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Redefining Freedom of Religion for Children as Depicted in the Movie of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*: A Postmodern Approach

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ABSTRACT

The author frequently observed parents embroiled in a continuous argument regarding the appropriate religious upbringing of their children, which seem to be an ongoing and persistent disagreement to this day. The matter then inspired the researcher to find out more regarding the religious freedom for children, especially in the United States, as seen in the movie version of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. In relation to the previous statement, this article formulates two objectives: (1) to present how the movie depicts the kinds of children's freedom of religion, and (2) to discuss how the findings of the first objective contribute to the ongoing polemic in the United States. The postmodernism approach was applied, by using Lyotard's theory, focusing on the diversity of experiences and the rejection of grand narrative as its starting point to unveil the fragmented freedom of religion for children in the US. The first results show that, according to the movie, two types of parents often engage in a debate: one who creates a religion-neutral environment and the other who creates a religion in a neutral environment. The second result shows that both types are valid. Unlike the freedom of religion for children, the freedom of religion of parents is, in a way, stronger than the rights of children. The powerful parental right is legitimate if parents do not break the border upon "the best interest of the children". Parents are then allowed to impart or not to impart their religious beliefs towards their children.

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INTRODUCTION

Frequently and unconsciously, the freedom of religion for children is being violated by either parents or their guardians who decide to impart their personal religion to their children. Surely, it is a natural feeling of a parent wanting the best for their children as a child is the love of their life, their pride, and their everything in this world. However, the dream that they wish their children could have a perfect life, in the end is what drives them to unconsciously or somehow consciously violate the children's right to their own freedom. This condition is in line with Reid's idea (2018), "The United States is currently involved in the violation of many set forth in the CRC, but if it were to ratify the CRC, it would then be expected to begin working towards fixing them".

On the other hand, there are some parents, who share the same value of wanting the best for their children, decided to give neither any intervention nor any exposures regarding religion and beliefs to them. These parents refuse to interfere with the matter of religious beliefs, allowing

children to learn and choose based on their own desire in the future. These types of parents frequently have in mind that by not giving any intervention in their children's life decisions and establishing a neutral environment from the beginning is the best for their children. The two types often engage in a debate as one thinks that their choice is the correct one over the others. However, one should not judge whether one is terrible, or the opposite is a violence of the rights of the children without digging a deeper understanding and analysis.

The 1960s was claimed as the biggest transition in history in terms of secularization and claimed to be the era of the death of God. However, according to Jones (1971), it is recorded that 90% of the American adult population was identified as Christian (2021). In 2022, the adult identified as Christian now has fallen to 63% (2022). It is also claimed that nowadays the number of younger parents raising kids without religion is growing rapidly. However, the opposite party of parents who raised children with religious backgrounds is found to be in a quite equal number. Throughout

the decades, the debate between the two parties has been a never-ending debate. Between 2016 to 2023, the researcher at least found 6 debate forums in Quora debating whether or not parents should teach children religion, not in public school but privately by parents. In sharing their arguments, parents mostly use their point of view. Hence, it left us a question about the freedom of religion of the children themselves.

Counting into the big eight as countries with the most religious freedom (US News, 2023), the US seems to be one of the pioneer countries upholding religious freedom at all levels. The government of the United stance is clear as the first amendment of the US Congress says,

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

As with the first amendment, we might consider the US as a country where freedom of religion is fundamental and applied in all layers, to all citizens without exception. Unfortunately, the stance is

rather blurry, it needs more attention and detailed information, especially to protect the children's rights. An example of bolder action in protecting freedom of religion for children comes from Scotland. Their government has an exclusive organization for children and young people, which explicitly makes a clearer statement upon the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child's ratification article 14 regarding the protection of children's rights. The official says, "their parents can help them make decisions around religion, but a parent cannot force a child or young person to adopt a religion, and a parent cannot force a child or young person to stop following a religion" (2023).

Unfortunately, the US does not ratify the UNCRC, making an unclear stance on its position in defending the rights of children. The debate between the two types of parents and parenting styles, whether to teach the children religion or not, has been a never-ending debate for decades. Some parents appear to respect the others' choice, while the rest engage in a debate with those who have different perspectives. As previously mentioned, the researcher at least found six big debate

forums in Quora between 2016 and 2023 over the matter of imparting parents' religious beliefs. The condition where the government of the US did not ratify the UNCRC appears to implicitly play a role in the never-ending debate.

Despite the condition nowadays where there is an increasing number of millennial parents raising kids without any religious community background, the number is still close to fifty-fifty compared with parents who send children to Sunday school or other religious events. The PEW Research Center survey found that 48% of kids in the age between 13 to 17 say that they share totally the same religion as their parents did. Whilst other 43% kids say that between them and their parents shared some beliefs and only 8% claimed they had different religions. As Jesse Smith, a doctoral candidate of Pennsylvania State University, mentioned in his writings "parental religiosity is consistently found to be the single strongest predictor of child religiosity over the life course. Parents who are closer to their children exert a stronger influence on their children's religious life" (334, 2021).

Written in 1970 by Judy Blume, *Are You There God? It's*

Me Margaret captures the condition nicely: capturing the harmonious relationship between the pro-teaching-religion to children and the against team parents, as well as being a good example of how to be a supportive American citizen to uphold the First Amendment. From the previously mentioned condition and background, this article aims to find whether or not introducing a certain religion and interfering with a child's right of freedom of religion by exposing parents' religion to them is a violation.

This article highlights the argument between two groups of parents. Each argument coming from each group claims that the way they choose is the best way, and each group of parents claims that their way is the right one or the truest one, whilst what the opposite is doing is somehow wrong. People should not judge the choice of some people to give influence on their children regarding religion or not giving any religious background and let the children decide on their own in the future. Using the perspective of Lyotard about postmodernism, the researcher wants to dig more into the fragments that live within American society upon principles of freedom of religion, which are depicted in

Are You There God? It's Me Margaret.

METHODOLOGY

The authors conceptualize the meaning of freedom of religion for children through the movie version of *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*. The urgency of this study comes with the persistent parental conflicts over children's religious upbringing, and the tendency that it is often overshadowed by dominant parental rights in a pluralistic society like the US.

DISCUSSION

The Religion Neutral and Un-Neutral Environment

As the types and kinds of freedom of religion are not clearly describe, and that the clause only mentioned that the limitation of freedom of religion is on the public moral and health, and the rights of other, it can be implied that the types and kinds are not limited to any as long as it does not harm others and violate public moral and health. In response to the urgent need to address children's freedom of religion, some categorizations were developed based on the universal principles of freedom of religion through Article 14 of the United Nations

Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and based on the movie's scene.

Neutral Environment

Religion neutral environment can be defined as the disengagement of parents in their children's religious matters. Parents decided to not involve and let their children later in their life learn and decide their own religion. This term of neutral environment is borrowed from article 14 of the UNCRC, as they mentioned that "Parents are also not obliged to provide a religiously 'neutral' upbringing...". Although the organization did not mention explicitly, from the quotation it implicitly tells us that they considered the parent and parenting style of religion's freedom in two categories: neutral and un-neutral.

Some religion-neutral environment scenes are depicted and being the highlight in the movie. The first act of a religion-neutral environment that Margaret's parents created, can be seen and is subcategorized.

1. A Free of Religious Perspective since Early Age

Margaret's parents in the movie neither seem to introduce anything related to their religion nor provide any

exposure to their religion. A proof that Margaret's parents did not introduce or give exposure about religion to Margaret can be seen from when her parents are both shocked hearing Margaret going to the temple and joining the Jewish praying section with her grandmother, as they never wanted nor imagined that anybody would let Margaret learn about religion so soon.

Herb, Margaret's father, in the scene says that he was shocked by Margaret's confession that she had just gone to the temple with her grandmother. The stronger reaction comes from Margaret's mother. Barbara was even more shocked, disappointed, and angry at once.



Figure 1. Margaret's mother's reaction

Barbara says that she cannot believe what just happened, that her mother-in-law took

Margaret to the temple without asking their permission, although it was Margaret's own idea. When Margaret confesses that it was all her idea, wanting to go to the temple and that later she will try church, her mother reacted in a higher pitch, implying that she was really angry and disappointed. Not only does the conversation show explicitly the shock and disagreement of Margaret's parents, but it is also a short and powerful statement to implicitly prove that Margaret's parents had never introduced any religion to Margaret. Further, it seems that they did not have the intention to let Margaret learn about religions before she is an adult, although it is only a year to go until Margaret turns twelve.

The second proof that Margaret's parents never introduced religious beliefs to Margaret can be seen through her conversations with Mr. Benedict, her teacher. It was the end of the class when Mr. Benedict called Margaret to have a conversation with him regarding the school project. Mr. Benedict was curious that Margaret wrote 'religious holidays' as something that she hates, and thus he asked why.



Figure 2. Margaret's conversation with Mr. Benedict

Margaret says herself that she is not into religious holidays because she did not celebrate any of them. Although her parents are not atheists, both still hold their own religion; clearly, it can be seen from the conversation that they never celebrate the big days in their religion. This can be considered as another proof that both were in agreement not to introduce their religion to Margaret. As with Margaret's next statement, it clearly shows that her parents decided that Margaret is not into any religion until one day she can finally decide on her own.

2. An Absolute Freedom of Religion

The freedom of religion of a parent comes with the right of parents to introduce their religion towards their children (2015). However, in the movie, as well as becoming the main theme in the story, is that Margaret's parents give her absolute freedom of religion. The absolute terms here refer to the non-intervention of

Margaret's parents in her religious life. Margaret is allowed to choose and decide about her religious life on her own. This typical treatment given by Margaret's parents can be seen when Margaret goes to religious places without the guidance of her parents.



Figure 3. Margaret at a temple with Sylvia

Margaret goes to the temple with her grandmother. Margaret is so confident asking her grandmother that she wants to join prayer in the temple because her parents always told her that she can choose her own religion when she is an adult, now that she is almost an adult, she thinks she is ready. Although the day after that, when her parents find out that she has gone to the temple with her grandmother, Herbs is surprised, and Barbara is mad. However, the conflict just passed quickly, and her parents did not take the problem seriously. There is no explicit statement, but it can be inferred from the conversation after Herbs persuades Barbara that it is not a bad thing because Margaret will soon be

glad that her parents never force her to go to religious prayer.



Figure 4. Herb and Barbara discussing Margaret going to a temple

It can be deduced that Margaret's father himself felt tired of the endless events at the temple that his parents asked him to attend during his childhood. He is trying to be as positive as he can and persuade Barbara to allow Margaret to start learning religions sooner. Although it seems that Barbara is strongly against Margaret learning about religion, Barbara makes no answer, implying that at one point she agrees with her husband. After a while, there is a scene showing Margaret going to a church with her friend, Janie, and her mother.



Figure 4. Margaret going to a church with Janie and her mother

Margaret is happy to join the morning prayer. It implicitly tells that Margaret's parents finally agree that Margaret starts to learn religions earlier, before she turns 12, and she finally attends a church with her best friend. Another scene used as a supporting statement that Margaret's parents allow her to learn about God can be seen when Margaret joins the Christmas Eve mass with Nancy's family.



Figure 5. Margaret attending the Christmas Eve mass with Nancy's family

Margaret joins the Christmas Eve mass with Nancy and her family. As in the previous debate, Barbara seems to reject Margaret's request to learn earlier about religion, yet in this picture and as in the previous picture, which shows Margaret going to religious places, it can be inferred that Margaret's parents finally agree that Margaret tries church and learns a bit sooner about religion.

Margaret also whispers in silence that she is more confused than ever regarding

the religion that she should choose. Her whisper is proof that her parents give her absolute freedom of religion, as it seems that Margaret never shared with her parents what she felt about God, and her parents never asked or discussed anything about God and religions with Margaret.

Unneutral Environment

The growing number of religiously free-child rearing is undeniably huge. In the last two decades the number of pro-teaching-religion parents finally beats the non-pro-teaching, even until in the early 21st century the number seems far away to be beaten. The near to fifty-fifty condition makes a clearer vision to the fact that the two sides with different views and values, the pro and non-pro teaching, exist. It simply tells the viewers that both are justified now and then, even though in the previous two decades, the number of child rearing with religion was not even touching 10%.

The picture of an un-neutral parenting style is also depicted in the movie. Despite not being as many as the neutral parenting style scene, the movie draws a highlight of the era when child rearing was the majority's choice at that time.

1. Taking Children to Religious Places

The first type of with-religion child rearing can be seen through the scenes in the movie where children in the story join their parents in the sacred places, such as the church.



Figure 6. Margaret going to a church with Janie and her mother

Janie and her mother are members of the black church. Janie's mother teaches her Christianity since her father is not seen, and the religion is unknown. Janie seems to enjoy the prayer and implicitly shows that her mother successfully converted her to be a Christian.

Another scene that shows the act of parents taking children to church can be seen when Nancy's family joins the Christmas eve prayer.



Figure 7. Nancy's family joining the Christmas Eve mass

Nancy's whole family attending the Christmas eve prayer shows that they are an obedient Christian family, unlike Margaret's mother who decided to not include Margaret in her religion and never introduce her a thing about Christian. It be inferred that Nancy's parents are the pro-religion-teaching parents and Nancy's parents also seem to successfully convert their two children to hold Christian as their religion.

2. Child Baptism

The other act of an un-neutral environment found in the movie is the pedobaptism or child baptism. It is Laura Danker's parents who conducted the child's baptism. This agenda can be seen through the action when Laura Danker and Margaret are together in the library doing homework. At first, Margaret was asking when Laura's mother would pick her up and then Laura told her that her mom will pick her up after her confession.



Figure 8. Margaret having a conversation with Laura about pedobaptism

The conversation Laura Danker has with Margaret explicitly shows that she is a Catholic and now that she is still in the sixth grade or eleven years old, meaning that her parents did the pedobaptism to her. It is strengthened by the fact that in the movie, Laura went to confession by herself and after that her mother just picked her up. It indirectly tells us that she has been doing this confession for routine, giving us more proof that she undergoes to the child baptism as previously mentioned that someone cannot join the sacrament of confession or any other sacraments before they have been baptized.

Despite the lesser scene of un-neutral environment that depicted in the movie, it can be disclosed from the scenes that in the story the pro-teaching-religion or the with-religion child rearing is more common and well represented the status quo in that era where majority choose to pass religion towards their children. In addition, Margaret's parents portrayed the minority in that era, and it can be drawn that both parties exist and are justified. A few numbers do not imply that people in the opposite bench of majority do

not exist and that their belief is wrong or invalid.

The Parents and Children's Rights: Which Wall is Higher?

The Position of Children's Rights

The condition where the US is the only country to not ratify the United Nation Convention of the Right of Child (UNCRC) results in the unclear position of the government in defending the rights of children in the US. Although the US is contributing to the convention, the government decides not to submit the sign to ratify the Convention. The George Walker Bush Administration opposed the CRC and was expressing their deep political legal concern that by ratifying the treaty it would backlash the US laws of privacy and family rights (Blanchfield, 2015). In short, the main objection of the government of the US is the possibility of the UN making an intervention to the parents' rights which at the same time is considered a threat to the law (2017).

The US federal government has what is called The Children's Bureau under the Administration for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services. The Children's Bureau, known as CB,

focuses to improve the lives of children and the family through programs which aimed reducing child abuse and neglect, increasing adoptions, and strengthening foster care (2023). Through their mission and agenda, it clearly demonstrates that the children's rights to religion are not in the list. Further, as mentioned by Blanchfield that by ratifying the UNCRC it would be against the family rights itself, it clearly depicts the picture of the stance of the US government upon children's right to religion. In short, being the only country absent to ratify the UNCRC and the lack of governmental organization in defending the right of children and so their voices lead to the conclusion that the US government is taking aside more to the parents' rights rather the children's rights, especially in the case of freedom of religion.

Children's Rights in the Movie

The position of children's rights where they are put under the parent's right is also portrayed in the movie. The strongest evidence that children's right to religion is put in the second place can be seen by seeing Laura. She needs to go to confession and later continues with "It's something you have to do when you're

Catholic". Indeed, she is a Catholic and is already baptized because she does the sacrament of confession. Clearly her parents conducted the baptism for her during her childhood. For some people who are against child baptism, they believe that children are not yet into the sense of being able to choose the faith nor have the capability to be responsible for themselves, thus they should not be baptized early. Richard, a president and professor of systematic theology says, "We wholeheartedly affirm that baptism is rightly administered to adults (never before baptized) when they profess faith in Christ.". However, he then continues his writing with, "We don't merely baptize young children; we baptize both professing believers and their young children ..." (2020). Through the writings, it can be inferred that there are two types of Catholics' parents, one that is into child baptism and one that is against. Parents who conduct the child's baptism tend to come from the same Catholics affiliation.

