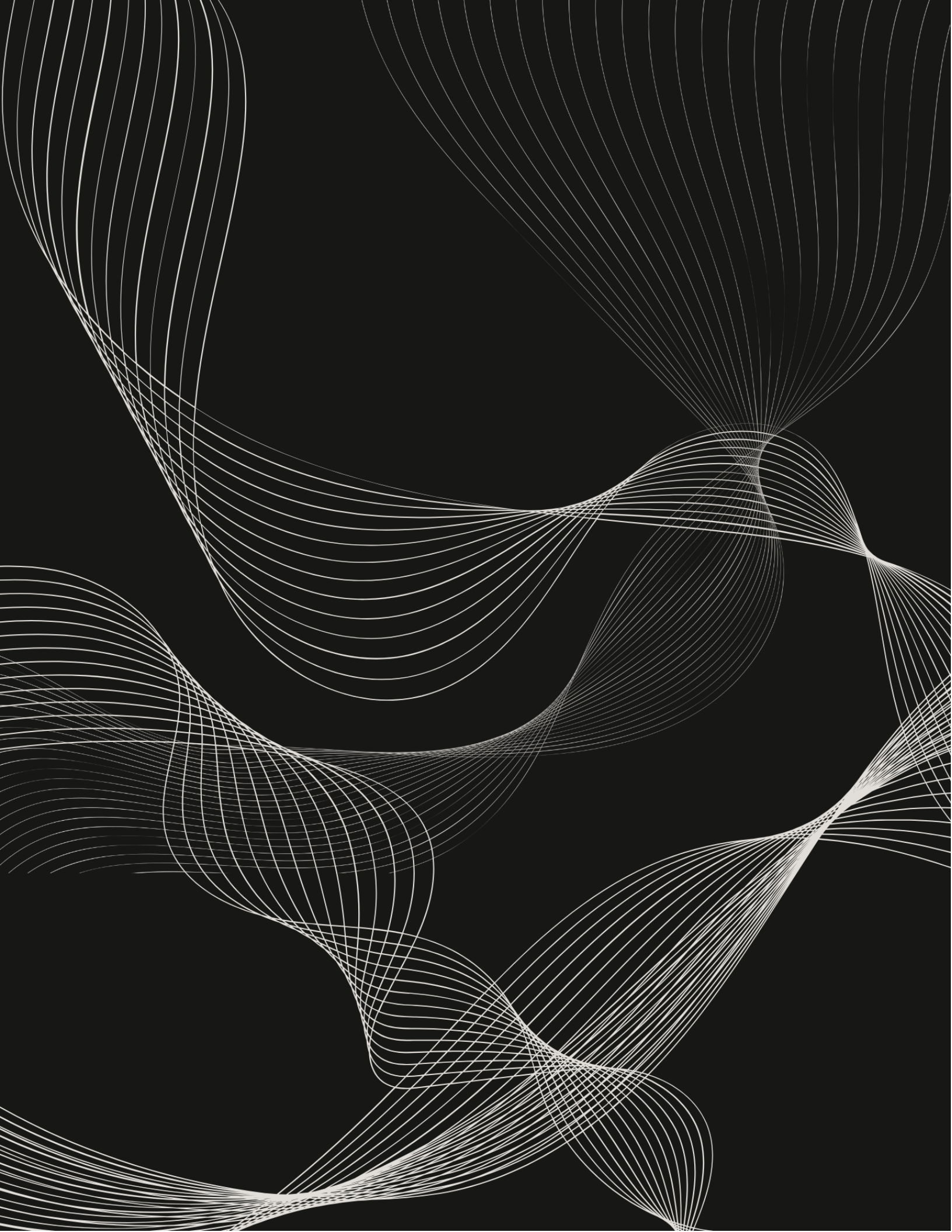

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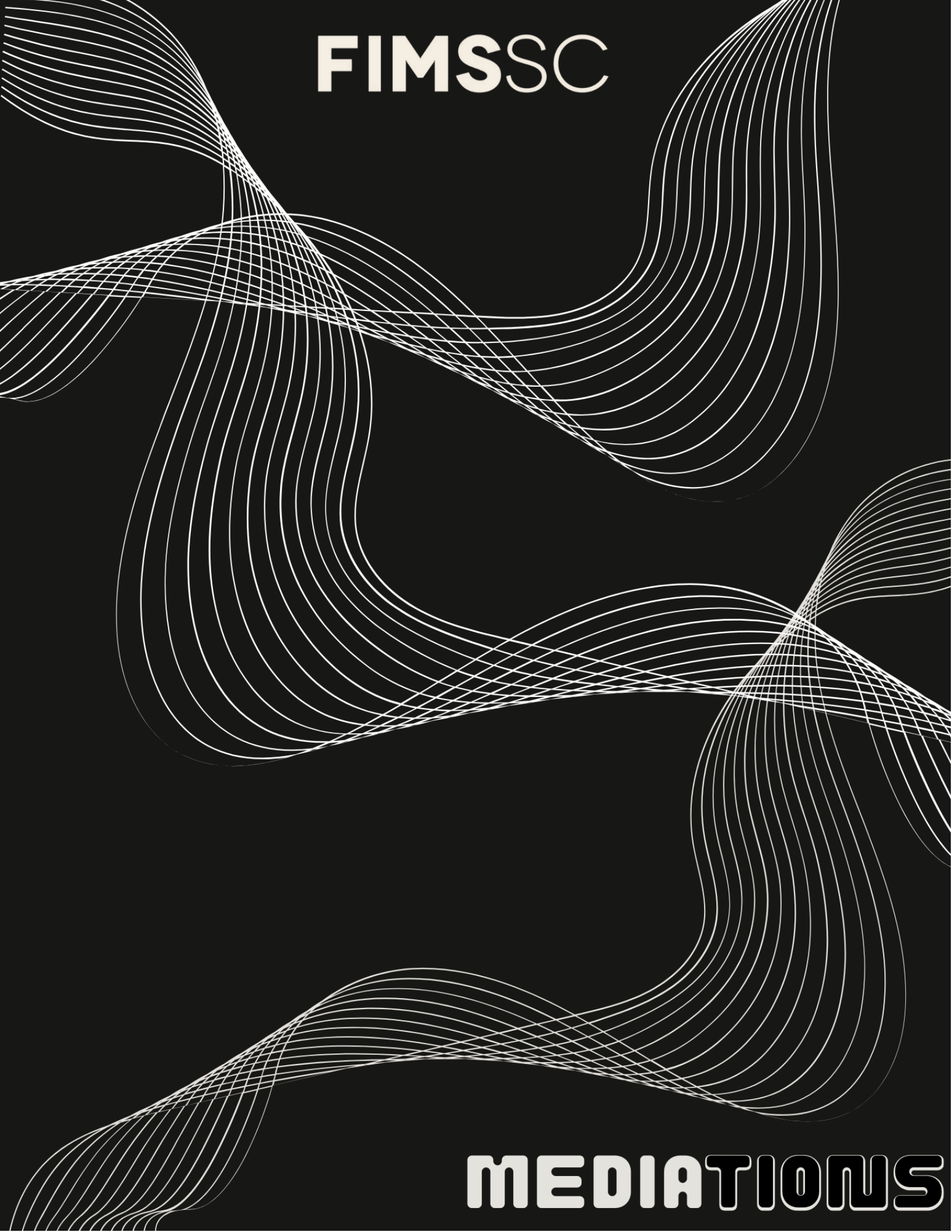

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