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"You Have to Accept the Pain": Body Callusing and Body Capital in Circus Aerialism

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Abstract: Little sociological research has examined the work of circus aerialists. Drawing from interviews with 31 circus aerialists in Canada, we explore what aerialists say about their bodies. Circus aerialism is an intense form of physical work, and aerialists endure intense pain during training and performance. Engaging with sociologies of the body and injury, we examine how body capital is generated, maintained, and lost in the career of the aerialist, as well as how injury accelerates this process. Injury and "aging out" of the circus are prominent themes in what aerialists say about their bodies. Arguing that circus aerialism is an undervalued form of work in which risk accumulates in aerialist bodies, we explore how aerialist bodies provide tacit cues about how to avoid injury and when to consider retirement. In the conclusion, we explain how this work contributes to sociologies of the body and circus.

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In 2018, circus aerialist Yann Arnaud fell to his death while performing for Cirque du Soleil in Tampa. A few years earlier, in 2013, aerialist Sarah Guyard-Guillot died from the result of a fall at a Cirque du Soleil show at the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas. Aerialist Oleksandr Zhurov also died at a Cirque du Soleil training facility in Montreal in 2009. Part of what audiences have always found appealing about the circus is the way the performers appear to be in peril (Stoddart 2000), yet, little research has focused on the dangers of circus aerialism. A 2012 survey of the Ka show at which Guyard-Guillot died found that 56 out of 100 aerialists had experienced injury—a rate that is four times higher than professional sports and five times higher than firefighting (Berzon and Maremont 2015). As such, it is important to understand the risks to the bodies and lives of aerialists.

Circus aerialism is similar to high-performance sports in terms of risks and injury, yet it differs as it is set in an artistic context. As a performance art, aerialism combines aerial technique and dance by working with silks, hoops, ropes, and trapezes to suspend the aerialist's body midair. The body, having the freedom to float, can twist and turn itself into a visually appealing dance. This graceful display, performed individually or with partners, is fascinating given that the aerialist's body is contorting into painful positions. The shocks absorbed by the aerialists' bodies flying high above crowds would rupture most humans. Still, circus aerialists captivate their audiences with theatrical performances and death-defying maneuvers. Such performances are the product of intense training and choreography that prepares and engages the aerialist's body and mind. Despite how fantastical circus performances appear to the audience, there is a need to explore the impact aerialism has on the bodies of performers.

We aim to understand the corporeal dimensions and physical culture of work (Giardina and Donnelly 2017). To do so, we draw from interviews with 31 Canadian circus aerialists to analyze their body talk (Oleschuk and Vallianatos 2019). While Rantisi and Leslie (2015) note that aerialism is creative work, we focus on the physical toll enabling those creative performances. Similar to Tynan and McEvilly's (2017) interview findings with retired elite gymnasts, our respondents articulate a desire to work through the pain and fear of injury for the love of their craft. Aerialism is a form of physicality and artistry that entails intense training and pain. Aerialists describe having to accept and adapt to physical pain. We analyze this tacit corporeal knowledge aerialists develop over time. Allen-Collinson, Crust, and Swann (2018) point to the need for more research on mind and body activities that are not divisible in practice. Circus aerialism is one of these types of practices and work.

The intensity of circus aerialism also leads to injury and "aging out" of the circus, both of which are prominent themes in what aerialists say about their bodies and work. We engage with sociologies of the body and injury to interpret these narratives, specifically, literature on body capital (Wacquant 1995) and body callusing (Spencer 2009). We show that aerialists must accumulate body capital, which entails body callusing and exposes aerialists to injuries and physical risks. We argue that aerialism is an undervalued form of work in which risk accumulates in the bodies of aerialists and that their bodies provide tacit cues about how to avoid injury and about when the body can no longer endure the trials of aerialism.

First, we examine sociological literature on circus, bodies, and embodiment. Second, we offer a note on research methods. Third, we analyze interviews with 31 circus aerialists. Fourth, we focus on narratives about training, pain, risk, injury, and aging out that demonstrate how aerialists conduct body work and risky work. We examine how body capital is generated, maintained, and lost in the career of the aerialist and how the role of injury acerbates and accelerates this process. In the conclusion, we explain how this research contributes to sociologies of the body and circus.

Literature Review

Performing Circus

Truzzi (1968) wrote of the decline of the circus as a social institution. This was before the rise of the new circus. The family circus focused on the foreign, oddities, and animals, juxtaposing these against family as the cornerstone of the story and performance (Davis 2002). The family circus was also a social system with a strict hierarchy and assigned roles and performances based on race and gender (Easto and Truzzi 1973). New circus no longer relies on the same trope of family and now engages with more diverse storylines and forms of identity (Albrecht 1995; Carmeli 2003; 2007). Stephens (2019) notes that new circus aerialism is a collective practice. Circus also creates social and physical bonds among aerialists. As such, it is important to examine the issue of identity in the circus (Little 1995), but equally vital to assess the corporeal dimensions of aerialism.

Aerialists work for large and small companies, or independently when contracted for corporate events. Working for large companies can sometimes mean long-term contracts with employee benefits, where-as small companies or corporate events usually offer brief contracts with more costs and economic risks. In some cases, aerialists go months without paid work due to injury or lack of opportunity. Despite this, aerialists often have prolonged training schedules; the advantage of copious training is that the troupe learns to trust one another, which is crucial during performances. Regardless of the size of the company the aerialist works for, circus aerialism engulfs their identity.

One important facet of circus work we cannot explore fully here is the potential for breaking down traditional gender norms at work. Tait (2005) examines the gendered dimensions of circus bodies and aerialism. While upper body muscularity is conventionally associated with men, it is evident across genders in circus aerialism. As Tait (2005:3) suggests, "male bodies in graceful flight displayed qualities contradicting manliness, and muscular women went completely against prevailing social patterns of bodily restraint." The pursuit of muscularity and body power by women was re-legitimated at the beginning of the 21st century, although there are still many representations of gender in the contemporary circus that reproduce gender stereotypes as well.

Pleasing a circus audience entails a projection of excitement and delight (Carmeli 1996). Although sports can elicit commotion among their audience, sports set the athletic body into direct competition with other athlete bodies and subjects them to measurement and scoring. In the circus, the body is not subject to scoring systems, rather the audience judges the body on its ability to allure. While gymnastics has rules and competition, there is a perception of the circus body "as oscillating between control and loss of control in a constant shift between the con-

dition of playing and being played" (Tait 2005:261). The circus designs the story to display the aerialist in peril: "The design of the whole circus act—its early mimetic part, the balancing postures, the progress of the act towards 'more dangerous' routines, its closure by a 'final' feat—all intensified and explicated this process" (Tait 2005:262). Danger as a metaphor crystallizes the circus experience. As Willy, a circus artist, says: "they are after my blood" (Tait 2005:264). The risks are real, as we explore by considering what aerialists say about corporeality, injury, and aging.

Body Work and Body Capital

As Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2017) note, experienced athletes have an advanced sense perception of their bodies and injuries. An aerialist can feel if their rigging equipment is suitably tense or tight and their body part is too hot or sweaty for the next maneuver. As the aerialist is alert to the danger, they quickly calculate potential injury to adjust the body with the equipment. Through this haptic perception, the body unifies with the equipment, like a musician with an instrument. This union not only helps aerialists avoid injury but also express themselves. Developing this corporeal knowledge, the aerialist uses the body as a device for creative expression to bring excitement to audiences.

The sporting body is an antidote to the monotony and drudgery of modernity (Shilling 2005). Still, many forms of thrill-seeking are forms of work that adversely affect the body. During training, the aerialist endures intense pain and flirts with injury. To transform physically and mentally, aerialists embrace and "listen" to their bodies for injury. Staying aware of physical stress and tension is important since injury creates a disrupted body (Allen-Col-

linson 2017) that can no longer function at an elevated level in a sport or thrill-seeking activity. One can also experience body disruption as a dissolving of the self or a breakdown of identity (also see Sparkes and Smith 2002). As such, we focus on injury as it manifests in training, performances, and retirement in aerialism.

Given the work on the self and touching of other aerialists, circus aerialism is a form of body work (Wolkowitz 2002). It entails working on one's body, but also manipulating the bodies of fellow aerialists. Wolkowitz (2006) argues that the sociology of work has ignored bodies. Specifically, scholars have singled out the bodies of manual laborers instead of the bodies of artistic workers. The reasoning behind the limited research on artistic workers could be due to the ample number of manual laborers compared to artistic workers or the ease of access to studying a more available group. In addition, fewer researchers may have access to gatekeepers or key informants involved in circus work.

Aerialism also involves the accumulation of body capital. There are forms of body work that entail the accumulation of forms of "body capital" (Wacquant 1995) or physical capital (Bourdieu 1978), which are specific to a set of situated practices. Wacquant (2004) sees the body as having somatic potentialities that can become valued. When Wacquant (2004) discusses the assembling of body capital, he states the objective is to build body capital without extinguishing it through training. Although some body capital is primarily aesthetic (Frew and McGillivray 2005; Hutson 2013), some body capital is cherished only for its use value or the corporeal and technical skill this body capital facilitates. The goal is to peak with body capital during the performance. The same author assumes that the body worker needs to

build capital through repetitive episodes of training (Wacquant 1995). Body callusing (Spencer 2009) is the process by which an individual builds physical capital. The repeated training fortifies the aerialist body and transfers skills among corporeal experts in training centers. As the body calluses, it assists the body in accepting pain. Undergoing this pain creates a form of identity and membership for circus aerialists (cf. Spencer 2009; Rafalovich 2016). Over time, however, injuries and aging erode this bodily capital. Researchers in many disciplines have a keen interest in body callusing as it relates to injury. Understanding body callusing is crucial to understand because it provides insights into the injurious elements of work. Below we examine how body capital accumulates and declines in aerialism.

Research Design

While we do not offer an ethnography of circus aerialism, following Allen-Collinson and colleagues (2018) our research design and analysis provide a phenomenologically oriented sociology. Such an approach entails focusing on the sensual and situatedness of both consciousness and action in the body (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2011). Ingold (2000) argues it requires focusing on concrete descriptions of actions, thinking about the specific in relation to the whole, and the analysis of articulated experiences.

The first author interviewed 31 circus aerialists, ranging in age from 22 to 37. 12 circus aerialists identified as men and 19 aerialists identified as women. Many aerialists had secondary work as yoga teachers, bartenders, or aerialism coaches. A few aerialists owned small circus schools or small circus companies. We contacted initial interviewees through the distribution of posters in Montreal and Ottawa. Respondents contacted the first author if they wished

to participate in the study. Interviews occurred in coffee shops or homes of the respondents, whatever made them feel most comfortable (Nespor 2000). Interviews were flexible, but based on a thematic interview guide. The guide included questions about their experiences of the body and risk. We further asked questions about their history of circus work, circus injuries, and retirement. The first author also conducted observations at a circus school in New York City. We acknowledge that an autoethnographic approach would provide even more detailed data on the corporeal dimensions of circus aerialism and the sensations and pain aerialists endure.

The first author conducted interviews and initially coded interview data for (1) narratives concerning the body and work, and (2) work risks. The interviews were emotionally intense at times, and some aerialists wept when reflecting on pain and injury, which speaks to the physical and mental toll of this work (see: Corbin and Morse 2003). However, participants did not oppose speaking about the injury. The authors worked together during data analysis to ensure rigor and credibility during the selection and interpretation of interview excerpts (Tracy 2010). We substituted pseudonyms for respondents' names if they opted to select one.

Aerialism and the Body

"…the hands will have calluses": Training and Pain

For the aerialist, the body must become a sort of Swiss army knife (Van Lenning 2004) that they can manipulate to achieve incredible feats. To manipulate the body into acrobatic maneuvers, the aerialists undergo continuous and intensive training. Through this training, aerialists become acutely

aware of when they sharpen and dull their corporeal senses and skills. The training to create this instrument is grueling, but during training the aerialists establish an intimate knowledge and relationship with their bodies.

> For doing aerial work, the biggest challenge is training, is building for strength and grip strength to be able to hold yourself up for six minutes. [Circus_02, woman]

> …through this great awareness of my body, I eventually overcome chronic fatigue and chronic injury situations…through my acrobatic training, I learned more about the muscles and the engagements that were necessary to keep good alignment…I feel a deeper, emotional relationship with my body. [Circus_18, man]

> …it's a lot of conditioning just to get enough muscle to do the tricks, whereas hoop diving, the Chinese hoop diving is more of a precision thing…it's more of really concentrating in and trying to find the center, and if you have too much adrenaline, you jump too high and you have to control, it's a lot more control. [Circus_09, man]

The body is an accumulated history of the movement that alters its materiality (e.g., toughness of the hands and feet) depending on the practice. Physical capital (flexibility, speed, tough skin, stamina) is built through training and work on the self. To accumulate body capital, habituated and focused action must be undertaken (Shilling 2004). To develop strength and precision, the aerialist engages in training regimes in which the body becomes conditioned and endures pain. Part of the training is for the body to be taught how to endure pain. This echoes Encandela's (1997) findings on aging and pain among individuals in a retirement community. The author found that, in some cases, individuals were encouraged to focus on things other than pain, such as group activity, as giving into the pain would lead to bodily decline and defeat.

> It takes years…it's really painful when you miss your tricks…pole is tough on the body, you get lots of burns…it's a lot of conditioning just to get enough muscle to do the tricks. [Circus_09, man]

> Trapeze is painful…the metal bar on your skin is painful, the ropes are painful. You have to develop the strength, but it's not the hardest, everybody can develop strength. The hardest in the aerial area is to get used to the pain…it's like your skin or your body adapts to this pain, to this hurt, to this shock. This is incredible to see how your body can adapt, the hands will adapt, the hands will have calluses. [Circus 01, woman]

Aerialists undergo a bodily transformation where they gain physical control over the body. The control not only permits them to endure the pain but also to manage the fear that comes with the risk of injury and flying high above the audience. While the aerialists agreed that the hardest part of aerialism is the pain, it could be that proving oneself or remaining competitive motivates the aerialists to deal with the pain. Eventually, an experienced aerialist develops a high pain tolerance (cf. Rafalovich 2016). As one aerialist notes, "You have to accept the pain and go for the pain, do it every day, and you have to like it" [Circus_01, woman]. In engaging the transformation of their bodies and the physical capital of an aerialist body, the performers push personal boundaries.

> You finally get used to the pain, even your bruises. You're going to do a move, and you're going to have

bruises with a new move for maybe one or two months. You're going to have a bruise, and then, at some point, your bruises will disappear... [Circus_01, woman]

There was a time when I broke my finger and I didn't even know...I didn't even remember anything going wrong in the piece. [Circus_19, woman]

These forms of repetition and intense training comprise body reflexive practices. Body reflexive practices are repetitive actions undertaken to prepare the body for skilled performance (Crossley 2005). Body reflexive techniques that generate a toughening of the body, especially those meant to overcome pain, entail body callusing (Spencer 2009). Body callusing is building toughness and endurance to "withstand the rigors" (Spencer 2009:133) of an athletic activity, which results in the embodiment of strategy. Training and performance develop body capital that makes the performer an asset to an organization (Shilling 2017). Further, the aerialist only deploys the use value of body capital in the context of the performance.

"They wouldn't let her do any pull-ups…": Body Image

As with other high-performance athletes such as rowers (Chapman 1997), aerialists must work on their bodies to make them perform. Body image may even be a secondary issue compared to performance and capability. Aerialists describe the need for strength and ability over the appearance of the body to perform maneuvers. In some cases, aerialists describe a woman's "masculine" strength as a highlight in a performance.

I used to do an act with a guy where we'd do balancing on each other, and one holds the other person,

and normally the man holds the woman, right, but since I'm a bigger, stronger woman, we shared the role, which was our selling point. [Circus_03, woman]

If you want to work in the circus, you need to take good care of your body. We're running solid for 2 hours, you're on stage, or you're doing something backstage, or you're stretching. You need to be in top shape and that's your job as a circus performer, to keep your body in really good condition. It doesn't necessarily need to be ridiculously skinny or extraordinarily muscular, but it does need to be fit. [Circus_02, woman]

The aerialist must develop a rare physical skill set that would amaze even other high-performance athletes and thrill-seekers. At the same time, it could be argued that aerialists are more concerned with body image compared to other athletes, especially since their bodies are decoratively on display. The aesthetic feature of the body (Vannini and McCright 2004) in aerialism could also contribute to body capital development. This "body talk" (Oleschuk and Vallianatos 2019) reveals how aerialists think of the results of body reflexive practices, but also pressures put on them by their employers. Based on pressure from circus companies, there is an expectation for some women aerialists to maintain femininity. Traditional gender performances remain part of some circus plots. This gender expectation demonstrates traditional gender-streaming in the new circus. There is an expectation for women aerialists to weigh on the lighter side. Such expectations may lead the aerialist to unhealthy eating habits to maintain a particular body image. Dieting to achieve a self-governed body shape (Turner 1982) is common. Body expectations among circus companies also dictate how often an aerialist might work. Therefore, aerialists toughen the body to en-

able them to endure pain, but they may also undertake practices to maintain the expected body image.

> They wouldn't let her do any pull-ups. They wouldn't let her do any conditioning that was muscle building. They didn't want her to be muscle-y...I know tons of people that don't eat, or they starve themselves and they do way too much cardio. [Circus_03, woman]

> At Cirque Éloize the style is very European. The director wants women to look like women, so he encourages you to have the body that is most naturally yours... with the exception of me, all the other girls have long hair and we wear dresses so a more feminine body, if you have hips and you have breasts, that's OK....it is easier to lift yourself on the fabric if you're lighter. [Circus_02, woman]

> At Cirque du Soleil they have written in your contract that you have to maintain a certain amount of weight...directors will pressure you depending upon your role in the circus to maintain a certain body image...it's also inherent a lot in the circus schools because they'll say, "If you want to be a circus artist, you're going to have to lose 10 pounds"...anorexia and eating disorders are rampant... [Circus_05, man]

On the other hand, we observe the aerialists equating body scars with positive imagery, which is contrary to positive body imagery assuming that body scars are equated with negative imagery. To the aerialist, bodies scarred through training or injury represent achievement and expertise. Even though an aerialist described being more attractive without scars, the aerialist is the aerialist is proud and amazed at how they obtained their scars.

> Everyone feels more attractive if they don't have scars and everything, but in a way, I'm glad that my scar

has a cool story because people like that story. [Circus_19, woman]

Aerialists even describe the body as appearing robust and transcendent during an accident that led to injuries and scars. The aerialists may be shaken by accidents and, at the same time, amazed at the sight of the injured body rather than unsettled by its marred appearance. While the aerialist describes a comfort in feeling attractive, she proudly describes the accident in which she now carries a symbolically important scar. She even ends the story by suggesting the moral of the story is to back up your shackles, almost nonchalant, indicating the importance of fortitude before aesthetics.

> There was a shackle that attaches the platform attached to the crane bar and…the shackle hopped and I fell…I grabbed onto the bungee cord that the trapeze was hooked by and I was able to delay my fall a little bit by holding that bungee until the bungee snapped. When it snapped, I got torqued the other way…I twisted and caught it in my elbow and you can see the scaring…I'm riding down it just trying to hold myself as my skin is coming off and I can see that I'm coming to the edge of the net and I'm not going to be able to land in the net. So I flung myself off it and tried to twist so I could get to the net…It was like a 24-foot fall and I had bad burns…So the moral of the story is back up your shackles… [Circus_19, woman]

> If you look at pictures from after that, because someone took a picture of me right after I fell, and the picture looks 3D. I feel like I was so vividly alive and shaken at that moment that it's coming out through the photo, my muscle looks like it's popping out of my skin and my veins look like they're popping out of my skin, I look like an Olympic athlete just because I think I was so pumped with adrenaline about the

fall…I probably wouldn't fly again if I could actually see what happened. [Circus_19, woman]

One can view the scar as a form of perseverance in a regime of body reflexive practices that are demanding and grueling in many ways. The stories about scars and accidents can also be interpreted as viewing the body with fascination and amazement with what it endures and how it adapts. The aerialist body must have some aesthetic appeal, but it is much more important it be a functional tool for performance.

Performance: Putting Body Capital to Work

Aerialists describe the body as a separate entity that they manipulate to experience transcendence. In a sense, aerialism is an escape from contemporary life. Some aerialists speak of their bodies metaphorically, as a vessel that can tell stories (also see Oleschuk and Vallianatos 2019). Circus aerialists also mention that an element of escape is integral to their circus performances. This masterful dissociation assists aerialists in overcoming the fear of heights, potential injury, and pain.

I see myself more as a vessel of storytelling...and it's a process of living between the extremes consistently. The pain and the exhilaration and just doing it every day. That continuum, that's what I think has made it a very emotional, an emotionalized process for me, and with my body being more than just a simple physical device. [Circus_18, man]

Up there, you have to be in your own world...you have to create a small space because if you start to think about how high you are, how many people are watching you, you can panic…You have to have this ability to be happy in the air…you feel that you're alone in

the world...You feel very special. You know that everybody is watching you, but it's not you, it's somebody else. It's like a dream. [Circus_01, woman]

The connection of the body to the aerial apparatus is synchronistic (Shilling 2005; Austin 2009; Byczkowska-Owczarek 2020). The aerialist feels physically and emotionally connected to the apparatus (also see Coetzee 2020; Rau 2020). A unification occurs between the aerialist and the apparatus. One can also interpret a merger between the aerialist and the story. These kinds of embodied subjectivities form in specific spaces and respond to routines and physical practices.

My body is everything on the trapeze. The way I do trapeze, there's not much difference between the apparatus and myself. We're always connected unless I've left it. It goes beyond just holding on, it goes more to the tension that's in the ropes is also in my arms and the rigidity is in my feet or in my shoulder, or you share the roles that each piece of the apparatus takes, or each piece of my body takes the apparatus has to adapt. If I want to twist with my body, I have to twist with the ropes. [Circus_03, woman]

The body is one of the main repositories of those stories and the way that we understand them. The gestures, the simple gestures of flight and aerialism, it's something that is so universal that you don't even need to understand how to speak to get it…I've learned it from other people and brought the ideas from other places, and it translated through my body and translated into other people, and I think the organization is sort of the ultimate manifestation of that here. [Circus_18, man]

The aerialist views their profession as a means for expressing passion through the body. Like profes-

sional wrestlers (Corteen 2019), circus aerialists often work through the pain that would overwhelm the average human. No matter the pain, the aerialist must display a body that is in accord with the theme of the show rather than a body that is suffering.

"…my teeth had been pushed up into my skull": Aerialism and Risk

Athletic performance is risky work since it is not often compensated well except at the elite level. Yet, the risk of injury is downloaded onto the performers while the organizations benefit financially (Roderick, Smith, and Potrac 2017). Aerialists use the idea of risk as a trope to tell stories about their bodies' work. There is considerable risk in aerialism, including financial, gendered, physical, and emotional. Circus workers are precarious workers (Stephens 2015). They experience economic precarity, as well as other forms of risk since circus companies offer limited contracts and few benefits.[1] The physical risks are equally serious and can have dire consequences.

While both the aerialists and rigger workers (who set up the equipment) conduct safety checks of their equipment, the risk of physical injury is always present.

> I woke up, I was lying on the ground...the most intense pain was in my hands, but also in my teeth...I did see my arms, I had compound fractures on both sides with the right side bearing the brunt of the fractures. My bones were like dust, the end of the bones were into 100 pieces on the right side. The left side was freakier as a large gash of bone came through the skin...my teeth had been

pushed up into my skull. My jaw was cut, and I had two lateral cracks in my head...both of my wrists were broken...It was centimeters from me snapping my spine. I was thrown to the ground at force because of the way the wire was rigged. The carabiner that was holding it on one side was a carabiner that was not rated for that work. It was the wrong piece of equipment... [Circus_02, woman]

> I've heard of a certain apparatus…people dropping like flies…people were just getting injured left and right. They had replacements lined up so they weren't changing the apparatus. They were just changing all the people. [Circus_03, woman]

To navigate the possibility of injury, aerialists enthusiastically point to a kind of "circus luck" when describing traumatic injuries.

> …it was during a rehearsal. I had asked the rigger and my coaches, I kept asking, "Is this safe?" Is this safe?… But, I think they just thought that an engineer had looked at it, but it turns out that no one had looked at it…So I asked them to tighten it, but then the rigger was training a new technical director at that point…and he dropped my lines, which wasn't normal…the next thing that I remember was a loud crack…luckily because of the cracks in my skull my brain was able to expand so I didn't suffer any brain damage, knock on wood. I was very lucky…I was thrown to the ground at force because of the way the wire was rigged...No one else was hurt even though this massive structure went flying across the gym. [Circus_02, woman]

> A new team comes in and puts up the trapeze so, basically, you're using equipment that you're assuming nothing has gone wrong with it in a way that you can't know when you're taking care of your own personal belongings…basically, the shackle spontaneously hopped,

[1] Related to financial risk, on March 16, 2020, Cirque du Soleil laid off 2600 employees (1200 artists and 1400 technicians) as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

and so there are two of them, one on each side and one broke so the board went vertical and the person who was standing on the outside fell, and I fell so she is so lucky, so lucky. I heard she hit the net, I was too busy with my own problems to see what happened with her, but, basically, one of the biggest strongest guys on her team happened to be standing where she fell and freaking caught her like this. Like a baby. She is so lucky, I mean, it's like the stars lined up…I was so lucky and she was so lucky it could have been so much worse. [Circus_19, woman]

Another aerialist thought of risk in terms of repetition. Proper technique requires the repetition of practice. When the act is not fresh and the aerialist is repeating the same movements and routine, a fall can result from a lack of focus.

An automatic pilot is a lot more dangerous than actual big tricks that you're throwing...with something small and simple I've more often fallen on a really simple trick just because I wasn't paying attention than a really hard one. [Circus_07, woman]

The possibility of injury and learning to control the body under the aerialist's extreme circumstances is part of the thrill.

The risk of injury also connects aerialism with "edgework" as the aerialist flirts with the potential of injury and losing control. Lyng (2004) describes risk-taking behavior as "edgework" or the exploration of life and death. Edgework is about performance and the fine line between being out of control and harnessing excitement in life and death contexts (Laurendeau 2006). There is an emotional element of living on the edge or being in and out of control (Kusenbach and Loseke 2013; Coetzee 2020). The thrill is experienced physically and shared with the audience. The idea of risk allows for intense pleasure.

Something about the circus that really drew me in was this element of constantly being on the edge. It is mind-blowing to people when they first see it because they don't quite comprehend how it's done... If people are asking themselves how and why at the end of a performance, then I've done my job. Being on the edge also is the element of risk, too…you're on a rope and you do a head dive straight down and your head lands inches from the floor, that to me is what circus is all about…to make people think that, wow, you might actually split your head open and then you don't...If something goes wrong, there's always a moment in the audience where people go, "Oh," they breathe in…and they wonder if everything is OK…it draws them closer to you. [Circus_04, man]

A lot of that has to do with the inherent risk attached to the industry…the thing about the circus that makes it popular is that sense of danger and sense of risk so that makes it appealing that people want to see that, however, it's much safer than the perceived risk because we're, it is calculated risk that we're participating in. We train, we're really aware of what we're doing, and we do check all of our equipment… [Circus_24, woman]

In the latter portion of this quote, the aerialist first mentions the risk, then diminishes the risk by stating it is a calculated risk that they train to surmount. This quote demonstrates the risk-taking level of the aerialist that the general public may not appreciate. The risk level of the aerialist is high enough that they continue this work even though they may have to use their financial means for rehabilitation after obtaining injuries from training or performances. One aerialist [Circus 02, woman] described an accident in which she fell 11 feet and had just enough money to eat, pay the rent, and pay for rehabilitation from severe injury.

An injury is a threat to the aerialist's physical body, as well as their ability to express themselves creatively and emotionally. The injured body prohibits performing and causes the aerialist a temporary loss of their identity (also see Allen-Collinson 2017). The injured aerialist faces reality head-on, in that their injury pulls them away from the world of circus aerialism. Aerialists appear to view themselves as different from others, so the idea of stopping circus work can be disheartening. This notion is clear when aerialists describe "circus" people as distinct from "normal" people.