The identity of Laura's parents is not revealed in the movie. It thus can be made into two scenarios: (1) both of her parents are Catholics and (2) her parents are doing the intermarriage but one must be

Catholic and hence she can be baptized. However, the two scenarios make no difference. The main concern is that in Laura's case, the movie depicts child baptism which shows that children's right to freedom of religion is put on the second place after the parents.

Another part of the movie which shows the condition where children's rights are placed as secondary can be seen even through the constructed neutral environment. Although Margaret's parents decides that they create a neutral environment and will let Margaret choose on her own, yet there is a point where her mother, Sylvia, is showing an authoritarian objection towards Margaret learning religions. Sylvia is strongly against the idea that Margaret wanted to learn religions sooner. In the engaged argumentation, Sylvia insisted that Margaret should not learn about religion sooner. However, Margaret convinces her that there is only one year left until she is turning 12 which can be considered as an adult. Luckily, her father Herb took side on Margaret. After Margaret leaves the room, her father also tries to convince Sylvia to allow Margaret to find out about religion earlier as what she wanted. At that point, the discussion ends.

Even though Margaret is allowed to go to church, it was obvious that before her father convinced Sylvia, there is no way Sylvia is going to allow Margaret to learn about church. It implicitly shows Sylvia has the feeling of superiority over her daughter's right to freedom of choice and religion. Consciously or unconsciously, Sylvia tries to defend her rights as a parent over Margaret's freedom of religion. Assuming that Margaret and her parents are living in a country such as Scotland, Sylvia's actions might be considered as forcing a child which is clearly against the children's right under the article 14 which says "... a parent cannot force a child or young person to adopt a religion, and a parent cannot force a child or young person to stop following a religion" (2023).

Behind the Powerful Parental Rights

Often people and parents think that children's rights are after their parents due to the thought that children are immature individuals. Children are often unable to distinguish bad or good things, and often unable to take responsibility upon their own actions. Hence, their parents are acting as their legal custody to take responsibility for them, and it is allowing them to make

decisions on behalf of their children. Parvis (2020) states that according to the Fourteenth Amendment, the Supreme Court has interpreted that in accordance with family law as,

the right of the individual...to marry, establish a home and bring up children, ... and generally to enjoy those privileges long recognized at common law as essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men. (Meyer v. Nebraska, 262 U.S., 390, 1923).

In strengthening the previous results, Parvis took the more recent precedents Troxel v. Granville, 530 U.S 57 (2000),

liberty interest ... the interest of parents in the care, custody, and control of their children-is perhaps the oldest of the fundamental liberty interests recognized by this (Supreme Court). ... It is cardinal with us that the custody, care, and nurture of the child reside first in the parents (2020).

The quotations implicitly show that, according to the constitution and through the parental law, parents are allowed to act and behave in accordance with their private preferences if it is legal.

Pervis, however, later in her writings explains that parental rights is set with limitations. She says that the state's standard in courts to decide parenting and child custody is under the best interest of the child (2020). Abaya writes that the term "best interest of the child" is the main principle used to guide the governmental policies regarding the children's rights in the U.S territories (2022). According to Melone, the "best interest for children" might be perceived differently, yet the closest refers to the custody, visitation discussions, and decisions that must be protecting the child's security, physical and mental health, and the development of their future (2023). The lacking point of the United States government is their clarity over the term "best interest" itself. Through several cases in decades, as previously written cases example: *Meyer v. Nebraska*, 262 U.S 390 (1923) and *Troxel v. Granville*, 530 U.S 57 (2000), the term "best interest for children" can be widely translated without specific provision. In addition, the term is only working as guidance of the judges, meaning that when things and problems related to children are not up in the Court, the term is shut

down and only parents' rights play the role there.

Between the Two Times: Then and Now

The movie preserves the original setting of times and places as the original book. It picturized the 1970's condition well. Each piece of literature tends to mirror the spirit of its era. An author's surrounding background, time and place, is the strongest influential element upon the work. Jenkins believes that the personal background of an author significantly shapes the overall story. He then explained by saying,

... socio-economic influences, cultural heritage, life events and explorations of identity can all bleed into an author's work inadvertently or consciously. Even the time period and historical context during which they lived play a crucial role in molding their perspective ... (Jenkins, 2023)

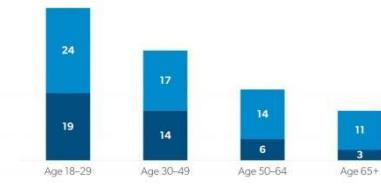
It is obvious that Blume, the novel's author, is influenced by the 1970s. Majority of adults in the US in late 1970's or around 90% self-claimed to be a Christian, meanwhile only 7% of the total population is identified as without any religion (McCarthy, 2019). In addition to this, the movie depicts quite the same

things as the surrounding neighborhood of Margaret's and her school friends are mostly Christian, it was only her who was raised from intermarriage parents and raised of free religious perspective. "Parent-child agreement on religious affiliation is consistently high" (Hill via Wilson, 1997:290).

As with the previous statement, it shows that even before the 1990s the condition where parents are imparting their religious beliefs to their children is high in the US. As an example in this case, is conducted by Matthew Brown who finds out about older generations passing their religion using 360 samples of Californian families. The research shows that in the 1970s seven out of ten parents passed their religious belief towards their children, and only three who choose to not pass their religion to the next generations (2013). Another example used as a proof is the survey of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). The company conducted a survey in 2019 regarding the decline of religious beliefs within American families from all nations.

Close to Half of Young Unaffiliated Americans Were Raised in Nonreligious Households

Percentage of Americans in each age group who were ...
Raised in a religion, but now unaffiliated Raised unaffiliated, still unaffiliated



AEI AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES SURVEY

Survey of US adults (N=2,561) conducted November 13-14, 2019.

Figure 9. Child Rearing Regarding Religion

The sample of the survey is 2561 adults aged 18 and above living in the US. From the first chart they offer, it can be seen that as many as 66% of adults aged 18 to 65 or above are raised with a religion (2019). Through the red lines, the movie indeed depicts the real condition of that era where majority parents decide to impart their religious beliefs towards their children rather than create a more neutral religious environment.

On the contrary, discussing the present era, through the same survey conducted by the American Enterprise Institute, the percentage of American adults raised in a religion but then now turns to be an unaffiliated adult reached the highest with 24%. Meanwhile, the older adults aged 30-49 with the same religious environment and now unaffiliated ranked the third position with 17% (2019). This data again taken from the

American Enterprise Institute indirectly shows us that children from nineteen to fifty years ago (early 2000s and 1970s) have the big possibility of previously in their childhood having the feeling of being forced to hold the religion that their parents tried to impart, proven by their now choosing to be an unaffiliated adult.

CONCLUSION

Unlike the freedom of religion that adults had, the freedom of religion for children is nuanced and presents a unique challenge. In conducting this research, the researcher applied the postmodernism approach. Lyotard's objection to grand narratives became the stepping point of this research to present the more diverse fragments laying under societies. Using the postmodernism approach the researcher presents two categorizations of parenting style related to child's freedom of religion: as portrayed through the characters Mr. Herb and Mrs. Barbara (Margaret's parents) which focus on creating neutral environment beliefs, and the other one shown through the character of Janie's and Laura's parents who shares their religious perspective towards their children or to

the extent of conducting baptism for their son/daughter. The depicted neutral and unneutral parents are indeed happening since then until now. The pros and cons to religious child rearing are all valid and correct in their own ways. According to UNCRC and the United States' government, parents' right to freedom of religion comes with their right to teach their children about their religious beliefs if the parents are fit and they do not go beyond the boundaries of "the best interest of the child". It is quite an irony where a nation that dreams of a total freedom of religion yet limits the children's right to their own religious liberty; that these children need to wait until they are considered to be a mature adult before being permitted to convert or follow their own religious preference meanwhile the border upon the harm and "the best interest of the child" is undefined clearly.

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The Impact of Colin Kaepernick's Protest on Public Perception of Athlete Activism

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the influence of Colin Kaepernick's protest on the public's perception of athlete activism. This will entail doing a thorough examination and analysis of pertinent previous research related to the NFL game that had similar activities to those of Colin. The primary data comprises the results of American Football matches, the performances during NFL matches, the pre-game, which includes the kneeling protest by various sportsmen, and noteworthy findings from earlier studies. The study will undergo a comprehensive examination and analysis. This involves analyzing the intricate correlation between race, racism, athlete activism, and how these interconnections reflect broader societal inequalities and power dynamics. There are three keyways in which researching the linkages between professional football and social movements sheds light on the interplay of sport, politics, and culture. In addition, this article shows some of the various ways that professional football players have utilized the game for purposes other than just earning money and enjoying a love of the game. In this instance, the NFL and the press got along well throughout the decade, therefore, the public's perception of the NFL's responses to social movements was largely determined by the press's coverage of the events.

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INTRODUCTION

The enduring prevalence of Black sportsmen's increased vocalization on social concerns persists to this day. Athletes like LeBron James, a prominent forward in the National Basketball Association (NBA), and Kaepernick actively advocate for raising awareness about the challenges that minority communities in the United States currently encounter. When NFL players, many of whom are Black, knelt during the national anthem, it elicited diverse reactions from fans and the media. There was a division among people over the acts of the players. Some viewed it as a threat to their feeling of national pride or patriotism, while others admired the players for their skill in expressing themselves and advocating for causes that they deeply care about. Hence, media coverage possesses a potent capacity to shape the perceptions of audiences regarding player protests during the national anthem (Lanham, 2018).

In the United States, the increased focus on athlete activism began with Colin Kaepernick, the ex-quarterback of the San Francisco 49ers, who

knelt during the national anthem in 2016 to protest racism and police brutality against Black Americans and show support for the Black Lives Matter movement (Lewis, 2016). Several sportsmen and teams participated in Kaepernick's anthem protest. Players from the National Football League, college football teams, and the National Basketball Association protested during the national anthem by kneeling, raising their fists, or making similar gestures. Multiple teams, including some from the Women's National Basketball Association, demonstrated by wearing shirts that included messages such as "Black Lives Matter" or "Change Starts with Us" (Cooky and Antunovic, 2020). Naomi Osaka, a tennis star, and Lewis Hamilton, a Formula 1 driver, showed solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement by wearing specific facemasks (Müller et al., 2023).

Athletes who engage in activism are often confronted with two interrelated challenges: public backlash and potential repercussions for their professional careers. Given their visibility, athletes who take public stances on social or

political issues frequently provoke strong reactions from fans—ranging from support and encouragement to pressure for greater involvement, as well as resistance or hostility (Leppard, 2022).

For athletes in team-based sports, challenging racist or oppressive institutional practices may jeopardize their team membership and negatively affect their professional reputation. By contrast, athletes in individual sports, while also subject to pressures such as sponsorship obligations, generally possess greater autonomy to withdraw from competitions and exercise agency over their participation. Notably, existing scholarship on mobilization in sport has given limited attention to these dynamics (Leppard, 2022).

Minoritized athletes who engage in social justice advocacy often disrupt established norms within sport, and thus it is unsurprising that such actions have historically provoked negative reactions, ranging from public criticism and audience hostility to institutional sanctions and exclusion from competition. Speaking out on political and social issues may also result in marginalization, social

isolation, and the forfeiture of commercial endorsements. In recent years, scholars in sport communication and media studies have increasingly focused on public perceptions of athlete activism (Frederick et al., 2018), with particular attention to the role of social media and how fans resist such forms of advocacy. Schmittel and Sanderson (2015), for instance, contend that while social media platforms provide athletes with significant opportunities to engage in activism, fans often continue to expect them to remain apolitical and to limit their activities to the athletic domain rather than serve as vocal agents of change (Kluch, 2020).

Stepp & Castle (2021), explained However, the protests have consistently sparked political disputes, frequently instigated by remarks made by President Trump. The subject of political engagement by Black athletes has garnered attention since the 1960s, when Dr. Harry Edwards played a pivotal role in establishing the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR), an organization dedicated to challenging racial discrimination in athletics and advocating against racial segregation. The display of the 'Black Power

salute' witnessed at the 1968 Olympic games by numerous Black athletes and members of OPHR elicited significant negative response from the sports community and widespread contempt towards political involvement by Black athletes (Edwards, 1969). Black athlete activism has evolved in several stages over time, with the most current phase being marked by protests against police brutality targeting Black Americans (Edwards, 2016).

Colin Kaepernick's act of sitting during the national anthem during a 2016 preseason game was intended to initiate a dialogue regarding the systematic mistreatment of black individuals and the persistent issue of excessive force by law enforcement in the United States (Wyche, 2016). The act of sitting or kneeling during the national anthem caused a significant amount of criticism (Rorke & Copeland, 2017). This criticism escalated when President Donald Trump, during a rally, suggested that NFL owners should terminate players who knelt as a sign of disrespect towards the flag. He also encouraged fans to leave if players knelt (Tatum, 2017). The controversy resurfaced in 2020 when well-known Black athletes expressed their

intention to kneel during the anthem as a means of drawing attention to racial injustices, particularly in light of George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police (Broussard et al., 2021).

As mentioned by Intravia et al., (2018), In August 2016, during a pre-season game of the National Football League (NFL), Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, chose to remain seated on the bench while the national anthem was being played. At first, just a small number of people paid attention, but with time, more and more focus was directed towards Kaepernick's protest, especially when several of his colleagues joined him and started kneeling during the national anthem. Kaepernick stated that his protest during the national anthem was motivated by the discrimination faced by people of color, including instances of police brutality in the United States (Stites 2017).

The action taken by Collin Kaepernick is a form of protest against the brutal actions taken against civilians by the police, which has become a hot topic for all Americans, including athletes in all sports in America, including Lebron James and several

athletes in the NFL. The protest was carried out in its own way, for example, Lebron James showed by posting an article on social media and was responded to by many parties. This protest has at least generated some controversy in many sports because it is considered to have crossed the ethical boundaries that should not be done as a professional athlete. This action is widespread throughout America, known as Black Lives Matter (BLM), in which American civil society, especially "blacks" take action by taking to the streets to protest against the American government, which is considered racist against black citizens in America.

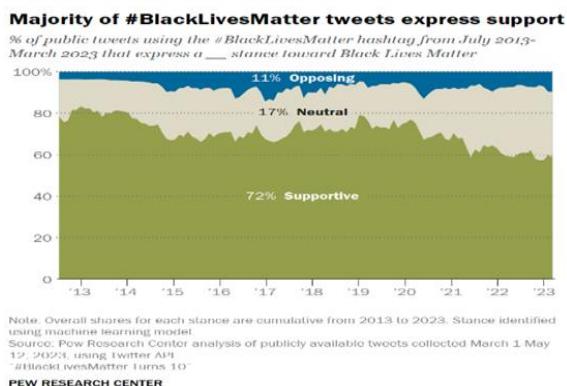


Figure 1. Majority of #BlackLivesMatter Tweets Express Support
Sources: Pew research Center

Over the past decade, the overwhelming majority of tweets with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter have expressed support for the larger social movement that

the hashtag represents, usually in a positive manner. From 2013 onwards, a total of 72% of tweets with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter have unequivocally shown support for the broader campaign and its goals. In contrast, 11% of these tweets have clearly indicated opposition to the movement. Approximately 17% of the tweets do not explicitly express a definite stance. There has been a minor increase in the proportion of tweets expressing a neutral viewpoint in recent years. However, the overall distribution of opinions in these tweets has consistently shown support for the movement as a whole (Bestvater et al., 2023).

As stated in Boykoff & Carrington, (2020), The action gained widespread attention as he explicitly expressed that his act was not arbitrary, but rather a deliberate political declaration against the systemic discrimination and excessive use of force by law enforcement towards individuals belonging to marginalized racial groups in the United States. He expressed his commitment to support those who are under oppression. This paper aims to (1) analyze the coverage of the controversy surrounding Kaepernick's choice to protest by kneeling during

professional sports events in mainstream US newspapers and (2) examine this sheds light on the intersection between media communication and significant worldwide matters relevant to the study of sports sociology, particularly in relation to topics such as authority, communication, protest, and societal transformation (Dart and Wagg, 2016).

Kaepernick aspired to leverage his prominent status to align himself with the grievances expressed by numerous individuals within the broader black community against the persistent absence of racial advancement, grievances that frequently went unnoticed by the unresponsive white majority. Discussions on the definition of racial progress and the feasibility of achieving it are expected to persist in the foreseeable future. An increasing number of black individuals have engaged, or reengaged, in endeavors to oppose private actions and official policies that put black people and other marginalized groups at a disadvantage. Athletes, such as Colin Kaepernick, exemplify this dedication. Adaptive activist athletes have shown a newfound dedication to participating in civic activities and asserting their

own power, therefore emphasizing the constraints on racial advancement in the United States (Martin, 2018).