> …it's very painful when you go from being a normal person to a circus artist. [Circus_02, woman]

However, as described in the next section, the process of injury and retirement can also be painful for aerialists.

Injury and the Erosion of Body Capital

While the body changes to conform to the techniques of circus aerialism, the body may plateau. When an injury forces the aerialist to discontinue training, the body will undergo another transformation to conform to the healing stages and lose the developments gained during aerialism training. The mind also transforms as it must adapt to a more sedentary lifestyle than it is accustomed to as the body recovers from injury. At the same time, the body is healing, the mind is at a grieving stage as it contemplates the work that will be undone, such as learning to handle fear.

> With my own body, if I stop training, everything disappeared. I don't have calluses anymore, but if I start training tomorrow morning, I know it's going to come back in 2-3 months. [Circus_01, woman]

It's not just physical pain. It's the realization that you're going to be physically, financially, just impact in your day-to-day life…Anybody who's been training has a basic understanding of what the magnitude of their injuries are, like all of a sudden you realize that a moment ago you were training and all of a sudden it's going to be 6-8 months. [Circus_18, man]

Physical fitness does not correlate directly with injury prevention (Jones et al. 2017). In aerialism, there is an imminent sense of injury given the intense nature of aerial performances and the technical nature of aerial rigging. When aerialists deal with tendonitis and bodily breakdowns, they can see and feel their body capital disbanding.

> What happened was from so much repetition certain muscles had gotten over-worked, and other muscles I wasn't working on were muscles that I needed to use, I used the strong muscles to compensate for them. So, I had built sort of these smaller muscles that were a bit weaker around the shoulder area, a lot of physical therapy. [Circus_25, woman]

As in many sports, there is a normalizing of injuries because aerialists cannot afford time away from training without losing strength and flexibility. Further, there is competitive pressure to perform. While classical ballet dancers consider injuries as devastating to their career, they also consider them a component of ballet and often prioritize the ballet show ahead of injury and pain (Turner and Wainwright 2003). Likewise, aerialists abuse their bodies by denying the need for healing so that they may continue to perform.

> As an aerialist, the last thing that you want to hear is that you, for sure, are injured and that you need to stop working because you just can't afford to do that. You

especially can't afford to pay someone to tell you to stop working... [Circus_19, woman]

Many of the circus aerialists we interviewed suffered serious injuries from work. Allen-Collinson (2005) examines the emotional aspects of athlete experience of and recovery from injury. The way athletes experience pain and injury relates to how long they participate in this activity and the goals they set. As the aerialist's body wears down, the risk of injury increases (Dickson 2018); yet, most circus aerialists lack access to organization-based physiotherapy and care. When the body becomes incapacitated, it means disruption to the aerialist's sense of the self. When the aerialist must consult the outside expert of the medical profession, it is humiliating to the aerialist who considers themselves as knowing their body better than anyone else. Throughout injury to recovery, the managing of pain involves a government of the body that returns to basic repetition and training. Sparkes and Smith (2002) consider how injured people define themselves as disabled. The respondents talk about their bodies as becoming problematic, as did several aerialists. Much like what Tulle (2008) notes about aging runners, the athletic competence of aerialists is retained, yet the body capital of the aerialist erodes.

Aging Out

It takes years to shape the aerialist body to perform death-defying feats, yet aerialism is a short-lived profession. While the body transforms to become an aerialist, it eventually reaches an end-stage due to age and injury. Toward the end of the career, pain may consume the body. Similar to retired military personnel (Williams et al. 2018), aging out of aerialism is a shock to the self and the body's familiarity with routines (also see Bieńko 2018). It is important to explore how aerialists make sense of aging and the

pains that the aging body produces (Encandela 1997). The passion for their art is so strong, not even pain holds some aerialists back from performing.

> As athletes, aerialists are very passionate people and especially if you're an athlete who would be what I would call in the good enough category…I'm good enough to be working, but I'm not elite. So when you fall into the good enough category, then to make up the difference between yourself and someone who is at an actual elite level, you have to make up that difference with perseverance and dedication. So for someone to tell you that you can't train or you can't do to make it happen it's, you have to be very stubborn about your persistence in your task. And you cannot have a doctor or someone telling you don't do it. [Circus_19, woman]

This next aerialist's description of performing indicates that aerialists know nothing else like the feeling of aerialism.

> It is unreal when you are performing in the air, but I think, for most of the artists, it's very unreal when they are on the stage. They are in a place that they don't know anywhere else. They don't feel that way anywhere else than on stage under a spotlight. [Circus_01, woman]

This surreal description of aerialism can help one to understand the shock aerialists experience when aging out of their career and the show ends.

At the end of their aerialist journey, not only are aerialists faced with deteriorating bodies but a loss of whom they have become. At a young age, they must reinvent themselves to belong within the aerialist world. While their bodies may no longer be able to perform as they once did, their passion and drive for risk may still ensue. Some aerialists who have destroyed their bodies through their work continue

to provide the ontological narratives of an aerialist. They even make sense of their self through aerialism, despite no longer conducting aerialist work.

> I'm 30 now, but I have started to feel my mortality. Through injuries, fatigue, I can feel it where there are days where I don't feel any older, but I recognize that I'm more than my body. What I'm really doing to the organization [as a coach] is putting everything I've learned into a body of knowledge, which people can access that will live on...When I'm ready, don't reincarnate me, I don't want to be reborn, when this life's over, I want to rest. I'm going to be tired. Don't bring me back, I want to be dead. By that point, I'll have transitioned what I want, the legacies in this world into the organization, and that will live on...So I see my body as sort of that physical conduit for the stories and the ideas that have come through it. [Circus_18, man]

The aerialists are aware of how short their careers are as aerialists, and many translate their body capital to cultural and social capital after their circus careers end due to age or injury.

> I often do consulting with people who are just starting in the circus…you can either be smart about it and learn the dynamics of the business or you can starve, or you can supplement it with getting what's called a real job...I'm my own agent, and the Internet makes it incredibly easy, so I know how to negotiate contracts... So if you embark upon the process of doing it all yourself, then you get the alternate skills of knowing how to become a businessperson, as well. [Circus_05, man]

Aerialists can experience a sense of devastation when told they ought to stop due to injury or age. Wainwright and Turner (2006) argue that social constructionist arguments in the sociology of the body literature fail to consider the materiality of the body and

aging. Drawing from ballet dancers' stories about their craft, Wainwright and Turner argue that dancers' body capital declines with injury and aging. The case is similar for aerialists. Work destroys bodies, and if work does not provide opportunities for the body to heal due to the contractual nature of the work, the body of the worker will break down. Some aerialists develop marketing and business skills and work in the circus industry administration. Other aerialists might find themselves with opportunities such as coaching, choreography, and set design.

Discussion and Conclusion

The body is at the core of the existence of the aerialist and their craft. We examined how aerialists talk about their bodies work and how work wears down their bodies, eventually making it impossible to retain and mobilize the body capital to continue being an aerialist. Allen-Collinson, Crust, and Swann (2019) focus on the senses and tacit knowledge of high-altitude mountaineers and how this connects to their bodily practices. Like high-altitude mountaineers, aerialists sense how things should be or when things are going awry with their rigs and with their bodies (also see O'Connor 2007). Aerialists demonstrate this sense in their routines of learning to tolerate pain, adjusting their bodies with the equipment to avoid injury, and using adrenaline to perform through injury. Knowing their time as circus artists is short-lived, they push their bodies beyond pain and risk boundaries. Shedding light on how aerialists make meaning out of pain (Bendelow and Williams 1995; Turner and Wainwright 2003), we have shown how aerialists endure incredible amounts of pain, as well as gruesome injuries, and interpret these happenings using frames such as circus luck. Body callusing (Spencer 2009) and skilled pain tolerance give way to injury and aging. Aerialists may still stay involved like endurance runners run for run-

ning's sake (Tulle 2007). Nevertheless, the experience is not the same since the disrupted body (Allen-Collinson 2017) becomes a challenge to overcome instead of a tool to use in high-level performance.

Our work resonates with Wainwright and Turner's (2006) exploration of ballet dancers and aging since we focus on the lived experience of embodiment and trace the rise and fall of body capital with aerialists over time. Aches, pains, and body battles are common. When people age in ballet, their physical capital declines. They must begin to draw on cultural capital to make advances in the field. A similar dynamic or cycle occurs in aerialism. Aerialists are putting themselves at risk of injury with every maneuver, and their accumulation of body capital leads to risk, injury, and even inequality (Shilling 1991; Stephens 2015) in ways we have hinted at, but that deserve more attention in future research. Social and cultural capital becomes key for aerialists staying in the industry as teachers or administrators.

Circus organizations are now big enterprises and businesses (Beadle and Könyöt 2006; Parker 2011), and there is a sense in which circus organizations are harvesting the body capital of aerialists. We have examined body callusing and body capital in an artistic, creative, but nonetheless demanding form of physical work. Circus aerialists work to build body capital, though it dissipates over time due to stress on the body, age, and injuries. Aerialists must artfully negotiate the decline of their bodily capital and the pains of aging while, at the same time, trying to maintain the physical capital needed to perform. In the end, despite heaps of tacit and sensual knowledge, the aerialist has little body capital left. At best, they can translate this body capital into social and cultural capital. To the outside observer, losing one's physical capital at the end of an aerialist career must be better than losing one's life after being hurled from a faulty rig. And yet, given the centrality of the body to the work of aerialists, exiting the stage for the last time entails a deep sense of loss, a pain that many aerialists can never entirely accept.

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Citation

Deadly Disease vs. Chronic Illness: Competing Understandings of HIV in the HIV Non-Disclosure Debate

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Abstract: Over the past several decades, understandings of what it means to have contracted the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) have shifted so that an infection once viewed as deadly and ultimately terminal is now largely regarded as chronic and manageable, at least in the West. Yet, the shift has not been complete. There are arenas of discourse where understandings of what health implications HIV carries with it are contested. One such space is the debate concerning the appropriate response to cases of HIV non-disclosure, that is, situations where individuals who are HIV-positive do not disclose their health status to intimate partners. This paper examines the competing constructions of HIV found within this debate, particularly as it has unfolded in Canada. Those who oppose the criminalization of non-disclosure tend to construct HIV as an infection that is chronic and manageable for those who have contracted it, not unlike diabetes. Those who support criminalization have mobilized a discourse that frames the infection as harmful and deadly. We use the case of the HIV non-disclosure debate to make the argument that representations of health conditions can become mired in larger social problems debates in ways that lead to contests over how to understand the fundamental nature of those conditions.

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There has been an ever-growing appreciation within the social sciences that disease is not something that is objectively given, but a construction subject to the interpretative work of social actors as they engage in the meaning-making activity (Conrad and Barker 2010; Pawluch 2016). As a result of this interpretative work, behaviors, conditions, and states of being once considered "normal" come to be seen as events that call for medical intervention. This development has been well documented, for example, in connection with childbirth (Oakley 1984), infertility (Scritchfield 2009; Bell 2016), premenstrual syndrome (Figert 1996), menopause (McCrea 1983), erectile dysfunction and andropause (Conrad 2007), weight (Sobal and Maurer 1999), shyness (Scott 2006), dementia (Harding and Palfrey 1997), and even death and dying (Horwath 2007). In other cases, behaviors that are now viewed as symptomatic of disease were once seen as lapses in moral judgment or deviant behaviors (Conrad and Schneider 1992; Conrad 2007). These definitional shifts, as social accomplishments, have been studied in connection with mental illness (Szasz 1961), hyperactivity or ADHD in children (Conrad 2007), child abuse syndrome (Pfohl 1977), and sexual compulsivity (Levine and Troiden 1988), to name just a few.

The process of medicalization can also work in reverse. Just as diseases are constituted as identifiable and objective entities through interpretive social processes, through those same processes they can be reconstituted as something other than disease. Homosexuality was once considered a psychiatric disorder and listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, but has now been normalized (Spector 1977; Conrad and Angell 2004). Late 19th century views of masturbation as a disease were supplanted in the 20th century with understandings of masturbation as a normal part of human sexual development (Conrad and Schneider 1992). "Paraphilia"—a catch-all diagnosis for BDSM (an acronym for a variety of sexual practices that include bondage, dominance, submission, and sadomasochism) is undergoing a similar definitional shift as advocates press a rhetoric of freedom of sexual expression (Lin 2017).

Citing the contributions of sociologists of medicine like Freidson (1970), Waitzkin (1989), and Zola (1972), as well as developments in the sociology of science, Brown (1995) has drawn attention to the importance of acknowledging the social forces and interactive meaning-making processes involved in shaping what we make of health and illness. Brown's (1995:38) notion of a "sociology of diagnosis" treats medical categories and diagnoses as instances of the "politics of definition" and focuses on exploring processes of "naming and framing" (Brown 1995:35). Brown offers a typology of conditions, including conditions around which there is consensus so that the condition is universally accepted as a disease and others where groups are still seeking to have disease labels applied or recognized as legitimate in an environment where others might be contesting the "disease" status of the condition.

We situate our analysis within these conceptual debates. However, our paper is concerned not so much with contests over *whether* a condition ought to be viewed in medical terms, but about the fundamental nature of a condition and what kind of medical threat it represents. Competing constructions of HIV—HIV as a deadly and life-threatening virus versus HIV as a chronic and manageable virus—are examined. When first discovered in the 1980s, HIV was generally understood to be an infection with life-threatening implications. The prognosis for anyone receiving an HIV-positive diagnosis was

dire, carrying with it the expectation of an inevitable progression into AIDS, a shortened lifespan, and death, often within mere months (Beaudin and Chambre 1996). Even in the earliest days of the epidemic, there were segments of the HIV community who resisted the fatalism in this prognosis. For example, Gamson (1989) and Gillett (2011) have written about the refusal on the part of many people living with HIV to believe that their diagnosis was a hopeless death sentence. By and large, however, the virus generated a great deal of fear and uncertainty, particularly among groups believed to be most at risk of infection—gay men, intravenous drug users, and sex workers (Herek and Glunt 1988).

The campaign to redefine HIV from an ultimately life-threatening virus to a virus that could be managed gained traction, at least in the West, in the early 2000s. The shift was prompted in part by an increased understanding of HIV and related disease processes and the development of treatments. The antiretroviral therapies (ART) that were developed in the late 1980s showed signs of being successful in at least slowing down the virus. By the mid-1990s, ART had started to give way to highly active antiretroviral therapies (HAART), which were even more effective and afforded those infected with HIV the opportunity to reach near-normal life expectancy and prolonged, disease-free health (Samji et al. 2013; Webel 2015).

As Beaudin and Chambre (1996) argue, non-medical factors also contributed to the shift. They point to the role played by the formal and informal organizations and communication channels set up by the AIDS community, made up then largely of gay white men. The community agitated for a dramatic expansion in the services and programs available for people living with HIV/AIDS (PHAs). Gradual-

ly, the short-term and crisis-oriented responses that characterized HIV's early history were replaced by a greater appreciation for the long-term needs of a diverse population of people living with a complex and uncertain combination of chronic and episodic needs. Advances in treatment have continued, with the latest research focused on the use of bone marrow transplants to induce remission (Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange 2021). With each advance, the framing of HIV/AIDS as a manageable condition is reinforced. But, again, we emphasize that these developments pertain largely to Western countries. In much of the developing world, access to therapy is limited, and HIV continues to be regarded as a significant public health burden (Chan 2017; UNAIDS 2021; WHO 2021).

Yet, even in the West, there are arenas of both expert and popular discourse where questions about the threat of HIV persist and where a view of HIV/AIDS as deadly can still be found. One such arena is the debate surrounding the criminalization of HIV non-disclosure. As our analysis will show, those who oppose criminal sanctions against individuals who do not disclose their HIV-positive status (referred to from here on in as non-disclosers) build their claims on an understanding of HIV as a chronic and manageable infection. On the other hand, those who favor the criminalization of non-disclosers as an effective method for stopping the spread of HIV are more likely to promote a view of HIV as deadly and a diagnosis of infection as devastating.

Our concern in this paper is to examine the competing claims made about HIV—a "life-threatening and deadly" view of the virus versus a "chronic and manageable" view. We want to make clear that we are not addressing the issue of what sort of con-

dition HIV/AIDS *really* represents. Our analysis is not intended to challenge or endorse any specific view of HIV/AIDS. We position ourselves decidedly on the sidelines of the debate for reasons we elaborate in our discussion of the theoretical perspective that informs our analysis. We start our paper by providing a brief background into the issue of HIV non-disclosure and the debate about how non-disclosers should be treated. Then we turn to the perspective that informed our analysis. After briefly describing the methods we used, we discuss the typifications of HIV inherent in the claims made by both those who favor criminalization and those who oppose it. The paper concludes with a discussion of a series of more general questions about the links between disease construction and social problems claims-making. We argue that definitions of health conditions can become mired in larger social problems debates in ways that lead to contests over how best to understand the fundamental nature of health conditions.

The Criminalization Debate

Among the challenges that HIV has presented is the issue of how to deal with non-disclosers or those who do not disclose their HIV-positive status to those with whom they are intimate. Like much of the Western world, Canada initially showed a preference for public health rather than a criminal approach. While a criminal response involves the laying of criminal charges—typically sexual assault charges—against non-disclosers, a public health approach emphasizes education. The recently diagnosed are targeted, informed about the risks involved with having unprotected sex and their legal obligations to disclose their positive status to any potential sexual partner. In cases where non-disclosers are reported to public health authorities, be-

havior orders or warnings may be issued. Only as a last resort would public health officials contact the police.

However, since the early 2000s, both in Canada and elsewhere, there has been a move in the direction of criminalization, with a dramatic increase in the use of criminal sanctions (French 2015). Mykhalovskiy (2015:373) notes that, as of 2010, approximately "41 countries had prosecuted people living with HIV for non-disclosure, exposure, and transmission." In Canada, between 1989 and 2009, 98 individuals were criminally charged for not disclosing their HIV-positive status to their sexual partners. However, approximately 68 percent of all prosecutions for non-disclosure occurred in the five years between 2004-2009 (Mykhalovskiy, Betteridge, and McLay 2010). Since there are no HIV-specific criminal laws on the books in Canada, the charge typically used is "aggravated sexual assault." In the United States, since 2003, it is estimated that there have been approximately 541 HIV-related offense convictions in 19 states (Hernandez 2013 as cited in Mykhalovskiy 2015). Hoppe (2014) argues that in the United States, 33 states have enacted criminal sanctions against those who are HIV-positive, a phenomenon he refers to as the "criminalization of sickness."

The trend towards criminalization has generated debate and controversy. Many policymakers and public health authorities, academics, human rights activists, people living with HIV/AIDS, and AIDS service organizations have taken the position that criminalization is an inappropriate response and counter-productive to the goal of combating the spread of HIV/AIDS. Arguments against criminalization include observations that criminalization deters individuals from getting tested, erodes pub-

lic health norms of mutual responsibility, and exacerbates the stigma attached to HIV, all of which puts the general population at greater risk, not less. Opponents of a criminal approach point to the historical record of failed attempts to control sexual activity using criminal law, ambiguities in the law concerning the conditions under which individuals are required to disclose, and the potential for criminal laws to be applied in discriminatory ways. They also point to the therapies that have significantly reduced, if not eliminated, the risk of HIV transmission (Galletly and Pinkerton 2006; Jürgens et al. 2009; Merminod 2009; Mykhalovskiy et al. 2010; O'Bryne, Bryan, and Roy 2013; French 2015; Swiffen 2015). Adam (2006; 2015; Adam et al. 2013) has argued that criminalization as a strategy for preventing transmission will not work simply because of the gap between "the practicalities of disclosure in everyday life and the somewhat abstracted vision of the rational actor envisioned in court decisions requiring near-universal disclosure in sexual interactions" (Adam et al. 2015:386).

Pro-criminalization arguments stress the rights of those potentially at risk because of non-disclosers. Non-disclosure denies individuals access to vital information they need before engaging in sex. This matters because infection with HIV is at stake. Apart from the health consequences connected to HIV infection, there are serious social consequences. HIV continues to be highly stigmatized, and the lives of those who become infected are significantly compromised. They experience status loss, discrimination, and isolation. Given the gravity of the potential health and social consequences, a tougher approach is warranted (Elliott 1999; Lazzarini, Bray, and Burris 2002; Merminod 2009). Lazzarini and colleagues (2002:329) summarize the legal rationale for criminalization in this way:

It may *deter* unsafe behavior by the threat of punishment; it may help convince people with HIV that risky behavior is wrong, by supporting a *social norm* against the behavior; or it may *incapacitate* through imprisonment those who have a propensity toward unsafe behavior.

There is evidence to suggest that some service providers and PHAs themselves support this position. For example, Lichtenstein, Whetten, and Rubenstein (2013) found that 90% of the HIV providers in North Carolina supported disclosure laws with criminal sanctions for non-disclosers. In addition, a review of the extant literature on this question (O'Byrne et al. 2013) showed that while qualitative studies among PHAs indicate opposition to criminalization, quantitative, survey-based studies generally show support for HIV criminal laws. Adam and colleagues (2013) found support for the prosecution of the high-profile non-disclosure cases among PHAs, though participants also expressed concerns about the degree to which those who are criminally charged are presumed to be guilty until proven innocent and, therefore, carry the burden of proof when it comes to establishing their innocence. In a study of young men in the Vancouver area who were HIV-seronegative, or did not know their HIV status, Knight and colleagues (2018) found that a significant number felt a criminal approach was justified.

While the debate around criminalization is interesting and important, our concern in this paper is not with appropriate responses to non-disclosure. Rather, we are interested in the divergent constructions of HIV contained *within* the arguments that each side advances in defense of its position. Before describing the data we analyzed to address this issue, we discuss the framework that informs the questions we are asking.

A Social Constructionist Perspective

In exploring the issue of competing constructions of HIV in the criminalization debate, we bring a social constructionist perspective to bear on our analysis of the data. Broadly speaking, social constructionism is concerned with how social actors create meaning, make sense of their worlds, and construct reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Hacking 2000). The perspective has pushed many areas of scholarly inquiry in the direction of looking at subjectivities as constitutive of reality. We started our paper by covering some of the literature that the constructionist perspective has generated in the sociology of health, where the focus has been on how understandings of conditions as disease emerge and change. While much of that literature was being produced, there were parallel developments in the sociology of social problems. In 1977, Spector and Kitsuse published *Constructing Social Problems*, a book that took issue with the focus in the sociology of social problems on objective conditions (poverty, family violence, crime, etc.). Insisting that conditions become problematic only by virtue of the subjective judgments that individuals make with respect to these conditions, they urged sociologists to stop studying social problems as objective facts and to consider instead how certain conditions come to be *defined* as problematic. Since social problems are a matter of social definition, and these definitions change over time, they insisted that the emphasis should be on the *social processes* by which these definitions come about and the claims-making activities that generate them.

Building on the agenda that Spector and Kitsuse laid out for sociologists of social problems, Loseke (2003a) elaborated on the three interconnected elements involved in the social problems claims-making process—the construction of conditions (diagnostic framing), the construction of people (motivational framing), and the construction of solutions (prognostic framing). Diagnostic frames essentially communicate to audiences why a particular condition is problematic; motivational frames focus on the individuals connected with the condition as either victims or villains, thereby providing audiences with a rationale for caring about the issue; and prognostic frames suggest what needs to be done to ameliorate the condition.

Elsewhere, Speakman (2017) has used the concept of motivational framing to look at how non-disclosers are characterized in the criminalization debate, finding that proponents of criminalization are more likely to construct non-disclosers as villains while opponents construct them as victims. In this paper, we look more at the diagnostic and prognostic framing going on in the debate. How conditions are framed, Loseke (2003a) points out, is often related to the solution that is ultimately proposed, linking diagnostic and prognostic frames in decisive ways. To illustrate, she uses the example of "transportation for disabled people." If the condition is framed simply as a problem with transportation itself, the solution is to call for more funding for adequate transportation. On the other hand, the framing of the problem as a violation of civil rights would call for looking beyond transportation issues at the broader institutionalized discrimination against those who are disabled.

Loseke (2003a) also notes that in some cases, the definition of the condition itself can become a point of contention between claims-makers and counter claims-makers. That is, there may be agreement about the existence of the condition, and perhaps even on the issue of whether the condition is problematic, but *not* on how to typify or characterize the condition. The debate around the criminalization of HIV non-disclosure offers a unique opportunity to explore the issues that Loseke raises, particular-

ly around how competing definitions of a condition (HIV infection) are linked to competing definitions of the appropriate solution (education or criminalization of non-disclosers).

There will be readers unsettled by the fact that our analysis resists privileging any particular view over another. This includes the views of HIV researchers and medical experts. We put those views on the same ontological plain as the views of non-experts and members of the general public who have weighed in on the criminalization debate. In doing so, we want to make clear that we are not *challenging* the science around HIV/AIDS. Our point is simply that how HIV should be viewed is still contested territory. We recognize that which view prevails has serious consequences, not only in terms of how we deal with non-disclosers but more broadly on how much of a priority HIV/AIDS becomes in national health policies and in the funds it receives for research, treatment, and services (Scandlyn 2000). However, we also recognize that which view prevails will be determined not by us, but in the "social problems marketplace" (Best 2015) within which claims-makers and their audiences operate and where "truth" claims are ultimately arbitrated. That makes it all the more important to understand how these contests are fought and won. Hence our interest in how claims are framed and how respective positions are advanced, without regard to questions about the validity or truth value of claims (for more on this issue, see: Pawluch 2019).

Method

Qualitative Data Analysis

The data for this study came primarily from internet sources and were analyzed using qualitative docu-

mentary analysis. There are specialized varieties of documentary analysis, such as archival and historical research (Gidley 2017) and the qualitative media analysis approach developed by Altheide and Schneider (2013) specifically for examining traditional print media (e.g., newspapers and magazines and more recent forms such as television broadcasts and cyberspace). But, in its more generic form, qualitative documentary analysis refers to the systematic examination of *any* type of document to "elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (Bowen 2009:27). The term "documents" has gradually expanded to take in an ever-wider range of materials—written, printed, oral, recorded, photographed, painted, and virtual (Tight 2019). Among the advantages of working with this type of data, according to Lincoln (1980:10), is the fact that documents represent a "natural" source of information—"a delight to the naturalistic inquirer." They are an "in context" source of information in that they are generated in the context of everyday interaction, not elicited by the researcher. Moreover, they provide information *about* the context, in the sense that they provide a record of the environment as social actors define it. Lincoln (1980:10) concludes: "They are repositories, as a result, of some of the best grounded data available on the events or situations under investigation."

The Johnson Aziga Case

For this study, we worked with agency reports, academic papers, press releases, news stories, editorials, letters to the editor, comment feeds, blogs, and chat rooms. A strategy that proved useful in locating many of these documents was to start with a particularly high-profile case in Canada—the case of Johnson Aziga—and then to carefully track as much of the coverage and commentary as was

accessible. Since many of the quotes refer to the Aziga case, we provide a summary here. Johnson Aziga was a Ugandan-born immigrant to Canada whose non-disclosure of HIV-positive status led in 2009 to a conviction of two counts on first-degree murder, ten counts of aggravated sexual assault, and one count of attempted aggravated sexual assault. In 2011, the prosecution petitioned the court to declare Aziga a dangerous offender, a designation usually reserved in Canada for only the most heinous criminal offenders. The court granted the request, meaning that Aziga's incarceration is indeterminate and that his sentence is likely to be lifelong.

Aziga was not the only criminal non-disclosure case to generate media attention in Canada (for a comprehensive media analysis of all HIV criminalization cases covered in Canadian English-language newspapers between 1989 and 2015, see: Mykhalovskiy et al. 2016). But the Aziga case does stand out, most notably because it was the first time a first-degree murder conviction had been handed down in connection with HIV non-disclosure. That may be why the case prompted such intense debate, at least in Canada.

Data Collection and Analysis

An online search using Aziga's name generated a multitude of hits. While many of these documents were trial-related and included summaries of the trial itself, related hearings and appeals, and victim impact statements, others were reactions to and commentaries about non-disclosure generally. In addition, we used the LexisNexis database to locate all articles in Canadian news sources between 2003-2014 that referred to "Aziga"—approximately 350 in all.

We did not limit ourselves to Aziga-related material. The Aziga case was simply our entry point into larger discussions about non-disclosure. When we found those entry points, we tracked the discussions in a snowball fashion wherever they led. That road took us to a broad range of websites, some of which were entirely unrelated to Aziga or even HIV for that matter. For example, among the sites that included comments about HIV non-disclosure were *PlentyOfFish.com*, a free dating website, and *Queerty*, gay and lesbian news and entertainment site. After eliminating articles that were re-posts from other sites, we were left with 92 documents as the basis for our analysis. The documents ranged in size from one-page notes to the 87 pages of comments following an article published on *Slate.com*.

Given the range of sources, it is not surprising that there was a great deal of variability in the data as far as style, tone, and technical sophistication. While reporters on news and organizational sites typically identified themselves, those who contributed to comment feeds typically used a pseudonym or wrote anonymously. Some contributors wrote as interested parties (people living with HIV, clinicians, lawyers); others appeared to simply be members of the public with an opinion on these matters. In some cases, the comments were detailed and more formal in tone. In other cases, they were brief and written casually, sometimes using profanities and negative stereotypes. In some cases, views were expressed using temperate, civil language; in other cases, in extreme and offensive terms. The latter was especially true for those who supported criminalization and wrote anonymously. Anonymity allows individuals to express themselves in unrestrained ways since they cannot be held accountable for what they say (Kling et al. 1999). Since we intended to get a sense of how HIV

was constructed in the discourse around the issue of non-disclosure, irrespective of where those conversations were happening and the language used, we included all the data collected. That also meant that we did not make distinctions between contributors to the discourse in terms of their status or credibility. As we explained earlier, we were aiming to identify competing constructions of HIV, not to judge those constructions based on who generated them.

Regarding our analytical process, the goal in the qualitative documentary analysis is to immerse oneself in the text and to produce thick or detailed accounts of one's findings (Berg 2006). This paper originated in a related analysis about how non-disclosers were represented in the criminalization debate (Speakman 2017), depending on whether they favored or opposed criminalization. However, that analysis showed that contributors spoke differently not only about non-disclosers (as victims versus villains) but also about HIV itself. Once HIV emerged as a focus, the data were subjected to a careful coding process that involved looking at any reference to HIV and exploring how the virus was represented in that content. Themes were then identified in these typifications, which ultimately became the basis for the analysis that follows. We drew the terms "deadly" and "manageable" directly from the competing discourses about HIV.

Caveats

We conclude this section with several caveats. First, it is not at all clear how representative the data we collected are of the full range of views around the criminalization of non-disclosure. People tend to react publicly only when they have a vested inter-est in the issue being debated or feel strongly about the issue. Therefore, our data may have captured both ends of the continuum and less of the more moderate views in between, giving the impression of a debate more polarized than is the case.

Second, our data do not capture the prevalence of the competing points of view on criminalization or how pronounced each was in relation to the other. Mykhalovskiy and colleagues (2016:12-13) argue that public understandings of crime in general, and the HIV criminalization debate more specifically, are shaped by how the mainstream media presents these issues. Their analysis of media representations of HIV non-disclosure cases—including the Aziga case—in the Canadian, English-language media showed that coverage focused disproportionately on African, Caribbean, and Black defendants and paid an inordinate amount of attention to their immigration status. The sensationalized coverage, they suggest, has informed how people think about and respond to HIV non-disclosure. The counter-discourses offered by AIDS service organizations, networks of people living with HIV, and the scholarly and alternative press have received "limited reach." They may be right, but to what extent either discourse holds sway, and among which audience is an empirical question that has yet to be answered.

Third, we were not able to capture temporal dimensions of the debate and how significantly positions shifted as new therapies for HIV/AIDS emerged or new policies were rolled out. What we can say is that throughout the period covered by the data, including the most recent data, there were vociferous voices on both sides of the debate. It was those voices, and how they constructed HIV as a disease, that most interested us.

HIV as a Chronic and Manageable Virus

We outlined earlier the range of arguments that those opposed to the criminalization of HIV non-disclosure have marshaled in making their case, including the point that criminalization undermines HIV counseling, educational, and preventative efforts in a way that increases rather than reduces risks to the general population. Their anti-criminalization position did not rest entirely, or even principally, on their construction of HIV as a manageable virus. However, that construction does enter the discourse in connection with the argument about advances in science and the disjuncture that has created between the severity of the response (criminal charges) and the nature of the threat (risk of HIV infection). To be fair, the *risk* of infection is different from the *nature* of the infection. We appreciate that saying that the *risk* of infection has become minimal is not the same thing as saying that the infection itself represents a minimal threat. But, as we show below, in much of the anti-criminalization discourse, the nature of the infection did become part of the discussion. In that discussion, HIV was constructed as chronic and manageable.

Opponents often referred to advances in treatment and new knowledge not (or not only) as it affects the risk level, but in terms of how it mitigates the effects of living with HIV on a long-term basis. Based on this new knowledge, opponents argued, the dire prognosis that was once common for those diagnosed as HIV-positive has been greatly reduced, and the probability of living a full and normal lifespan greatly increased. This argument is reflected in a comment made following a *Globe and Mail* editorial.

> BTW—HIV/AIDS is no longer a death sentence in this country [Canada]. Proper drugs and lifestyle can have

those living long productive lives. [*Globe and Mail* 2010]

In a report critical of the trend towards criminalization in Canada (Mykhalovskiy et al. 2010), the authors underline the dramatic medical advances that have taken place since the first precedent-setting cases were tried and insist that the law has simply not kept up with the science around HIV. The report argued that this gap may be partly a result of the "complex and rapidly evolving nature of scientific research on HIV sexual transmission risks" (Mykhalovskiy et al. 2010:26). But, beyond addressing the question of risk, the report also characterized HIV as a "chronic and manageable condition," akin to diabetes:

> With the advent of effective therapy in the mid-1990s, life expectancy for people living with HIV has steadily increased. The World Health Organization and other leading health authorities consider that, with proper medical care, HIV is a chronic manageable condition, similar in many ways to other chronic conditions such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease. [Mykhalovskiy et al. 2010:26]

A similar argument is made in a comment thread on *Queerty* discussing criminal charges laid against an HIV-positive gay man:

> Why is it, well over a decade after HIV disease became a non-instant death sentence, that Canadian authorities are beginning to pull crap like this? [*Queerty* 2010]

A health editor for the *Globe and Mail* goes even further in the claims made for the effectiveness of current treatments, suggesting that treatments have made it possible to reduce the level of the virus in the system to a virtually undetectable level:

At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, doctors had little means of treating the disease, and most patients faced certain death. But, medical advances transformed HIV treatment. Patients given highly active antiretroviral therapy, known as HAART, can now expect to live an almost normal lifespan. Furthermore, the drugs reduce HIV to undetectable levels in semen, vaginal fluids, and blood. [Taylor 2011]

The reference to the undetectability of the virus is significant in that it reflects the position that a number of HIV experts, including scientists, advocates, and organizations, have taken in the last few years. Captured in a slogan first promoted by the Prevention Access Campaign, a multi-agency health equity initiative launched in the US in 2016 (Prevention Access Campaign 2016), "Undetectable equals Untransmittable" (or U=U) rests on the premise that HIV-positive individuals showing undetectable viral loads of HIV—200 copies/ml or less—for at least six months represent no infection risk to their partners at all.

Since its inception, the U=U movement has been aggressively promoting the notion that individuals with undetectable viral loads should be under no moral obligation to disclose their HIV-positive status to their sexual partners. In terms of the criminalization debate, the implication of the U=U campaign is that individuals cannot be held criminally responsible for an action (non-disclosure) that is within their rights. The U=U campaign reinforces the argument that in cases of HIV non-disclosure, the law has simply not kept pace with science. Those who oppose criminalization juxtapose accounts of advances in HIV treatment and their effect on reducing the threat of death once linked to HIV against the trend towards greater criminalization. They point to the irony in the fact that as HIV becomes more manageable, criminal charges have increased in number.

A contributor to the *dailyxtra.com* news site pointed to a consensus statement issued by a panel of HIV experts that takes a similar position:

Just last month, dozens of Canadian scientific experts released a consensus statement that said, "A poor appreciation of the science related to HIV contributes to an overly broad use of the criminal law against individuals living with HIV in cases of HIV non-disclosure…We are concerned that actors in the criminal justice system have not always correctly interpreted the medical and scientific evidence regarding the possibility of HIV transmission, and may not have understood that HIV infection is a chronic and manageable condition. This may lead to miscarriages of justice." [Fouchard 2014]

The view of HIV as a chronic, manageable condition comes through as well in another argument that opponents of criminalization make, having to do with the precise charges laid in non-disclosure cases. While opponents take exception to any use of the law in non-disclosure cases, they are particularly against the use of criminal law, claiming that criminal charges do not align fairly with the severity of the harm caused. In one case in the United States, an HIV-positive person was charged with bio-terrorism for allegedly biting a neighbor during an altercation. In commenting on this case, a reporter at one news outlet wrote:

…the wealth of research on HIV/AIDS over the last three decades contrasts sharply with ongoing public misconceptions that are codified by policies that criminalize disease—paving the way for [people living with HIV] to find themselves susceptible to terror charges for actions that not only are demonstrably incapable of spreading HIV but would, for a non-HIV positive person, carry much less serious sanctions. [*Alternet.org* 2010]

Even those who would like to see some sort of consequence for non-disclosure take the position that—given the nature of the virus—a more appropriate response would be a fine or a public health warning. The proposed response is a measure of the seriousness of the offense from the perspective of those who do not see HIV as life-threatening. That is to say, as a manageable condition, HIV does not warrant the kind of response that might be justified if it were, in fact, a death sentence. The ridiculing of current responses, juxtaposed against actions typically understood as examples of bioterrorism, serves to indirectly challenge a view of HIV as deadly and threatening.

HIV as a Deadly Disease

Arguments on the pro-criminalization side of the debate are similarly multi-faceted and complex. However, those arguments too rest on a particular understanding of what it means to be infected with HIV. The assumptions that some proponents leave implicit in their arguments in favor of criminalization are expressed by others in explicit terms. For example, HIV is characterized as a "killer virus." The actions of non-disclosers are described as "basically attempted murder" (*Positive Living BC* 2014), and the virus they harbor as a "murder weapon" (Clairmont 2011). Characterized in this way, criminalization of non-disclosure is seen as warranted. The gravity of the wrongs perpetrated against those who become infected as a consequence of their relationships with non-disclosers justifies the severity of the response to non-disclosure. As one proponent of criminalization put it:

> The fact is, they put their partners in tremendous danger by not disclosing their status. The law is reasonable and moral. [*Positive Living BC* 2014]

A contributor to the same comment thread draws an analogy between non-disclosure and drunk driving, emphasizing the deadly nature of HIV in the process:

> If I drive home drunk, and [no one] gets hurt, I can still go to jail for a DUI. Attempted murder is a stretch, but HIV is a life-changing, potentially fatal illness, and someone who doesn't respect their partner enough to inform them should be punished. [*Positive Living BC* 2014]

"Harm" in much of this rhetoric extends beyond those who are infected by a non-discloser to instances where a partner has to live with the uncertainty and anxiety of not knowing if their test results will come back positive for HIV. In the case of Johnson Aziga, some of the women who were exposed did not contract HIV, but the psychological harm that they suffered before their test results came in was emphasized. Victims were described as being traumatized. News accounts referred to a woman who had decided with her current partner that if her test results came back positive, they would carry through on a suicide pact they had made. She is said to have described the waiting as "pure torture" (Nguyen 2011). In one comment thread on *AlterNet.org*, non-disclosure was equated with terrorism:

> If you have HIV and you bite someone, then YOU ARE A TERRORIST. A biological terrorist. Period. [*Alternet.org* 2010]

The magnitude of the offense was also underlined in the kinds of penalties supporters of criminalization see as appropriate. News coverage of another non-disclosure case—the case of Vincent Walkem—elicited several responses. Walkem was found guilty

and sentenced to 56 months in jail. One contributor to the discussion thread wrote:

> I say keep him locked up, as a menace to society, and take away his drugs. Let him rot to death, carry out the death sentence he so willingly handed out. [*Plenty of Fish* 2007]

Another contributor called for the re-institution of the death penalty for such cases (capital punishment was abolished in Canada in 1976). Others recommended castration and physical branding:

> Not only should it [HIV non-disclosure] remain a crime but castration should be the punishment. [*Plenty of Fish* 2007]

> Since this guy has shown a willingness to expose others without telling them… Tattoo "HIV Infected" in inch-high letters right across his face. [*Plenty of Fish* 2007]

The extreme nature of the descriptors used and sanctions called for in these instances have the effect of underlying the gravity of the harm caused by non-disclosers and, indirectly, the seriousness of an HIV diagnosis.

The construction of HIV as dangerous and deadly is not restricted to anonymous online comments. One finds the same kind of framing in the comments of professionals involved in criminalization cases. For instance, during the Aziga trial, the Crown prosecutor referred to HIV as a "slow-acting poison" (*Hamilton Spectator* 2009). The judge who presided over the Aziga trial, Justice Thomas Lofchik, made several statements over the course of the trial that underscored the seriousness of the offense. In summarizing the evidence, Justice Lofchik stressed for the jury the consequences of Aziga's actions—the fact that two women had died as a result of AIDS-related cancers and that those who were still alive reported having their teeth fall out, sores on their feet that prevented them from walking, and symptoms that persisted despite treatment. At the sentencing hearing at which he was considering the "dangerous offender" designation requested by the prosecution, Justice Lofchik described the consequences of Aziga's actions as "fatal" and said of Aziga that he "represents a gamble on the safety of the women in this community" (*CTV News* 2011). Similarly, Mark Nagler, a retired sociologist and well-known disability activist who followed the Aziga case closely and was often quoted in the local press, referred to HIV as a "transmissible disability," arguing that:

> Society has a right to be protected from its maniacs, no matter where they come from, whether they have intention or not…This is the perspective that the law takes: that society is in need of protection. [Hemsworth 2005]

A challenge for supporters of criminalization, of course, is how to engage with the argument that opponents make—that while an understanding of HIV as deadly might once have been true, advances in treatment make that view no longer accurate. Many supporters appear to accept that developments in treatment have made a difference. However, they minimize the impact, insisting that while these treatments may have improved life for those living with HIV, they have *not* changed the fundamental threat that HIV represents. The following comments illustrate this point:

> I don't think it's OK to give someone a terrible disease just because the disease isn't **as** deadly as it used to be. [*Positive Living BC* 2014]

The whole "HIV is no longer a death sentence" argument is stupid. You've still been given a life-long incurable disease with potentially bad consequences. [*Positive Living BC* 2014]

I'm sorry, but I don't want a disease that has no cure, no matter how good the treatments have become, or how long my life *could* be. [*Positive Living BC* 2014]

Another argument that supporters of criminalization make is that while there have been advances in treatment, not everyone has access to those treatments. They observe that victims of non-disclosers typically come from marginalized groups and groups with lower socio-economic status. These are precisely the individuals, they point out, who have limited access to healthcare and/or may not be able to afford medications. For these individuals, they point out, HIV is just as deadly and devastating as it was 30 years ago. In the same comment feed referred to above, one contributor noted: "If you are poor, it is still a death sentence." Likewise, another contributor, referring to the affordability of medication, stated: "Which means that it's still a death sentence, if you are unemployed or the working poor."

Discussion

Despite the reconceptualization of HIV as a chronic, manageable infection among most medical professionals, the scientific community, AIDS activists, and people living with HIV understandings of HIV as it was once typified—as a devastating and ultimately deadly virus—persist. The competing views of the disease are evident in the debate around the criminalization of HIV non-disclosure. While those who support criminalization construct HIV as devastating and ultimately terminal, those who oppose criminalization conceptualize HIV as an infection

that, with proper management, allows those who are positive to live out normal life spans. The objective of this paper was to uncover and draw attention to these competing views and illustrate how they find expression in the criminalization of non-disclosure debate.

The case study raises several more general issues. First, the case of HIV underlines the extent to which how we view conditions and diseases is affected not only by scientific evidence and interpretations of that evidence but by larger debates within which definitions may become embroiled. In other words, where there are differences in views about disease definitions, those differences may be related to broader social issues. Going back to Brown's (1995) discussion, it may be worthwhile to look at the conditions that fall into the "contested" category and to explore more deeply the social bases for those contestations. Many of the conditions he identifies (e.g., occupational diseases, multiple chemical sensitivity, environmental diseases) are linked to social problems debates about occupational and environmental hazards and risks more generally. It is not unreasonable to suggest that their construction as either legitimate or contested is connected to one's positioning in those debates and that the question of whether they ever get generally recognized as diseases rests, to some extent, on the outcome of those debates. Another example is transability, a condition characterized by a desire on the part of able-bodied individuals to acquire a physical impairment (amputation, paralysis, blindness, etc.). What type of condition transability represents (a psychiatric problem or a dysmorphic disorder like transsexuality) or even whether it is a disease at all and not simply an extreme form of body modification or art (Stevens 2011), are all questions being considered in the context of larger social debates about diver-

sity and challenges to the notion of "disability" (Lin 2017).

Second, our findings are a good illustration of the socially contingent nature of understandings of HIV specifically, and disease more generally. In that sense, the analysis adds to the literature on the social construction of health and illness. In a social context where individuals have access to the same scientific information about a condition—its manifestations, characteristics, symptoms, treatment options, and prognosis—the case shows that they can, nevertheless, adopt understandings of the condition that are dramatically different and at odds with each other.

Third, the case addresses *why* definitional contests can emerge in certain instances and provides insight into some of the factors that can potentially generate debate around how a condition ought to be understood. It would be impossible to say how firmly a definition of HIV as chronic and manageable would have taken hold in the absence of the non-disclosure debate. There might well have been a stronger consensus by now that HIV does not represent the threat it once did. But, the fact is that the appropriateness of criminalizing HIV non-disclosure has emerged as an issue and has prompted a debate about the seriousness and nature of the harm perpetrated by non-disclosers. That debate has, in turn, ultimately kept alive the question of how we are to understand the nature of HIV as an infection. The debate around criminalization, and more specifically the claims-making of those who favor a criminal response, are perpetuating a view of HIV (as deadly) that may have otherwise been entirely supplanted by now.

Finally, the case of HIV raises questions about *how* the construction of problems (diagnostic frames)

and solutions (prognostic frames) are linked. One could ask about the criminalization debate whether individuals take a hard line on the criminalization of non-disclosure *because* they believe HIV is deadly and warrants severe sanctioning; or is it the case that the pursuit of a "get tough" approach to non-disclosure encourages a more dire and fatalistic construction of HIV, and an exaggeration of its impact in discourse about the issue as a way to justify continued criminalization? Conversely, do those who oppose criminalization do so *because* they really do see HIV as manageable and non-disclosers as benign; or does an anti-criminalization stance encourage as a discursive strategy the construction of HIV in more benign terms and minimization of its potential impact as a way of changing responses to non-disclosure?

Put more generally, the question becomes: do claims-makers seek out certain solutions because of how they understand the problematic condition in question or does the desire to enforce a particular type of solution affect how conditions are constructed? The data in this study do not allow for any definitive conclusions. But the pattern does suggest that more research on the question of the direction of the link between the construction of conditions and solutions would be fruitful. There are certainly cases within the literature that speak to this issue, suggesting that the construction of conditions can, in fact, be solution-driven. One of those cases has been published by Loseke herself (2003b) in a paper on the resolution of the "problem" of homelessness in New York City in the 1980s. Loseke (2003b) discovered that when officials found themselves needing to respond to citizen complaints about the growing presence of the homeless on city streets, they sought to remove them against their will. However, to do so in a way that was legal and not seen as a violation of the rights

of homeless people, they defined the homeless as mentally ill and used existing involuntary confinement provisions to forcibly remove them. Like the case of HIV discussed in this paper, the study underlines the imperative to consider and analyze more carefully the use of condition constructions as justificatory rhetoric in the pursuit of particular end goals and forms of social control.

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Researching Masculinity and Men's Sexual Health in Bangladesh: Methodological Reflections

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Abstract: Sex and sexuality are deemed "sensitive" issues in relatively conservative, predominantly Muslim countries. Men's sex and sexualities research within such cultural contexts confronts certain challenges and raises important methodological issues. This paper reflects on some of the methodological issues and challenges encountered when carrying out a study in Bangladesh. It reports on a male researcher's qualitative study of men's sexual health and masculinity in Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim country where sexuality is largely constituted as a taboo subject. The researcher faced challenges in gaining access and in discussing sex and sexuality issues in interview settings. Moreover, the interview context emerged as a site for expressing, negotiating, challenging men and masculinities. Drawing upon experiences in navigating the "field" in Bangladesh, some of the useful ways of researching "sensitive" issues such as sex, sexuality, and masculinity within these settings are suggested, highlighting what works when researching men's sexual health and masculinity.

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The knowledge produced through masculinity and sexualities research cannot be separated, or considered in isolation, from the social reality actively co-produced both by the researcher and research participants. For this reason, since the 1980s, there has been increasing emphasis on the researcher's reflexivity (Kulick and Wilson 1995). Anthropological literature on sexuality research has shown that researchers' positionality, as well as

their sexual desire, plays a vital role in the production of knowledge (Kulick 1995).

Social research in general, and research on sex and sexualities in particular, is constituted as "sensitive" (Elam and Fenton 2003). Although "sexuality is everywhere" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988:293), and sexualities research is necessary and "intrinsically interesting" (Fisher 1989:144), the study of sexualities is considered a taboo subject (Sharpe and Pinto 2006). There are dangers, risks, and shame associated with sexualities research (McCormack 2014). Researchers reported issues and difficulties with respect to representations of research interviews (Roulston 2016). In addition, they expressed fear of misrepresentation of sexuality research in the media (Irvine 2002), difficulty in getting through ethics committees (Allen et al. 2014), and publishing in top-ranked journals (McCormack 2014). Some researchers spoke of causing public embarrassment by studying sex and sexuality in relatively conservative countries (Roudsari et al. 2013).

Researching sex and sexuality carries implications not only for researchers but also for research participants. The researcher is seen as the "other" (McCormack 2014). Therefore, participation and engagement in such research may produce discomfort for both and may also trigger public reactions. Researchers suggest that moral panics pervade sexuality research or the implementation of sexual health education in the context of schools involving children and/or young people (Irvine 2002; Sikes 2008; Allen et al. 2014). Poole, Giles, and Moore (2004) indicate that researching sex and sexuality can have negative consequences for both professional and personal lives. The personal and professional lives of sexualities researchers are affected because friends, family members, colleagues,

religious groups, strangers, and the public react in specific ways when they learn about such research. They tend to express titillation, outrage, ridicule, and stigma towards the researcher, who may also be discriminated against (Fisher 1989).

Discomfort and negative experiences may be more strongly experienced by researchers in conservative, predominantly Muslim countries where public discussion of sex and sexuality triggers more intense responses among religious groups, politicians, and the public. Sex and sexuality are contentious issues in Muslim countries such as Iran (Tabatabaie 2015a), Bangladesh (Siddiqi 2011; Anam 2014; Ahmed et al. 2020), and Indonesia (Bennett and Davies 2014), where these topics generate debates and complex responses from a wide range of groups. Similarly, writing about women's sexuality in countries where there is a substantial number of Muslim populations is challenging and is often seen as threatening to religion, the state, and society (Beck et al. 2005; Ahmed-Ghosh 2012). As Khan (2006:90) put it,

> In almost all Muslim countries, people are still reserved when it comes to sex. It is still very much a taboo topic, something to be spoken about behind closed doors. Sex is hushed and curtained off to the bedroom, and speaking about it is considered a sin, accredits a loose character, and many other such remarks prevailing in Muslim society.

Religion is a powerful social institution shaping sexual practices, as well as sexuality research. It establishes the boundaries of acceptable sexuality, forbidding particular sexual orientation, practices while allowing certain other sexual norms, practices, and beliefs (Khan 2006; Hunt and Jung 2009; Dialmy 2010). Islam, for instance, strongly regulates pre-marital and extra-marital sex. In Iran, for exam-

ple, a high percentage (about 73%) of female college students viewed pre-marital heterosexual relations as unacceptable (Farahani and Cleland 2015; Tabatabaie 2015a; 2015b). "Islam…is often perceived as rigid in controlling all aspects of its believers' lives, and intolerant of any expressions of sexuality outside of the context of heterosexual marriage" (Yip 2009:2).

Sexuality is an important element of masculinity. Over the last 40 years, the critical study of men and masculinities has emerged as a distinctive field of academic inquiry and a matter of policy concern (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2003:128-132; Connell 2005:xii). Concurrently, research on the critical study of sex and sexuality, too, has emerged as a distinctive field of research, as opposed to traditional, quantitative sex research focusing on sexual dysfunctions (Dowsett 2015). It is important to recognize that the study of sex, sexuality, and sexual health raises important methodological issues. For instance, researching sexual behavior raises concerns about the accuracy of self-reported sexual behaviors (Schroder, Carey, and Vanable 2003). Likewise, studying men and masculinities raises methodological concerns about the methods used (Hearn 2013; Pini and Pease 2013). However, there is little methodological reflection on studying sex, sexuality, masculinity, and men's health, especially in settings such as Bangladesh.

Compared to the spectacular growth of the field of men and masculinities and critical sexualities studies, methodological literature focused on these topics is sparse and underdeveloped. What Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (2003:121) observed still appears to be true, "In fact, sustained methodological discussions of masculinity have yet to take place." As Pini and Pease (2013:1) similarly wrote:

Notwithstanding the growth of this scholarship [studies of men and masculinities], we have been struck by the relative lack of interrogation of the epistemologies and methodologies involved in the study of men and masculinities...masculinity scholars have generally not problematized the methodologies they have chosen to research men's lives.

By contrast, feminism has been characterized by a relatively well-developed methodological literature called feminist methodologies.

Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim, largely patriarchal, and conservative country located in South Asia. The taboo attached to sex, heteronormativity, and cultural norms prohibiting pre-marital sex spread in society renders the sexual largely invisible. Despite a taboo assigned to sex and sexualities, rapid population growth, concerns about women's reproductive health, and the fear of HIV and AIDS have opened up opportunities for researching sex and sexuality in Bangladesh (Khan 1997; Khan et al. 2005; Muna 2005; Imtiaz 2012). Although sex and sexuality are seen as taboo subjects, pre-marital and extra-marital sex occurs secretly often transgressing the acceptable norms of sexuality (Siddiqi 2011) and masculinity (Hasan, Aggleton, and Persson 2019). Although some methodological literature concerning studying sex and masculinity exists in other contexts (Pini and Pease 2013; Allen et al. 2014; McCormack 2014), hardly any published work focused exclusively on researching men's sexual health and masculinities in Bangladeshi contexts.

To address the gap in the literature outlined above, this paper seeks to provide an overview of some of the critical methodological issues that unfolded when studying men and masculinities in relation

to men's sexual health in Bangladesh. In the light of the reflections presented, the article offers some fresh thoughts about how best to methodologically approach masculinities and sexual health in an Islamic context. To that end, I begin with a brief note on the research study undertaken. Next, some of the key methodological issues and problems are discussed before offering some suggestions with respect to studying men's sexual health and masculinity in conservative cultural settings such as Bangladesh.

Men's Sexual Health and Masculinities Study

I completed a research study at the University of New South Wales (UNSW Sydney), exploring the implications of generational masculinities for men's sexual health in Bangladesh. A variety of influences in my educational, professional, and personal background drew me to the study of men, masculinities, and sexual health. My interest in pursuing a doctoral study in a health-related field developed through my engagement with health, development, human rights, social justice, and gender issues over a decade as a student, researcher, development worker, and teacher. My interest in men's sexual health was also shaped by my growing up as a heterosexually-attracted Muslim man in Bangladesh, which required me constantly to negotiate, adhere to, and resist different forms of masculinity.

I learned that little research in South Asia to date has focused on men as gendered subjects, on masculinities, or men's sexual health. To address this gap in the literature, my research has been examining the implications of cultural gender ideologies and enactments of masculinity for men's sexual health in Bangladesh. The research applied semi-structured interviews with 34 Bangladeshi men representing three generations. My study sought to examine the implications of multiple and performative masculinities for men's sexual health. I drew on Raewyn Connell's (2005) theory of multiple masculinities and Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. These theories stress that masculinities are context-bound, multiple, emergent, and are subject to change across time and space.