Kaepernick's protest is in line with the deliberate protests carried out by sportsmen in past generations, such as Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who notably protested during the playing of the U.S. national anthem at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, which brought them significant attention. Considering the importance of Kaepernick's protest, it is crucial to analyze the reactionary response from far-right social media against him. Celebrities have consistently asserted their entitlement to partake in social activism, arguing that their prominence affords them a platform that entails an obligation to tackle societal concerns. However, several far-right critics argue that athletes' fame and recognition should disqualify them from participating in political discussions (Duvall, 2020).

Athletic activities have been of paramount importance in cultures throughout history, from the inception of the ball and competitive sports. Sports have garnered immense followings and have become one of the most lucrative domains within the entertainment industry.

Countless individuals aspire to join a professional team or pursue a career in this industry. However, political scientists, fans, and sports organizations frequently neglect the political aspects of sports, as the primary objective of the sector is to amuse the public and generate financial gains. Notwithstanding this omission, athletes have gradually gotten politically engaged as they have grown to recognize that they possess a prominent platform to disseminate their message to the public. Jackie Robinson, Muhammed Ali, and Fritz Pollard are among the early athletes who utilized their sport as a platform to convey political views (Drayman, 2020).

As also mentioned by Drayman, (2020), despite facing criticism, non-violent protests proved far more efficacious than their counterparts. This is because individuals opposing this type of activity lacked a means to counter these demonstrators, as they were not violating any laws or aspects of the Constitution. Conversely, the minority communities of that era faced adverse media coverage due to the occurrence of violent protests, which were effectively manipulated by those advocating against

changes in segregation laws (Wasow, 2020). Non-violent protest has emerged as the prevailing method of activism to advocate for political transformation, and it is the preferred form of protest among athletes in all sports (Wasow, 2020).

Indeed, whenever a well-known individual, sometimes referred to as a "public figure," expresses a viewpoint that is deemed "controversial," it inevitably sparks a debate within the public domain. This leads to a range of ideas and reactions from the community, with some offering support while others express opposition. Studying the scientific reasons behind why athletes, particularly "black athletes", persist in voicing their opinions on social and political matters will always be intriguing. The intersection of sports and politics often sparks a contentious relationship, as some view it as an unnecessary and potentially problematic connection. There is a fear that this association can lead to outcomes that extend beyond the realm of sports. Many argue that sports should remain separate from external factors, particularly political and social issues. However, numerous viewpoints argue that sports not only

serve as entertainment and competition but also provide a platform for athletes to express their intentions regarding social and political matters. If it is perceived that sports demonstrate impartiality towards certain groups, particularly minority groups in America, they can have a significant impact.

The study of athlete activism is important as it demonstrates how athletes leverage their visibility and influence to contest social injustices and draw attention to broader political and societal concerns. Athletes from marginalized communities, in particular, frequently encounter inequality within both personal and professional domains, and their decision to engage in activism disrupts conventional expectations that they remain politically neutral and confined to athletic performance. Examining this phenomenon offers critical insights into the intersections of sport, identity, representation, public opinion, and institutional transformation, while also revealing how athletes navigate resistance from fans, sponsors, and governing organizations. Accordingly, athlete activism extends beyond the realm of sport, serving as a lens

through which to understand wider struggles for equity and justice in society.

METHODOLOGY

This research applies library research by collecting data and information from relevant documents, both printed and electronic versions, which are books, journal articles, articles in mass media such as newspapers or magazines. Internet sources are needed to get the latest information and issues of American Football in America, taken from any reliable U.S sports media like The New York Times, Washington Post, TIME, Bleacher Report, Politico, Deadline and NFL (National Football League) website, etc. The second, the researcher identified, defined and made some notes on important facts that gave clearer information about American football.

During analysis, data are organized and reduced through summarization and categorization to make patterns and themes in the data so that they can be identified and linked. The data is collected and then categorized and clustered into some criteria to ease the understanding and interpretation of the data.

Since Horkheimer's first statement of the necessity for critical theory (or, at least, a revitalized awareness of its importance for the moment in which Horkheimer was writing), this theoretical discourse has not stagnated and is flourishing in the same way that traditional theory did in the 1930s. Critical theory has exploded throughout the theory landscape in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as an empirical, practical, and normative discourse that embeds within its conceptual purview the attempt to both understand the conditions of oppression and exploitation as well as the possibilities for human emancipation that exist within each historical period (Macdonald, 2017).

Critical theory approaches the contemporary social environment warily, constantly and militantly in "conscious opposition" to and "tension" with the existing society. Thus, it cuts through the professed and proclaimed pretenses of a society's institutions and examines how they live up to the empirically grounded underlying potentialities nourished within that society. Such an assessment is carried out by assuming two important aspects and conditions: first, that while society appears to be a

ready-made, law-like structure whose existence is external to the individual, such structures, as Horkheimer clarified, are the products of human activity and can thus be changed and transformed and second The possibility of creating a logical society that allows for critique is inherent in human effort, but not fully understood by individuals or the general public (Macdonald, 2017).

The perception that White culture is the prevailing racial norm in America extends to sports. Feagin (2013), for example, suggested that the White racial frame is "ideal" in sports. Because societal systems often favor White identity, he claimed that Whites are the dominant in-groups in athletics, with Blacks and other people of color viewed as outliers (Flores, 2022).

Smith (2019) also advocated for a Whiteness standard in the sports media since it frequently shows Whiteness as superior to media portrayals of Blackness. She went on to say that the archetypal sports hero never has a racial identity, although the public generally perceives the archetypal sports hero to be White (Flores, 2022).

Critical theory can be employed to analyze and evaluate the influence of social media on the formation of public opinions regarding Kaepernick's protest and the broader phenomenon of athlete activism. This entails examining the role of social media platforms and algorithms in propagating specific narratives while marginalizing others, and how these mechanisms both mirror and strengthen existing power dynamics in society.

The study can utilize critical theory to examine the convergence of racism and athlete activism, specifically within the framework of Kaepernick's protest. This entails studying the complex relationship between race, racism, athlete activism, and how these connections mirror larger societal disparities and power structures.

Jhally (1984) examines the sports/media complex as a prominent illustration of how modern capitalism is formed by tangible and cultural connections. Jhally argues that the sports/media complex is a significant example that vividly demonstrates the interconnected and contradictory link between material and cultural aspects in advanced capitalist societies (1984, p. 55).

Jhally employs a Marxist framework to contend that the sports/media complex serves as the central point where consumer audiences engage with sports. The phrase refers to the combination of traditional broadcast media, print media, and the new media that make up the practical aspect of consuming sports. The term "sports/media complex" refers to the contemporary concept of spectator sports and the historical evolution of the material consumption practices associated with viewing sports (Walizer, 2023).

In this research, the researcher applied the concept of critical theory has the potential to question and contest the prevailing myths that surround athlete activism and protest. This entails analyzing the way Kaepernick's protest was depicted in the media and public conversation, and how these depictions either mirror or strengthen established power dynamics and disparities. It also delves into the connection between celebrity culture and athlete activism, utilizing insights from Critical Theory to comprehend how celebrity culture influences and is influenced by social movements and protests. This entails analyzing the incorporation of Kaepernick's protest into

celebrity culture and the subsequent influence on public perceptions of athlete activism.

DISCUSSION

As explained by Smith (2019), athlete activism is a longstanding occurrence that has evoked intense emotional responses. President Donald Trump incited widespread anger by expressing his belief, during a speech in 2017, that NFL owners should terminate the contracts of players who kneel during the national anthem ("Remove that individual from the field, as they are the offspring of an unpleasant woman"). He has been terminated!" said the individual who choose to kneel during the national anthem (Jenkins, 2017). The president has consistently utilized athlete activism to energize his support base, employing a "us" versus "them" storyline. He has labeled kneeling athletes as "un-American" and protesting athletes as "whiny," while also casting doubt on the intellectual capabilities of Black athletes. Furthermore, he has criticized athletes who have declined invitations to visit the White House (Boren, 2018). Following LeBron James and Kevin Durant's expression of criticism towards the president, Fox News host Laura

Ingraham seized the moment to emphasize, "While you are undoubtedly talented athletes, it is important to remember that you do not hold elected positions." Millions choose Trump to be their leader. Please refrain from engaging in political commentary, or as a notable individual once expressed, kindly refrain from expressing opinions and focus solely on your athletic performance" (Chavez, 2018, p. 1).

Athletes Activism

Every type of activism and protest has a distinct objective, and it is not accurate to categorize all protests under a single unified purpose. Nevertheless, the prevailing unfavorable opinions appear to revolve around the idea of perceiving the protesting athlete as a menace to collective identity. According to the literature previously examined, when an athlete participates in an activist protest, such as kneeling during the national anthem, it has the potential to jeopardize the social identity of a certain group. The group that would be at risk is the one whose members have a strong sense of pride and emotional attachment to their country. The act of an athlete kneeling would be perceived as a challenge to the principles

cherished by the in-group (Smith, 2019).

The benefits and drawbacks of celebrities expressing their opinions on socio-political matters have been noted in fields beyond sports, such as entertainment, where audiences and followers often retain intense and intricate connections with them (Van den Bulck, 2018). Simultaneously, it is crucial to take into account the particularities of the various individuals involved and their connections within the celebrity system. Although the BLM (*Black Lives Matter*) movement and Kaepernick's activism had a significant impact worldwide, the issues of racial injustices, race relations, and racial identities that Kaepernick focused on are primarily rooted in the historical and societal context of the United States.

The actions taken by Collin Kaepernick will more or less be carried out by other athletes from various sports, as if these athletes have the same feelings experienced by most "minorities", this is due to social justice or feelings of injustice that occur in the public space, especially in the US. It will affect the quality of the matches displayed by the National Football League (NFL), as well

as the number of viewers, which will have a significant impact on the diverse public perceptions of controversies that occur on the field.

Newly disclosed data indicate that the NFL witnessed an 8% decline in television viewership during the 2016 regular season compared to 2015. According to ESPN.com's Darren Rovell, the average number of viewers for an NFL game decreased from 17.9 million in 2015 to 16.5 million in 2016. According to A.J. Perez of USA Today, there was an 8% decrease, which was an improvement from a 14% decrease in the first nine weeks of the season. Brian Rolapp, the NFL's executive vice president of media, ascribed this reduction to the presidential election (Chiari Mike, 2017).

Presidential elections have always had an impact on our ratings, so we were prepared for a dip this season. ... We're pleased at how our viewership rebounded after the election and are looking forward to what should be a very competitive and exciting postseason.

As mentioned by Rorke (2017) in a post-game interview with Steve Wyche of NFL.com on August 26th, Kaepernick was questioned about his rationale for choosing to remain seated

during the national anthem. In response, Kaepernick stated,

I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color...To me this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way (Hauser, 2016).

Athletes Voices

The act of "taking a knee" during the national anthem altered the narrative of the protest. Other NFL players, renowned soccer athlete Megan Rapinoe, and high school athletes, notably those in Beaumont, Texas, showed their support for Kaepernick both politically and physically. The protest rapidly adopted an action frame, as described by sociologists studying social movements. It involves individuals aligning themselves with a particular cause, actively seeking ways to participate as agents rather than passive observers, and expressing their discontent with an injustice (Johnson & Noaks, 2005). A significant number of individuals, predominantly African-American, were drawn to this course of action, while others perceived the protests as exacerbating divisions within American society along the lines of "us" versus "them"

(often, this allegation was made as if the Kaepernick protest was the initial occurrence in this societal realm). The protest appeared comprehensible; however, the numerous interpretations of the case were influenced by historical context (Rorke, 2017).

It is evident in sports such as American football and basketball, where Black athletes make up a significant majority. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Black Americans in these sports does not necessarily imply that their political views are embraced. Peterson (2009) observed that there exists an unspoken rule or standard in sports where participants are expected to refrain from expressing their political views and engaging in social activism within the confines of the arena or stadium (p. 101). Simply said, athletes have been regularly told that it is acceptable to hold political views, but they should refrain from expressing them in public, where the majority of Americans are likely to encounter them. Athletes may face consequences when they decide to openly voice their political views. Indeed, these threats are genuine: When personal matters intersect with politics in sports, the act of

cheerleading frequently ceases suddenly (Coombs et al., 2020).

Politics and Sports

As stated in Mueller (2022), political communication is not limited to a one-way flow from elites, such as Trump, to the general people. Mass media also amplify the voices of non-elite actors who present powerful alternative narratives (Wasow, 2020, p. 638). The phenomenon of media framing may account for the findings of a Washington Post poll, which revealed that 62% of Americans believe that professional athletes should utilize their platforms to voice their opinions on national matters. Additionally, 59% of football enthusiasts consider kneeling during the national anthem as an acceptable means of protesting racial inequality (Maese & Guskin, 2020). According to a different survey, there is a significant disparity in opinions based on race, with Black individuals showing a much higher level of support for the players compared to white ones (Quinnipiac University, 2016).

Although there are similarities in the protests carried out by Black athletes, there are also significant differences. Specifically, the

protests carried out by NFL players are notable due to their overt demonstrations of patriotism during American football matches. According to Sorek and White (2016, p. 274), there is a positive correlation between being an American football fan and having a stronger sense of national pride. However, being a fan of baseball or basketball does not exhibit the same correlation. Consequently, the objections made by players during the national anthem might be readily misconstrued as lacking in patriotism. This may elucidate the reason behind the significant presence of NFL demonstrations in public discussions regarding sports activism. These protests strike a sensitive chord among individuals who identify themselves as American patriots, encompassing both supporters and critics of the demonstrators. Approximately 50% of the news pieces analyzing Kaepernick's choice to kneel during the national anthem portrayed the protest in relation to his patriotism (Mueller, 2022).

Suchman (1995) contends that statements aligning with a society's core cultural and political values are more likely to achieve moral legitimacy, whereas those that

conflict with these values risk being perceived as illegitimate. In the context of athlete activism, most political expressions do not directly oppose foundational societal values but instead tend to align, at least partially, with certain social values embedded within broader political discourse. Consequently, individual legitimacy judgments may be influenced by personal value systems. This perspective is further supported by theories of psychological balance, which suggest that individuals seek consistency between their values and their evaluations of others' actions (Meier et al., 2024).

At first glance, this narrative seems to be politically unbiased, but in reality, it effectively suppresses social protest in the sports arena. Specifically, it sends a clear message that politically active players, especially those without exceptional talent, will not be hired by the NFL (or other sports leagues). However, it is important to note that the distraction theory is not limited to activist players alone: Michael Sam, who was named the Defensive Player of the Year in the prestigious college football league, the

SEC, in 2013, was not selected until the last round of the 2014 NFL draft and did not get the opportunity to play in any regular season games (Hawkins et al., 2022).

Media's Representation of Black Social Action

The illusion of meritocracy is reinforced by the high number of African American athletes in sports like American football and basketball, leading to the notion that racism in sports is not a significant issue or that affluent athletes of color are perceived as entitled or unappreciative. Carrington warns that the idea of fair competition in sports can mislead people into believing that Western societies have achieved a merit-based system that overlooks racial inequalities. Sport provides a symbolic unity that is threatened when African American athletes like Ali, Carlos, and Smith question the unwritten social and political conventions (Butterworth, 2020).

According to researchers, the relationship and role of an athlete in a particular sport has a significant influence on the formation of public opinion on social issues that occur, especially in America where society is very

pluralistic and as the facts occur that it is not uncommon for those who are different from the majority to experience unpleasant treatment from the majority community, especially cases of racism that are still rampant in American public spaces.

These things triggered several athletes from various sports in the US, including in this case. Kaepernick, who loudly participated in the process in his way, which was then also followed by other athletes around the world to show their solidarity, especially black athletes (African-American). Athletes also on the other hand according to researchers are social beings who will certainly socialize in the midst of a pluralistic American society and with the injustice felt by fellow minorities, they will spontaneously feel the same way, therefore according to researchers based on the facts and data described by previous researchers that the activities of athletes will form their respective perceptions and will take actions that can at least influence public opinion towards minorities and similar cases experienced by others.

After Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem,

other players have participated in symbolic protests like sitting, raising fists, and linking arms. Kaepernick's protest at an NFL game is just one instance of social activism in sports, but his act of kneeling during the national anthem is considered one of the most contentious actions in professional sports history. Kaepernick's actions sparked a nationwide discussion over the suitability of social protests in professional sports (McNeal, 2018).

During critical moments, pre-game demonstrations and gestures disrupt expected messages and performances. These exhibits push audiences and leaders to reflect on Black victims' stories, racial justice movements, policing, and Black athletes' political voices. Sports and news media outlets, including Sports Illustrated, ESPN, CBS News, Al Jazeera, CNN, Washington Post, The Guardian, The Nation, USA Today, and Quad Cities News ABC (Illinois), summarized the purpose of the protests and documented responses from organizations like the NFL and Knox College (Hartmann et al., 2022a).

As explained in Hartmann et al., (2022), athletes' voices in traditional media can oppose racial oppression on

more than one stage, including pre-game exchanges and ritualized ceremonies. Post-game and pre-game news conferences, as well as interviews with local and national sports media, give opportunities for players to challenge accepted cultural norms and express significant social messages. In this scenario, the focus switches from bodies to voices. In July 2016, Maya Moore, Rebekkah Brunson, Lindsey Whalen, and Seimone Augustus held a pre-game press conference to explain why they were wearing shirts that read "Change Starts With Us", "Justice and Accountability", "Black Lives Matter", and the names of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille, as well as the Dallas Police Department emblem. Moore and Brunson, in particular, directly called for an end to racial profiling and senseless violence, as well as sharing their own concerns with the realities of racism in the United States as Black women (Shoichet and Martin 2016).

These athletes are legally practicing their First Amendment right to freedom of expression, despite facing criticism. As people nationwide discussed the suitability of Kaepernick's protest, a quiet movement was

gradually growing in high school football. High school students across the country started emulating Kaepernick by kneeling during the national anthem to protest police violence (McNeal, 2018).

While individual action was emphasized, the coverage of Kaepernick's protest gained widespread attention and aligned with the concept of a "protest wave" observed in previous research by Andrews & Biggs (2006). Kaepernick's initial choice to sit during the national anthem appeared to be personal, but it soon gained widespread attention as a form of protest against police brutality and in support of social justice, spreading rapidly both within and beyond the NFL (Coombs et al., 2020).

A significant advantage of using social media for athletes is the ability to engage in open conversations with fans to share and comprehend athletes' viewpoints on various topics. Athletes now primarily use social media as their main platform, which has both positive and negative consequences. Advocacy efforts might elicit various responses from fans, potentially threatening their social identity and impacting an

athlete's activism. Followers often relate to athletes, and when athletes express their views through advocacy, followers may react strongly, leading to controversy due to differing ideas on activism and politics (Costello, 2019).

Hartmann et al., (2022), explained Athlete perspectives in conventional media environments. Athletes can oppose racial discrimination beyond pre-game exchanges and ritualized ceremonies. Athletes use postgame and pre-game press conferences and interviews with local and national sports media to challenge cultural norms and convey impactful social messages. The focus transitions from physical forms to vocal expressions in this scenario. In July 2016, Maya Moore, Rebekkah Brunson, Lindsey Whalen, and Seimone Augustus conducted a pre-game press conference to discuss their decision to wear shirts with messages such as "Change Starts With Us," "Justice and Accountability," "Black Lives Matter," and the names of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille, as well as the Dallas Police Department emblem. Moore and Brunson explicitly demanded the cessation of racial profiling and senseless violence, expressing their unhappiness with the realities

of racism in the US as Black women. Shoichet and Martin (2016).

There are numerous additional instances where politics and sport have overlapped beyond these three examples. It is not evident what specific criteria need to be met for a decision or acts to be considered the blending of politics and sport. The mentioned stories demonstrate instances of individual protest, organized terrorism, and government policy utilizing sport as both a resource and a platform for political activities. The absence of consistency in the three cases emphasizes the challenge of establishing a specific and comprehensive definition of politics (Coakley & Dunning, 2000).

An emphasis on the politics in sport is based on a perspective that disregards the distinction between the public and private spheres and considers politics as a pervasive element in all social organizations, such as schools, sports clubs, and governing bodies. The ability to engage in political actions is based on several resources, such as knowledge, wealth, and credibility, which are spread out among many social institutions. Examining politics in sports involves

analyzing how organizations wield power to further their own goals over other social groups. Gender fairness, racial prejudice, and class advantage are all valid topics for investigation (Coakley & Dunning, 2000).

One other issue that may contribute to the unfavorable backlash against athlete advocates is the presence of patriotism or nationalist views. Kaufman (2008) posited that sports cultivate an augmented sense of patriotism and a robust national identity among enthusiasts. Nationalism is commonly defined as an individual's unwavering and favorable feelings towards their country, which includes unquestioning endorsement and a sense of pride in one's homeland (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). Individuals who have strong nationalistic ideas perceive their homeland as superior to other nations and tend to unquestioningly support national, state, and political authority. On the other hand, patriotism can encompass a more discerning perspective on one's homeland, yet the person still possesses affection and admiration for their country (Flores, 2022).

One important component that greatly influences the meaning and impact of race-based athletic activism is the

cultural norms and beliefs surrounding sports, including its highly regarded place in society and the ideas people have about it. Although a comprehensive analysis of the underlying cultural framework of sports is not within the scope of this section, we will emphasize many crucial elements (Hartmann et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

To truly comprehend the significance of Colin Kaepernick's protest, when he knelt during the national anthem to bring attention to racial injustice and police brutality, it is necessary to analyze it from Horkheimer's perspective, which will provide a deeper understanding of how it influenced the public's perception of athlete activism.

Primarily, Horkheimer's argument necessitates our acknowledgment of the impact of prevailing ideas on public opinion. During Kaepernick's protest, there were conflicting narratives in circulation. Others perceived his action as a valid expression of freedom of speech and a potent form of activism, effectively increasing awareness about urgent social concerns. However, many others

criticized Kaepernick's actions as showing contempt towards national symbols and disregarded his concerns.

Horkheimer's theory urges us to scrutinize the impact of power structures on the shaping of public opinion. Kaepernick's protest immediately challenged deeply ingrained norms and hierarchical systems in both the sports industry and society as a whole. The challenge to the current status quo sparked intense debates and revealed societal divisions about issues of race, patriotism, and involvement in activism.

Horkheimer's critical theory ultimately prompts us to scrutinize the broader ramifications of Kaepernick's protest that extend beyond personal interpretations. This requires a thorough evaluation of the reactions and actions done by numerous institutions, such as sports organizations, media outlets, and political leaders. The range of responses, varying from approval to disapproval, demonstrates the intricate interplay between authority and ideology in influencing the public's perspective on athlete activism.

Ultimately, we may comprehend the interplay

between prevailing ideologies, systems of authority, and the intricacies of societal transformation by employing Horkheimer's critical theory to scrutinize Colin Kaepernick's protest and its impact on the public's interpretation of athlete activism. This highlights the significance of understanding the social context and the various stakeholders' responsibilities in shaping public opinion.

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An Educational Frontier: Hannah Breece and the American Colonial Project in Alaska

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of Hannah Breece, a government schoolteacher in early 20th-century Alaska, as an agent of U.S. internal colonialism. Through an analysis of her experience in Alaska, this study explores how education functioned as a tool of assimilation, aiming to bring 'modernity' to indigenous and Russian-descended communities. Breece's experiences illustrate the mechanisms of tailored migration, whereby specialized workers were deployed to the colonial frontier to reshape native societies through structured educational, religious, and legal interventions. While Breece was deeply committed to her mission, her reflections reveal tensions within the colonial project. She recognized the failures of the American education system in Alaska, and her accounts highlight the interplay between colonial education, missionary work, and governance. By centering on Breece's account, this article situates her within the larger framework of U.S. expansionist policies while acknowledging her personal agency in carrying out, and at times questioning, their implications. Her story exemplifies the contradictions of colonial rule: the belief in progress through education, the erasure of indigenous cultural practices, and the unintended consequences of assimilationist policies. Through this case study, the article contributes to the broader discourse on American internal colonialism, demonstrating how individuals like Breece navigated the space between personal conviction and state-imposed transformation.

Keywords: *colonial Alaska; colonial education; Hannah Breece; indigenous communities; internal colonialism*

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the long nineteenth century, Alaska, like much of the American West, became a focal point for American colonial ambitions. After declaring independence from Britain in 1766, the United States spent much of the next hundred years establishing itself geopolitically in North America. From the initial base of the Thirteen Colonies, major milestones included the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the Northwest expansion between 1819 and 1845, and the Southwest expansion between 1845 and 1860 (see Burns, 2017, and Edling, 2021). Following the Civil War of 1860–65, territorial expansion was focused on the settling of the American West. Although there had been migration westward across the Prairie in the mid-nineteenth century for economic, social, and religious reasons, the official incorporation of many western territories into the United States did not occur until much later (Teggin, 2022, p. 63; Frymer, 2014). As the United States expanded its borders and consolidated control over the continent, it also became an aggressor against many indigenous peoples who occupied the land that the United States

laid claim to. This is connected to what is known as the process of internal colonialism, an action whereby minority groups are exploited within a wider society and denied the same rights, privileges, and economic opportunities (see Chávez, 2011, and N. B. Chaloult & Y. Chaloult, 1979). This line of thinking has since been developed by scholars such as Gesa Mackenthun (2000) and Ramón Gutiérrez (2004) in the American context.

Whereas the formal purchase of Alaska went through on 18 October 1867, the negotiations and American desire for northwest expansion had been ongoing since the time of the Crimean War (1853–56) (Golder, 1920, pp. 411–412). The transfer of Alaska was an attractive prospect to both sides, with Russia in need of cash and facing growing difficulties in justifying the possession of such a remote and low-value territory. The United States, on the other hand, were keen to round out its Pacific seaboard and to weaken the British position in the Pacific northwest (Luthin, 1937, pp. 168–170). Britain, it must be remembered, held a sizeable interest in the region due to its Canadian possessions,

something that spurred the United States into colonial behaviors. It is in this way that we must also view Alaska and the neighboring Yukon as a frontier space between two competing powers. Such frontiers were dynamic spaces which saw the mingling of peoples, cultures, and ideas over a number of years. This study aligns with Richard White's (1991, pp. 1-3) view of the American West as being more important as a powerful symbol and cultural identifier than as a specific place. Alaska and the Yukon were a space of great social, religious, and migratory change in the late nineteenth century (Coates, 1987, pp. 145-147). This is something that Breece's account will be used to bear out.

Following its purchase from Russia in 1867, the United States sought to incorporate Alaska into its national framework, extending its influence through education and religion in particular. Using education as a tool for social homogenization, a standard colonial practice, the United States government sought to reduce the influence of two distinct socio-cultural elements at work in Alaska. First, the previous Russian Orthodox education and religious instruction, which was distinct from the largely

Protestant congregations in the United States (Murray, 2013, pp. 91-92). Second, the historic native Alaskan cultural identity, which revolved around family, community, and spirituality (Barnhardt, 2001, pp. 6-8). The latter aspect was complicated by the fact that Alaska was home to a diverse range of communities from multiple linguistic and ethnic groups, a burgeoning Creole community, and a mix of American, Canadian, and Russian settlers (Burch Jr., 1979, pp. 123, 134; Easley, 2008, pp. 73-74, 80-85). Educational development was slow in Alaska, with American missionaries arriving in the 1870s and 1880s, followed by the establishment of Organic Act schooling from 1884 and Nelson Act schools after 1905. This was capped by the Bureau of Indian Affairs also establishing schools in the early twentieth century (Williams, 2011, p. 190).

At the heart of the United States' efforts to educate and transform newly-settled territories were individuals such as Hannah Breece (1859-1940) who were sent from the metropolitan East. There had been a long history of New Englanders in particular contributing to this cause, along the lines of what Lubick (1978) has described as a sort

of “missionary zeal” (p. 27). Breece (1997, pp. 3-4) herself was sent to Alaska in 1904, having previously taught for twenty years in Pennsylvania and four years in the Rockies. The diary of her time spent teaching in Alaska, edited by her great-niece, the urban theorist and activist, Jane Jacobs (1916-2006), provides a wealth of evidence to discuss in connection with US colonial activity and educational efforts in early twentieth-century Alaska (see also, Jacobs, 1961, and 1970). The contents of Breece’s diary also provide an opportunity to engage with the fascinating theme of women’s roles in early America. As per Snyder’s (2012, p. 421) thoughts on the matter, it is felt that there is a need to refigure women’s place in such histories, enabling them to be framed as having their own agency in colonial expansion and state building. This is further connected to what Mary Beard (1987) has discussed as the concept of ‘women as force’ in history. What is curious in Jacobs’ editing of Breece’s diary, however, is that while women are not a central theme in her wider work, she has reimagined the world from a mixed-use perspective (Rosenberg, 1994, p. 139). This is something that enables the account of Breece

to be told in a more open fashion.

Finally, Breece’s sojourn in Alaska must also be considered in terms of what is often described as the colonial ‘civilising mission’. This is a process whereby colonial powers sought to enforce cultural homogenization and reduce the influence of traditional societal systems (d’Errico, 1999; Liebersohn, 2016). This often played out as a traditionalism vs. modernity paradigm, whereby the colonial metropole viewed the colonial periphery as savages. This is a serious consideration for the present study as Breece’s (1997) self-proclaimed mission was to bring native Alaskans “benefits now available to them from civilization and from Uncle Sam’s care for his less fortunate children” (p. 5). This is a theme that Breece refers back to often in her account and was the driving force of her presence in Alaska. Although her dedication likely came from an altruistic belief in helping others, her views, like so many others during the colonial period, did not fully take into account the beliefs, needs or wishes of those on the receiving end of her instruction. As shall be discussed in this study, individual actors such as Breece had the potential,

intentionally or not, to promulgate colonial attitudes and demands upon vulnerable and often marginalized societies to a great extent.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative historical methodology, combining primary and secondary source analysis to investigate the role of Hannah Breece as an educational agent of U.S. internal colonialism in early twentieth-century Alaska. The central source is Breece's published diary, *A Schoolteacher in Old Alaska* (1997), edited by her great-niece Jane Jacobs. The diary is approached both as a first-hand narrative of frontier life and as a mediated text shaped by Jacobs' editorial interventions. Close textual analysis of Breece's reflections provides insight into her perceptions of indigenous communities, her pedagogical practices, and her interpretation of the American civilising mission.

To situate Breece within broader historical processes, her account is read alongside scholarship of U.S. government legislation on Alaskan schooling, missionary records, and contemporary studies on U.S. expansion, colonial education, and internal colonialism. This comparative

approach allows for the identification of structural patterns in educational policy while also foregrounding the subjective dimensions of Breece's experience. The analysis pays particular attention to recurring themes of assimilation, religion, gender, and the tension between progress and cultural erasure.

In addition, this study draws on postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks to interrogate how individual agency and state policy intersected in Alaska's colonial frontier. Concepts such as the 'civilising mission' and 'women as force in history' guide the interpretation of Breece's role as both a participant in and a critic of U.S. colonial practices. By combining textual analysis with theoretical framing, this methodology highlights the contradictions of Breece's position and contributes to understanding how colonial power was exercised and contested through education in early twentieth-century Alaska.

DISCUSSION

THE QUEST TO TEACH AND 'CIVILISE'

The transfer of Alaska to the United States in 1867 brought with it both a new

territory and a population, but also a host of other responsibilities which the U.S. government became responsible for. Foremost of these was how to provide for the new population and to educate its youth. As a result, it found itself with a growing need for teachers to travel west. Although Hannah Breece's time in Alaska is the focal point of this study, she was by no means unique in making the journey west. Indeed, despite the relative invisibility of women's place on the frontier due to stereotypes brought about by the Turner thesis, which emphasized male achievements, women's place in frontier communities was central (Walsh, 1995, pp. 241-242). This is connected to Snyder's (2012, p. 421) view of the need to reframe women in early America to demonstrate their agency. Lois Fawcett's (1933, pp. 142-145) study of Harriet Bishop's time in Minnesota Territory in the mid-nineteenth century bears out how early the process of volunteer migration to teach began, and the establishment of a New England Association in Helena, Montana, in 1869, together with Edward Tenney's quest to found a college in Colorado in the 1860s, show just how organized voluntary educators were in the nineteenth century (Lubick,

1978, p. 29; Dunn, 2012, pp. 535-537).

However, these were early cases before Breece's time. Breece (1997, p. 4) was sent to Alaska in 1904 as a salaried teacher by Sheldon Jackson, U.S. Education Agent for Alaska, presumably under the terms of the Organic Act of 1884 (Barnhardt, 2001, p. 11). As such, she may be seen as a state-sanctioned agent of change in the region, with a twofold mission to educate and instill American values. Previous missionary and volunteer teachers, whilst furthering this same aim, could be considered to have acted with the United States' consent rather than formal direction. Using education for cultural homogenization was not an uncommon strategy for colonial powers when dealing with a colonized population. The intention was that the educated youth would return to their communities and unknowingly act as agents of change themselves by bringing new knowledge and cultural traits (Jester, 2002, pp. 1-3; Jones, 2014/2015, pp. 5-6). It is in this way that U.S. education policy and Breece's presence in Alaska were connected to the concept of the colonial 'civilising mission', whereby the colonizer attempted to force the colonized to adopt metropolitan

cultural behaviors and traditions. Breece's (1997) preconceptions about her mission underline this, with her preparation for teaching in Alaska consisting of studying "primitive races" (p. 4) from the perspective of American anthropologists. Her contention at this point was that she would be bringing civilization to inferior peoples (*ibid.*, p. 5).