Using a cross-sectional study design, I conducted the research in three Bangladeshi cities with men belonging to three social generations. The selection of participants was informed by Mannheim's (1952) work on social generations. For this study, the three groups of men comprised the "war generation" (pre-1971), the "post-war generation" (post-1971), and the "generation of the new millennium" (post-2010s). I utilized semi-structured interviews with a total of 34 men; 10 men from the older social generation, 11 men from the middle social generation, and 13 men from the younger social generation. Details about this study were published previously (Hasan, Aggleton, and Persson 2017). Most older generation men were illiterate, married or widowed, and ranged in age from 56 to 75 years. Most of them were retired and some were engaged in informal economic activities such as rickshaw pulling and driving. Most middle generation men were educated to the secondary level, were married, and were employed in van driving, small trading, garments factory work, and office assistance. Two of them held university degrees and were involved in teaching. In contrast, almost all younger generation men were university students and aged between 18 to 27 years. Younger generation men were unmarried, but most had romantic relationships.

At the time of interviewing, these men lived in three separate Bangladeshi cities such as Dhaka, Chittagong (now named Chattogram), and Gazipur. Dhaka is a megacity and the capital city, which is about 500 years old. This historic city is a center of commerce, trade, education, administration with a high concentration of ready-made garments (RMG) factories. Chittagong is also a historic city located close to the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh's second-largest city Chittagong is the country's busiest seaport. The other location, Gazipur, was until recently a town, but now has become a city. It is also an important center of business, RMG factories, and educational institutions.

After obtaining ethics approval from UNSW Sydney, I conducted semi-structured interviews face-to-face with each man. Men's accounts were captured by using a digital audio recorder. A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate the interviews. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility in asking questions that were not in the guide. Each interview was conducted for about one hour. In a few cases, when there was confusion about information that an interviewee provided, they were asked for clarification on a second meeting or over the phone. I regularly recorded field notes, methodological issues, and challenges, observations, and analytical points during my stay in the study locations.

My research raised a number of methodological and practical issues. As discussed below, gaining access to research participants, getting them to talk openly about sexuality matters in the context of the interviews, and the emergence of the interview context as a site for negotiating masculinity were some of the issues that required innovative thinking and strategies. In addition, my social generational lo-

cation, educational, class, and professional background influenced the study.

Researching Men's Sexual Health and Masculinity: Methodological Reflections

Negotiating Access, Encountering Gatekeepers

Given that sex and sexuality are perceived as taboo subjects in Bangladesh due to the shame and stigma assigned to these, entering the field and gaining access to participants was not always easy. A few potential participants declined to take part in the research. Often reasons for non-participation could not be known. Most participants who did not participate either did not want to disclose their sexual practices or perhaps had engaged in pre-marital or extra-marital sex, which is mainly framed as "bad" in Bangladesh. Being an insider as a Bangladeshi and having lived in the study sites for a total period of five and a half months, I learned that this was the case. I had an opportunity to informally chat with a number of men during the fieldwork and learned about their life, male culture, and their sexual practices. Some had had sexual relationships outside marriage, a practice that was largely viewed as immoral, anti-religious, and anti-social.

To gain access, I had to use several different recruitment strategies. An advertisement for recruiting research participants was initially circulated through several non-government organizations (NGOs) and higher education institutions in all three research sites. The NGOs work closely with local communities to improve the health of local populations. The higher education institutions were the University of Chittagong in Chittagong and BRAC University located in Dhaka.

Some men had initially expressed an interest to participate, but after learning more about the research topic, they later declined to do so. In most cases, reasons for non-participation were not known. Then, however, I came to know from third parties and sometimes through my connection with male networks of potential participants (some of whom had earlier declined to participate) that one of the main reasons for some men's non-participation was their involvement in pre-marital or extra-marital sex, which constitutes a violation of social, religious, and sexual norms in Bangladesh. A Muslim married man in his mid-thirties, who declined to participate, later revealed during informal conversations that he had had sex with numerous partners. He considered himself handsome and popular among women. He spoke of going to official and sex tours with his female Chinese boss to Cox's Bazaar, a South-Western beach town that attracts many tourists. His male friends suspected that he had often gone out of his locality to have paid sex with sex workers. Besides this, shyness, the cultural taboo ascribed to sex, and concerns over privacy may have prevented men from participating.

Overall, gaining access to and recruiting middle and younger generation men was the easiest because of their and my generational location. Men belonging to these generations tended to be more economically active, more educated, and more mobile than their older counterparts, which enabled them to respond to the advertisement. In addition, since most of the middle social generation men were of my age, they considered me as a friend with whom sexuality matters can easily be discussed.

During my fieldwork, I encountered some influential gatekeepers while attempting to recruit older generation men. The recruitment of men belonging to the older generation proved particularly tricky. I initially tried to recruit men of this social generation through specialized institutions, including homes for the elderly located in Dhaka and Gazipur. While most of the NGOs and universities I contacted assisted in circulating the advertisements, two old-age homes in which I had wished to recruit older men did not want to assist in any way with the recruitment. I realized that these organizations might have viewed the topic as "too sensitive" to talk about. I, therefore, needed to slightly change the recruitment strategy based on feedback received from local researchers. I used a snowball sampling technique later to recruit older generation men.

Discussing Sex and Sexuality in Interviews

Although the semi-structured interview method used in this study was well suited to the study of social generational masculinities and sexualities, it must be recognized that no method of inquiry is entirely perfect for grasping the densely complex worlds where gender and sexuality collide (Plummer 2010). While semi-structured interviews helped provide rich accounts, given the sensitivity of the research topic, perhaps many aspects of men's sexual practices could not be known about through this study. A small number of potential participants refused to participate in this study because, perhaps, they did not want to discuss sexual health issues, while some who had had pre-marital sex were afraid of the disclosure of such information.

In addition, non-participation by some middle and younger social generation men who had initially expressed an interest may also have influenced the findings. During interviews with men of all social generations, there were occasions when participants avoided answering questions relating to sexual

practices. Perception of being seen as sexually different or "deviant" had an impact on research conversations. Similarly, some of the questions asked about non-normative sexual relations appeared to produce discomfort for some research participants and me. However, older social generation men provided only the briefest of answers to these kinds of questions, saying that they knew nothing about same-sex sexuality and claiming that they had never engaged in same-sex sexual relations.

Some participants did not answer some questions relating to sexual practices. For example, a heterosexual man refused to disclose where sex with his girlfriend had taken place, as this was an instance of pre-marital sex, which was not socially acceptable and had occurred secretly. A 23 years old university student similarly refused to answer a question about his views on engagement in pre-marital sex and Islam. This younger generation man, who identified as a Muslim, reported during the interview that he had engaged in pre-marital sex. Following his disclosure, I probed him about his views on the disapproval of engagement in pre-marital sex in Islam. Being slightly offended by the follow-up probing question, he requested me not to ask such a sensitive question again during the interview.

In a predominantly Muslim and conservative social setting such as that where this research was undertaken, both questions and responses, as well as research conversations, were underpinned by the dominant cultural discourses of sexuality, gender, and religion. Although many men were not aware of their gender/sexual subjectivities, their accounts revealed that most were largely heterosexist. Because of this, informants may have censored themselves while answering or discussing aspects of themselves as men and especially their sexual prac-

tices. Men of all three social generations talked very little about non-partnered sexual practices such as masturbation. As I shared some of the same cultural sensibilities as the participants did in this study, there were occasions where I, too, censored myself by not asking "too sensitive" questions about these and related matters.

It is important to note that research interviews are a site for social interaction in which people use symbols to communicate meanings. As interactionist sociologists[1] have long argued, actors engage in meaning-making, meaning-giving, and impression management across a multiplicity of social settings (Goffman 1956). In this respect, the interview context is no different. Some of the participants in this study may have engaged in impression management by attempting to valorize the more performative aspects of masculinity (e.g., marital sexual prowess), while sometimes avoiding certain topics (pre-marital sexual encounters). Khairul, for instance, talked in detail about how well he lived up to the ideals of masculinity in the Bangladeshi context by being a good provider for his family and by taking care of his old mother.

In brief, questioning and responses in this study were underpinned by dominant normative discourses about sexuality. Participants often made strongly heteronormative, heterosexist assumptions, which I did not dare to challenge. Sometimes questions that were deemed as "too sensitive" by men were avoided, resulting in little or no discussion around same-sex relations with older men, and the nature of sexual activity with men from all gen-

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[1] Interactionist sociologists emphasize the importance that symbols such as words, facial expressions, and gestures play in social interaction. They consider actors as meaning-giving beings. They suggest that behaviors and identities are profoundly shaped by social interaction.

erations. Some questions may have produced a degree of discomfort because they open up what is "normative" and usually not talked about.

The Influences of Researcher's Background on Fieldwork

The study indicated that researchers' and participants' age, religious beliefs, gender, heteronormative assumptions, cultural beliefs, social rank, education level, and power relations all shaped how the field unfolded. This, ultimately, influenced what was known through the research about men's enactments of masculinities and their sexual practices. Participants seemed to perceive me as a respectable, educated man with knowledge about the study topic and, therefore, they at times inquired whether their responses were right. This signals that they wanted to respond in ways that pleased me, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, they did not want to come across as ignorant or unaware. This suggests that the hierarchical research relationships influenced men's narratives in this study and the knowledge produced through such a study, indicating the social locatedness of knowledge about sexual practices and men's sexual health.

Effective qualitative interviewing is underpinned by the relationship between the researcher and research participants, and the nature of this relationship may influence the data that are co-produced in the interview (Connolly and Reilly 2007 as cited in Cowburn 2013:186). For example, the gender of the researcher can influence the direction, tone, and content of the research conversation (Cowburn 2013:187), with male participants being more likely than women to express more misogynistic, sexist, and homophobic attitudes to a male researcher than to a female researcher (Coates 2003:197 as cit-

ed in Cowburn 2013:187). As South Asian culture is largely heteronormative with strong homosocial bonds between men, study participants sometimes expressed sexist and homophobic views. I did not dare to challenge many of these ideas, foreseeing possible repercussions such as embarrassment, fear, or even threat. At the same time, and paradoxically, the same homosocial bond helped build a stronger rapport between some participants and me. Since a higher degree of shame is culturally associated with cross-sex conversation in Bangladesh, it would have been more difficult for a female researcher to conduct research on male sexual health with men. Thus, the homosocial bonds formed during the fieldwork worked to the advantage of the research.

Existing social hierarchies were also reproduced during the interviews. These hierarchies link closely to differences in age, education, prior knowledge about the study topic, power, and so forth. Their presence can give rise to somewhat incompatible understandings of the topics discussed. Sometimes participants and I understood different things in terms of notions of masculinity, sexual practices, and sexual health. Some participants tended to consider masculinity and men as the same concepts, while I brought with me a different view. Many older and middle social generation men seemed to understand sexual health narrowly as sexual success through penetration or as not having worries about semen loss, while my view of sexual health was much broader. The theoretical framework that I employed throughout the study enabled me to develop a progressively more nuanced understanding of the topics discussed during the interviews. Possible differences in the knowledge of key terms between participants and me need to be taken into consideration while interpreting the findings and conclusions.

Given my generational location within which the middle generation men of this study were situated, older men may have seen me as a son, middle generation men as a member of their peer group or *bhai* (brother), and younger generation men may have viewed me as an "older" and respectable educated person. For this reason, my relationship with the older generation men and younger generation men was more hierarchical than the middle generation men. These research relationships tended to influence what was said and not said in the interviews. For example, because of the narrower age gap, middle generation men tended to disclose more than their older counterparts, especially about extra-marital sexual practices. In contrast, some younger generation men felt discomfort in discussing certain topics such as pre-marital sexual relationships.

The "Field" as a Site for Expressing Masculinities

In the Bangladeshi context, research indicated that being sexually successful is an important dimension of hegemonic masculinity (Hasan et al. 2017), which is an honorable form of masculinity (Connell 2005). The dominant notions of masculinity were reproduced and articulated by research participants in the context of the interviews. "Interviews can themselves be a site for producing, or challenging, men and masculinities" (Hearn 2013:28). In the case of this study, too, the field emerged as a site in which participants expressed sexualized masculinities through their narratives. As being a "good" Muslim man represents a form of hegemonic masculinity, participants often have to engage in "impression management" and "face-work" (Goffman 1956) to protect aspects of honorable masculinity embodied in being a "good" Muslim man who did not engage in pre-marital or extra-marital sex. Akkas (70 years old, chef) repeated in the interview that he had never had pre-marital or extra-marital sex, thus

expressing an honorable aspect of Muslim masculinities. By representing himself as sexually "pure," Akkas seemed to engage in impression management.

At times, in line with the dominant discourses of masculinity that emphasize men's sexual strength, some men valorized and appeared to exaggerate their narratives of sexual prowess, which they constituted as a manly characteristic. An older Mozammel (72 years old, retired) proudly narrated a story of his wedding night when he had had six sex sessions. Thus, some participants such as Mozammel often tended to valorize their narratives of sexual potency and sexual achievement while trying to conceal accounts of sexual impotence. Concurrently, a married man in his 40s appeared to be in a dilemma about participating in the study because after being unemployed for years, he might have realized that his masculinity was at stake. He was living in Gazipur and was away from his family living in another town. Foreseeing that an interview that required information about one's employment and sexual life could pose a challenge to his masculinity, he did not participate in the study in the end, although he had initially expressed willingness to partake. Thus, non-participation was a means of defending his sense of manhood. Therefore, both the valorization of sexual performance and non-participation were ways of enacting and defending masculine honor or ways of impression management.

In contrast to Mozammel, other men such as Mazid (35 years old, factory worker) expressed a "subordinated masculinity" (i.e., forms of masculinity that are culturally de-valued) (Connell 2005). He attempted to hide narratives of sexual impotence that might undermine his sense of manhood. He explained that he had encountered sexual health problems, such as not being able to have sex with his wife for a long time, and, therefore, he felt that he was not a real man. For

Mazid, this feeling of being less of a man was exacerbated by his low income and his employment in low-paid informal sector economic activities.

> Indeed, I'm now not a real man. First, my wife complained against me once. She asked me to be with her for more time [during sex]...[And the second wife] hasn't been finding enough *moja* [sexual pleasure] for the last two years. She's now saying, "Be with me for a longer time." But, I couldn't give her this [*moja*]. From this point of view, I've totally failed. Another failure is that I'm not able to provide my child and wife with enough subsistence...I'm from all sides nobody. I'm not a real man if one looks at my economic situation, my work, and my wife's demands. I'm not a real man from all these perspectives. I can say I'm not a full man.

Thus, men's narratives suggested that the interview context may emerge as a site for the production, reproduction, and (re)negotiation of masculinity.

Although most men from the older generation subscribed to the dominant patterns of traditional masculinity, some men from the younger generation tended to resist older forms of masculinity. For instance, Nahian (27 years old, researcher) said he was not bothered about whether he was seen as masculine or feminine. He said that he had had sex with numerous men and women, which is a challenge to traditional Bangladeshi and Islamic masculinity.

What Worked? Research Strategies

To address some of the issues and problems, I used several strategies in carrying out the research. Since two homes for older people had declined to assist in the recruitment and considering the high illiteracy rate among men of this generation, snowball sampling had to be adapted. I requested several middle

social generation men to circulate the advertisement and to spread it through word of mouth to potential older social generation research participants. Next, I requested each older generation man interviewed to verbally inform other potential older social generation participants about the research. One older social generation man from Chittagong, who initially verbally consented to participate in the study, withdrew on the very eve of the interview. With a low literacy level and little understanding of the research process, he became skeptical of the signing of the Participant Information Statement.

Building rapport and trust was an important first step in gaining access and facilitating open communication and dialogue throughout the interviews (Dean et al. 2012:913). I attempted to build rapport with participants by interacting with them, and by talking informally to break the ice before the interview commenced. After greeting, I disclosed information about myself, such as my place of origin, education, work, family, and the purpose of the interview. Some asked me about the sources of funding for the present research. These early conversations helped build a degree of trust and confidence, as was reflected in their willingness to participate in the study. However, I later realized that conducting interviews for a second time with all interviewees could have built stronger rapport and trust. This would have facilitated a greater level of disclosure from the participants.

Later, I paid careful attention to the ordering of questions in the interview guide. Following Patton's (1990) advice, to encourage disclosure and reduce discomfort during the interview, I asked sensitive questions relating to sexuality and sexual health only after a discussion of other topic areas. I probed participants about their romantic and sexual relationships and sexual practices. In this way, the interviews grad-

ually moved on to more sensitive topics. These latter types of questions were posed to elicit information about sexual partners, the nature of sexual activities, the formation of sexual relationships, marriage, sex in and/or outside of marriage, condom use, and so on.

Another key interviewing strategy that worked was asking indirect questions to probe into sensitive issues. Occasionally, indirect or "projective questions" were used to elicit information on topics that were perceived as more sensitive than others. This type of questioning, which enquires into the attitudes and practices of "other people," may offer insight into participants' attitudes and practices, which they might not be prepared to speak about directly (Liamputtong 2013:57). Given the heteronormative, Islamic cultural context in which the research was conducted, I found it difficult to ask direct questions about whether participants had had any same-sex relations. Heteronormativity refers to the beliefs and discourses that render heterosexuality as "normal." Indirect questions proved helpful in eliciting useful information about same-sex relations from some of the middle and younger social generation men, without producing major discomfort or embarrassment. Overall, it was noticeable that participants grew more comfortable and more interested in the research as interviewing progressed. Towards the end and/or after the interviews, some participants told me that they had disclosed more than they had expected they would. As I had gained participants' trust and confidence, several men told me that they had found it easy to tell me the "truth" or disclosed more than what they otherwise might do.

Indirect questioning techniques and open-ended questions were used to reduce discomfort. In contrast, discussion of same-sex attraction/sexuality was difficult with older men. The indirect questioning technique was somewhat useful in this regard. Instead of asking

directly about men's engagement in same-sex relationships, I asked whether they knew about it or what they thought about it. This type of projective question elicited an intended answer without disrupting the relationship or producing discomfort for the participants and me. The following conversation from an interview with an older generation man named Kashem (75 years old, retired, Muslim, Gazipur) illustrates this point.

> **I:** In your time, did you hear about sex between men?
> **Kashem:** No, I didn't do it, neither did I hear about it. I heard that some people do it. Suppose, he's a man, I'm also a man, doing it with him is of no use. I heard men of this era do it. Allah [God] knows.

Additionally, being of the same sex as informants was an advantage in the sense that cross-sex conversation on "sensitive" topics such as sexuality is not common in the strongly homosocial Bangladeshi context. Despite the taboo attached to public discussion of sex in the country, the topic is discussed in all-male homosocial settings, and this created a favorable situation during the interview.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to present a reflective account of a study on men's sexual health and masculinity conducted in a predominantly Muslim country where the dominant discourses of gender, religion, sexuality, and culture influenced how the research was conducted. The broader cultural and social context, as well as the interview situation, ultimately influenced the knowledge produced through such a study. The study raised a set of methodological challenges including gaining access; discussing sexuality matters in interviews; the influence of the researcher's background on the research process; and participants' engagement in "impression management" (Goffman 1956).

Although there might be methodological challenges, it is not impossible to conduct research on sex, sexuality, and masculinity in conservative, Islamic settings. However, careful planning, innovative strategies, and preparation are required when studying sex, sexuality, and masculinity within such contexts. An awareness of the socio-cultural framing of sexuality and masculinities is of pivotal importance when conducting research on these topics. Researchers may need to prepare themselves to address methodological challenges as efficiently as possible. This paper alerts us to some of the potential methodological issues that might arise when researching sex, sexual health, and masculinity in conservative, Islamic contexts. In addition, knowledge produced through specific methods and within such contexts needs to be considered when interpreting research findings.

That said, the reflexive accounts provided in this paper offer some insights and teach some useful lessons about conducting research in men's sexual health and masculinities in conservative settings. It is advisable to build a strong rapport with research participants well before the fieldwork starts. Furthermore, to strengthen rapport and build trust, it would be useful to conduct interviews for a second time. Particular attention needs to be paid to the ordering of interview questions with more "sensitive" questions being asked towards the end of the interview after participants are eased into the research conversations. When it is difficult or impossible to ask "too sensitive" questions, projective or indirect interview questions might prove useful. These questions can generate valuable insights about the study problem while not offending the research participants or the researcher concerned.

In addition to indirect questioning, creating homosocial bonds when researching masculinity and sexuality in conservative settings would prove effective. The foregoing discussion has indicated that men belonging to the middle social generation to which I belonged as a researcher and as a man helped build a stronger connection and thus encouraged a higher level of disclosures from men of this specific generation. This means that the more homogenous the researcher and research participants are, the more trustworthy the relationship would be, and this would ultimately make it easier to conduct research on sensitive topics in conservative cultural settings such as Bangladesh.

Finally, it is also important to critically reflect on and interrogate the knowledge on sex, sexuality, and masculinity that are generated through research because responses are underpinned by the relationship between the researcher and research participants, and by methodologies used. The social hierarchy and cultural discourses also shape what is said and not said in interviews. Therefore, reflexivity is crucially important in the studies of men, masculinity, and sexual health. Future researchers on masculinities and sexual health in countries such as Bangladesh need to reflect on their methodologies more critically.

Acknowledgments

Kamrul Hasan

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Citation

"You Are First a Chinese Citizen, Then A Consumer": Presenting and Balancing Identities Online as Chinese International Tourists

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Abstract: This paper is based on the analysis of 261 video and word posts collected from four popular social media sites on which Chinese tourists shared their consumption-related experiences during and after the trip. It investigates Chinese international tourists' diverse presentations of self to a broad audience online through explaining their shopping experiences and product reviews. Tourists are expected to balance multiple identities carefully when they project themselves online as consumers—on the one hand, they present themselves as global consumers and trendsetters who are strategic and savvy; while on the other hand, they still need to preserve and even emphasize their national identity as Chinese patriots. Providing the much-lacking qualitative insight, this study enhances our understanding of international tourists and their consumption behaviors, the construction and presentation of a digital self, and how globalization operates at the micro-level.

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With a population of 1.4 billion, China generates the greatest number of international tourists worldwide. According to *The Outbound Chinese Tourism and Consumption Trends: 2017 Survey*[1] jointly issued by Nielsen and Alipay, Chinese tourists traveled overseas on 131 million occasions in 2017, with an increase of 7 percent from the previous year. Among all the destinations visited, nearly three million Chinese tourists visit the US annually, spending over $30 billion per year. While shopping may not be the primary motivation for most travelers, it is a universal tourist activity that often adds to the overall attractiveness of almost every region in the world (Jansen-Verbeke 1987; Butler 1991; Prus and Dawson 1991; Page 1992; Law 1993; McIntosh, Goeldner, and Ritchie 1995; Chen 1997; Kincade and Woodard 2001; Reisinger and Turner 2002). Even though China is an active participant in the global marketplace, shopping while traveling abroad is still a prominent trend among Chinese tourists despite most brands examined in this paper being available in China.

In addition to the existing close link between shopping and tourism, the widespread use of social media applications adds another layer for the scholarly exploration of tourism, consumption, and the presentation of self. Currently, tourists not only post their travel experiences on different social media platforms but also share their shopping experiences, recommend what to buy to others, and review the products they purchased during and after their trips. Their roles as tourists and consumers are much expanded when they decide to post their shopping experiences online. With the help of social media, tourists are capable of presenting themselves as cultural intermediaries, trendsetters, and global consumers. Further, shopping is also used to promote their national identity as Chinese patriots and loyal citizens. In the social media age, the timely issue of how people's identities are constructed and shaped by the interactions online is worth exploring.

Nowadays, tourists can construct and present diverse digital selves in virtual settings. In physical spaces, there is a limited audience and time for every performance; but, for interactions online, people's audiences can theoretically keep expanding indefinitely, and the performance never has to end. At the same time, it is worth noting that such tourists' presentations of self are monitored and policed in stricter ways by their much-expanded pool of virtual audiences, compared to traditional face-to-face interactions in physical settings. In other words, successful presentations of self in virtual settings require performers to acquire approvals from a much-expanded group of audiences outside their intimate life circles. Consequently, Chinese international tourists sometimes need to balance multiple different, even competing, identities while doing self-presentations online.

Being a part of a larger study on Chinese international tourists in the US, this present paper aims to better understand how Chinese international tourists present themselves in virtual settings through the discussion of their shopping experiences. To answer this research question, data from four social media platforms were examined: travel journals from one open-access travel forum (www.mafengwo.cn), short and long videos about shopping experiences, and product reviews that are posted on social media platforms like Red, Weibo, and Bilibili. This study contributes to the field of tourism studies and the investigation of identity construction in the social media age in multiple ways—on the one

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[1] See: https://www.nielsen.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/05/outbound-chinese-tourism-and-consumption-trends.pdf. Retrieved July 30, 2017.

hand, it provides the much-lacking qualitative insights in the exploration of tourists' consumption behaviors when they travel internationally; while on the other hand, it extends Goffman's theoretical framework by looking at self-presentation and identity construction in virtual settings.

In the following section, a literature review is undertaken to discuss Goffman's theoretical framework of the presentation of self and the connection between consumption, tourism, and identity. Following this, methodology and data collection across different platforms are discussed. In the following section, through describing their consumption practices, sharing what they bought during the trip, and offering product reviews, Chinese tourists present themselves online as 1) good community members; 2) smart and competent global consumers; 3) trendsetters and cultural intermediaries; 4) good Chinese patriots. Simultaneously, many are expected to strategically balance their global and national identities toward their audiences in mainland China so that their followers do not feel offended or betrayed. Finally, I conclude and set out future avenues of research.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Goffman's Theoretical Framework: The Presentation of Self

In his work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) explored the presentation and management of the self during social interactions with considerable insight. Utilizing the metaphor of social life being a "theater" and people being "performers," Goffman described in great detail the back versus front stage operations and the presentation of self in social encounters. According to Goffman, performers achieve their ideal identities in different interactional arenas through performances. At the same time, the competent performances are under social constraints and subject to the disposition of relevant audiences in social interactions (Gecas 1982). This means that they need to deliver different performances when facing different audiences. Thus, based on Goffman's work, identities are constructed both by actors through performances and by others who serve as audiences in different situations.

Goffman claims that to understand identity, researchers could look into the intentional and tangible component of self—self-presentations. Through the dramaturgical lens, people are social actors that engage in different presentations of self to manipulate other people's impressions of them during social interactions. In this way, the presentation of self is achieved through the corporeal display in communicating the desired or potential self across different social settings (Belk 1988). However, with the voluntary usage of social media, users' imaging can transform into publicly accessible artifacts (Patterson 2018). With the worldwide prevalence of the Internet, smartphones, and social media applications, researchers have started to conduct studies exploring people's presentation of self in online and virtual spaces without having to engage in any corporeal interaction (Kendall 1998; Zhao 2005; Gottschalk 2010; Ictech 2019). The idea of self-presentation serves as the theoretical framework for the analysis of Chinese tourists' presentation of self and balancing of multiple competing identities online through sharing their shopping experiences and product reviews.

Identity, Consumption, and Tourism

The discussion of self and identity in the field of sociology asks the question of "who am I?" From

the symbolic interactionist perspective, one's self and identity, although sound intimate, and internal, are unavoidably constructed through identification with others. As Charles Horton Cooley (1983) suggests when he discusses the concept of the "looking-glass self," the self operates in the imagination, drawing from, reflecting upon, and responding to real and imagined others. Building on Cooley's work, Mead (1934) suggests that one's self is born out of reflexive actions from interactions, and the base of the self is an awareness of the generalized other. In today's society, our self and identity can be conceptualized as a social product created and sustained during interactions in the social world (Kroger 1989; Côté 2006).

The relationship between consumption and identity is emphasized in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) that deals with the "sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption" (Arnould and Thompson 2005:868). Being one of the most central human practices, consumer culture and its dual activities have greatly contributed to the construction of people's identities. According to Bourdieu (1984), consumption is not only an economic but also a symbolic activity people adapt to separate themselves from others. Through the process of purchasing goods that they do not need, consumers construct some of their identities from the possession of new products (Stearns 2006). Material possessions, on some level, become the extension of the self, and the display of material goods helps affirm their owners' identity (Belk 1988). Therefore, it is through the consumption experiences that modern individuals build their identity, as well as assure its coherence (Parmentier and Rolland 2009).