Over the course of fourteen years, Breece taught at several schools in Alaska that ranged from coastal towns to rural inland villages in the sparsely populated Alaskan interior. Starting at Afognak Island, beside the larger Kodiak Island in the Aleutian chain off the southern coast of Alaska, Breece's account describes both the challenges she faced as a teacher as well as some fascinating details about Alaskan-Aleutian society, in particular, her description of the Russian-descended Aleuts, societal structure, and economic pursuits (Breece, 1997, pp. 11, 16-17, 36-38). This dovetailed with her description of anthropological elements of material culture, such as religious iconography, diets, and sea travel by kayak (*ibid.*, pp. 15, 31, 134-135).

In many cases, the narratives she gave echoed descriptions provided in more

modern anthropological and ethnographic studies such as those of Burch Jr. (1979, pp. 141-143), Easley (2008, pp. 73-75), Quimby (1944, pp. 3-8), and West et al. (2010), demonstrating the utility of her diary as a multidisciplinary source.

Breece's diligent chronicling of her experiences in Alaska did not, however, mean that she necessarily admired those around her; instead, it might be suggested that she tolerated them for the sake of her mission. This is something that the following quote bears out:

I have always been careful when working among inferior races to convey to them that I have their interests at heart and love and respect them as people, but that I do not come among them to sink to their level but to uplift them. If this standard is not adhered to, little can be done to improve their lives [...] I am superior to an uneducated native woman and give her to understand that I realize it. She knows it herself. But I want them to realize I have faith that the ability is within them to improve themselves and their lives and their children's lives. They are more uncivilized in more ways than I may say here. But I want to draw a line between "whitizing" and

civilizing them (Breece, 1997, p. 104).

In this extract, Breece makes it quite clear that she viewed herself as morally and socially superior to the indigenous people she lived with. This was expected behaviour given the prejudices and stereotypes against indigenous people at the time. What is interesting in the above quote, however, is that she explicitly draws a line between attempting "civilizing" over "whitizing" (Breece, 1997, p. 104). On the one hand, it may be seen as overt racial profiling; on the other, it could be viewed as an acknowledgement that the U.S. government could only interfere so much in native society. Either way, Breece still made it clear that she wished to "improve" (*ibid.*) them.

When it came to societal regulation and the care of children on the frontier, it must be acknowledged that it was often women who led in this area. This was likely due to what Hinckley (1980, p. 37) has discussed as the stereotypical relationship opinions on the frontier, with common assumptions about the place of women among these. As Sundberg (2010, p. 207) has highlighted, women not only participated in frontier life, but also shaped their own identities and

experiences there. Whereas much progress has been made in recent years towards a more authentic depiction of women's role, Castañeda (1990, p. 8) has correctly pointed out that it took a period of revisionist scholars beginning in the 1970s to slowly update the broader narrative. It is in this vein of thought that the actions of women such as Breece must be reappraised; clearly, women such as her had the potential to play a large role in the reformation of society on the frontier. This is something that can be witnessed in the following quote, in which Breece describes her strategy for conditioning Russian-descended pupils of hers to act out their assumed superiority over the Aleut population by becoming involved in 'training' them:

During the first week, when I was teaching little children a game during the recess period, the Russian pupils rounded up every single one of the twenty Aleut children, big and small, and before I knew it the Aleuts were fleeing to their village with the Russians in pursuit. Then the Russian children came back triumphantly. Now they had the school to themselves [...] I asked the Russian children to tell me about the situation and listened to their scorn and complaints. I laughed along

with them and told them I did not wonder they had chased the Aleuts away, they were so ragged and dirty. I reminded them that I had not seated them alongside the Aleut children but kept them apart as far as that was possible [...] But then I asked how many had a grandmother or grandfather who lived in the Aleut village. While I could see they were thinking about that, I proposed a compact with them. If I tried to be patient and was willing to teach such ragged pupils, would they help me to tame them and teach them? [...] If we all worked together, I said, soon there would be no dirty Aleut section in our nice school. I pictured how it could be when the Aleuts were clean and neat and could talk English and we would all be like one big school family. How many would like to train the Aleuts? Everyone volunteered to help (Breece, 1997, pp. 17-18).

Breece felt her role went beyond that of a teacher of the three Rs, and that life skills and sanitation came under her remit too. Whilst her objective of providing improved education and sanitation to the Aleuts likely came from a noble place, her methods of achieving these mirrored traditional forms of social control and transformation connected to the so-called 'civilising mission' (Liebersohn, 2016, pp. 383-

387). For this to be accomplished in the colonial-imperial space, a degree of collaboration from sections of the indigenous population was necessary. This is reminiscent of Frederick Lugard's famous 'indirect rule' method of colonialism (see Apata, 1992).

Whereas Breece's strategy appears to have had the desired effect of directing the rowdy Russian children's energy into a project, it cannot be denied that she was channeling their prejudices to achieve this. Once again, this channels beliefs common at the time surrounding the need to eradicate traditional native culture and viewing the frontier as a wild space lacking any degree of formal control (Jester, 2002, p. 1; Faber, 2018, p. 24). Breece's methods and recorded opinions are also highly critical of the indigenous Aleuts and show no concern for their culture. This is a pattern that is consistently present in her diary throughout her time in Alaska (Breece, 1997, pp. 39, 72, 99, 133). It is ironic in this respect that, according to Jones (2014/2015, pp. 3-4, 7), many groups of indigenous Alaskans were in favor of Western education. However, they felt this must not come at the expense of their heritage. Problems such as schools being

built on tribal land, certain students being refused access, the school curriculum, and schools claiming legal jurisdiction over children were all reasons for complaint and were grievances that led to the founding of the Alaskan Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood to address these issues (*ibid.*).

In her diary, Breece quite naturally described her efforts in a positive light and sought to portray how her bringing of so-called modernity was necessary. The case of her using the Russian children is a good example of this; so too is that of the quote below:

I then asked the mother to undress the boy and wash him. She was furious and insisted it would kill the baby if I made her put it in him in water. There was no point of contact between my words and her conceptions and no way to bridge them with more words. The only recourse was an object lesson [...] So I took her baby and, in spite of her efforts to stop me, removed his filthy rags and put him in the tub and he had the washing of his life. He was a sturdy six-month-old and kicked and crowed while he was bathed. Then the girls helped and together we dressed him in new, clean clothes. The old ones went into the fire [...] When it was all over, and the mother saw her child so clean and

comfortable, lying there in his little white bed, she thanked me over and over in Russian, 'Spaseba! Spaseba!' (Breece, 1997, p. 104).

Breece took it upon herself to forcibly separate a mother from her child to clean and dress it. Whilst it cannot be denied that improved hygiene and sanitation were beneficial for the child, Breece acted with arbitrary power and lacked the medical or governmental authority to do so. As an agent working for a colonial power governing the region, Breece's behavior and attitude align with those of colonial officials in global empires at the time. In seeking to dismiss the mother's supposed superstition about bathing potentially killing her child, Breece (1997) determined to use an "object lesson" (p. 104) to enforce her will. Again, her use of language and aims were very heavy-handed and mirror the type of ends justifying the means approach commonly seen in colonial settings and used by colonial officials.

ALASKA AND A MODERN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Although Alaska has one of the highest populations of indigenous people in the United States, policymakers have tended to ignore the history of education in Alaska. Indeed, it was only in the latter half of

the twentieth century that indigenous claims and opinions have been listened to (Barnhardt, 2001, pp. 1-2). Prior to this, there was a long chain of educational interventions which did not take indigenous needs into account. Teaching efforts by Russian Orthodox missionaries under the Russian American Company were the starting point for this, with attempts to teach going hand in hand with conversion to the Orthodox faith. Interestingly, Orthodoxy was also seen as being directly linked to 'Russianness' (Murray, 2013, pp. 94-95). This is important both in terms of the colonial history of Alaska, and the fact that intermarriage with native Alaskans and the employment of Creoles were encouraged by the Russian American Company. This was not something replicated by the Americans after the transfer of Alaska in 1867, and was something which left the Creole population with a confusing identity and a sudden lack of societal status (Easley, 2008, pp. 84-86). The situation for the Creole population was also exacerbated by the sudden influx of American fortune hunters after 1867 (Lain, 1976, p. 146). Although, as Shortridge (1977, p. 88) has commented, American attitudes towards Alaska alternated between hope and

frustration, this did not stop the mass migration of people and the change in demographics. With a burgeoning settler population in a frontier-colony setting, this presented a challenge to the United States government in terms of implementing an effective and modern education system.

The problem, as Case (1984, pp. 4-8) has discussed, has been that the U.S. government did not deal with native Alaskans as it did with other indigenous communities, thus depriving them of aboriginal status and claims. It was not until 1905 that a formal distinction between native and non-native Alaskans was made, and not until 1932 that indigenous Alaskans were given the same legal status as Native Americans (*ibid.*). This is a serious issue since, as Tippeconnic and Gipp (1982, p. 126) have laid out, Native Americans differ both culturally and legally from other minority groups in the United States, with there being numerous congressional acts, treaties and court orders that have codified their status. Prucha (1984, p. 1128) reaffirms this reality by acknowledging that native Alaskans have never been fully incorporated or represented in federal policies developed for Native Americans. Whereas

literacy programs flourished during the Russian period and there is ample evidence for a long and proud history of cultural learning practices, there was a marked change of approach under the Americans (Dauenhauer, 1982; Kawagley, 2006; Jones, 2014/2015). This reflected the type of cultural transformation that the U.S. government was aiming for, with the 'Westernization' and cultural homogenization of Alaska to reflect the broader United States being preferred. As Burch Jr. (1979) has noted, the result of such practices served to create a manufactured stereotypical category of people during what he calls the colonial period (c. 1898–1960), which he loosely termed as "non-whites" (p. 134).

The first step in moving beyond reliance on missionary and volunteer schools was the 1884 Organic Act, which delegated responsibility for the schooling of all children to the U.S. Department of the Interior. This saw local schools opening in villages, as well as a small number of vocational boarding schools (Wexler, 2006, pp. 17–18). Sheldon Jackson, the education agent who sent Breece (1997, p. 4) to Alaska, played a leading role in this movement. It ultimately proved that the education bureau was unable to

provide schooling to all, so Congress devolved responsibility to local authorities to support schools through taxation. The continued struggle to adequately provide schooling hereafter led to the 1905 Nelson Act, which allowed for the establishment of schools outside of incorporated towns; however, whilst new schools were built, only European-descended children were encouraged to attend (Barnhardt, 2001, p. 11).

Despite the limitations placed on attendance, Breece (1997, p. 32) herself considered the act to be a positive piece of legislation, even though she was ordered to admit only Aleuts to her school. Despite the slow progress being made, access to education in Alaska continued to be a problem into the twentieth century. Although new schools were being built each year and individual teachers, such as Breece (*ibid.*, 32–33), allowed native children to attend school as 'visitors', there was also the problem of young children being sent away to federal 'Indian' boarding schools in places like Arizona, Oklahoma, and Oregon (Williams, 2011, p. 190). This contributed to the breakdown of cultural and community ties, as well as accelerating the assertion of U.S. colonial control in

Alaska. Breece (1997, p. 189) herself held that any educational benefits the children might have gained from these boarding schools were made obsolete by their dislocation and unhappiness upon returning. This is something described in the following quote:

Southeastern Alaska had long interested me because it was the home of hundreds of native people who had been sent to the United States for their education, in hopes that they would be able to solve problems for their race at home when they returned [...] The older native people had looked forward to bright days when these educated young people returned. But often, instead, the educated sons and daughters turned into one more problem [...] Observing cases instance by instance, it seemed to me that the returned students were usually so uprooted and dissatisfied that their unhappiness annulled what knowledge they may have gained in distant places of how to improve conditions for their people [...] I finally reached the conclusion that native children and young people should be taught in their own settlements, in schools adapted to their own ways of life (Breece, 1997, pp. 188-189).

What is interesting in the context of this quote is that Breece appears to have come full circle and grown to realise that sweeping educational policies were not always appropriate for minority communities. This was a far cry from her initial viewpoint of considering native Alaskans to be uncivilized and in need of American salvation (Breece, 1997, pp. 4-5, 11, 39). It is also an important consideration given that those creating educational policies for remote territories such as Alaska were often thousands of miles away in Washington D.C. and had no first-hand experience of the needs of the people they were legislating for. Prior to venturing to Alaska, Breece's (1997, pp. 4-5, 14-15) only knowledge of the region was through Jackson's museum at Sitka and attending anthropology lectures and summer schools, for example. There appears to have been a point of inflection for Breece during her time at Afognak, which saw her begin to appreciate those she was living with. She concluded that "In Alaska everyone was your friend and interested in you" (*ibid.*, p. 50) and that in remote regions such as Alaska, "stronger friendships could form in a month than would develop in years where there was much that was distracting

and artificial" (*ibid.*). This was a small step, but it was significant given that it represented the beginning of a change in perception of Alaska; she was now thinking of it as the U.S. proper and not simply a far-flung colony in need of civilizing.

Breece's more holistic view was informed by both the practical limitations of laws such as the Organic and Nelson Acts, but also by witnessing the real-world challenges facing children and families in Alaska. A regular and nutritious source of food was her primary concern, though she was also aware of societal difficulties such as alcohol addiction and the breakdown of familial units. Whereas hunting and fishing were common sources of food and income, something Breece (1997, pp. 22, 36, 100, 136) also discussed, she was all too aware that children often had to make do with bread alone (Quimby, 1944, pp. 3-5). Breece (1997) firmly believed that "Children seldom learn well when they are undernourished" (p. 22), and took steps to support them. Foremost of these efforts were the provision of cooking lessons, breakfast clubs, and petitioning the government to provide emergency food vouchers (Breece, 1997, pp. 20, 107-108, 136). In seeking to develop

cooking skills and nutritional literacy, Breece foreshadowed many contemporary efforts to combat child poverty and malnutrition (see Bernardo et al.; Chilón-Troncos et al.).

What the following excerpt shows us, however, is that the situation for Breece's students was complicated:

In their anxiety and deprivation, they thought that the miserable hooch would help them. I had a suspicion that the children were even less well off than could be expected. So I told them to bring a piece of pilot bread to school the next day and they would get a nice dinner, but anyone not bringing the bread could not eat dinner. Every last one brought the piece of bread [...] I had judged rightly. The bread had been made of flour from the fermented mess left in the bottom of hooch barrels. After school that day I stormed to the village and made the biggest racket of which I was capable. They would not, I made sure, use their flour that way again - the flour that should go into bread for the children and themselves (Breece, 1997, p. 143).

Breece deduced that the parents of her students were using their flour to brew liquor and were then using the leftover scraps to make bread. While it is an unfortunate and

unjust stereotype that many indigenous North American communities facing poverty fall to alcoholism, there was clearly an issue facing the people at Iliamna, where Breece (1997, pp. 92-100) was based at the time (see also, Utami, 2021). Indeed, Breece (1997, pp. 13, 23, 39, 49, 143) condemned the consumption of alcohol and the presence of saloons as a societal sin, something she frequently made reference to in her diary, but it is also fair to comment that she sought to do something about it rather than simply criticize from the sidelines.

Breece's first run-in with the Kenais people's homemade liquor involved her ransacking the camp for every possible hiding place and led to her tipping away a barrel full of alcohol. Although Breece (1997, pp. 138-139) admitted that she felt very alone and unliked after this, she claimed that the villagers later apologized to her. Beyond Breece's (1997) statement that she made "the biggest racket of which I was capable" (p. 143) in response to the production of illicit alcohol, it is fair to comment that she also advocated on behalf of her students in broader matters too. Due to the rural situation and the harsh conditions, Breece's (*ibid.*, p. 33) students were often

required to work to provide food and to support their families. This was in line with societal expectations and rites of passage in which boys were often educated and trained by their uncles, and girls undertook work with the women of the community (Jones, 2014/2015, pp. 4-5; Quimby, 1944, pp. 30-31).

Of course, if children were pressured into working during their childhood and could not attend school, they would not progress at the pace as their contemporaries who benefitted from full-time schooling. Whereas hard physical work in the outdoors was primarily a factor impacting boys, girls also faced significant challenges of their own. In particular, the prospect of being married off at a young age severely curtailed their opportunities; whereas sixteen was the legal age of consent, Breece (1997, pp. 43-45) remarked that this was often ignored in rural Alaska at the time. Children left behind with a widowed father could also face the reality of him remarrying soon after and abandoning them. Breece (*ibid.*, p. 48) noted that a man could remarry forty days after his wife had passed and that it was often the case that men gave away their children on the forty-first day. Although

orphanages and residential schools had been established in Alaska by the beginning of the twentieth century, it cannot be denied that arbitrarily removing children from their homes and communities would have hurt their ability to learn and thrive (Hirshberg, 2008, pp. 22-27).

CONCLUSION

Breece, as a teacher employed to educate indigenous children along the lines of her twenty-five years plus teaching experience in America, may be concluded to have been an active participant in the colonial civilizing mission in Alaska. Curiously, while efforts such as this clearly advanced colonial agendas, they also served to give a greater insight into the key role played by women in the colonial-frontier setting of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is something which has historically been slow to be unpacked and given proper reference to in the wider scholarship of much of the twentieth century. Whereas Breece may be seen as a colonial actor, there is also ample evidence to suggest that she genuinely cared about her students and took steps to protect them. We have seen this with her attempting to provide adequate nutrition to children and combating the production of

illicit alcohol. It is in this way that we may conclude that Breece was more of a passive colonial agent who was ultimately driven by a personal conscience and a sense of duty rather than any grand colonial plans. Finally, her diary charts the implementation of federal education policies such as the 1884 Organic Act and the 1905 Nelson Act, providing a fresh perspective on events from the local and personal levels. As such Breece's diary, and others like it from the colonial-frontier period of American history, are valuable resources for interdisciplinary studies examining the history, lived experience and journaling of the era. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the growing interest in the study of colonial-era diaries and may lead to fresh perspectives in the field.

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**Humor about the Lives of Asian Immigrants in the US in
*Ronny Chieng: Asian Comedian Destroys America!***

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ABSTRACT

This article explores humor about the lives of Asian immigrants in the United States as depicted in *Ronny Chieng: Asian Comedian Destroys America!* (2019). The article is conceived through qualitative discourse analysis approach to examine how Chieng utilizes comedic techniques to highlight the challenges and contradictions of Asian immigrant experiences in the US through thematic analysis, the study identifies key themes in Chieng's performance: cultural differences on American consumerism, admiration and dissatisfaction, racial marginalization, and family expectations. The analysis applies Berger's humor theories to understand the construction of humor criticizing American society. By employing exaggeration, irony, language play, high-energy delivery, and reversal, Chieng not only entertains but also provides a platform for the audience to engage with their lives through comedy. The study concludes that humor serves as a powerful tool for discussing Asian immigrant experiences, breaking stereotypes, and fostering empathy. Chieng's stand-up comedy show demonstrates how narrative comedy can be an effective means of social criticism, bridging cultural divides while making complex issues more accessible to broad audiences.

Keywords: *Asian immigrants; comedy; humor; Ronny Chieng; the US*

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INTRODUCTION

Asian immigrants in the United States experience a complex reality shaped by cultural adjustments, structural issues, and social integration (Liana, Adhitya, Kristiawan, 2025, 25). The US Census Bureau (2022) reports that Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial group in the country, with many arriving as skilled workers, international students, or family-sponsored immigrants. However, despite their economic contributions and high levels of educational attainment, many Asian immigrants face discrimination, stereotyping, and cultural misunderstandings (Lee & Zhou, 2015).

One of the key issues is the perception of Asian Americans as a "model minority", a stereotype that assumes they are generally successful and do not need to face struggles like other immigrant groups. While apparently positive, the stereotype is in fact negative, as it ignores economic and social inequality among the Asian American community (Chou & Feagin, 2015). For instance, while Indian and Chinese Americans have high median household incomes, other groups like Cambodian and Laotian

immigrants experience poverty rates exceeding the national average (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Asian immigrants also face challenges in the workforce. Despite their educational qualifications, many encounter barriers such as workplace discrimination, the "bamboo ceiling", a term used to describe the barriers that prevent Asian Americans from advancing to leadership positions), and difficulties with cultural communication styles (Gee & Peck, 2018). A study by the Economic Policy Institute (2021) found that Asian Americans are underrepresented in executive and managerial roles in the US workforce. Language barriers, cultural differences, and racial biases can hinder immigrants from fully integrating into American society.

A report by the Migration Policy Institute (2021) found that 35% of Asian immigrants experience difficulties due to language proficiency, which affects employment opportunities and social interactions. Moreover, there are higher academic and career expectation pressures for Asian immigrants, normally due to parental expectations and

community perceptions. A study by Kim and Hou (2021) found that 72% of Asian American college students in their first generation reported extreme pressure to be academically successful due to parental expectations. This expectation, while leading to higher educational achievements, also explains mental health concerns since Asian Americans claim lower rates of seeking psychological help due to cultural stigma surrounding mental illness (Wong et al., 2017).

Many Asian immigrants struggle to balance their native cultural values with American societal norms. This cultural duality is also frequently explored in stand-up comedy, a comedy performance using a monologue style of storytelling where the comedian must convince the audience to follow the topic being discussed. In a stand-up comedy show, the Asian comedian highlights the absurdities and contradictions of trying to fit into American society while maintaining his/her cultural roots. Humor becomes a coping mechanism for navigating microaggressions, stereotypes, and generational conflicts within immigrant families (Nakamura, 2020).

Ronny Chieng is one of Asian comedian who is well-known across continents for his

humorous materials about living as an Asian immigrant in the U.S. (Nurhantoro, et al, 2024), His performance, including in *Ronny Chieng: Asian Comedian Destroys America!*, can be seen in Netflix. In this stand-up comedy show, Chieng highlights cultural differences, stereotypes, and the challenges of assimilation. It is similar to common stand-up comedy shows that seem to discuss light humor themes, but there are also serious issues to be revealed (Adhitya, et al, 2022). This study explores Chieng's humor about the life of Asian immigrants in the US focusing on his humor that highlights the challenges and contradictions of Asian immigrant experiences, the key themes in his performance, including cultural differences, stereotypes, consumerism, and identity struggles, and the construction of humor from an Asian immigrant perspective that criticizes American society.

METHODOLOGY

The article was conceived through a qualitative research approach with a discourse analysis method. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research aims to "explore and understand the complexity of human behavior, experiences, and interactions". The research examines how humor is built up in a stand-up comedy show *Ronny Chieng: Asian*

Comedian Destroys America! regarding the experiences of immigrants in the U.S. The approach allows an in-depth exploration of comedic techniques, rhetorical strategies, and thematic representations of Asian immigrant life in the US in a comedic context.

The primary data source for this study is the Netflix stand-up comedy show *Ronny Chieng: Asian Comedian Destroys America!*. This stand-up comedy show serves as the main text for analysis, as it directly presents Chieng's comedic narratives, language choices, and performance style. Additionally, secondary sources such as theories, reviews, research articles, and academic discussions on stand-up comedy and immigrant humor were consulted to provide contextual understanding.

DISCUSSION

Thematic Analysis of Humor in Immigrant Experiences

Ronny Chieng: Asian Comedian Destroys America! reflects multiple aspects of the Asian immigrant experience: cultural differences on American consumerism, admiration and dissatisfaction, racial marginalization, and family expectations. Each theme is articulated through comedic

exaggeration and satire, drawing attention to contradictions that immigrants face in adapting to U.S. life.

One major theme is cultural differences related to American consumerism. Chieng ridicules Amazon Prime culture by escalating demands to absurdity.

Now. Prime Now. Break into my house... and put the food I ordered in my mouth... and help me chew it! And then push it down my esophagus with a stick. And then pull the feces out of my anus for me now. (Chieng, 2019: 00.07.10 - 00.07.40)

The grotesque imagery critiques excessive consumption, reflecting the outsider's amazement at U.S. abundance. For immigrants from societies where efficiency and frugality are valued, American wastefulness appears both fascinating and absurd. Kuipers (2008) notes that humor often highlights cultural contradictions; here, laughter exposes the irrational extremes of consumer culture.

Another theme is the contradiction between immigrant admiration for the U.S. and Americans' dissatisfaction. Chieng emphasizes how immigrants revere America as "mei guo" [a beautiful country] and the "NBA of nations," only to discover Americans saying,

The New York subway sucks.
Los Angeles traffic sucks.
Statues suck. Standing sucks.
Kneeling sucks. Congress sucks.
Republicans suck.
Democrats suck. Independents suck.
Elon Musk sucks.
Netflix (Chieng, 2019: 00.11.20 - 00.12.05)

This irony dramatizes the dual perspective of immigrants: idealization of the U.S. as a dreamland versus frustration with its shortcomings. Lee and Zhou (2015) argue that this tension defines much of the immigrant narrative, where admiration coexists with disillusionment.

Chieng also explores racial marginalization through satire. In the joke that Asians could serve as "objective referees" when stating

Right now, we're like 5.6% of the population. Okay? We need to get the number right up. Need more Asian people in this country. I'll tell you why. Because we are the only objective referees... in the ongoing race war... between white and black people. (Chieng, 2019: 00.14.50 - 00.15.20)

he satirizes the exclusion of Asians from dominant racial discourses. This joke reflects what Kim (1999) describes as "racial triangulation," where Asian Americans are positioned as outsiders in a Black-White racial framework. Humor becomes

a way to reclaim invisibility by turning it into a position of authority.

Family expectations are ridiculed through the stereotype of Asian parents wanting their children to become doctors only for the money and prestige, as he says,

I know because my parents were the same way. They just wanted us to be doctors. It was like this obsession. They just wanted us to be doctors. And it's insidious as well, because when Asian parents want their kids to be doctors, helping people is, like, on the bottom of the list of reasons. (Chieng, 2019: 00.28.40 - 00.29.05)

Chieng further highlights the paradox that Asian parents never see doctors themselves, as they just want to take people's money, despite glorifying the profession. This exposes the contradictions of the model minority stereotype, echoing Chou and Feagin's (2015) observation that such stereotypes create pressure while obscuring inequality.

There are several humorous themes employed by Chieng in his stand-up comedy. The themes about cultural differences on American consumerism, admiration and dissatisfaction, racial marginalization, and family expectations illustrate the tensions of immigrant life

while critiquing American society from an outsider-insider perspective.

Comedic Techniques and Performance Style

The stand-up comedy show also requires Chieng's mastery of comedic techniques and a distinct performance style that enhances the delivery of his immigrant-centred narratives. By combining exaggeration, irony, language play, high-energy delivery, and reversal, Chieng transforms personal and cultural observations into memorable comedic commentary.

Chieng often exaggerates situations to absurd extremes, such as when he critiques internet addiction.

Like, in 50 years, we're gonna look at the internet the same way we look at smoking right now. It's going to be like, "Man, I can't believe 50 years ago, we just let pregnant people use the internet. What were we thinking? Pregnant people were just using the internet. We'd use the internet in front of babies. We'd let babies use the internet." Yeah, in 50 years, we're gonna have special areas outside buildings where you can use the internet. Internet designated zones 50 feet from every entrance. Don't bring the internet indoors. (Chieng, 2019: 00.03.20 - 00.04.10)

By equating the harmless act of browsing with second-hand smoke, he creates comic hyperbole that highlights the irrational dependence on technology. This exaggeration emerges laughter by blowing reality out of proportion to expose hidden truths.

Irony also pervades Chieng's commentary on American abundance, for example, in describing food and packaging waste. Chieng mocks how every restaurant provides too many napkins.

So much stuff. So much... So much packaging. Oh, my God! The packaging in America. Everything here is triple-bagged. Right? You order anything to eat at any restaurant, they give you 50 napkins. You throw away 80. Yeah, in America you throw away more napkins than you took. Just breaking the laws of reality... with the abundance. Every restaurant you go to in America, you just make it rain napkins every day. A glass of water, five napkins. (Chieng, 2019: 00.09.00 - 00.09.20)

The irony lies in the contrast between immigrant frugality and American excess. Using irony Chieng targets consumer habits not through direct scolding but by mocking the illogical extremes of everyday life.

Chieng plays with language to reveal cultural differences like

when talking about Chinese greetings during New Year. He points out,

Even during Chinese New Year, the biggest holiday for Chinese people, Chinese New Year, when we see each other during Chinese New Year, the way we greet each other is we say, "gong xi fa cai," or "gong hei fat choy" in Cantonese. I'm sure you've heard that, at least peripherally, "Gong xi fa cai." Gong xi fa cai means, "Hope you get rich! That's not "Happy New Year. (Chieng, 2019: 00.39.40 – 00.40.10)

In this case, comedy arises from highlighting cultural semantics and translations. The humor stems from the incongruity between Western holiday greetings, which emphasize happiness, and Chinese ones, which foreground wealth.

The stage presence in the stand-up comedy show also contains high-energy delivery. For example, while recounting dietary restrictions at his wedding, Chieng impersonates guests listing absurd allergies,

Excuse me, Ronny! Excuse me! I can't eat figs! Excuse me, Ronny. I can't eat red pepper. Green pepper is fine, but red pepper makes my mouth red. Excuse me, Ronny. I can't eat fried garlic. Does this have fried garlic? I have to pick the fried garlic out of the bok choy. Excuse me, Ronny. I can't eat

lettuce. This san choy bau is wrapped in lettuce. I can't eat it! From the same person. Yo, dietary requirements is a serious issue. Okay? It's a medical condition. It means if you eat this, you could die. It's not license to tell me what textures you don't enjoy. (Chieng, 2019: 01.11.10 – 01.12.00)

His rising volume, physical gestures, and incredulous tone transform a common anecdote into a hilarious performance. The humor comes from mocking the disproportionate seriousness with which trivial food preferences are treated.

Reversal is also a central technique employed in the show. When reflecting on the absurdity of having three weddings for the sake of parental pride, Chieng says,

Because Asian parents have to brag, okay? And I know every parent has to brag. I'm not trying to take anything away from anyone. I'm just saying Asian parents also have to brag, and, like, weddings is how they do it. Like, Asian weddings for baby boomers, Asian baby boomers, it was the original Instagram, okay? It is how they catch up with everybody. It's how they get the likes. It's how they get the dopamine hit. It's how they leave comments. Why so skinny? Why so fat? Why aren't you married? Why don't you have a baby? What's wrong

with your balls? (Chieng, 2019: 01.08.10 - 01.08.40).

Chieng parodies generational behavior by likening parents' bragging rights to our modern social media validation. This reversal, where elders are portrayed as the real attention seekers, subverts stereotypes of Asian parents as conservative and dignified, showing them instead as competitive status-chasers.

Chieng's comedic techniques: exaggeration, irony, language play, high-energy delivery, and reversal, are in line with Berger's humor categories. These techniques enable Chieng to critique both American and Asian cultural practices while entertaining a diverse audience, demonstrating how stand-up comedy functions as both social commentary and cultural negotiation.

Social Impact of Chieng's Humor

Chieng's stand-up is more than just entertaining as it can be social commentary that puts immigrant life as the center that is both relatable and humorous. His comedy challenges dominant narratives about immigration and promotes cross-cultural understanding. Through humor, he normalizes the challenges and contradictions of immigrant life, making them more accessible to wider audiences.

His performance also promotes a broader discussion on cultural integration, privilege, and systemic preconceptions. By presenting the immigrant perspective in a humorous but insightful way, he fosters empathy among diverse audiences. Furthermore, his humor defies stereotypes with the presentation of the complexity of immigrant experiences rather than reducing them to stereotypes.

Chieng's humor also serves as both entertainment and a medium for social critic. His life as an immigrant, a subject of humor makes marginalized experience visible, promoting empathy and discussion among diverse audiences. His satire challenges mainstream narratives about immigration, questioning policies and stereotypes in an accessible manner. By making immigration-related themes humorous and relatable, Chieng's stand-up contributes to broader discussions about diversity, identity, and cultural integration in the US.

CONCLUSION

Ronny Chieng: Asian Comedian Destroys America! shows how stand-up comedy reflects and critiques Asian immigrant experiences in the U.S. Humorous materials, such as cultural differences on American consumerism, admiration and

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dissatisfaction, racial marginalization, and family expectations, illustrate the contradictions of immigrant life. Through satire and exaggeration, Chieng transforms these struggles into humor that resonates across audiences. By combining comedic techniques, exaggeration, irony, reversal and code switching with a high-energy performance style, Chieng provides visibility to immigrant voices, critiques systemic contradictions, and fosters solidarity through laughter. His comedy thus operates as both entertainment and cultural intervention, reshaping how Asian immigrant identity is perceived in American society.