While tourism has existed as a mass phenomenon at least since the late nineteenth century, the expan-

sion of road transport infrastructure and a decrease in the cost of air travel have encouraged the industry's expansion. As a result, the rise of domestic and international tourism has transformed consumption both in form and in content. Warde (2015) discussed how consumption could help promote social interaction, friendship and kinship, elite formation, the gift economy, collective mobilization, social solidarity, and rebellion (McCracken 1990; Thornton 1995; Maffesoli 1996; Noble 2004; Reimer and Leslie 2004; Martens and Casey 2016). Moreover, scholars have studied international tourists' souvenir and general shopping behaviors, preferences, and expenditures in the age of globalization (Lehto et al. 2004; Albayrak, Caber, and Çömen 2016; Jin, Moscardo, and Murphy 2017; Sthapit 2017).

As for the investigation of Chinese tourists' consumption behavior, there is a dominant trend that focuses on tourists' shopping motives (Chan et al. 2014; Tsang, Lee, and Liu 2014; Correia, Kozak, and Kim 2018) for both daily necessities and luxury products when they travel internationally. Several previous studies have also focused on tourist shopping satisfaction at the destination level (Lin and Lin 2006; Liu, Choi, and Lee 2008; Wong and Wan 2013). Apart from that, another line of research has provided the profiling information regarding Chinese international tourists as consumers (Huang and Lu 2017; McKercher et al. 2020) that includes the youthful "second-wave" (Arlt 2013; Cheng and Foley 2018), as well as the elite middle-aged Chinese outbound travelers with ample buying power (Bao, Jin, and Weaver 2019; Liu and Li 2020). One clear gap within the existing literature is the lack of qualitative exploration. The majority of the previous research mentioned in this section used quantitative survey methods and statistical analysis. Therefore, this area of research calls for more qualitative stud-

ies that provide thick descriptions and micro-level complex explorations for Chinese tourists' consumption behaviors.

Globalized Consumer Identity as Cultural Intermediaries

Previous studies have discussed the blurred boundaries between mass media and physical consumer products by looking into the phenomenon of consumers becoming cultural intermediaries (Lash and Lury 2007). The concept of a "cultural intermediary" addresses how individuals who tend to be early adopters of new fashions or lifestyles gradually become professional intermediaries between brands and consumers and have a significant influence on a broad swath of the population (Bourdieu 1984; Featherstone 1991). These individuals adopt the ethics of self-expression through consumption and promote new products and lifestyles in everyday and relatable ways (Sassatelli 2007; Maguire and Matthews 2012). On a similar note, Schor (2004) looked at the phenomena of "stealth marketing," discussing how large brands and corporations use various means to smuggle a marketing message so that it is seamless.

Web 2.0 and modern social media applications now provide people with multiple platforms to mediate between manufacturers and consumers. This phenomenon offers a distinct twist on traditional understandings of what consumption looks like. Traditionally, companies that produce products and services directly advertise them for consumers to buy. However, with various social media platforms, users sometimes unwittingly provide free advertising for products and services they like by sharing a review on YouTube or Facebook (Rojek 2011). These new media platforms have a democratizing effect on the production and distribution of media content by undercutting the monopoly previously held by media companies and advertisers (Strangelove 2010). Large companies have started to encourage consumers to share testimonials regarding the products that speak positively and sincerely about the brand and use these narratives in their marketing as a source of profit for their brand (Foster 2011). As a result, it requires researchers to study consumption through a different lens and further cultivate social media as a critical source of data.

Consumer Citizenship and the Nation-State

In the age of globalization, many consumers not only see consumption as a means of personal satisfaction but also as a tool of political expression. In many ways, consumers act as citizens through actions in both domestic and international marketplaces. In turn, during certain historical moments, such as in the context of a trade war, government officials encourage citizens to consume, exchange, and dispose of specific types of products to help the nation achieve its political and economic goals.

Many previous works across different disciplines have explored the relationship between nationalism, tourism, and consumption behavior (Pretes 2003; Baillargeon and Gélinas 2011). Cohen (2003:204) made a distinction between citizen-consumers and consumer-consumers and defined the former as "consumers who take on the political responsibility we usually associate with citizens to consider the general good of the nation through their consumption," while consumer-consumers are those who seek primarily to "maximize their economic interests in the marketplace." Overall, consumers who act as citizens began to organize to achieve collective goals through co-operatives and boycotts beginning

in the eighteenth century and continue to do so to the present day. This connection between consumer citizenship and nation-state illustrates that in some settings, consumers can express and enact the values and goals of solidarity and social change, construct and present their collective national identities through consumption. Consumer politics has taken many forms, from consumer associations concerned with product quality to campaigns to "boycott[2]" large brands to pressure companies to change specific policies and improve working conditions and fair trade (Gabriel and Lang 1995; Daunton and Hilton 2001). Other work has also been conducted to understand related concepts such as consumer ethnocentrism (Pecotich and Rosenthal 2001) and animosity (Shimp and Sharma 1987) that aim to understand the appropriateness and morality of purchasing foreign brands.

In addition to this, many existing works have focused on Chinese nationalism and its connection to consumer behaviors. Because of the strong anti-foreign feeling together with a victim complex (Wu 2006), many Chinese nationalists tend to frame and rationalize their behavior based on past humiliations (Gao 2012) and collective memories of past national experiences (Carlson 2009). As for the impact of grassroots nationalism in China on foreign brands, Gao (2012) has identified four fronts, including the political, cultural, economic, and consumer rights. A few scholars from various disciplines have also looked at Chinese consumers' resistance to foreign brands (Hooper 2000; Wang 2006; Li 2008; Lu and Weber 2009), while some empirical work has examined the influence of nationalism on Chinese tourists regarding the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island Inci-

dent between China and Japan since late 2012 (Li 2009; Cheng and Wong 2014).

Historically less powerful groups have used the space of consumer citizenship to claim collective rights and demand equality not only in the economic but also in the political sphere. Nelson's (2000) study of consumer nationalism in South Korea looked at how South Korean activists and government officials discouraged their citizens from consumption to promote a distinct road to economic development. In China, while modern consumption developed alongside the rise of the nation-state, government officials, businesspeople, and activists sought to persuade Chinese individuals to only purchase Chinese-made goods to further advance Chinese nationalism (Gerth 2008). In contrast to the Western model of mass consumption without the involvement of the nation-state (Ritzer 2003; Smart 2010), these cases demonstrate the vital role of the nation to understand specific patterns of consumer citizenship.

In summary, literature on tourism, consumption, and identity construction has focused on how consumption is used in multiple ways to help consumers present themselves and construct different identities towards distinct groups of audiences. In many cases, consumers can even become cultural intermediaries between brands and their potential consumers. Sometimes, consumers can use their consumption power to preserve and emphasize their national identities. However, existing literature overlooked the issue that examines how social media and the act of "posting experiences online" further shape people's self-presentation. This requires an extension of Goffman's theory to not only look at the presentation of self during corporeal but also virtual interactions. As a considerable amount

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[2] Deliberately purchasing a company's or a country's products in support of their policies, or to counter a boycott.

of our self-presentation and identity construction relies on interactions happening in virtual settings nowadays, the role of social media and how it shapes our self-presentation is still not being sufficiently explored. In addition to that, empirical exploration of consumer citizenship mainly focused on how consumers chose to reject foreign brands and purchase products made in their country. In the case of international tourism, the phenomenon that tourists manage to maintain their national identities while purchasing foreign brands is understudied.

Data and Methods

In this paper, social media is an essential field in understanding how tourists, both as consumers and social media users, talk about their consumption experiences while at the same time construct their identities in virtual settings. The data sets assembled in this paper were collected from four social media platforms that are the most popular among Chinese tourists: Mafengwo (www.mafengwo.cn), a Chinese social media site for travelers to share tips, pictures, and travel logs about their worldwide traveling experience; Red, a social media and e-commerce platform that allows users to share product reviews, travel blogs, and lifestyle stories via short videos and photos; Weibo, a Chinese microblogging website similar to Twitter that allows word-, picture-, and video-postings; and Bilibili, a popular video-sharing social media platform that many Chinese tourists use to post longer travel video logs or "vlogs" and "haul" videos.[3]

Given that all four social media platforms have hundreds of millions of Chinese users worldwide, the focus was narrowed down by limiting the sample

to posts from January 01, 2014, to December 31, 2018, made by Chinese tourists who have visited the US. In addition to that, the results on all sites were filtered by popularity to capture the most popular posts that reached the greatest number of users. I have also excluded posts that only offered concrete travel tips and did not have individuals' travel and consumption experiences. This research went through an in-depth analysis of 261 posts, which included travel logs, short product-review videos, as well as longer travel vlogs, and shopping haul videos. The sampling process was concluded when similar information began to emerge, which indicated that the data had reached a saturation point.

These four social media sites were chosen not only because they are popular among tourists who want to share their experiences but also because they contain a rather comprehensive format of qualitative data that includes words, pictures, and videos. Therefore, the data incorporate an exploration of the more diverse forms of digital data that are available nowadays.

Mafengwo is a Chinese travel forum founded in 2006. Currently, it has over 300 million users worldwide, and it covers over 95 percent of the popular travel destinations in the world. Tourists can post their travel logs, pictures from their tour and share travel tips about hotels, flights, local culture, along with their recommendations of local restaurants and places to shop. On Mafengwo, many tourists share their shopping-related experiences in various outlets, department stores, and luxury shops. Some share and briefly review the products they bought during the trip to provide insights for future travelers. This research selected 55 posts from Mafengwo, most of which are 1500 to 2000 words long with 10 to 30 pictures each.

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[3] A video recording, posted on the Internet, in which a person discusses their fashion and beauty purchases (Romano 2010).

Red is a social media site founded in 2013 with a current worldwide user base of over 500 million. The majority of its users are Chinese people around the world. This particular social media application does not have a web version, and all posts are documented through smartphones. On Red, people can either share product reviews, travel experiences, and lifestyle tips via videos shorter than 60 seconds or post pictures or screenshots of various note-taking apps if they wish to share more words. To collect data, I analyzed 156 short videos and photo posts on Red.

The third site chosen for this paper is *Weibo*. Weibo is a Chinese microblogging website and one of the biggest social media platforms in China. By searching keywords and hashtags such as #USshoppinghaul and #whatIboughtintheUS, I chose to analyze 30 shopping-related videos posted on Weibo between the selected period.

The fourth and final site is *Bilibili*, a Chinese video-sharing website equivalent to YouTube. On Bilibili, Chinese tourists can share longer posts about their trip in video format. In total, 20 longer videos were analyzed on Bilibili. The content of video posts both on Weibo and Bilibili include shopping videos that feature the live footage of the tourists visiting different department stores and outlets, as well as videos where tourists shared what they had purchased with their online audiences.

To analyze the data, an inductive approach was taken (see: Glaser and Strauss 1967). As the study proceeded, relevant categories emerged from the data. In particular, grounded theory was used to analyze the online posts. According to Charmaz (2014), researchers' active involvement in coding is a crucial part of the grounded theory process, and the data

collection and analysis should be conducted sequentially with preliminary data analysis informing future data collection. For the online posts collected for this study, I wrote theoretical notes to creatively analyze the data and link the emerging categories to the existing literature. Gradually, I integrated the theoretical notes into analytical memos that helped further focus the study. The data analysis process continued during and after data collection until I developed guiding theories, a general scheme, and identified an overall pattern and categories for data analysis. All of the collected data were in their original language, including simplified Chinese and Mandarin. As a native Mandarin speaker, I translated the data from Chinese to English for the purposes of this paper. Meaning-loss was inevitable; however, I mitigated against this to preserve the meanings contained in its original language by providing context and necessary annotation.

In addition to the use of memos, the ongoing process of coding these online posts was central to the data analysis. Accomplishing this goal required reading and rereading the data to highlight and label important, descriptive, and informative issues that emerged for later sorting and categorization. I examined the data to identify and discover classes of things, persons, and events, as well as the properties that characterized them. The ultimate goal for the grounded theory approach was to develop theories that account for Chinese tourists/consumers' meaning-making processes and their presentation of self when they talk about their shopping experiences. Data collection ceased when no new ideas or concepts emerged, and when no negative cases could be found that disconfirmed or invalidated the proposed framework of analysis for each data set. In the end, a total number of 261 cases from all data sets were analyzed.

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Chinese International Tourists' Diverse Presentations of Self on Social Media

Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese tourists spend 61 percent of their money on shopping while US residents, Canadians, Europeans, and Australians spend from 28 to 37 percent of their money on shopping activities (Heung and Qu 1998). Based on the data analyzed, shopping is one of the primary motivations of outbound tourists traveling from China. In the travel logs posted on Mafengwo, Chinese tourists offer various tips about bus schedules to outlet malls, acquiring coupons in stores, and paying attention to different holiday sales in the US; while in both short and long haul videos posted on Red, Weibo, and Bilibili, tourists often mentioned how important shopping is to them during their trip. Multiple people talked about purchasing a second or third suitcase to store the products they bought in the US, as well as staying in cheap hotels or hostels to save money for shopping. Shopping opportunities are everywhere, and as Underhill (1999:31) puts it, "you almost have to make an effort to avoid shopping today."

Furthermore, with the prevalence of social media and smartphones, people's presentations of self rely heavily on various digital platforms. Utilizing various forms of posts, including videos, pictures, and words, Chinese tourists who travel to the US can present themselves to their virtual audiences online. Different features of social media platforms, such as the use of hashtags and labels, greatly expand the pool of audiences their posts can reach while at the same time, the imagined feedback from the audiences will, in turn, further shape their self-presentations. In this section of the paper, I explore Chinese tourists' presentations of self virtually by sharing their shopping experiences on different social media platforms and thus form different digital identities.

Chinese International Tourists as Good Community Members

From approximate calculations based on the prices and discounts mentioned in the videos and travel logs, the Chinese tourists analyzed in this paper have estimated budgets from $1000 to over $20,000 during an average 15-day trip. Among various products they purchased during the trip, souvenirs and gifts constituted the smallest portion of their travel budgets. The purchase of souvenirs and gifts was perceived as an obligatory aspect of their trips, both for their memories of the trip and the maintenance of healthy relationships with friends, family members, and colleagues. For instance, one person, who purchased a necklace from a local souvenir shop at the Grand Canyon, stated that it was "the only souvenir I bought to remember this trip." Another tourist discussed purchasing a Hollywood keychain in Los Angeles near the Hollywood Walk of Fame. She noted that "one does not have to buy too many souvenirs because they are not practical. Purchasing only one or two things to remember the trip is enough."

Moreover, Chinese international tourists examined in this study purchased gifts for close ones not only from the souvenir shops but also from supermarkets like Walmart and Trader Joe's. One tourist spoke about purchasing large bags of chocolates, Tostitos chips, and nut boxes from Walmart as gifts for friends and colleagues. According to him, these types of products both "represent American culture and are more practical than a fridge magnet or a keychain because you can eat them." Posting online about their experiences of selecting souvenirs for various groups of people helps Chinese tourists construct their identity as good friends, colleagues, and thoughtful family members. This particular idea was discussed by one of the tourists in her short video posts:

When you travel to the US, you cannot come back to work empty-handed. Even without bringing it up intentionally, your colleagues always expect you to bring them something from your travel destination. I bought these three large packs of chocolate from Walmart as gifts for people in my office. We can share them, and one pack only costs about five dollars.

As demonstrated by this post, when people travel internationally, an almost unspoken rule is that one cannot return empty-handed. Purchasing souvenirs that friends and family can share helps maintain healthy relationships without having to choose separate gifts for everyone. Another person mentioned purchasing a Harvard sweatshirt and baseball cap for her little brother as an "inspirational gift." According to this tourist, the most appropriate kind of gift for younger family members should be both practical and inspirational. Simultaneously, this helps maintain healthy relationships with relatives due to the goodwill this product creates. No matter if it is several packages of chocolates, one box of nuts, a sweatshirt, or a couple of keychains, most people discussed the obligations to buy gifts for people they are close to. Although not costing a large amount of money, gifts are always considered necessary. Discussing their experiences selecting souvenirs aids tourists in presenting themselves as thoughtful and considerate and thus construct healthy relationships with friends, relatives, and colleagues.

Chinese International Tourists as Competent and Smart Global Consumers

In addition to souvenirs and gifts, most of the tourists' posts also mentioned purchasing products such as clothing, sneakers, electronic products, and nutritious supplements from Western brands. Nearly all accounts analyzed discussed purchasing clothing, shoes, and various accessories from large retailers like H&M, Gap, Forever 21, Levi's, American Eagle, et cetera, as well as sports brands such as Nike, Adidas, Converse, and Under Armor. While most of these Western brands are available in China with a price markup, the inaccessibility of items due to very high cost fuels the idea of tourists as shoppers. For instance, many shared their experiences purchasing different skincare and cosmetics products while traveling to the US. One tourist wrote in her travel log about doing "80 percent of the shopping in Sephora[4]" and discussed purchasing numerous products to "stock up for the entire year because it's so much cheaper here." Besides that, many detailed their experiences purchasing luxury Western brands like Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Hermes.

According to Keown (1989), relative prices are one of the most influential factors in generating shopping tourism. Together with the rapid growth in popularity of outlet malls and factory shops, tourists attest to the importance of good value and price. Given the enormous demand for shopping by tourists, many destinations have launched major shopping promotional campaigns and have adopted retail and tourist shopping as official policies in their tourism development efforts, thus further expanding the price advantages (Jansen-Verbeke 1990). Below is an example in which a Chinese tourist shared tips for purchasing luxury products during a trip:

If you want to buy luxury products in the US, Hawaii should be your first choice because their sales tax is only 4%, and it is the lowest in the US. I purchased my Hermes handbag in Hawaii without having to first buy other of their products that match the price of the bag because they knew you are tourists, and you are not

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[4] A multinational chain of personal care and beauty stores.

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able to stay there long to accumulate the credits.[5] I only bought a $4,600 bracelet and a $600 pillow, and then the salesperson took me to see their handbag collection in the back. I ended up purchasing this beautiful $8,600 Hermes bag in only one visit. Everyone should try their luck in places like Hawaii and Las Vegas.

Figure 1. A Chinese tourist showcases her "haul" after a shopping day at an outlet. At the bottom of the picture, she states, "Shopping for an entire day makes me feel so happy"

Source: Platform Red.

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[5] One unspoken rule in many luxury shops is that consumers will first have to buy a certain number of "unpopular" products like shoes, clothing, belts to accumulate their credit and status for the most popular handbags.

As shown in these video posts, "being strategic while shopping" is a theme that frequently emerges when Chinese international tourists discuss their consumption experiences in the US on different social media platforms. Many tourists mentioned that the price for the same product is two to five times higher when purchased in China. Discussing their experiences and strategies for finding different deals both for everyday and luxury products while traveling to the US helped Chinese international tourists present themselves as well-off and smart global consumers. In the videos and travel logs that I analyzed, many cannot hide their excitement talking about the deals they discovered while traveling in the US. Most of them are noticeably proud of their ability to locate good deals, as, according to one tourist, "you are saving money while spending money." The following two examples each reveal how Chinese international tourists construct and manage their identities as savvy global consumers:

In China, one Tommy Hilfiger T-shirt will cost me about $100, and I'm really not willing to spend so much money on a plain logo shirt. When I went to the outlet in the US, I was shocked by the low price of this brand—it's only $20!…I've had my eyes on this pair of Coach sneakers back in China for a long time, and I did not even dare to try it on in the store because I knew I could not afford it. It costs about $500 in China and owning a pair of $500-dollar sneakers is unimaginable for me. When I travel to the US, I went to the Coach outlet store and saw the exact same pair for $90! That's why I went for it immediately. I love it so much!

You can buy Coach, Michael Kors, and Samsonite with your eyes closed! There's no need to compare the prices because it's definitely cheaper here in the US. The prices from these brands are almost half com-

pared to the prices in China. If you buy it in outlets, they will have additional discounts.

Figure 2. A Chinese tourist posted a long article to offer an extensive guide to all the outlets near San Francisco

Source: Platform Mafengwo.

In the above examples, Chinese international tourists shared their experiences finding good deals on Western brands when they travel to the US and justified their consumption by reference to the large price differential for certain products between the two countries. There are many more examples from the data analyzed that saw significant price difference as the major shopping motivation while traveling in the US. At the same time, discussing shopping strategies helped them confirm their shopping skills publicly. One tourist even went as

far as to create a Google Doc to track different deals during her trip. After sharing the document with her viewers on Bilibili, many people complimented her as the most "hardcore deal-catcher" on the Internet. Upon my latest visit to her page, I found that she has responded and further altered her online performance as her viewers affirm her identity as a strategic and savvy buyer. For example, she mentioned in one of her videos that many other bloggers were copying her act of tracking discounts using interactive files and that she had even set up a discount-tacking website on her own to make it easier for her audiences and separate herself from other bloggers. Overall, one consistent message that was apparent from these posts was that Chinese tourists are well-off and willing to spend a lot of money when they travel, but they remain savvy and strategic. They will evaluate deals and make shrewd decisions accordingly. Sharing shopping tips and justifying their consumption practices using the price differential helps Chinese tourists present themselves as competent and smart global consumers.

Chinese International Tourists as Trendsetters and Cultural Intermediaries

The prevalent use of social media and smartphones during and after trips adds another layer to the exploration of tourists' roles as consumers. Tourists post about their trips online not only to share their experiences with friends and family but also strangers who are seeking travel tips, things to buy, and general shopping information. Social media platforms enable them to reach a broader audience when sharing their perceptions and experiences. In this way, Chinese international tourists present themselves as trendsetters and cultural intermediaries between China and the US.

When searching for questions, labels, and hashtags such as "what to buy in the US," "US shopping haul," "tips on what and where to shop in the US" on various platforms, there are tens of thousands of results. By utilizing hashtags or similar features, social media users do not necessarily need to have a large number of followers to achieve a high-click volume for one specific post. Many with fewer than 100 followers can have several posts that reach over ten thousand readers through tracking hashtags. Being considered as experienced consumers who have the right to speak about their shopping experiences and the value of the products they bought in the US, some tourists move beyond their traditional roles as consumers in destination countries and become cultural intermediaries who, in many cases, unwittingly provide advertisements for products and services.

Posts from the chosen social media platforms demonstrate that many Chinese international tourists who have shopped in the US gave future travelers and potential customers advice regarding what brands to buy and not to buy, where to shop, and what the latest products and services to try out while traveling to the US. Several people mentioned purchasing newly released cosmetic products that are not yet available in China during their trip to the US:

> If you ever go to Sephora, you should pick up this eyeshadow palette from Urban Decay. This product is from their latest cosmetic line, but is not yet available in mainland China. If enough people buy it and post about it, the Chinese supplier will probably consider introducing it to Chinese customers.

In this particular video post, the informant encouraged future Chinese tourists to purchase one spe-cific eyeshadow palette from a brand in the hope of setting a trend and potentially signaling to Chinese suppliers to bring this product to mainland China. In other words, the influential power of social media is used to promote new products and lifestyles on behalf of large brands. Further, Chinese tourists continuously shared their reviews of various outlets, stores, restaurants, coffee shops; their shopping experiences in luxury stores; and their perspectives on customer services. In one post analyzed, one person complained about the barista's attitude in a well-known coffee shop and strongly discouraged future tourists from visiting that specific shop:

> When I stepped into Blue Bottle for a cup of coffee, I had high expectations. However, after I ordered my coffee and waited there for over five minutes, I did not notice anyone making it. I had to remind the barista again of my order. They did not apologize or anything, one guy just proceeded with my order slowly and reluctantly. The customer service was just ridiculous. If you ever travel to New York, do not go to that coffee shop.

By sharing her experience extensively online, this particular tourist became a credible source for future consumers. Therefore, Chinese international tourists who post their shopping experiences online, either encouraging or discouraging future customers from coming to specific shops in the US, indirectly act as middlemen between future customers and brands. As well as taking on the role of Internet key opinion leader, many eventually become resellers themselves. On numerous social media platforms, many Chinese international tourists publicly offer to purchase items in the US for interested persons, so they can purchase it for them with a small price markup. By taking advantage of the large price differences mentioned in the shopping motives sec-

tion, these tourist resellers turn their journey to the US into a win-win situation for their customers in China and themselves.

Figure 3. A Chinese tourist holds up a pair of Adidas sneakers to show it to her online audiences

Source: Platform Bilibili.

The phenomenon of tourists taking on the role of resellers that connect retailers in the US and customers in China is particularly apparent on the social media platform Red. On Red, there are two resell models—the resellers will ask potential customers to submit their requests, or they will recommend what they think is popular in the US. The following are two examples to demonstrate these two models:

> Hi guys, I will be traveling to the US during the summer. If you need anything, please just message me and let me know. If you are not familiar with what you want to buy in the US or US brands, my recommendation is that you can start with athletic products. Products from Nike and Adidas usually have really large price differences and are all worth checking out.

> I want to recommend an indie brand that few people know in China, and it is called Réalisation Par. It is

an American brand, and its dresses accentuate your body curve perfectly. I wore it once when I traveled to Thailand, and it was so flattering. I can help to purchase their dresses when I travel to the US. I cannot do a large order since I'm not really a professional reseller, just a tourist. I still need suitcase space for myself lol. Just message me and let me know.

As seen in the above examples, people extend their roles from tourists to resellers during or after their trip. This extended role builds a bridge between Chinese customers and US retailers; meanwhile, their tastes and recommendations mediate between the two cultures and set trends. Resellers' posts are pervasive on social media sites throughout the year, but tend to peak during summer and around national holidays. Many social media users who are not able to travel to the US also share their experiences finding "customized buyers." One person shared her experiences finding various Chinese tourists around the Chinese National Day holiday period to purchase her engagement ring. She said:

> It's easy to find tourists as your buyers around national holidays because there are so many of them! I asked multiple people to find me a Tiffany engagement ring in different regions in the US so that I was able to compare the prices. Although you are not able to travel with them, you can find the products you love and have them buy them for you simply by browsing social media apps.

While reselling and setting trends brought profits and a new identity to some tourists during their travel, it can sometimes be accompanied by complaints and dissatisfaction from domestic consumers back in China. In one case of "tourists as resellers and trendsetters," I have seen instances where the reselling tourists had to apologize or

even end this service after being accused of overpricing or selling counterfeit goods. In this case, the audiences' feedback and reactions have further influenced tourists' presentation of self online. Through maximizing the impact of social media, Chinese international tourists act beyond their role as tourists and become culture intermediaries between potential consumers back in China and businesses in the US. Different features embedded in social media platforms allow their posts to reach a broader audience online, thus further enabling them to present themselves and construct their identities in unconventional ways.

Chinese International Tourists as Good and Loyal Chinese Patriots

While traveling in a foreign country, tourists' national identity becomes more pronounced compared to when they are in their country of origin. In the case of Chinese tourists in the US, it is likely for them to be recognized collectively as "Chinese." Many feel obligated to not lose face and to convey a positive national image of Chinese people when they travel abroad. Shopping, as one of the most important tourist activities, can move beyond a means of personal pleasure and be used as a way to express political standpoints and construct national identities.

For some people, there is a strong relationship between consuming behaviors and personal beliefs in politics, morals, and justice. After analyzing the social media posts from Chinese tourists, it was observed that many take the chance of sharing their travel purchases online as an opportunity to form identities beyond tourists and consumers. By sharing what to buy and what not to buy, tourists can present themselves as good and loyal Chinese patri-

ots. By endorsing certain brands and condemning others, a message of patriotism and nationalism can be sent.

When Chinese tourists share their product reviews and shopping experiences online, whether or not a certain brand supports Tibetan independence is one of the most frequently asked questions. In Chinese Pinyin,[6] "Tibet Independence" translates as *ZangDu*, and people who post about this issue online use its abbreviation ZD. People on various social media sites try to identify and share information about US brands that support Tibetan independence based on information such as whether the particular brands' representatives have met with the Dalai Lama or not. By doing so, they intend to persuade their readers and followers to boycott these brands in support of the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese national sovereignty. For example, one person posted a video on Weibo to share what she bought in the US, and in the comments section, a viewer pointed out that one brand she purchased from supports ZD and Tibetan independence, and "as a small influencer, you should boycott brands like that." In her defense, she posted and pinned her response to the top of her profile:

> I was in "buy, buy, buy" mode every day and did not notice the large "bomb" I had stepped on. I just came back home and read your comments; the fact that the brand Anastasia Beverly Hills supports ZD is something that I did not know before now. I will not recommend this brand anymore. There's a lot of substitute products out there, so you do not have to purchase an eyeshadow palette from this specific brand.

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[6] The official romanization system for Standard Chinese in mainland China.

As we can see from this post, it is crucial for any Chinese person who shares their haul video or product review to have a firm stand on issues regarding national sovereignty. For the audience, the national sovereignty of China is non-negotiable and needs to be addressed almost immediately. On Red, they typically use hashtags like #supportsZD and #ZDbrand to warn future customers about specific brands that support Tibetan independence. By expressing political opinions while sharing what they bought during the trip, they demonstrate that they are not only tourists and consumers but also Chinese patriots and loyal Chinese citizens. Of the posts analyzed, there were no posts publicly supporting Tibetan independence. Such opposing views are either directly censored altogether by the Chinese government or kept private by the individuals themselves.

Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan are also frequently mentioned in national sovereignty issues. In 2019, luxury brands such as Versace, Givenchy, and Coach mistakenly identified Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan as independent countries on their websites and items of clothing. This incident caused considerable online backlash and calls to boycott these brands in China. While noting that Chinese people enjoyed purchasing Coach handbags at outlet stores, one particular tourist suggested that "at this special moment, we as Chinese citizens should do our part to protect China's territorial sovereignty and stop purchasing from this brand." As said by one tourist on Red, "you are first a Chinese citizen, then a consumer," hoping to discourage tourists who come to the US from purchasing specific brands perceived as disloyal. Overall, many tourists consider their purchasing power as a form of leverage to force large Western businesses to comply with the so-called "Chinese laws and regulations" unconditionally.

China is a key market for luxury brands; thus, many of them quickly expressed regret and contrition for their mistake after the eruption of a backlash from Chinese social media users.

Other than issues regarding the unification of China, Chinese tourists also frequently post to remind future customers not to purchase from brands that have posted racist content about Chinese or Asian people in general. Many initiate online social movements to urge people to use social media as a tool to express their disappointment publicly on brands' online accounts. In the example below, one Chinese tourist posted about Tarte, a Western cosmetics brand, after it referred pejoratively to Chinese people as "Ching Chong" on their Instagram page. The tourist explained the racial slur to people who may not be familiar with it and encouraged future tourists to boycott this brand when traveling to the US:

> This brand posted a meme picture on their Instagram page a couple of months ago, and in the caption section, they used the word "Ching Chong." If you are not familiar with this word, it is a racial slur targeting Asian people. It's similar to the N-word for black people. It's extremely offensive. I know that many of you want to purchase their cosmetic products because they are cheap and of good quality, but I encourage you to reconsider it. If you travel to the US, there are so many other options.

Besides this, many videos and posts talked about boycotting US celebrities and their endorsed products because they had posted racist content on their social media in the past. Multiple people on Red discussed one US celebrity's video post and notified future tourists not to purchase products that she endorsed:

Gigi Hadid posted a video in which she squinted her eyes intentionally to mock Asian people. Let's try not to purchase her products when we travel to the US, and maybe get her banned in China forever, as well.

Trust me, you don't really need this pair of jeans she [Gigi Hadid] wears. If you don't respect Chinese people, then you don't take money from us. This [boycotting her brand] is something that all Chinese who are abroad should do together.

The Chinese government has banned almost all forms of social movements and political protests in mainland China, except for collective actions that propagate nationalism and patriotism. As can be seen in the examples above, when Chinese tourists share their shopping experiences on different social media platforms, they are expected to present themselves as good and loyal Chinese citizens by boycotting certain brands that violate the territorial integrity of China or demean Chinese people in general. In this sense, Chinese international tourists are not just tourists but defenders of Chinese national interests.

Enacting and Balancing Competing Identities Online

As discussed in the previous section, social media platforms and the much-extended groups of virtual audiences allow Chinese international tourists to present various multi-faceted identities online. Compared to constructing and presenting themselves solely as tourists, they are capable of becoming cultural intermediaries, global consumers, trendsetters, and Chinese patriots. Although most people analyzed in this study do not embody all types of identities simultaneously, in many cases, Chinese tourists who talk about their consumption

experiences online need to be strategic and exercise caution when presenting competing identities so that the expansive pool of audiences will not feel offended.

Overall, there is a clear tension between presenting the global and the national self when tourists share their consumption experiences online. This phenomenon is particularly real when tourists wish to present global identities as cultural intermediaries, trendsetters, and national identity Chinese patriots simultaneously. For instance, in one post on Red, one tourist who visited the US discussed how young people in China could consider copying American fashion styles. In the comment section, a commenter confronted her and said, "What is the problem with the ways Chinese people dress? American culture should not be prioritized over our own." In this example, presenting a global self as a trendsetter can sometimes conflict with presenting as a loyal Chinese patriot. While introducing Western fashion trends to the local audiences in mainland China, Chinese tourists often face judgment from their fellow countrymen for seemingly prioritizing Western culture over their own. This requires them to carefully balance these competing identities using a variety of tactics.

Among all the tourists examined for this study, the strategic balancing of global and national identities happened more often among people who already had a particularly large fan base. Based on the data analysis, if a Chinese tourist is already an "Internet influencer"[7] who can potentially monetize the content they post, balancing the roles of being a Chi-

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[7] "Influencers in social media are people who have built a reputation for their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic." See: https://influencermarketinghub.com/what-is-an-influencer/. Retrieved February 29, 2020.

nese patriot, a fashion influencer, and a profitable content provider becomes even more crucial. As one subscriber noted under a Chinese blogger's video, "if you are already making money out of your Chinese fans, you had better watch your words and not comment bad things about China." Noticeably, several Internet influencers who had a fan base between 5,000 to 100,000 sometimes use various forms of disclaimers in their videos or posts to balance their multiple roles. For example, at the beginning of a video in which one Chinese tourist/influencer shared her shopping haul in the US, she first announced that,

> I am not rich at all, and my family is just middle-class. I am not making this video to brag about what I purchased or expressing how good American products are. I understand that many of our local brands in China have already surpassed a lot of foreign brands, both in quality and style.

By having this type of disclaimer either at the beginning of the post or as a later response, many sought to portray to their audiences that purchasing Western brands should not disqualify them from being considered loyal Chinese patriots.

Although not the research subject of this paper, similar criticism can also be found in the comment sections of Chinese bloggers who reside in the US. For instance, one Chinese blogger named Vicky Soupsss was forced by her audiences to stop posting for several months because she posted a picture with an American YouTuber named Serpent_Za, who once criticized China publicly on his channel. There are also cases where Chinese bloggers were even forced to quit career after collaborating with another person who, according to their fans, supported the independence of Taiwan or the protesters in Hong

Kong. Overall, Chinese international tourists, especially those with an established fan base, are expected to strategically balance their global and national identities so that their audiences can be satisfied with their self-presentations and monetize the content they post online.

Discussion and Conclusion

As discussed by many previous scholars (McCracken 1990; Thornton 1995; Maffesoli 1996; Cohen 2003; Noble 2004; Reimer and Leslie 2004; Sassatelli 2007; Maguire and Matthews 2012; Martens and Casey 2016), consumption has long moved beyond meeting basic living needs and has become a way for people to construct their identity, discover meanings in their lives, and mark themselves apart from other groups. As a result of globalization, international tourism has become a significant contributor to consumption, and international tourists, as analyzed in this paper, see shopping as one of the primary motivations for traveling. In turn, shopping becomes a way for them to construct their identity beyond simply being a tourist and consumer. Furthermore, with the use of social media during and after their trips, tourists are expected to balance multiple identities carefully when they project themselves online—on the one hand, they present themselves as global consumers who are shrewd and savvy; whilst on the other hand, they still need to preserve and even emphasize their national identity and show how loyal and patriotic they are as Chinese citizens.

In this paper, to analyze Chinese international tourists' presentations of self on different virtual platforms, data were collected from four popular social media sites where tourists share their shopping experiences and tips. Chinese international tourists

present themselves first as good community members by discussing how they select different souvenirs and gifts for friends, family, and colleagues, thus maintaining healthy relationships with people around them. Further, they discuss their shopping strategies and share tips about what and where to shop when they travel abroad to the US. By doing so, they present themselves as affluent and smart global consumers. Social media platforms and the utilization of hashtags or labels allow them to ascend to trendsetters by informing their Chinese audiences what is popular in the US, with some tourist resellers serving the role of cultural intermediaries between potential customers back in China and brands in the US. Finally, posting about how they use their purchasing power as political leverage enables many Chinese tourists to present themselves as good and loyal Chinese citizens.

This present paper contributes to the study of international tourism, consumption, and the construction of digital self in multiple ways: first of all, this particular study complements Goffman's theoretical framework by extending the field of research into virtual settings and focusing on the combined effect among international travel, consumption, and the use of social media on the construction and presentation of people's digital self. Moreover, this research provides readers with much-lacking qualitative insights into the exploration of tourists' consumption behavior and its connection to Chinese nationalism in the digital age. As demonstrated by the data, many tourists were forced to make statements regarding the products they had purchased if it was perceived that a brand had disrespected China's sovereignty. Any posts that did not sufficiently promote patriotism or display positive images of China were subjected to severe attack and criticism online. Some tourists and social media

users also face the dilemma that requires them to strategically manage the tension between their competing global and national identities. Overall, the paper discussed the complexities and the liberating, yet constraining aspects of presenting one's self in virtual settings—people can present themselves in myriad diverse ways online, and all that while their presentations are constantly being monitored and policed by more and more audiences outside their immediate life circle. This sometimes requires them to creatively conduct self-presentation so that their competing identities can be strategically balanced.

Another larger irony that emerged from the data was tourists' obsession with the American way of living along with the preservation of their national identity as Chinese patriots. Their fascination, yet distanced attitude toward the US should be situated and understood within a broader social context. On the one hand, their presentation of such conflicting identities should be situated within the context of China's economic ascendence. As mentioned above, China is not only the largest tourist-generating country in the world but Chinese tourists also bring big revenues to the destination countries. Being able to travel and shop abroad is a great testament to their financial strength and purchasing power, and sharing their shopping experiences online helps them further confirm their identity as wealthy global consumers. Along with the economic boom was the growth of Chinese national identity. Historically, China has gone through a significant national identity crisis since the mid-19th century largely due to the Opium Wars, the Sino-Japanese War, and a series of foreign invasions (Gries 2004). In the 19th century, China was portrayed as the "sick man of East Asia," and as Scott notes in his 2008 work, contemporary Chinese national identity still grows out of China being the victim of the hostile West. There-

fore, Chinese tourists visit the culturally dominating country with great curiosity, yet bearing a mild hostility toward the US—based on coverage and propaganda in the domestic media. They want to embrace the American culture and lifestyle, yet also carry a strong sense of national pride, especially toward the "hostile West."

One limitation of the paper is that the majority of the posts analyzed came from female social media users in their 20s to 40s. Some possible explanations for the unbalanced gender ratio include: first, a primary source of data for this paper, the platform Red, has a predominantly female audience of approximately 88 percent; simultaneously, 83 percent of their users are Millennials born between 1982 and 2000. Secondly, women today still share the responsibilities as purchasers both for themselves and their entire families. Being a strategic and smart consumer is still a common expectation for women in the context of China. Another weakness is that this study only focused on consumption experiences that had been shared online, which represents a rather small portion of global consumption activities. Like most qualitative studies that do not aim to generalize their findings, another limitation of this present paper is that the findings may not be able to generalize to other groups of population such as US international tourists in China or domestic Chinese tourists.

Another shortcoming of this study is that since the data were videos, pictures, or texts posted online, it was difficult to capture how audiences' feedback and reactions have further influenced the performers' self-presentations. In other words, interactions that happened back and forth in cyberspace were hard to be fully presented and understood in the same way as physical interactions. Only in some

rare scenarios, such as when a post was highly controversial, will the blogger give a new round of feedback addressing their previous performances. Additionally, given that all posts analyzed were in Simplified Chinese and Mandarin, how people from other parts of the world react to Chinese tourists' presentations of self in various virtual settings was not examined. However, through collecting and analyzing various forms of data from Chinese social media sites, I hope that this paper has helped, in some small way, to deepen people's impressions of Chinese tourists in the age of globalization. This study has provided some insights into how globalization operates at a micro-level and can serve as a starting point to unpack the various issues and interactions people face in the digital age. The case of China is unique because of the Internet surveillance imposed by the government—Chinese people need to be cautious about what they post online; otherwise, they will not only take the risk of having their posts deleted and their accounts canceled, but they may also be subject to legal action for what they say. As a result of living under such censorship for long, many Chinese netizens have also internalized this set of standards for online speech and use it to examine the speech and posts of others. However, the case of China, on some level, might also shed light on exploring the virtual self-presentation of people in other parts of the world. In the age of social media when performers' presentations of self constantly orient towards a virtual group of the audience outside their life circles, they need to manage and balance their identities more creatively compared to traditional face-to-face interactions to seek the audiences' approval.

Conclusively, future studies on international tourism and consumption should continue to cultivate social media sites as an essential source of data and

further explore the consumption, interaction, and presentations of self that take place in virtual settings. Recently, the tourism industry has been massively affected by the spread of coronavirus. It is also important for future scholars to pay close attention to how COVID-19 and the worldwide pandemic shape tourists' identities and the stigmas Chinese/Asian-looking tourists might face afterward.

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Citation

Supporting the President in a #NotMyPresident Context: Experiences of College-Aged Trump Supporters at a Southern University

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Abstract: In light of sexual misconduct allegations involving the former president of the United States, this study analyzes the reasons some university students provide for their continued support of Donald Trump. Relying on ten semi-structured qualitative interviews with college students who align with the president, this paper identifies three interrelated stages making up a model of support. First, students identify their conservative worldviews as helping to explain their initial support of Trump. Second, given the numerous accusations leveled against the president in the media, students readily use neutralization tactics to counter these narratives and rationalize their continued support. Finally, they feel vilified at their university and elsewhere for supporting Trump, and they find it necessary to conceal their opinions. Such experiences do not contribute to them questioning their beliefs. On the contrary, they lead to more entrenched and rigid support of the president. By identifying this three-stage process and applying neutralization theory to better understand it, this paper contributes to the existing sociological literature on the persistence of conservatism in the United States today.

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It was an outcome that shocked the world. On the evening of November 8th, 2016, Donald Trump was elected as the forty-fifth President of the United States. His election was met with widespread protests across the nation as many took to the streets and Twitter with the phrase #NotMyPresident. By mid-afternoon on January 9th, #NotMyPresident was tweeted

more than 490,000 times (Frumin 2016). In the weeks and months that followed, emotions ranged "from panic to disbelief, to fear, to anger, to hope that Americans will not give up and continue to fight for change" (Frumin 2016). Conservative journalists frame the #NotMyPresident protests as an indication that liberals were sore losers, whiners, and not respectful of the democratic process (Gainor 2016; Gainor 2017; Reimer 2017). One such journalist, Reimer (2017), describes the protests as "extraordinarily disrespectful to the leader of our nation" and as setting a "dangerous political precedent." Donald Trump's election was certainly not the beginning of partisan acrimony in the US; yet, his election further polarized the nation and is arguably one of the most contested presidencies to date.

Some of the protests that mark Trump's presidency focus on a host of investigations, lawsuits, and allegations against Trump, including, but not limited to, accusations of sexual misconduct (Abrams 2019). Notably, at least twenty-six women accuse President Trump of sexual misconduct dating back to the 1970s when Trump is alleged to have groped Jessica Leeds on a flight (Keneally 2019; Relman 2020). More recently, several women accuse Trump of sexual harassment and assault throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Cassandra Seales accuses Trump of sexually assaulting her during the 2013 Miss Universe competition (Keneally 2019). Trump's reaction to his numerous accusers is asserting that all of the women are lying and that they are not attractive enough for him to assault (Keneally 2019; Relman 2020). Of the twenty-six women who have come forward, only two have taken legal action against President Trump (Keneally 2019). E. Jean Carroll, one of Trump's accusers, claims that her move to sue is the reason she was fired from her columnist position at *Elle*, which she held for 26 years (Grady 2020).

In addition to sexual assault allegations, Trump is also known to have made lewd and sexist comments about women. For example, in a 2005 recorded conversation with Billy Bush, Trump brags, "when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything to women," including "just start kissing them…I don't even wait" and "grab em' by the p***y" (Fahrenthold 2016). Also, in this recording, Trump recounts how he aggressively pursued a married woman with little to no regard for her consent (Fahrenthold 2016).

Despite Trump's deeply troubling and offensive comments about and actions toward women, he still has a fervent support base that includes conservative college students. Following the 2016 election, these students showed their support in numerous ways, including chalking pro-Trump messages on their respective campuses, disrupting anti-Trump protests, and some even showed support by verbally and physically attacking minority students (Dickerson and Saul 2016; Rogers 2016). Other university students who endorse Trump did so more quietly and behind the scenes. In fact, in 2016, Trump "surpassed expectations, earning 37 percent of the millennial vote" (Spencer 2019).

Given that college students can be a major deciding factor in presidential elections (Spencer 2019), sociologists need to understand why some university students continue to support President Trump, particularly in the face of his numerous sexual misconduct allegations. Additionally, for a host of reasons, including how experiences in academic settings can challenge or reinforce such beliefs, it is important to know how these students navigate their conservative political identities on their university campus. The current study utilizes interviews with college-aged Trump supporters to investigate these

timely issues and identifies three interrelated stages of support (initial, ongoing, and consequences). I rely on previous scholarship on conservative identity, neutralization theory, and alienation to explain how Trump-supporting university students account for their initial and continued approval of the president and the reported consequences of endorsing Trump at a Southern university, as well as how these perceived costs only strengthen their belief in Trump.

Literature Review

This research draws from three main bodies of literature, including conservative identity, neutralization tactics, and alienation. A conservative identity describes what leads interviewees to initially supporting Trump. Secondly, the neutralization theory explains how interviewees rationalize the ongoing approval of Trump. Lastly, participants report experiencing alienation from others on their campus as a direct consequence of endorsing Trump, which, for some, confirms their approval of him.

Conservative Identity

Much of the research on conservative identities was conducted by scholars in the field of political science (Gross, Medvetz, and Russell 2011; Kidder 2016). Indeed, there is a noticeable lack of sociological research examining conservatism and conservative political identity resulting in a relatively vague sociological definition of what constitutes American conservatism (Gross et al. 2011; Kidder 2016; Merriman 2019). The sociological research that does exist suggests that conservatives tend to resist progress, embrace traditional values, and support a free market (Gross et al. 2011; Merriman 2019). In addition, a conservative identity is shown to include Chris-

tianity, a pro-life stance, and an economic/business mindset (Kidder 2016; Adams 2019; Berlinerblau 2019; E. Johnson 2019; Merriman 2019).

Scholars also find connections between religion, especially white evangelical Christianity, and political conservativism, a pattern that appears to have become especially pronounced in recent years, particularly in terms of Trump (Binder and Wood 2013a; Adams 2019; Berlinerblau 2019). In fact, white evangelical Protestants report having the highest endorsement of Trump—7 in 10 white evangelicals say they approve of how Trump is handling the presidency (Schwadel and Smith 2019). More specifically, Trump is seen by many of his evangelical supporters as a protector of evangelical Christianity and as God's candidate (Adams 2019; Berlinerblau 2019). Adams (2019:254) argues that,

> by presenting Trump as God's man, conservative Christians no longer need to justify his questionable past and vile behavior. God is in control, and thus pious consciences are apparently cleansed, and support for Trump is legitimate.

The Christian aspect of the conservative identity allows some supporters to disregard Trump's past for the sake of having what they perceive as a Godly candidate (Adams 2019).

Additional factors, such as race (whites), gender, a pro-business stance, and an anti-choice, or what others may call a pro-life position, prove to be key components in conservatives' support of Trump (Kidder 2016; Blackett 2017; Edgell 2017; Junn 2017; Tien 2017; Hills 2018; Pruitt 2018). However, most of this previous work relies on surveys or content analysis and also tends to ignore the experiences of university students in their work. Previous litera-

ture also tends to overlook conservatism amongst college-aged people. This study addresses these gaps, in part, by relying on interviews with college students who identify as conservatives that support Trump. By doing so, I also can identify some of the processes involved in why people persistently claim to approve of Trump.

Neutralization Tactics

Neutralization theory was originally coined by Sykes and Matza (1957) to describe how criminals reject perceiving themselves as delinquent and relieve any guilt associated with an action deemed delinquent. Furthermore, Sykes and Matza (1957) establish five different neutralization tactics, such as individuals denying responsibility by claiming their actions are caused by forces outside of their control or denying having caused harm to neutralize their behavior (Boyle and Walker 2016). Also, turning the victim into someone deserving of the crime allows individuals to justify their actions (Boyle and Walker 2016). Another strategy is to direct attention away from their misdeeds by shifting the focus to perceived wrongdoings of others, especially those against them (Kaptein and van Helvoort 2019). Lastly, claiming that their behavior serves the greater good or protects their in-group is a way to appeal to higher loyalties (Kaptein and van Helvoort 2019).

More recently, sociologists apply neutralization theory to numerous other arenas, including the behaviors and attitudes of university students. For example, Boyle and Walker (2016) examine how college students use neutralizing strategies to downplay and excuse sexual violence (Boyle and McKinzie 2015; Boyle and Walker 2016). Other studies on neutralization explore a variety of topics, including the

minimization of sexting on campus, students' neutralization of state crime, and even green consumers rationalizing the use of environmentally harmful products (Klein and Lavery 2010; Atkinson and Kim 2014; Renfrow and Rollo 2014). More broadly, researchers find that when reporting on Trump's sexual misconduct allegations, media sources engage in neutralizing techniques by minimizing his accusers' stories (Schneider and Hannem 2019). Silva (2019) also finds that Trump's racism is neutralized in multiple ways through public posts on social media. Scholars explain women's support of Trump through the endorsement of hegemonic masculinity, religion, sexism, and racial resentment (Jaffe 2018; Setzler and Yanus 2018; Vescio and Schermerhorn 2020). Jaffe (2018) categorizes women who voted for Trump into types: the wealthy, the white supremacist, the evangelical, the security voter, and the worker. Lastly, previous literature has identified tactics of denying, justifying, and legitimatizing racism, such as the strategy to present a positive in-group presentation or to reformulate a controversial event (van Dijk 1992; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). One study finds that "bitchifying" Hillary Clinton was a common tactic amongst Trump supporters (Erichsen et al. 2020). Overall, scholars find that neutralization tactics justify the continuation of knowingly harmful behaviors (van Dijk 1992; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999; Klein and Lavery 2010; Atkinson and Kim 2014; Renfrow and Rollo 2014; Boyle and McKinzie 2015; Boyle and Walker 2016; Schneider and Hannem 2019; Silva 2019; Erichsen et al. 2020).

I argue that neutralization theory can explain how conservative students can acknowledge the harm Trump has perpetrated while simultaneously still endorsing and defending him. Thus, even though Trump is associated with behaviors that many

Christians are usually critical of, such as offensive and lewd language and sexual misconduct, their support remains unwavering.

Perceived Sense of Alienation

Originally coined by Karl Marx (2013), alienation describes the state of industrial proletariat workers under capitalism. More recently, sociologists apply the term more widely to include non-workers who feel isolated, marginalized, and different from society (Seeman 1959; Binder and Wood 2013b; Pruitt 2018). For instance, some researchers examine alienation among college students, particularly those who are not part of hegemonic groups, such as racial, ethnic, and religious minorities (Shammas 2015; Gummadam, Pittman, and Ioffe 2016; Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird 2017). Others use alienation to help explain Trump's election. However, they largely focus on how reported feelings of alienation (racial and religious) led some voters to support Trump in the 2016 presidential election (Hills 2018; Pruitt 2018). Specifically, some voters feel as though Trump is finally letting them into politics where previously they have felt left out of the political realm (Hills 2018; Pruitt 2018).

The few scholars that address experiences of conservative students find that they face a hostile political climate, alienation, and marginalization both in and out of the classroom (Munson 2010; Binder and Wood 2013b; Kidder 2016). Moreover, conservatives often see themselves as political minorities on their college campuses (Munson 2010; Binder and Wood 2013b; Kidder 2016). Similarly, studies find that white men also perceive themselves as racially oppressed or alienated by denying white privilege and adhering to color-blind ideologies (Cabrera 2014; Kolber 2017).

The current study fills gaps in the existing literature by honing in on experiences of college Trump supporters to understand what role their conservative identities play in their political decisions, how they implore neutralization tactics to excuse Trump's sexual misconduct and sexist rhetoric, and by investigating how they perceive a sense of alienation being a direct result of their support for Trump. Rather than relying on content analysis, this study utilizes interviews to gain important insights into college-aged conservatism, which other methodologies have not captured. This paper also explores how alienation sustains and furthers their conservative identities. Further, this paper is unique in its consideration of how conservatism and alienation act as motives in supporting and neutralizing Donald Trump. Overall, this study adds to the field of sociology by providing important insight into the current political tensions on college campuses and by explaining the process by which conservative identities persist and strengthen even in the face of controversy.

Methodology

This qualitative study relies on ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with college students who support Donald Trump. The focus for this paper is a university that has the reputation for being relatively progressive. Interviews took place over the phone and in person at semi-public areas around the campus, such as the library. Interviews were conducted between March and September 2019 with a total of ten hours and fifty-two minutes of interview hours. Interview length ranges from forty-one minutes to one hour and fifty minutes with the average interview length being an hour and five minutes. Participants were found through reaching out to the college Republicans group on

campus, as well as posting a recruitment statement on the campus newsletter. Snowball sampling was then utilized to find additional interviewees for the study.

The interview schedule (see: Appendices) consists of five sections to explore why participants report continuing to support the president in light of recent scandals and the perceived consequences of this support on campus. Participants are first asked background questions about what role politics played in their upbringing and family if any at all. The second section focuses on their personal views regarding Trump. These include questions about recent scandals surrounding the president, as well as his performance thus far. The third section explores their relationships and interactions on campus with peers and faculty. In the fourth section, questions focus on the interviewees' hopes for the future of politics, beliefs about women's rights, and how Trump could impact politics. Finally, participants were asked a series of basic demographic questions, such as their age, race, hometown, and class status.

The sample (see: Table 1 [Appendices]) consists of six women and four men who are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. All interviewees attend the university that is the focus of the study. A total of eight interviewees identify as white, and two identify as white and Hispanic. All ten participants report supporting Trump's political agenda, with five participants belonging to the Republican party and five identifying as Independents. Finally, in terms of the economic class of the interviewees, two students identify as upper-class, five reside in the upper-middle-class, and three identify as residing in the middle-class at the time of the interview.

Interviews were conducted, digitally recorded, and transcribed by the author. I used an iterative inductive coding process. I read through each transcribed interview multiple times, identifying three major themes, coding relevant excerpts, and placing them into appropriate themes. After I did this, two classmates separately read and coded clean copies of all of the transcribed interviews. I then met individually with each of the two classmates, and we verified our respective coding, discussed discrepancies, and agreed on which excerpts fit in each thematic category. As a result of this collaborative process, a total of 127 pages of interviews were analyzed and coded into categories in a multi-stage process by three senior undergraduate sociology majors. At the end of this process, I identify conservative identity, neutralization tactics, and a perceived sense of alienation as the three major themes.

All of the interviewees explicitly label an aspect of their upbringing as conservative, which made up the conservative identity code. The conservative identity category is marked by mentions of religion, business, and traditional values. For instance, Andrea, a white freshman's comment, "one thing that has been very fundamental in how I've been raised has been core beliefs surrounding faith and religion," was coded as conservative identity. Additionally, any mentions of an influential conservative family member were also coded as conservative identity.