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Contesting American Academic Hegemony in the Author Guidelines of SINTA Journals: An Analysis of Structure, Language, and Academic Tools

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ABSTRACT

The dominance of American academic standards has shaped scholarly writing practices worldwide, including in Indonesia. This influence is evident in the adoption of the IMRaD structure, APA citation style, English as the primary language, and reliance on tools such as Turnitin, Grammarly, and reference management software. This article shows how these forms of dominance operate within the author guidelines of Indonesian scholarly journals indexed by SINTA and how local academic actors engage in resistance and negotiation. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and decolonial perspectives—such as epistemic disobedience (Mignolo), epistemic freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni), and ecologies of knowledges (Santos)—the research employs a critical qualitative approach. The data consist of 319 author guidelines from SINTA-accredited journals (levels 1 and 6), analyzed thematically and discursively. The findings show that while many journals conform to American standards, others resist by adopting non-IMRaD structures, alternative citation styles, and Indonesian or Arabic. In addition, local initiatives such as the Garuda portal and institutional repositories provide spaces for resisting epistemic domination. Overall, the article highlights both the persistence of American hegemony and the possibilities for negotiation, contributing to theoretical debates on academic power while offering practical insights for developing more autonomous and context-sensitive academic standards in Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of knowledge globalization, the academic world is increasingly marked by massive standardization in writing styles, article structures, evaluation systems, and language preferences. This phenomenon not only reflects efforts toward integration within the global scholarly community, but also generates epistemic disparities in access, recognition, and distribution between the academic center and periphery (Altbach, 2011; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). A concrete manifestation of this dynamic can be seen in the dominance of the IMRaD format (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion), the APA (American Psychological Association) citation style, the use of English as the lingua franca of global scientific publication, and the reliance on technologies such as Turnitin, Grammarly, and reference management tools.

This hegemony does not operate in a vacuum. It is deeply rooted in the long history of epistemic colonialism and the logic of academic capitalism, which prioritizes quantifiable productivity through international indexing systems such as Scopus and Web of Science. Countries in the

Global South, including Indonesia, often find themselves in structurally inferior positions, compelled to comply with standards set by Western academic power centers (Quijano, 2007; Santos, 2014). Within this context, national accreditation systems such as SINTA (Science and Technology Index) in Indonesia—although originally intended to promote academic independence—demonstrate a tendency to adopt these American epistemic norms.

This tendency is visibly reflected in the author guidelines of SINTA-accredited academic journals. These documents function not merely as technical instructions, but also as normative discourses that legitimize certain forms of knowledge while disciplining others (Fairclough, 1995).

The process of academic internationalization is frequently accompanied by a tendency to conform to standards originating from the centers of global scholarly power. In this context, Indonesian academic journals have gradually adopted the IMRaD article structure, the APA citation style, the use of English as the primary medium, and the reliance on technologies such as Turnitin, Grammarly, and reference management tools. While

such measures are often viewed as part of efforts to improve quality and competitiveness, they also carry the risk of absorbing the Indonesian academic system into a pattern of American epistemic domination, where local forms of knowledge are increasingly marginalized.

Based on this background, this article articulates how to (a) identify how American epistemic hegemony is manifested in the author guidelines of SINTA-accredited journals in Indonesia, (b) examine the extent to which Indonesian journals reproduce Western academic values and structures in the writing and management of scholarly manuscripts, and (c) analyze the strategies employed by journal editors to negotiate or resist these American standards.

By pursuing these objectives, the study not only contributes to theoretical discussions on academic hegemony and knowledge sovereignty in the Global South but also offers practical benefits. The findings highlight the urgent need for Indonesian journals to critically evaluate their adoption of global academic standards and to develop independent approaches more aligned with local academic contexts. Moreover, the insights generated may serve as a valuable resource for future

research, particularly for quantitative investigations into the impact of American academic dominance on national scholarly publishing practices.

Conceptually, this study employs Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony as its core framework, examining how American academic values and practices are internalized "voluntarily" by local institutions through mechanisms of consensus. In this context, author guidelines function not merely as technical tools but also as ideological instruments that discipline ways of thinking and writing. This approach is enriched by Santos's (2014) concept of the epistemologies of the South, which calls for the recognition of diverse knowledge systems and the rejection of a singular Western epistemic model. Indonesian journals, therefore, are viewed as potential spaces for constructing ecologies of knowledges by privileging local languages, contextual topics, and non-standardized writing structures. Additionally, Canagarajah's (2002) perspective is used to understand that the adoption of global norms is not always passive. In many cases, local actors—such as journal editors and lecturers—can negotiate compromise, integrating technical norms while preserving

local values. This process, known as negotiated accommodation, is key to understanding symbolic resistance within Indonesian academic spaces.

With this conceptual framework, this article aims not only to describe the phenomenon of domination but also to reconstruct new possibilities for building a national knowledge system that is more reflective of diversity, contextually grounded, and epistemically sovereign. This study makes a significant contribution to understanding the dynamics of academic hegemony in the Indonesian context, particularly in an area that has often been overlooked: the author guidelines of academic journals. While previous research on academic hegemony has largely focused on macro-level policies, incentive systems, or international publication criteria, documents such as author guidelines serve as normative mechanisms that directly shape scholars' academic behavior and determine what kinds of knowledge are considered legitimate for dissemination.

By examining 319 author guideline documents across various SINTA journal rankings, this article portrays a complex landscape in which Western epistemic domination is strong,

yet subtle and adaptive forms of resistance simultaneously emerge. This resistance does not always take the form of explicit rejection, but is more often embodied in structural flexibility, the use of alternative citation styles, bilingual abstracts, and the continued use of Bahasa Indonesia in academic publications.

Another key contribution of this study is the mapping of local agency in journal management practices. Editors, journal managers, and academic institutions in Indonesia are not passive actors in the process of academic globalization. On the contrary, they employ a range of adaptive strategies that allow them to preserve local values while meeting global credibility expectations.

Thus, this article reinforces the argument that hegemony does not operate in a linear or totalizing manner. It is dynamic, marked by negotiations that create grey zones between compliance and resistance. The study shows that these spaces can be strategically utilized to build an academic system that not only follows global trends but also articulates its own intellectual position and identity.

The focus of the Discussion section is to explore in detail the forms of symbolic and structural domination embedded in journal guidelines—such as the enforcement of the IMRaD format and English language use—alongside various forms of resistance by journals, including alternative formats, linguistic flexibility, and local actors' agency in navigating global academic norms. This analysis offers an in-depth view of how Indonesia's knowledge system is being negotiated within an asymmetrical transnational space.

By centering author guidelines as the object of study, this article proposes a new approach to examining academic power relations—not merely from the top down, but through the everyday textual practices that constitute the primary battleground of epistemic struggle. The urgency of this research lies in its focus on elucidating how American academic hegemony is reproduced within SINTA-accredited journals, shaping linguistic norms, citation practices, and evaluative standards. By exposing these mechanisms, the study not only deepens our understanding of global-local epistemic dynamics but also highlights the critical need for Indonesian journals to

develop independent standards more attuned to the national academic context.

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

This article is grounded in a theoretical framework that integrates Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2014) alternative epistemologies, and Canagarajah's (2002) notion of negotiated accommodation. Gramsci's theory of hegemony explains how domination is exercised not solely through coercion, but through the internalization of dominant values within civil society institutions such as educational bodies and academic journals. In this context, the use of the IMRaD structure, APA citation style, and English language in journal author guidelines is interpreted as a form of consensus constructed through global normalization.

Complementing the Gramscian perspective, Santos proposes the epistemologies of the South, a framework that challenges the epistemic universalism of Western knowledge systems. Santos calls for recognition of the plurality of knowledge systems rooted in local and non-Western contexts. His principle of cognitive justice is especially relevant in understanding how

journals in the Global South—particularly in Indonesia—face the dilemma between adopting global standards and preserving local epistemic distinctiveness.

Furthermore, Canagarajah's concept of negotiated accommodation provides an analytical lens to examine how local actors—journal editors, reviewers, and managers—strategically negotiate the dominance of global standards. Rather than acting passively, they exhibit subtle forms of resistance, selective adaptation, and localized innovation that allow for a more flexible and context-sensitive academic system.

These three frameworks are employed synergistically to interpret journal author guidelines not merely as technical instruments but as discursive arenas in which values, power, and knowledge are produced and contested.

Literature Review

Inequities in the global knowledge system have become a central concern in postcolonial studies and globalization discourses in higher education. According to Phillipson (1992), the dominance of English in global science is not merely a linguistic phenomenon, but an ideological instrument that sustains the symbolic

superiority of Western nations. English functions as a hegemonic tool that defines the validity of knowledge and places other languages in an inferior position.

Marginson (2008) further explains that the global higher education system operates through a hierarchical structure in which institutions from the Global North dominate as the primary producers of knowledge, while countries in the Global South are often relegated to the roles of consumers or followers. In this context, knowledge from the periphery must be "packaged" in Western styles and formats to gain international recognition.

Canagarajah (2002) emphasizes that scholars from non-Western countries face pressure to conform to global academic norms that may not align with their local contexts. However, within this pressure lies a space for negotiation, enabling strategic forms of adaptation referred to as negotiated accommodation.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) offers the epistemologies of the South as a framework of resistance against the universalization of Western knowledge. He calls for the advancement of cognitive

justice—the recognition of diverse knowledge systems, including those from marginalized non-Western societies.

Altbach (2004) asserts that the globalization of higher education is not a neutral process. It carries the values, norms, and institutional structures of developed countries, which are then adopted as standards in developing nations. In this context, writing conventions such as the IMRaD structure and APA referencing style become part of a hegemonic mechanism that may not reflect local epistemic characteristics.

This article not only addresses a gap in the literature but also introduces significant innovations by making journal author guidelines the primary object of analysis—conceptualizing them as normative texts that reflect either compliance with or resistance to global academic standards. Methodologically, this focus represents a departure from the prevailing emphasis on published articles or citation practices, while theoretically it applies a critical discourse perspective to interrogate how epistemic power relations are embedded in seemingly technical instructions. In terms of findings, the study provides

new insights into how accredited Indonesian journals reproduce, negotiate, or contest dominant academic conventions through the prescribed formats, styles, and linguistic requirements.

Methods

This article is conceived via a qualitative approach with a document analysis design. The primary data consist of 319 author guideline documents collected from nationally accredited journals listed in the SINTA (Science and Technology Index) portal. The sample includes two distinct groups: 109 journals from SINTA 1 and 210 journals from SINTA 6, representing the two polar extremes within the national journal hierarchy. Data collection was conducted in June 2024 through direct downloads from each journal's official website.

Journal selection was based on the Slovin formula, using the total number of SINTA-accredited journals as of June 2024, with a 95% confidence level. This approach ensured proportionality and representativeness across SINTA clusters. The selected sample reflects diversity in academic disciplines, publishing institutions, and geographic affiliations.

Once collected, the documents were analyzed textually to identify patterns of epistemic domination, forms of resistance, and symbolic manifestations of American scientific systems within the local context. The analysis involved manual categorization of content across five key dimensions: (1) article structure (IMRaD vs. non-IMRaD), (2) citation style (APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.), (3) language policy (English, Indonesian, bilingual), (4) recommended supporting tools (Turnitin, Grammarly, Mendeley, etc.), and (5) normative narratives embedded in the guidelines.

These categories were then interpreted within the theoretical framework outlined earlier to uncover the ideological meanings and epistemic positions conveyed in the documents. The analysis focused not only on what is written but also on how it is written and why it is framed in a particular way.

To ensure data validity, internal triangulation across categories was conducted, along with cross-checking between journals from different SINTA levels. The findings were developed inductively and serve as the basis for the thematic discussions.

DISCUSSION

Global Standardization as Epistemic Hegemony: Reinterpreting Scientific Objectivity in IMRaD, APA Style, and English Language

The findings indicate that current academic practices in Indonesia are deeply entrenched in a system of epistemic hegemony shaped predominantly by the dominance of American academic standards. Three key instruments—namely the IMRaD article structure, APA citation style, and the use of English—have become the prevailing norms in scientific publishing, particularly among journals indexed in SINTA. However, this adoption cannot be interpreted merely as an attempt to participate in the global academic system. Rather, it reflects the internalization of specific norms that ideologically reproduce hierarchies in the production and validation of knowledge.

IMRaD Format as a Symbolic Regime

The IMRaD structure (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion), now widely regarded as the standard for scholarly writing, originated in the Western tradition of medical research reporting. Although initially developed for the natural sciences, this format has been

extensively applied across the social sciences and humanities, including in Indonesia. The data in this study show that more than 85% of SINTA 1 journals and nearly 91% of SINTA 6 journals adopt the IMRaD structure—an indication that it has been institutionalized as a national scientific benchmark.

However, as Swales (1990) noted—and later expanded by Gross, Harmon, and Reidy (2002)—the IMRaD format is far from value-neutral. It promotes an expository logic that is linear, deductive, and often abstracted from its social context—characteristics better suited to the natural sciences than to social sciences, which demand interpretive and reflective nuance. In many cases, the rigid application of IMRaD undermines the diversity of academic reasoning, particularly in disciplines requiring contextual and narrative-based approaches.

As Bourdieu (1991) emphasizes, symbolic power operates through instruments that appear neutral but in fact exert dominative effects. In this context, the IMRaD structure functions not merely as a communicative tool, but as a mechanism of symbolic subjugation—directing authors toward a form of argumentation

aligned with Western epistemic logic.

APA Citation Style and the Politics of Referencing

Alongside the IMRaD structure, the APA citation style—originating from the American Psychological Association—has become the dominant referencing method in academic writing in Indonesia. The data from this study indicate that 69% of SINTA 6 journals and 31% of SINTA 1 journals explicitly employ APA style. This preference is not merely an aesthetic choice in writing but functions as an epistemological tool that determines who is worthy of being cited and what forms of knowledge are deemed legitimate.

APA style emphasizes the chronology of publication and formal scientific authority, implicitly discrediting local sources, oral traditions, or community-based knowledge that are not standardized within Western documentation systems. In line with Foucault's (1980) concept of the regime of truth, citation systems such as APA delineate the boundaries of what can be recognized as scientific discourse. In this context, referencing is not just a technical activity—it is a political act involving the

selection and exclusion of knowledge.

Furthermore, APA citation style has been deeply integrated into digital technologies such as Mendeley, Zotero, and EndNote—reference management tools that also originate from Western academic environments. These technologies inadvertently reinforce APA's dominance, as most of their default templates and formatting options are based on APA standards. Thus, digitalization not only accelerates academic work but also deepens the internalization of dominant epistemic values through its technological infrastructure.

In the editorial practices of Indonesian journals, the adoption of APA style also reflects a broader tendency to pursue global legitimacy, often at the expense of disciplinary flexibility and local specificity. As Bourdieu (1991) argued, social classifications—such as citation styles—constitute a “symbolic order” that determines the positioning of actors within academic hierarchies. Consequently, following APA is not merely a technical decision; it is a form of participation in a global epistemic classification system fraught with power relations.

English as an Instrument of Epistemic Hegemony

One of the most visible and impactful instruments of hegemony is the dominance of English in scientific publishing. Data from this study show that 90% of SINTA 1 journals use English exclusively, while SINTA 6 journals increasingly exhibit bilingual practices, with 37% using both English and Indonesian. This dominance mirrors global data from Elsevier (2023), which reports that over 96% of scholarly articles indexed in Scopus are written in English.

In this context, English is not merely a medium of communication but a symbol of epistemic power. As Canagarajah (2002) argues, English plays a pivotal role in transmitting the values of the global center and serves as a prerequisite for academic recognition. Proficiency in English often determines access to global academic forums, research funding, and even career advancement. Marginson and Xu (2021) describe this phenomenon as epistemic asymmetry—a condition where the dominance of a single language undermines the diversity of other knowledge systems.

This linguistic dominance also disregards rhetorical

traditions from non-Western cultures. Studies by Kaplan (1966) and Hyland (2006) highlight that academic writing in Anglo-American contexts tends to be explicit, linear, and direct, whereas Southeast Asian rhetorical styles are more spiral, reflective, and cautious. When Western writing conventions become the universal standard, alternative forms of reasoning and academic expression are often deemed insufficiently objective.

Moreover, the pressure to publish in English is reinforced by national incentive systems—such as the PAK (credit point system) for Indonesian lecturers—which require publication in reputable international journals. This creates an evaluation system where English becomes a prerequisite for academic success, forcing Indonesian scholars to think, write, and publish in a language that is not socially or culturally their own.

Within Gramsci's (1971) theoretical framework, this situation exemplifies ideological hegemony operating subtly through what he terms a war of position—a struggle for influence through norms, institutions, and collective consciousness. In this light, English is not merely a

communicative tool but a primary instrument for shaping global academic consensus, effectively sidelining alternative forms of knowledge.