Neutralization tactics consist of reasonings interviewees provide for their continued support of Trump, even in the face of controversy. For instance, Bartholomew, a white freshman, states, "in general, I think he's done more good for the country than harm." His statement is coded under neutralization tactics because he neutralizes the harm Trump has

caused by claiming that Trump's positive impact outweighs the bad.

A common consequence of supporting Trump amongst interviewees is the loss of relationships or perceiving the university campus as against them. The mention of this consequence is coded as a perceived sense of alienation and includes dialogue, such as Anne, a white junior's comment, "[if] you voted for Trump, it's like leprosy written across your forehead."

My positionality as a white, college-aged woman with conservative family members who support Trump guided the research process from start to finish. During interviews, I was able to create a level of rapport and trust with interviewees as I could personally relate to their responses and foster a safe environment for them to share their views. Additionally, my positionality was useful during data analysis because I was able to detect nuances relating to a conservative identity as I sifted through the data. Additionally, my positionality furthered my understanding of the data because I have previously been exposed to rationalizations similar to the interviewees', which allowed me to formulate themes.

Historical Context

Since the 2016 presidential election, there is a rise in political tensions among students at university campuses (Cohen 2017; J. Johnson 2019). For instance, a protest at the University of Washington in response to Milo Yiannopoulos' talk on campus ended in a shooting (J. Johnson 2019). In another incident at Claremont McKenna College, conservative speaker, Heather Mac Donald, was blocked from speaking due to a large group of students protest-

ing her views on the Black Lives Matter movement (Wootson 2017). Despite such resistance to conservative speakers at American universities, conservative college organizations remain vocal and continue to prevail, such as the University of Maine's College Republicans, who have taken a harsh anti-immigration, anti-climate change, and "America first" stance (Anderson 2020). Recently, Trump addressed conservative Millennials at a Turning Point USA conference in which he rallied against looming impeachment, arousing thousands of college-aged supporters (McGraw 2019).

Interestingly, even with growing numbers, some conservative students at several universities report being marginalized and believe they face discrimination from faculty and peers for their conservative beliefs (Hartocollis 2016; Woessner and Maranto 2019). In fact, one survey finds that students on both the political left and right believe conservative students are less able to speak freely on campuses (Jones 2018). Although their candidate won, some conservative students say that they are under threat and need conservative safe spaces as they often find themselves at odds with the rest of campus (Kidder 2016; Hartocollis 2016).

Following the election, the university in this study, which has a relatively liberal reputation, experienced multiple incidents that could classify as hate crimes. These include pro-Trump chalked messages that consist of phrases like "you aren't safe here" and "build the wall." Additionally, there are reports of cars with Trump stickers being keyed or vandalized. Students who feared for their safety on campus reached out to administration, asking them to address the polarization on campus. In an email to the administration, one student says, "The truth is, we are scared. We are sad. We are exhausted. The

climate that is quickly escalating on campus is what we have deemed a state of emergency."

The university president attempted to mollify the polarization by sending out a campus-wide email. This email includes a reminder of what the university defines as a hate crime and an attempt to unite the student body. Although this particular campus flashpoint has since receded, as my findings indicate, political tensions among some students continue in more subtle and intermittent ways. According to popular press articles, these patterns appear to play out on university campuses across the country (Dickerson and Saul 2016; Hartocollis 2016; Jones 2018; Anderson 2020).

Findings

I organize the results into three interrelated sections. The first focuses on how interviewees' resonance with conservative worldviews drives their initial support. The second examines interviewees' use of neutralization tactics to rationalize their continued support. Finally, the third theme explores the alienation interviewees perceive as a consequence of their support.

Resonance with Conservative Worldview

All ten interviewees resonate with a conservative worldview, which includes a combination of having traditional values, being Christian, having a pro-business mindset, and being pro-life (Gross et al. 2011). These dimensions of participants' conservative identity are crucial in facilitating their initial approval of Trump as President.

The vast majority of the interviewees (9 out of 10) describe their family and their upbringing as con-

servative and/or emphasizing what they consider to be traditional values. Specifically, the conservative positioning of the interviewees' family members influences their political views and contributes to their support of Trump. In contrast, Bartholomew, a white freshman, explains that his parents hold differing views and mostly kept politics out of the house and allowed him to explore and form his opinions and beliefs. Importantly, these participants perceive Trump as embodying and upholding the conservative values they initially develop in their childhood. For example, Andrea, a white freshman, states, "[President Trump] reflects the views that I think I've grown up with." Hannah, a white senior, expresses a similar sentiment saying,

> A lot of people like to say that he's not conservative because of the things that he's said, but I believe that he does support traditional, conservative values. Values like we should take care of our country first.

Their conservative or traditional upbringing led interviewees to search for similar values within political leadership. Throughout his campaign, Trump appeals to the conservative identity and claims to uphold traditional values. For instance, Trump (2018) describes himself as protecting these traditional or "American" values, which he outlines as religious liberty, the sanctity of life, and reducing the burden of the government.

Religion is often cited as an integral part of the conservative outlook, and many view Trump as God's candidate and the protector of Christian values (Adams 2019; Berlinerblau 2019). Further, Trump (2018) describes his agenda as protecting religious liberties by bringing religious groups back into the field of politics and by implementing regulations to ensure that healthcare providers do not have to violate their

religious or moral beliefs. Notably, Trump's agenda mainly benefits Christians, while his notorious travel ban and push to bring prayer back into schools threatens Muslims' and others' civil liberties, thus implying that Trump is protecting Christian hegemony (Kaplan et al. 2019; Lemire and Schor 2020).

The second dimension of the conservative perspective that proves crucial for students' initial support of Trump is their religious beliefs. Out of the ten interviewees, eight describe themselves as religious and as growing up in a religious home. More specifically, five participants label themselves as Christian, two students identify as Catholic, and one interviewee describes himself as Mormon. Of the remaining two participants, one did not specify, and the other labels himself as non-religious. Six out of the eight religious interviewees explicitly identify their religious beliefs as a reason for their initial endorsement of Trump. For instance, Hannah, a white/Hispanic senior, explains,

> I like that he's more traditional in the sense that he supports Christianity as our predominant Western religion. I just believe in those values, and I think that he upholds them as well.

Andrea, a white freshman, also expresses the role Christianity plays in her support stating, "because in the house that I was raised in it was a very active thought to think that our politics should fall in line with what we believe in our faith." Andrea expresses an intersection of Christianity and policies that Trump appeals to. Moreover, Trump gears himself towards the conservative party by taking on what some perceive as a Christian mindset.

Having a pro-life stance is the third dimension of conservative identity that helps to explain many of

the participants' initial support of Trump. Half of the interviewees identify this issue as being critical in their support. Specifically, they mention his attempts to defund Planned Parenthood and roll back Roe V. Wade. Moreover, students connect their religion with pro-life policy (E. Johnson 2019). Kendall expresses her stance, explaining, "he's pro-life. I support that." Similarly, Bartholomew states, "he's tough on abortion. I definitely lean pro-life." This connection is one factor the interviewees use to explain their approval of Trump.

Having an economic or business mindset is the last dimension of a conservative identity that is important among participants. Specifically, four of the ten interviewees reveal that one of the main reasons that they support Trump is because they believe he is improving the unemployment rate, boosting the economy, and helping American businesses. Anne, a white junior, explains,

> It probably has to do with the fact that my dad is business, my mom is accounting. I was raised with business in my blood. I am very business, I really enjoy it. I love economics...It's just how I am, so that's probably played a big role into it.

Anne and other interviewees appreciate that Trump is a businessman with a focus on the economy. Similarly, in his qualitative study on the conservative identities of college Republicans, Kidder (2016) finds that conservative students value a free market and emphasize economics and business. Ultimately, the fact that Trump is a businessman contributes to some university students' approval of him.

Overall, a resonance with a conservative perspective, which consists of a conservative upbringing, a conservative Christian identity, a pro-life stance, and

a pro-business mindset, is an essential reason why some university students state that they initially supported Trump as president. Andrea encapsulates the importance of these dimensions of her conservative identity in her approval of Trump when she explains,

> I think that he falls in line with the way that my family has raised me to believe, which is very business intensive, economically driven, and religiously kind of backed.

Prior scholars argue that Trump is seen by white Evangelicals as protecting and representing conservatism, which is often associated with whiteness (Blackett 2017; Edgell 2017; Junn 2017). Andrea and other students perceive Trump as upholding and protecting various dimensions of their conservative identity. As a consequence, they throw their support behind him. Given the allegations about Trump's sexual misconduct, would their support for him waver, particularly given that such accusations seem to run counter to some of their stated conservative values?

Neutralization Tactics

Interviewees demonstrate various forms of positive self-presentation as a means to justify or deny Trump's sexism (van Dijk 1992). Specifically, they utilize the neutralization tactics of denying injury, shifting blame, and appealing to higher loyalties to absolve Trump of guilt. Throughout the interviews, they acknowledge that Trump and their support for him may be perceived as deviant or harmful. However, all of the interviewees report continuing to embrace Trump, even in the face of multiple allegations of sexual misconduct. Although previous research finds that conservatives are less likely to find the sexual misconduct of Republican politicians as problematic, much of this work fails to explain why (van der Linden and Panagopoulos 2019). Literature

on the denial, justification, and legitimation of racism reveals that people engage in several tactics to rationalize and reformulate harmful behaviors (van Dijk 1992; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). Similarly, my findings indicate that conservative university students engage in various forms of neutralizing techniques that minimize the significance of these allegations and allow them to justify their continued endorsement of Trump.

Similar to van Dijk's (1992) work on the denial of racism, participants employ neutralization tactics to deny Trump's sexism and sexual misconduct. When asked about whether Trump was guilty of sexual misconduct, all participants say no, and instead blame factors beyond his control, which serves to absolve him of responsibility and relieve their guilt for approving of him. For example, John, a white sophomore, in response to Trump's sexist rhetoric, states, "that is his generation, and that was just tradition, so they might not view it as sexist because that's how they were raised." Here, John justifies Trump's misogyny, sexist beliefs, and actions on his age, excusing his sexism as an artifact of his age group and upbringing.

Other interviewees explain away his sexism by stating that it was simply his status as a wealthy man in power, which caused Trump to say, "grab them by the p***y." More specifically, Carlos blames male locker-room culture and the tendency for men to boast about sexual pursuits, which is only amplified by wealth. Hannah, a white senior, points to the possibility that Trump was just revealing the truth when she states, "there are women like groupies that follow rich and powerful men that throw themselves at them." By claiming that factors outside of Trump's control are to blame for his sexist behaviors and comments, such strategies exonerate Trump from any responsibility.

The vast majority of students (8 of 10) also emphasize innocent until proven guilty, which sustains Trump's lack of responsibility by denying injury. For example, when asked about the accusations against Trump, Anne, a white junior, explains, "I completely understand that he has probably done some bad things, but I am not going to say he is guilty until there is hardcore proof." Jack, a white junior, also believes in due process, stating, "there needs to be due process of law. You can't just take someone's word for it. There has to be evidence." Emphasizing innocent until proven guilty when asked about Trump's sexual misconduct allegations allows interviewees to see Trump as innocent and thus continue approving of him.

Participants also appeal to higher loyalties by downplaying the significance of Trump's alleged sexual misconduct by pointing to his supposed victories. For instance, some interviewees, like Bartholomew, John, and Hannah, say that instead of focusing on Trump's sexual misdeeds, people should be paying more attention to how Trump is helping the economy and creating more jobs for women. Three out of the ten students negate claims that Trump is sexist by explaining that he has benefitted women or the economy. Furthermore, they explain that Trump has appointed more women into office than Obama did. For instance, John, a white sophomore, states,

> He did appoint a female CIA director, and that was a big step for CIA history…and that was very good for women's rights…so I don't think he's necessarily sexist where he degrades women all the time.

Interviewees can disregard the harm of Trump's sexist commentary by focusing on a few actions that may or may not have benefitted women.

Overall, participants utilize a denial of injury strategy to minimize or dismiss the seriousness of Trump's sexual misconduct accusations. Instead, they point to his alleged economic victories and continue to voice unwavering support for him. For example, Bartholomew points out that, "[Trump] has been really good for minorities in terms of economic development and unemployment." This pattern of focusing on a strong economy and boasting that Trump is responsible for it is similar to how social media posts neutralize his continued racist rhetoric, as well (Silva 2019).

Similarly, the majority of interviewees (8 of 10) use a denial of victim strategy to neutralize the seriousness of Trump's sexual allegations. The tactic students use most often is questioning the women's motives for coming forward during the presidential campaign. For instance, Jack, a white junior, explains,

> We want women to come forward with stories of how they were victimized, but at the same time, women are people, too. They're not angels. They can lie also, and take people out of positions.

This type of rationalization calls into question the veracity of accusers' claims and allows Trump's supporters to rationalize their continued support of him.

The majority of participants (9 out of 10) also shift attention away from the allegations against Trump to Democratic leaders, whom they perceive have engaged in unethical behaviors. For example, Bartholomew, a white freshman, reveals,

> It's happened to previous presidents, too, like if Bill Clinton was willing to [be involved with] an intern in his office, he's probably willing to do some other

stuff, too, behind the scenes…JFK had girls coming in and out of the White House constantly, people love him…we've had presidents with sexual scandals. It's not like we haven't had that.

Bartholomew neutralizes Trump by pointing to other similar examples, thus attempting to downplay Trump's misconduct. Jack, a white junior, also engages in this neutralizing tactic by shifting the attention to Hillary Clinton. He says,

> Let's face it, Clinton wasn't without dirt on her…She said that Bill Clinton's accusers of rape were trash…well, way to be an outstanding character for women, be a representative for women. It's just unfortunate that people just voted for her just because she was a woman.

By condemning Clinton and framing her actions as particularly egregious, Jack and other students neutralize Trump's alleged criminal behaviors, which, in turn, allows them to justify their continued support of him. This finding supports Erichsen and colleagues' (2020) findings.

The majority of interviewees (9 out of 10) also blame the media for exaggerating and perpetuating the claims against Trump. For instance, Bartholomew, a white freshman, says, "It is simultaneously not like a perfectly acceptable, like, upstanding thing to say, but it's also not the fiasco that a lot of the media has made it out to be. It's not rape," when asked about the recording of Trump saying, "grab them by the p***y." By articulating a "this is fake news" perspective, interviewees can more easily dismiss accusations against Trump.

Finally, although nine participants allude to the fact that Trump is not an ideal moral leader and

that they may see their approval of him as deviant, they still rationalize supporting him because they believe in his policies. By foregrounding the importance of Trump's policies, interviewees downplay the seriousness of his troubling actions and the accusations against him. In essence, they look past and excuse his character because he upholds Republican policies that resonate with their conservative identities. Bambi, a white sophomore, explains,

> It's a little disappointing that our president is not a role model…That has made me question a little bit, but his character as a person doesn't affect his ideas as a president and as a leader…It sucks that he's a horrible person…but in 20 years, I think that the impact he has had on our country today will be more relevant than who he was as a person.

This form of appealing to higher loyalties rationalizes continued support for Trump by disregarding his actions and lack of moral integrity for the sake of the Republican party. Studies have come to similar conclusions as conservatives are less likely to condemn a member of their in-group compared to someone in their out-group (van der Linden and Panagopoulos 2019). Ultimately, interviewees can disregard Trump's sexism and sexual misconduct by appealing to higher loyalties and by protecting their in-group, which would be Republicans or conservatives. Additionally, students employ neutralization tactics to resist the notion that their political beliefs are deviant despite the instinct for participants to conceal their support.

Sense of Alienation

Although participants did not indicate internal conflict over their support of Trump, students re-

port that they feel alienated both on a national level via the media and at a local level on their university campus due to their endorsement. As a result of their perceived alienation and the knowledge that their support is viewed by many around them as deviant, nine of the interviewees express being hesitant to share their approval of Trump and tend to hide their political beliefs. They are aware that their support of Trump is perceived as problematic, and in response, they conceal their support on campus. Similarly, at one university, 68% of conservative students report hiding their opinions compared to only 24% of liberal students (Friedersdorf 2020). When they express their stance on Trump, interviewees report being verbally attacked or cut off from relationships. Hannah, a white senior, describes her experience, stating, "I watched myself get alienated as soon as I started openly supporting the president." She discusses losing friends both on campus and at home and how hurt she was by these developments.

Participants also reveal how the media's perceived negative treatment of Trump fosters in them profound feelings of alienation from the larger country, a feeling that they say they had never experienced previously. Six of the interviewees say that because of the negative media attention about Trump, they have experienced frustration and disaffection. For instance, Hannah, a white senior, explains,

> It's frustrating to see that you're so hated. To just watch the news and hear every single news outlet talk about how Trump is Hitler...you think that's a person you support, so what am I to them? To be heard that all Trump supporters are racist...It feels hopeless in a way. Is there any chance for you to be able to be accepted in society with your political views, or do you always have to hide it?

Here, Hannah describes feeling a type of vicarious hatred; she perceives the media hate Trump, and since she supports Trump, she feels similarly vilified and persecuted. This sense of persecution leads to an increased sense of alienation and isolation where they hide their political beliefs and identity from others.

Although none of the students could identify any anti-Trump signage at their university, all participants voice feeling a sense of alienation on campus for supporting Trump. For example, Bambi, a white sophomore, reveals that "no matter whoever you talk to, no matter what classroom you're sitting in, you're probably outnumbered." As a result of such perceptions, many interviewees state that they intentionally hide their political beliefs in informal settings with friends, as well as in more formal contexts, like classrooms, with faculty and students. Multiple interviewees describe situations in classes where anti-Trump views are expressed either by faculty or other students, making interviewees hesitant to express their differing stances. Additionally, participants avoid explicitly stating their support amongst peers for fear of damaging or losing those friendships.

The negative attention Trump receives and perceived alienation on campus only strengthen interviewees' support for Trump. Half of the participants explicitly state that the marginalization they report experiencing pushes them further right politically and even more fervently in support of Trump. For example, Bambi, a white sophomore, claims that "It's [Trump's negative attention] made me want to stand up for him and to fight for him more and tell people I know he's done all this bad, but this is all he's doing that's great." Rather than being deterred by the criticism leveled against Trump, interviewees see this disparagement as a reason to double down on their support of the

president and as a further reason to adhere to their conservative identities.

Ultimately, students report that they experience tremendous negative social costs for approving Trump. They lose friends, feel vilified at their university and in their country, and find it necessary to hide and filter their views in both informal and formal settings on campus. Instead of causing these individuals to question their beliefs, such experiences lead to more entrenched support for Trump. When asked what Trump could do to lose their support, many explain that he would have to commit an egregious act, such as murder, abuse his wife, or take on a politically left stance. Importantly, six students struggle to envision a scenario where they would not support Trump. As Bambi, a white sophomore student, explains, "I don't think he's capable of taking actions that would contradict my beliefs." Although much of the public believes that Trump has already committed egregious acts against women and many other groups, these participants explain that it would take an even more heinous act to sway their vote from Trump, indicating that it would be nearly impossible for Trump to lose their endorsement (Abrams 2019; Grady 2020; Relman 2020).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines how college-aged Trump supporters navigate their support of Donald Trump in a university context that they perceive to be liberal. Although previous research examines what demographics voted for Trump and the media's neutralization of Trump, my work offers a new angle by exploring the processes, justifications, and consequences of supporting Trump, a President with low approval ratings and who is seen by many as controversial (FiveThirtyEight 2020; Milligan 2020).

Through an analysis of ten semi-structured interviews with university students who identify as Trump supporters, my paper finds that students point to their resonance with a conservative worldview as a reason they came to support Trump. The salient dimensions of their conservative perspective that facilitate their support of Trump include their childhood family influence, Christian beliefs, the economic/business mindset, and a pro-life stance.

Next, to justify their continued support of Trump in light of the many sexual misconduct allegations against him, participants engage in a variety of neutralization strategies. These efforts serve to downplay the seriousness of the multiple accusations against Trump, which, in turn, allow them to more seamlessly connect their conservative identity with their ongoing support of Trump, whom some Christian leaders increasingly view as "morally lost and confused" (Bailey 2019). Interviewees neutralize Trump by believing he is more of a political and economic leader than a moral one. They also cite his upbringing, gender, and wealth as excuses for his behavior. When asked about sexual misconduct allegations, students question women's stories and emphasize the importance of due process. Some respondents go as far as minimizing Trump's sexism by explaining how he has benefitted women. All of these tactics allow participants to downplay and even disregard the seriousness of Trump's alleged sexual misconduct and rationalize their continued support of him. This finding expands Silva's (2019) work on the neutralization of Trump's racist rhetoric by focusing on Trump supporters' perceptions of his sexism and acknowledging how the alienation they experience in the aftermath of support strengthens their ties to Trump and conservatism. My findings also extend Schneider and Hannem's (2019) content analysis of the media's coverage of Trump's sexual misconduct. Conservative college students—like the media—downplay the

impact of sexual misconduct by pointing to other facets of the accused or political figures they perceive as worse than Trump and by dismissing such allegations as false (Schneider and Hannem 2019). In addition, this finding supports past studies on the denial and justification of racism, as well as studies on the support of Trump (van Dijk 1992; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999; Jaffe 2018; Setzler and Yanus 2018; Erichsen et al. 2020; Vescio and Schermerhorn 2020).

Unlike past scholarship, this study views a sense of alienation as both a consequence and catalyst of support. As a result of their continued support of Trump, participants perceive a tremendous sense of alienation and vilification when they hear critical stories about Trump in the national news and on social media, but also when they attempt to engage with other students and faculty on their university campus. They explain how, as a result of their feelings of alienation in their university setting, they attempt to filter their speech on campus to avoid conflict and judgment. Additionally, students double down in their belief in Trump when faced with the controversies surrounding him. Interestingly, these perceptions appear to have some overlap with feelings of white victimization and white fragility, patterns that future researchers would be well served to explore in greater detail (DiAngelo 2011; Cabrera 2014).

My study has a couple of limitations worth noting. First, the sample size is quite small and focuses solely on students at one university in the South. Secondly, I foreground conservative students' responses to Trump's sexual misconduct allegations, not his racist comments, such as calling immigrants "animals" and actions, for instance, his Muslim travel ban and push to build a wall (Hayes 2018; Long 2019). Finally, my data were collected before both of the impeachment hearings, data points that would have enhanced my overall study. Still, my paper has some notable strengths. First, I explore the perceptions and experiences of conservative students, a group that sociology as a discipline has traditionally overlooked, and link four dimensions of conservative positionality to people's support of Trump. Secondly, by applying neutralization theory to university students who support Trump, I uncover important processes that help explain why some conservative individuals continue to support Trump, even in the face of accusations of misconduct. Although my work is a case study focusing on one university, the findings help explain larger national patterns by exploring the processes involved in citizens rationalizing repeated harmful actions taken by politicians. Popular press articles suggest that similar dynamics occur in contexts outside of the academic setting, including at the recent impeachment hearings (Fandos and Edmondson 2020).

With the current political unrest and continuation of support for Trump, it is essential to understand how some voters, notably those who are white and conservative, use neutralizing strategies to justify their continued support of a controversial and, to many, highly problematic political leader. Understanding these processes more fully may also provide important insights into the ways that citizens in democracies rationalize the sexism [racism, homophobia, ethnocentrism] of their leaders through their adherence to conservative values, even in the face of widespread disapproval (Hewitt 2019; Rubin 2020).

Acknowledgments

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APPENDICES

I. Interview Schedule

Background Questions
1. Can you tell me about the kind of political views of your family during childhood? If any.
2. Do your parents support President Trump? Grandparents? Others in your family?
   • How has this impacted your views?
3. Would you say you had a politically diverse upbringing?
   • Why?
   • What impact did this have on your views?
4. Tell me about a time when political issues were discussed in your childhood home?
5. Were politics important in your home, or were they a point of contingency?
6. How would you describe the political makeup of your high school?
7. Did you have open political discussions in high school?
8. Tell me about what it was like to have political discussions at your high school?
   • Did they lean a certain way, or were they unbiased?
9. How do you think your upbringing impacted the views you hold today?

Questions about Personal Views
10. Why do you support President Trump?
11. What are some specific examples of President Trump's leadership that have led you to support him?
12. How does President Trump reflect your views?
13. What are some of President Trump's specific policies that you support?

14. As you may know, a recording from 2005 shows President Trump saying, "Grab them by the p**sy." This comment has received a lot of negative attention from the media and from those who do not support him. What are your thoughts on President Trump's statement, "Grab them by the p**sy?"
    - Did this recording cause you to doubt or confirm your support at all? If so, how?
    - Do you think the media covered this event accurately?
    - How do you think this comment was perceived by women who have experienced sexual assault?
    - How did you perceive this incident as a woman?
    - Did you find it offensive? Why, or why not?
15. In general, do you think the media portrays President Trump accurately?
16. What do you think of President Trump's presidency thus far?
    - Would you say he is doing as expected, better, or worse?
17. Have you ever doubted your support for President Trump? If so, when and why?
18. As you may know, around 15 women have recently come forward accusing President Trump of sexual harassment and misconduct. Such as Samantha Holvey, the former Miss North Carolina, who claims President Trump inspected beauty pageant contestants. Jessica Leeds has also accused President Trump of grabbing her chest and attempting to put his hand up her skirt during a flight. What are your thoughts regarding these accusations?
    - How do you feel about the women who have accused President Trump of sexual misconduct?
    - Why do you think women have come forward?
    - Have these accusations made you doubt your support at all? If so, how?
19. As you may know, President Trump's former personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, recently testified before the House Oversight Committee. Cohen testified that President Trump instructed him to make payments to two women who claim to have had sexual affairs with President Trump to buy their silence. This would constitute an illegal campaign contribution. What are your thoughts on Cohen's testimony?
    - Has Cohen's testimony impacted your views on President Trump? How?
    - What are your thoughts on the women who claim to have had sexual affairs with President Trump?
20. How has the negative attention President Trump has received impacted your views, if at all?
21. Does President Trump uphold your values and morals? How?
22. What are some specific examples of things President Trump has done to earn your support?
23. Do you think Trump represents the United States well? Why?
24. How do you perceive opinions that view President Trump as degrading or sexist?
25. Do you think Trump respects women? Why, or why not?
    - If so, in what ways has President Trump shown respect for women?
26. Do you think your support for President Trump has impacted relationships in your life? How?
27. How could President Trump lose your support?
28. Would you say policies are more important than individual character when it comes to deciding whom to vote for?

Questions about the University
29. Given that [university name] has a reputation for being liberal, do you seek out other students on campus who also support President Trump?
30. How has college swayed or confirmed your support for President Trump, if at all?
31. Do you feel comfortable expressing your political views on campus? Why, or why not?
32. Tell me about a specific time when you felt comfortable expressing your views on campus.
33. Tell me about a specific time when you felt uncomfortable expressing your views on campus.
34. Tell me about a time you had discussions regarding President Trump with other [university name] students? Explain.
35. Has President Trump been discussed in your classes?
    - Can you tell me about a specific example?
    - What do you do when this happens? Do you voice or hide your opinions?
    - How have these discussions made you feel?
36. Have you ever felt attacked in the classroom for your support of President Trump?
37. Has a professor ever talked with you about your support for President Trump?
    - How did this make you feel?

38. Do you think the [university name] student body is majority anti-Trump or pro-Trump? Why?
39. Have you ever been shamed for your views on campus? Can you provide an example?
40. What changes, if any, would you want to see at [university name] regarding the political climate?

Questions about Future
41. How do you think President Trump will change the future of politics for the better? For the worse?
42. What do you hope to see in the future for politics?
43. What do you hope to see in the future for women's rights?
44. How do you think President Trump can impact women's rights?

Demographic Questions
45. How old are you?
46. What race do you identify as?
47. What ethnicity do you identify as?
48. What extracurricular activities are you involved in?
49. What is your hometown?
50. What is your major?
51. What social class do you belong to?
52. What political party do you belong to, if any?

II. Table 1. Interviewees' Demographics

Pseudonym	Political Identity	Race	Gender	Interview Length
Anne	Republican	White	Female	1 hour, 23 minutes
Kendall	Republican	White/Hispanic	Female	42 minutes
Bambi	Republican	White	Female	1 hour, 2 minutes
Hannah	Republican	White/Hispanic	Female	50 minutes
Annabelle	Republican	White	Female	1 hour, 6 minutes
Jack	Independent	White	Male	1 hour, 24 minutes
Andrea	Independent	White	Female	41 minutes
Carlos	Independent	White	Male	1 hour, 8 minutes
John	Independent	White	Male	46 minutes
Bartholomew	Independent	White	Male	1 hour, 50 minutes

Source: Self-elaboration.

Mechanisms of Identity Construction among Members of Pyramid Schemes in Iran: A Critical Ethnography

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Abstract: Whereas the emergence of pyramid schemes exerted considerable impacts on people's lives, up to now, far too little attention has been paid to the experiences of members from the sociological perspective, particularly in non-Western contexts. Therefore, this study illuminates social processes underlying participation in such schemes in a less studied social setting, Iran. This article also critically traces the social and psychological consequences of membership in pyramid schemes. We adapted a critical ethnographic approach, including participant observation of local branch offices, followed by 16 in-depth interviews with the former members of schemes. Our findings suggest that the practices deployed by the schemes lead to the building of social identity, namely, "superhuman," mainly based on the misinterpretation of the real world. Finding the reality surrounded deliberately contrasted with the firms' promises, the constructed identity fails, and members lose their social capital.

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Globalized neoliberalism trends have heavily influenced human lives in recent decades (Harvey 2007a; Cahill 2011). As Karl Polanyi (1994) pointed out, the emergence of capitalist institutions followed by liberal economic ideology resulted in changes in human rules and substantially transformed human relations. At the micro-level, neoliberalism has accompanied the ideology of universal competition based on the fulfillment of insatiable financial desires to accumulate more and more, while sufficient and suitable tools to realize them are by no means accessible (Biebricher and Johnson 2012; Overbeek and Van Apeldoorn 2012). A critical transformation related to globalized neoliberalism was the growth of "consumption management" (Dyer-Witheford 1999; Robins and Webster 1999), and consequently, the "marketing phenomenon" (Eckhardt, Dholakia, and Varman 2013). These ideas have been set on the grounds of popular culture, personal relationships, and even individual mentalities (Greenwald 2010). Under the shadow of the statements on maximizing social welfare, neoliberalism provoked an array of financial crises in recent decades (Harvey 2007b). Notwithstanding, market globalization remained a solid and durable transnational trend (Eckhardt, Dholakia, and Varman 2013).

Among different types of marketing, multi-level marketing (MLM) works through independent salespeople who sell products directly to the customers while receiving a commission on their own or invite their subcontractors' sales to join the scheme (Schiffauer 2019). Accordingly, unlike the traditional styles, consumers are not approached via an appointed store anymore, but through the network of personal communications. Hence, MLM eliminates the expenditures related to the traditional stores, so that is thought to provide more profits for both sellers and customers.

Pyramid schemes (PS) are, to some extent, similar to the MLMs, but focus on recruiting new members and wealth generation instead of selling products or services (Nat and Keep 2002; Deliema et al. 2018). As PS have been widely recognized as illegal by governments, they resemble MLMs, usually disguising entry fees as the mandatory purchase price paid. Members of PS are supposed to recruit new members to make a profit; hence, they invite personal connections to join the network. Although previous studies addressed the PS or network marketing from different perspectives (e.g., Muncy 2004; Nobre and Silva 2014; Bosley and Knorr 2017), a systematic understanding of members' experience in such firms still lacks notably concerning the schemes in the non-Western context.

Literature Review

Referring to the successful experiences of people who took part in marketing networks, some scholars introduce MLM as a low-risk business or the "safest trade" (Gregor and Wadlewski 2013; Tyre 2016). Others, like Hyman (2007), evaluated MLM's initiatives as deceptive, offering impossible goals. Some scholars also pointed out that the MLM offers attractive, but reality-free promises to recruit new members (Liu 2018; Musaraj 2019), while their activities are not profitable for most members (Makni 2015; Deliema et al. 2018). Additionally, Effiom and Effiong's (2015) study showed that although MLM is a way to create wealth, it is not intended to reduce poverty in the community. More broadly, some demonstrated that although MLM firms provide opportunities for making money at the global level, they do not necessarily contribute to official job creation (Franco and Gonzalez-Perez 2016).

Other studies pointed up the psychological consequences of network marketing, as Krige (2012) showed that participation in such firms is a sign of soullessness, lack of education, and greed. Regarding ethical issues, some believe that MLM is intrinsically inappropriate (Albaum and Peterson 2011), particularly with abusing personal connections for commercial activities (Grayson 2007; Groß and Vriens 2019), as well as causing family disputes (Pratt and Rosa 2003). Groß and Vriens (2019) summarized ethical issues caused by MLM—misleading distributors and customers via untruthful promises, imposing restrictions on customers' autonomy, and exploiting the distributors' private social relations. Focusing on the role of contextual factors, Bosley and Knorr (2017) highlighted the role of religious, social settings in flourishing MLMs. In her interesting analysis of MLM in Siberia, Schiffauer (2018) listed what motivates people to join the scheme—feelings of obligation, expectations of support and intimate pressure, and individual aspirations of making immense wealth.

PS, similar to the other social organizations, can lead to building an identity among their members (Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas 2008; Gioia et al. 2013). For example, the identity might be constructed through the collective endorsement of members' roles (Brewer and Gardner 1996; DeRue and Ashford 2010) or established via an interactive acculturation process (Bourhis et al. 1997; DeRue, Ashford, and Cotton 2009). Exploring identity construction processes in network marketing organizations, Pratt (2000) underscored the role of what he calls sense-breaking and sense-giving stages. Accordingly, marketing organizations firstly break what the distributors understand from "who they are" and then try to inspire them "who they must be." The current study takes a further step to characterize the constructed identity among PS in a non-Western social setting, Iran.

Iran, alongside economic crises, has witnessed the emergence of PS in recent decades. The troubles aside, capitalism and globalization of its ideology resulted in the exponential growth of materialistic desires among the Iranian population (Akbarzadeh 1995). The sudden increase in population, a massive number of unemployed people, in addition to the pre-existed social ties (derived from pre-modern relationships) all warmed up a desirable ground for PS in Iran. In the following, we presented a brief history of PS in Iran.

Pyramid Schemes in Iran

The first PS emerged in Iran in the late 1990s. Their activities were not restricted to selling goods and services, but also organizing meetings and classes. The number of members grew exponentially thanks to the massive existing disadvantaged groups (particularly women and youth). Among all, students played an important and active role in introducing the PS to society.

Comaroff and Comaroff (2000) pointed out that reaching wealth and reaching global prosperity potentially increase the general attractions of "occult economies," including PS or, more broadly, MLM-based economic activities. It is noteworthy that in Iran, economic downturns and successive years of recession provided a suitable opportunity for PS to introduce themselves as a fascinating business. The situation recalls the notion of the "broken ladder" in the United States (Payne 2017). Adapting the Mertonian conceptualization (Merton 1938), the broken ladder refers to the inconsistency between goals and ideals valued by dominant culture and tools available to realize those ideals. What is more, the intensified social ties that existed in the Iranian context provided a favorable platform for the PS to recruit new members and exploit members' social capital. As Van Oort (2015) discussed, economic crises allow the ethnographers to contemplate the mi-

cro-functions of the neoliberal order and explore how people in different places experience various forms of neoliberalism. Therefore, the present study was an ethnographic attempt to shed light on what members of such schemes under crisis context experience. Among all active PS, we focused on the three most popular ones in Iran. Due to the illegal nature of understudied schemes, we are not able to provide more information about their identities, but what they offer includes a variety of products from different types of cosmetics to clothes like socks and shirts.

Materials and Method

The study employed the critical ethnography method. The advantage of ethnography has been well-established; going beyond simple data descriptions and framing the analysis into the bigger context (Simon and Dippo 1986). Critical ethnography can also address the marginalized and disadvantaged people who have been unfairly and unjustly treated. Therefore, we adapted the critical ethnography proposed by Carspecken (1996); following five stages: (1) preparing the primary record; (2) preliminary reconstructive analysis; (3) discovering dialogical data generation; (4) describing system relations with a larger context; and (5) using system relationships to explain the findings. The whole research process took two years, from December of 2016 to December of 2018, whereas the data were collected during two interrelated phases—participant observation and in-depth interviews.

Participant observation was applied to grasp the members' experiences and the meaning systems they learn, followed by in-depth interviews to achieve more detailed information about the social processes behind the membership in the schemes. The participant observation and interviews, as follows, were carried out by the third author. Notes

taken during the participant observation were used to identify relevant ideas guiding the further process of research.

In the first stage, participant observation was carried out as the third author registered in the three most popular PS in Iran. She got involved in all held events, for example, workshops, meetings, and even purchasing products. The focal point of observation gradually turned from members' experiences to the social and cultural atmosphere while notes were written. At this stage, our focus was on behaviors, speeches, and activities, especially those related to power relations. The observations provided us with information about social and cultural spaces, practices, and identities. The observation was not recorded for confidentiality purposes, but the detailed handwritten notes were taken during and immediately after each observation.

In the next step, we tried to learn about the firm's structure, domains, roles, territories, interactions, power relations, and decision-making processes via reviewing the notes taken from the previous stage. Our attention was also drawn to non-linguistic aspects, such as gestures, facial expressions, and body language. *In the third stage*, we carried out interviews to gain a comprehensive knowledge of members' perspectives on the firms. To select the interviewees, we relied mainly on the purposive sampling and then snowball method. Our priority during the sampling process was selecting those members with considerable experience of engagement in the firms. The first four interviewees were selected based on the preceding participant observation when the others were approached via snowball sampling. The interviews were carried out in both private and public places, depending on the participants' preferences. Table 1 provides demographic information of the interviewees.

Table 1. Short Profiles of Research Participants

	Name	Gender	Birth	Job	Marital status	Experience (Months)	Role
1	Farzaneh	Female	1988	Housewife	Married	6	Member
2	Fatemeh	Female	1995	Bachelor student	Single	5	Member
3	Zohreh	Female	1995	Bachelor student	Single	4	Member
4	Mansoureh	Female	1986	Housewife	Married	12	Counselor
5	Tahereh	Female	1992	Make-up artist	Divorced	16	Counselor
6	Farideh	Female	1995	Student	Single	20	Counselor Presenter
7	Mahsa	Female	1992	Master's student	Single	3	Member
8	Yousef	Male	1991	Bachelor student	Single	24	Leader
9	Yasamin	Female	1992	Housewife	Married	6	Member
10	Ehsan	Male	1989	Chef	Married	15	Member
11	Shohreh	Female	1995	Bachelor student	Married	12	Member
12	Mehran	Male	1997	Bachelor student	Single	11	Member
13	Mostafa	Male	1992	Bachelor student	Single	24	Leader
14	Mahnaz	Female	1974	Hairdresser	Married	6	Member
15	Esmaeel	Male	1993	Conscript soldier	Single	13	Leader
16	Mohaddeseh	Female	1994	Bachelor student	Single	8	Presenter

Source: Self-elaboration.

The interviews lasted an average of one hour, ranging from 40 to 60 minutes. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. To remain aware of the gaps and areas of further exploration and to identify questions for the next round of data collection, the participant's transcript was reviewed after each interview (Charmaz 2006). The transcribed interviews were initially coded precisely, utilizing the participants' words or expressions. As codes were associated with each other to form clusters, themes were identified, and the coding became more focused. In this section, the sampling process continued until the end of the 16th interview, when we found the newly collected data did not offer significant knowledge to the previous findings. Themes gradually emerged on account of becoming intimate with the data, making logical associations with the interview questions, and accounting for what was understood in the light of the initial literature review.

Stages 4 and 5 were performed simultaneously, as we attempted to analyze the data from a macro-sociological perspective. Moving towards more abstraction, we tried to understand the explored processes by referring to the feature of the whole society. System analysis is at the heart of Carspecken's critical ethnography approach, which improves validity; the data obtained from the previous three stages were analyzed by referring to institutional, political, and social elements (Stewart and Usher 2007).

The reliability of the findings was confirmed through the following stages: (1) long-term participation and continuous observation in the field of

research; (2) peer review; (3) participant confirmation; (4) external audit (Creswell and Miller 2000). Besides, following Mauthner and Doucet (2003), we adapted reflexive accounts through all stages of data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

As PS have been unexceptionally recognized as illegal in Iran, members are usually reluctant to be approached by non-members. To help to mitigate the concerns, mutual friends and participants often initially opened the channels of communication, which alleviated the fears from prosecution. Participants were also provided with documented agreements that guarantee their anonymity. What is more, they were informed that there was no non-scientific goal behind the research. All participants were informed that they had the right to leave the interview at any stage without explanation.

Results

The current study aims to explore the processes underlying the membership in PS in Iran. The emerged themes from the participant observation and interviews are classified into the seven main categories: (1) invitation; (2) systematic promises; (3) working fence; (4) authoritarian psychology of achievement; (5) social construction of superhuman; (6) the fantasy of successful superhuman: a hyper-reality; and (7) double wandering. In the following, we elaborate on each emerged category.

Invitation

The recruitment process in studied PS is extensively accessible to the extent that this advantage allows such firms to spread fast. Creating an account on the provided website and paying a pre-established minimum amount is all the new members are supposed to do. Inviting relatives and friends is at the top of the recruitment program established by the schemes. Put differently, the priority of invitation is entirely according to the existing intimacy.

Not surprisingly, some discussed that PS function as "moral enterprises" (Schiffauer 2018) that exploit the members' social trust to profit. Conducting business in private settings can result in the misusing of relatively high confidence (Kong 2003; Groß and Vriens 2019). Non-members are usually approached via two main channels: phone and in-person invitations. Contrary to our expectation, the phone invitation is strongly recommended by the PS—since this kind of communication allows members to have strict control over the conversations, cutting it off when necessary. As Mohaddeseh and Shohreh state respectively:

> We call on the phone when we want to invite; it is better not to be in person. Personal invitations may cause some excuses or some questions that you cannot answer. When you call someone, you can control the dialogues; you can continue, you can end, or whatever.

> We did not let him ask too much. We put off questions to the consultation meeting. We made him curious, and then he came to the next meeting and understood what it was and then asked his real question.

Systematic Promises

Various tactics are employed by schemes to make their activity attractive to new members. The most frequent one is to focus on what schemes introduce as the "law of opportunities," as Esmaeel elaborate:

> They say that there is a law, 1990 law. I do not know if you heard or not about the law of opportunities. We say that the 1990 law is the law of opportunities that says the first 1 [percent]! It means 1% of people do something that the other 99% mock this 1%!

As demonstrated by Esmaeel's statement, the law of opportunities refers to the idea that members are unique because of their membership in the scheme. Considering superiority for their members, the PS aims to motivate new members while simultaneously construct the identity based on the differentiation assumption (Hall and Du Gay 1996). What is more, the inviters attribute a hyper-realistic characteristic to the current members via exaggerating the benefits attained (Liu 2018); meantime, they refuse to answer any challenging issues questioning the firm. As Koehn (2001) discussed, promises made by the schemes, that is, "get rich quick," play an essential role in the attractiveness of the scheme. What Mehran remembers displays that the schemes were not presented truthfully to the new members: "I just told something attractive to them [new members] to convince them to join."

Superiors, the so-called "upliners," teach members how to persuade people to buy the scheme's product, mainly in a deceptive way. Members are highly recommended to utilize any verbal communication to sell the product, even lying. As Zohreh state in this regard:

> [They told us], for example, don't tell them that you used this hair color if you don't really use it or tell them it was good if you're good at lying, but she understands because your hair is not colored! Tell them your sister has used this, and it works well for her. He said to say so if you're good at this.

The abovementioned statement sheds light on how the schemes sell their products—unethically via overestimating the quality of inferior quality products. Moreover, what Mostafa stated demonstrate that such training is issued to members from top to bottom of the scheme in an authoritative way:

> As far as I remember, after recruiting three newcomers, we had to learn to tell them about selling [presenting them], after completing the 4th, then we'd tell the nine principles[1] [Motivational book]. This had come from top to bottom. It means that the one on the top had said this, and it had come to the bottom in this way.

The schemes held official celebrations frequently, named "Visiontic[2]" and "Badgentic[3]," in the private gardens, which members financially cover. These events are organized to promote the attractive aspects of the firm through representing members' realized desires. As Zohreh describes:

> Talking of celebrations, we had a Visiontic celebration. For example, we had celebrations for people who had achieved one of their goals after working for a while; or a person who had ticked something off their bucket list. And they had to pay for these celebrations.

Working Fence

In the beginning, PS put their efforts into recruiting new members and then internalize favorable

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[1] It refers to nine basic principles of success emphasized by the firm. The principles mainly imply the obedience of the leaders, transfer of experiences, and belief (inspired by popular stories).

[2] During these monthly meetings, the members were supposed to present their goals, which they would strive to attain in the following month. At the end of that month, those who succeeded in achieving the goals, described them and became the so-called "Visiontic."

[3] Refers to those who reach the considerable sales volume and the acceptable team numbers (subordinates). They receive the symbols from the firm and set them on their clothes.

values. Several formal meetings are held weekly to the extent that newcomers feel fully engaged in the schemes. As Shohreh describes: "I would pass from 8 am to 8 pm for training." During meetings, experienced members gradually promote members' communication skills, preparing them to serve the scheme. As Farideh and Ehsan describe respectively:

> They taught communicative skills, not to be shy and other things. My senior once said: "I've always been shy, for example, I could not speak, and now I'm here, and I'm talking." Now he holds great seminars and easily stands and speaks for 200 people!

> They asked us to talk firmly, heads above, look strong, hold our chest tight, be dandy, and have such and such style.

According to what the participants stated, the organized meetings are posited in the center of the persuasion process. The held meetings or gatherings lead the newcomers to change their behaviors to match the responses of others—recognized as the conformity process (Cialdini and Goldstein 2004). That is why the firms persistently insist on organizing events weekly. The newcomers' information processing is highly adapted according to the majority and minority influence. They are urged to make their judgments in line with the numerical majority to reduce uncertainty (David and Turner 1996). Besides, the newcomers are continually bombarded with the amount of information that is highly simplified; Mansoureh elaborates in this regard:

> They kept showing us educational video clips; for example, they introduced different books so that we can give an example while we are teaching others.

The participants also frequently stated that irrelevant information is instructed in the held unceasing meetings to the degree that the interviewees sometimes believe that schemes financially benefit them. The upliners are also invited to the arrangements for giving lectures about their success. Before that, their credentials are ostentatiously shown by the other upline members. What Yousef stated depicts, again, untruthful promises made by the schemes (Groß and Vriens 2019):

> Well, when I come, I come with plans. Now we have to see what the aim of a certain arrangement is. It's not for the network; it's for earning money and making a profit. It's for gaining profit. I speak in a way that entices people to order products. I give you inspiration based on whatever you ought to do—so that for a month, you believe that you can be successful.

Authoritarian Psychology of Achievement

While schemes claim to benefit from selling products, the profitability is mainly based on extensive enrollments. Accordingly, the upliners continually share a set of subtle skills of selling and recruitment, which are immoral. What Mostafa and Mahsa state is noteworthy:

> You see this glass that has no value, and its actual price is 1,000 Rials[4] [less than one cent], but I could sell this to you for 50,000 Rials [around thirty cents]. I mean that I could convince you to buy this for logical reasons; it's so weird! I mean, it really works!

> For example, the book *Napoleon* by Hills, other books such as *Grow Rich! With Peace of Mind*, *The Master-Key to Riches* (which is also by Hill), *Awaken the Giant With-*

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[4] Iranian currency.

in by Robbins, *Prosperity* by Randy Gage, *The Instant Millionaire: A Tale of Wisdom and Wealth* by Fisher, *Who Moved My Cheese* by Brian Tracy.

What is more, upliners introduce documents, for example, books, clips, and photos that present what they name as "psychology of achievement." Whereas the schemes insist on the advanced scientific base of the psychology of achievement, the training is offered widely through a distorted form accompanied by overstated promises. The primary assumption behind what is publicly known as the psychology of achievement is that the more people think about a goal, the more they are likely to achieve it. Besides, the so-called psychology of achievement recognizes individuals as fully responsible for their fates via trivializing all contextual factors. It is noteworthy that the outlined pedagogy has already been stretched out among non-members. Of the proven potential motivating strength of the pedagogy among society, PS pervasively employ it as a practical toolkit to stimulate and keep the members committed.

Social Construction of Superhuman

Throughout the held meetings, recruiters mainly focus on their achievements, presenting what they gained recently. To make the audience emotionally excited, the upliners even utilize unconventional language and manners. As Zohreh remembers:

One of these men talked about his success in buying a house in 2 years. He spoke very excitedly, so he suddenly threw a bottle towards people while he was talking to make them clap and shout, and people did so, and it was like, "Now we are excited!" People were excited there, and I wondered what does this mean?! Or someone who was talking normally suddenly started shouting, "I can do this, you can do this, too, how dare you not!" Suddenly, the tone of his talk changed.

The meetings are mainly organized to evoke new members via accentuating dreams. Newcomers are firstly asked to write all that they dream about and then to imagine they have attained it. Mahsa states while laughing:

They said you are going to achieve your wishes if you write them down. Then put them on the wall and look at them every day. You will reach them if you do this. They said to write down your wishes, and, you know, sometimes it was enjoyable. Write down your wishes with details. For example, if buying a pair of socks is one of your wishes, specify its features and write them down. Write everything in detail. Then, in weekly meetings, they asked members to come forward and tell their wishes and tell what they want to do and what wishes they have for the coming years.[5]

Provoking the motivations, the schemes mostly use the psychology of achievement; that is, all wishes will be accomplished only if people consistently think about them. Therefore, the newcomers come to the idea that their dreams will be realized soon. Otherwise, they must feel guilty because of their faults and shortages. What Tahereh stated demonstrates that what is publicly known as positive psychology is trained by the schemes:

They say, Brian Tracy, in their words, is known to everyone, [even] those who made *The Secret* movie,[6] all

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[5] These meetings were known as "share-vision," in which people tell others about their wishes monthly.
[6] *The Secret* is a 2006 Australian-American documentary film by Drew Heriot.

say the same thing. They say imagine your dreams, you can't reach them if you don't; you can't reach what you haven't seen.

Over time, new members imagine that they attain their aspirations only through their efforts, assuming that the individuals are competent agents in accomplishing good or evil. Therefore, the upliners also put their efforts into convincing new members that achieving aspirations is to make "vibrations" in the universe. According to the experienced members, vibrations are made mainly via writing up personal ambitions. Besides, they also provoke the new members to think positively, being purely optimistic, and ignoring negative impressions. In this vein, they strictly ask the members not to use negative words. Zohreh describes the situation as follows:

> Based on the law of attraction, you should not think negatively; you should not think badly, no negative words, and so on. Instead, think about success to attract it.

The Fantasy of Successful Superhuman: A Hyper-Reality

The atmosphere of PS is optimistic, valuing the positive form of thinking. Consequently, self-confidence among members escalates rapidly. As Yousef remembers, "They raised you to the ceiling [increased your self-confidence], to the extent that if approached people refused to accept the invitation, you couldn't stand it." What Mostafa states shows that the schemes persistently impose specific behavioral patterns on their members: "For example, they [upliners] told us not to do some specific things, do not listen to that kind of music, and so on. Things that were bad for people like us. I mean,

you got away [from other people]." The schemes, thereby, encapsulate the members socially and ideologically (Pratt 2000). First, the schemes establish social fences via overloaded work schedules. This keeps the new members away from others. Then, as outlined here, the schemes dictate a kind of lifestyle to the members. The process builds an identity based on inspiring the members that they are different.

The network-based feature of schemes intensifies identity construction by allowing members to introduce themselves as distinguished people. So the members, proud of such differentiation, tend to internalize the scheme values more and more. Accordingly, the members would cultivate a hyper-real imagination about the PS's possibilities and achievements. The dream of becoming rich fast is the primary motivation to immerse in the firms' activities. As Yasamin reflects:

> Ms. Niayesh, one of my relatives, used to drive a "Pride[7]" to work, but now she has bought a Bugatti, her income has increased, she has changed her house, and she says all of these are because of the firm. She has even recruited her husband, her husband has left his old job, and now he is working in this firm.

Double Wandering

Although the organized meetings by the schemes firstly function as "group glue" keeping members together and away from non-members (Pratt 2000), they begin to get boring after a short period, once the recruited members do not experience the positive vibes. As Mahsa elaborates:

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[7] A type of vehicle in Iran that is generally known as a very cheap and unsafe car.

> The first meetings were good, but after a while, everything became boring, everything they said. There was nothing consistent with reality. When I asked them about that, they told me it's the beginning; it won't be like this after you get income. You need more time to fit in.

Trying to invite new members, the inviters face different reactions—some approached people decisively refuse, particularly facing the perseverance of inviters. The inviters, in return, get seriously disturbed when they guess that their friends and acquaintances distrust them. Some approached ones may accept the invitation, joining the scheme primarily due to the inviters' credibility and mutual trust. However, as soon as the newly joined members realize their failure to achieve the firm's promises, they cut off from the inviters. Some also use negative propaganda against inviters, resulting in the elimination of the inviters' credibility. As Esmaeel states: "This work ruins the friendships." Esmaeel also describes the situation as follows:

> It would make many people lose their friends. For example, I wanted to bring my close friend to this work, but he didn't come. One leader told me, "Look, go and tell him to come for me, do this, and you will succeed, don't you have trust in me?" Then I told that to my friend, and he said, "No," and our friendship broke down.

Acquaintances and friends leave the inviters gradually and even put an end to their connection with the inviter. Losing their reputation, the inviters also would be rejected by close friends and relatives. As Mahnaz states: "The way others treated us changed, my aunts usually say, 'Here she comes again to deceive us and sell her dodgy products!'" In some cases, families take a defensive stance against the invit-

ers, diminishing the inviters' dignity. As Fatemeh describes:

> My dad didn't agree with this work at all. So I spoke a lot with him, and I told him that I would prove it. But, now he mocks me and says, "You proved well!"

Over time, challenges and facing the actual world lead members to realize the gap between assumed imaginations and reality. Consequently, members believe that they have dedicated their capital, including time, money, and reputation, to the firms' activities, whereas they have gained nothing in return. As Farzaneh reflects:

> You know, it was hard for him to explain to me, as I was his subordinate. He used to tell me his great wishes, and now he works at the railway. The one who used to say my vision is to buy a Kia Optima,[8] I want to drive my Optima to the hotel where my wedding ceremony is, now he's married, and he is working on the railway, and there is no Kia Optima.

Discussion

The current study aimed to explore the social process underlying PS embedded in the less addressed social setting, Iran. According to what we explored here, participation in schemes leads to the multistage process of identity construction. Firstly, members are disconnected from non-members via established working fences. This finding is consistent with that of Pratt (2000), who conceptualized it as a social encapsulation process. In Bourdieu's words (1984), the studied schemes internalize their proposed habitus by dominating members' experiences. Introducing their pedagogies as scientif-

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[8] Referring to an expensive vehicle.

ically supported materials, the upliners put their efforts into internalizing the schemes' favorable values and attitudes. The unattainable promises are massively made to recruit new members and keep them committed to the scheme. Utilizing pedagogies, schemes induce a unique sense to the members—they are fully capable of achieving the promises; otherwise, they are responsible for the failure.

On the one hand, the PS benefit from the pedagogy to build an identity (Kuhn 2006) called superhuman here. The constructed superhumans are supposed to obsessively think positive, considering all aspirations attainable without attention to the real-world restrictions. Boosting members' self-confidence, superhumans recognize themselves as differentiated from non-members, feeling an exaggerated eupho-

ria. The constructed superhuman, then, defeats in facing reality and its limitations. Therefore, members experience double wandering—losing their financial resources while being rejected by their friends and relatives.

The findings from this study, in line with the literature (Koehn 2001; Moisander, Groß, and Eräranta 2018; Groß and Vriens 2019), highlight the unethical aspects of MLM, and particularly PS, that are based on misleading information and unfulfilled promises, and exploiting the members' relations. Though we attempted to represent all members of PS in the sample, the analysis was prone to overrepresenting the perspective of young members. Despite efforts to overcome such dilemmas through iterative analysis and an external audit, we acknowledge this limitation.

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For all sociologists for whom interpretative paradigm and qualitative research methodology are basic perspectives of studying social reality. In order to enable a free flow of information and to integrate the community of qualitative sociologists.

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