Technology as a Mechanism of Academic Normalization: Turnitin, Grammarly, and Reference Tools as Covert Agents of Hegemony

While IMRaD structure, APA citation style, and the English language represent symbolic forms of dominance in academic formatting and expression, digital systems such as Turnitin, Grammarly, and reference management tools like Mendeley, Zotero, and EndNote represent more systemic and technological forms of domination. These tools operate as normalizing technologies— instruments that standardize, evaluate, and monitor academic writing practices. In other words, technology is not merely auxiliary but has become a powerful and covert medium of epistemic domination.

Turnitin and the Regime of Originality Discipline

One of the most apparent forms of technological intervention in academia is the widespread use of plagiarism detection tools, with Turnitin being the globally dominant platform. Based in the United States, Turnitin is not only used to detect textual

similarity but has evolved into a discursive surveillance system that regulates how academic texts should be written, structured, and cited. In Indonesia, Turnitin is formally mandated in many institutions, including within the SINTA journal accreditation system.

Turnitin's dominance exemplifies Foucault's logic of control, where power operates not through overt prohibition but through surveillance and normalization, shaping the behavior of writers. As Foucault (1978) put it, "visibility is a trap." Contemporary academic authors are not only expected to write correctly but to write in ways that avoid being flagged by Turnitin's algorithm. This practice fosters what may be termed textual paranoia—a condition in which writers focus more on circumventing detection systems than on developing substantive arguments.

In this light, Turnitin functions not merely as a tool for similarity checking but as an enforcer of writing styles aligned with hegemonic norms. As a system developed by an American company, Turnitin's algorithm implicitly assumes Western citation and writing standards. As a result, academic texts that employ non-

Western rhetoric or traditional references are often penalized with high similarity scores due to their deviation from standard citation patterns such as APA.

Moreover, Turnitin reinforces the perception that originality is a mechanical attribute measurable by quantitative means. However, in various local or cultural scientific traditions, practices such as repetition, shared narratives, or unformatted citations are legitimate forms of collective reasoning. In this sense, Turnitin implements a panoptic regime in academic settings—one that not only surveils textual practices but disciplines academic bodies to conform to global norms.

Grammarly and the Standardization of Anglo-American Writing Style

While Turnitin serves to discipline the originality aspect of academic writing, Grammarly—an AI-based proofreading and editing application headquartered in the United States—functions to discipline form and stylistic expression. In Indonesia, Grammarly is now widely used by both students and lecturers, and several national journals even require manuscripts to be

checked using Grammarly prior to submission.

The free version of Grammarly is sufficient for correcting grammar and spelling, but the premium version offers suggestions on writing style, word choice, argument clarity, and tone. These features are far from neutral. They are programmed based on Anglo-American rhetorical conventions that emphasize explicit clarity, active voice, and linguistic economy. These values align with the expectations of Western academic audiences, yet they may not always be compatible with other rhetorical traditions that prize elaboration, expressive caution, or rhetorical politeness.

In practice, writers from non-English-speaking countries such as Indonesia often face pressure to conform their sentence structures and lexical choices to Grammarly's suggestions, even at the cost of losing local nuance or idiomatic expression. For instance, conditional constructions common in Indonesian academic discourse are often flagged as "ineffective" or "wordy" by Grammarly's algorithm. This creates a kind of covert ideological correction, in which expressions that diverge

from the Anglo-American model are deemed "weak," "illogical," or "unprofessional."

As Canagarajah (2002) argues, such adjustments represent a form of hegemonic adaptation rather than equitable accommodation. In this context, Grammarly extends epistemic domination through technological logic, where corrective authority is no longer exercised by academic supervisors or journal editors, but by an AI system modeled on Western language and values.

Reference Management Tools: Mendeley, Zotero, and EndNote as Infrastructures of Hegemony

Reference management tools such as Mendeley (Elsevier, UK), Zotero (Center for History and New Media, US), and EndNote (Clarivate Analytics, US) are primarily designed to assist academics in organizing references, inserting citations, and generating bibliographies automatically. However, beyond their practical functions, these tools also shape and constrain how writers conceptualize legitimate sources, how citations should be formatted, and which systems are deemed most valid.

Most templates embedded within these applications are based on internationally recognized citation styles such as APA, MLA, Chicago, IEEE, or

Harvard—all of which originate from Anglo-Saxon academic traditions. Local citation systems—such as the historical footnote method used in Indonesian historiography or hybrid styles that combine oral and written sources in local anthropological studies—are largely absent from these platforms.

As a result, Mendeley and similar tools subtly promote the homogenization of academic writing styles. Academics wishing to adopt alternative citation systems must either manually format references or customize citation style language (CSL)—a task that requires technical skills not possessed by all writers. Consequently, many authors are compelled to conform to the available templates, even if those templates conflict with the epistemological traditions they uphold.

Moreover, the integration of these tools into journal submission processes—both nationally and internationally—has rendered their use less of a choice and more of an institutional obligation. In many SINTA-indexed and Scopus-indexed journals, the use of digital reference managers is now an administrative requirement. Thus, these tools function as “hegemonic infrastructures”,

through which Western academic standards are internalized not via ideological coercion, but through technical necessity and bureaucratic efficiency.

Institutional Infrastructure and the Political Economy of Knowledge: Contestation in Funding, Incentives, and Academic Evaluation

While the IMRaD format, APA style, English language, and technologies such as Turnitin and Grammarly operate at the practical and discursive levels, a deeper and more pervasive form of academic hegemony manifests at the institutional and political-economic level. In this dimension, hegemony is not always visible through direct control but is embedded in funding structures, incentive systems, and academic evaluation policies that systematically discipline how knowledge is produced, written, and conceptualized.

Research Funding and the Hegemony of Scientific Agendas

One of the most effective mechanisms of domination in the global academic system is research funding. International donor institutions such as the Ford Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, Rockefeller Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have

played a major role in shaping research agendas in Global South countries, including Indonesia. As Parmar (2012) asserts, these institutions not only fund but also

foster and create frames of thought that cohere the network; they generously finance spaces for the production and legitimization of particular types of knowledge... preventing, or at least making a lot less likely, 'other thoughts'.

In the Indonesian context, these donors have funded research projects, university partnerships, and capacity-building programs that facilitate the integration of the national academic system into Western-oriented global knowledge structures. Research topics prioritized are those aligned with global agendas—climate change, public health, technology, and innovation—whereas local-based studies, oral history, indigenous epistemologies, or non-positivist community-based research are often sidelined as they are seen as lacking "global impact" or being difficult to publish in high-ranking international journals.

Moreover, these funding structures often set methodological standards that

marginalize interpretive or participatory methods rooted in local communities. This illustrates that epistemic power is exercised not merely through ideas but through budgeting schemes and research funding priorities. As Bourdieu (1991) explains, symbolic power is most effective when it operates through structures that appear natural and technocratic, though they are ultimately shaped by political forces determining who is entitled to know and what is worth researching.

Academic Evaluation Systems and the Commodification of Knowledge

Indonesia's academic evaluation system also plays a central role in reinforcing the dominance of global standards. Regulations from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology—such as Decree No. 500/M/2024—explicitly require publication in reputable international journals (Scopus or WoS) for academic promotion, especially to positions such as Associate Professor and Professor. Additionally, the credit scoring system (PAK) and SINTA assign the highest value to international, English-language publications in high-indexed journals.

As a result, academics are driven to tailor their research to the logic of the global market-producing articles aimed at high-index journals regardless of local relevance or societal needs. Topics such as local wisdom, regional literature, or culturally grounded educational approaches are often neglected due to their low "marketability" in global bibliometric systems.

This condition exemplifies what Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) describe as academic capitalism—the transformation of higher education into a market-driven entity that commodifies knowledge. In this paradigm, academic success is measured by citation indices, impact factors, and publication productivity, rather than by social contribution, policy influence, or community impact.

Beyond being a mere evaluation mechanism, the system creates a pattern of knowledge production that is homogenized and centralized. As Santos (2014) notes, such a system excludes other forms of knowledge that do not conform to the "Western modern canon" and produces epistemicide—the systematic erasure of alternative knowledge systems, particularly those rooted in local values and community practices.

Institutional Resistance and Local Spaces of Negotiation

Despite the overwhelming influence of global structures, resistance is not entirely absent. Some Indonesian universities have begun to develop alternative incentive systems that value local publications, community-based works, and non-article outputs such as books, book chapters, conference proceedings, and local documentation. Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), for instance, provides recognition for scholarly works that are locally relevant, even when they are not published in internationally indexed journals (Direktorat Penelitian UGM, 2025).

In addition, initiatives such as the Garuda portal and institutional repositories (e.g., UGM Repository, UI ScholarHub, ITS e-Repository, and Unair Repository) have emerged to provide open access to academic works in the Indonesian language. Although these platforms are not yet as prominent as Scielo in Brazil or AJOL in Africa, they signal ongoing efforts to strengthen national publication infrastructures and to counter the dominance of global publishers such as Elsevier, Springer Nature, and Wiley—who largely control the journal market through closed-access

models (paywalls) and expensive article processing charges (APCs).

Further efforts can be observed in the government's affirmative policies aimed at supporting national journals to gain international indexing through programs like Arjuna and SINTA. These initiatives include training for editorial management, grants for journal development, and incentives for national publications. However, such policies often continue to adopt international benchmarks as their primary criteria—potentially reinforcing epistemic dependency rather than enabling intellectual autonomy.

Epistemic Negotiation and Selective Adaptation: Forms of Resistance in Journal Editorial Practices

Although Western academic structures—such as the IMRaD format, APA style, and the use of English—exert considerable influence on Indonesia's scholarly publication system, this study reveals that not all journals fully comply with such pressures. On the contrary, this is precisely where the importance of counter-hegemonic strategies emerges, practiced by a range of national journals from both SINTA 1 and SINTA 6 categories. Resistance does not always

manifest as open rejection; instead, it often takes the form of smart negotiation, selective adaptation, and institutional flexibility.

Non-IMRaD Structures and Rhetorical Autonomy

One of the clearest forms of resistance lies in the continued use of non-IMRaD structures by several journals, particularly in fields such as law, nursing, and Islamic studies. The findings indicate that journals such as Samarah, Wacana Paramarta, Jurnal Keperawatan Muhammadiyah Bengkulu, and Jurnal Kajian dan Pengembangan Umat opt for narrative or discursive article structures that are more contextual and flexible, rather than adhering strictly to the IMRaD format.

This decision is not merely a result of technical limitations; rather, it reflects an epistemological preference for local traditions of argumentation, narrative writing styles, and thematic organization—methods more aligned with reflective and interpretive approaches. In Gramsci's (1971) terms, such strategies represent a war of position—a long-term struggle through cultural and intellectual positions that, while indirect, produce meaningful impact over time.

Moreover, the use of non-IMRaD structures asserts that scientific articulation can—and should—be plural. By maintaining context-sensitive formats, these journals affirm that academic writing need not be governed by a single universal model but can instead be tailored to the epistemic characteristics of each discipline. This aligns with Santos's (2014) argument for ecologies of knowledges, which calls for the recognition of diverse ways of thinking and writing as an essential component of global cognitive justice.

Diversity of Referencing Styles as an Epistemic Tactic

Beyond structural format, citation style has also become a site of epistemic resistance. The findings of this study reveal that several SINTA-accredited journals—both from tiers 1 and 6—explicitly choose citation styles other than APA. For instance, Hasanuddin Law Review and Journal of Indonesian Legal Studies use the footnote-based Chicago Manual of Style; Al-Ihkam employs the 17th edition of Chicago; and Muhammadiyah Law Review adopts the Australian Guide to Legal Citation (AGLC).

This choice is not merely a technical preference but is closely tied to the scholarly

traditions of each field. Legal journals, for example, have historically utilized footnote systems to document legal sources, jurisprudence, and constitutional materials—types of references that do not fit the parenthetical citation system of APA. Imposing APA style across all disciplines thus risks undermining the methodological integrity and rhetorical structure specific to those fields.

By maintaining alternative citation styles, these journals engage in a form of flexible compliance—a strategy of selectively conforming to global norms while preserving local authenticity. It also reflects epistemic agency, or the institutional capacity to determine the most appropriate framework for scholarly representation based on contextual disciplinary values.

Multilingualism and Academic Linguistic Rights

Another significant form of resistance lies in the adoption of multilingual policies. This study found that several journals—even within SINTA 1—explicitly accommodate the use of Arabic and Indonesian alongside English. It is a critical step in upholding epistemic linguistic rights—the right to think, write, and

disseminate knowledge in languages that embody the values, culture, and epistemic systems of local communities.

This phenomenon aligns with Canagarajah's (2005) concept of multilingualism as resistance, which argues that the use of non-global (non-English) languages in academia should not be seen as a sign of inferiority, but as a form of resistance against the monolingualism of power that marginalizes other languages from global knowledge circulation. Journals such as Al-Ihkam, Ahkam, and Samarah demonstrate that combining languages (Arabic-English-Indonesian) is not only feasible but also substantively relevant to their respective disciplines.

In this context, multilingual strategies represent an articulation of epistemic freedom as proposed by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), the freedom to write from specific social and geographical positions without submission to Euro-American frameworks. Language is not merely a medium but also an epistemic marker—and by preserving linguistic diversity in academic publishing, Indonesian journals expand epistemic participation both nationally and globally.

The Role of Local Editorial Boards in Perpetuating or Challenging Hegemony

The findings also indicate that editorial boards of journals hold a strategic position as epistemic gatekeepers. Some journals—particularly those indexed in SINTA 6—still demonstrate flexibility in accepting non-IMRaD structures, local citation styles, and the use of the Indonesian language, whereas SINTA 1 journals tend to be more rigid in enforcing global standards.

However, it is precisely within this space that the potential for transformation lies. If journal editorial boards—comprising academics, lecturers, and researchers—are willing to consciously position themselves as agents of epistemic change, resistance to knowledge homogenization can be more systematic. This requires editorial courage to open space for narrative experimentation, citation flexibility, and acceptance of alternative structures, all without compromising scholarly quality or academic accountability.

As emphasized by Curry and Lillis (2004), many scholars "are enthusiastic about their research and often work at building up local research structures... while increasingly

engaged in writing in English." In other words, negotiation does not imply total rejection of the global system, but rather the capacity to reconfigure power relations within it to be more equitable, contextual, and participatory.

Theoretical Reflection: toward Decolonizing Knowledge and Epistemic Justice

The contestation against American academic hegemony—identified through various aspects of scientific writing in Indonesia, such as the IMRaD structure, APA style, the dominance of English, and the use of Turnitin and Grammarly—illustrates that academic practice is inseparable from global power relations that operate symbolically, discursively, and institutionally. However, emerging local resistances—seen in structural flexibility, citation diversity, multilingual policies, and national publication initiatives—demonstrate that scientific practice is also a space for negotiation. In this context, decolonial theory provides a relevant framework for understanding the trajectory of resistance and the potential for transformation.

Epistemic Freedom: Writing from One's Own Social Position

As argued by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), epistemic freedom is "epistemic freedom is fundamentally about the right to think, theorize, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism." In the context of Indonesian academic publishing, epistemic freedom is not merely about preserving the Indonesian language or local structures, but about reclaiming epistemic autonomy—the right to determine one's own modes of knowledge validation, argumentation structure, and scholarly expression in ways that reflect the values of local communities.

Strategies such as maintaining Chicago style in legal scholarship, using Arabic in Islamic studies, and rejecting the IMRaD format in nursing and the humanities are manifestations of this freedom. These practices reveal that Indonesia is not merely a consumer of the global academic system but also possesses the capacity to redefine what constitutes "scientific" according to its own social and historical contexts.

Epistemic Disobedience: Unmasking False Universality

Through the concept of epistemic disobedience, Walter Mignolo (2009) calls for the necessity of resisting the claims to universality of knowledge that are shaped by the logic of Western modernity-coloniality. He emphasizes that the decolonial task is to engage in epistemic de-linking—that is, detaching from frameworks that equate scientific truth with a singular, Western mode of representation.

In the context of Indonesian academic journals, resistance to the APA citation style, rejection of rigid Turnitin checks, and the retention of narrative or thematic article structures are concrete forms of epistemic disobedience. These acts do not constitute a rejection of rationality per se, but rather a refusal to accept the hegemony of specific rationalities that claim exclusivity and universality.

In this sense, when Indonesian journals refuse to equate scientific quality with strict adherence to Scopus standards, or when writers choose to publish in Bahasa Indonesia to reach local readers, they are engaging in acts of epistemic defiance. Such resistance challenges the

assumption that only English-language IMRaD structures and APA style can be deemed "scientific".

War of Position: Cultural Strategies and Long-Term Negotiation

Gramsci's (1971) theory of war of position helps us understand that change in the academic world does not always occur through radical upheaval or direct confrontation (war of manoeuvre), but often through the gradual building of cultural alliances, intellectual consensus, and ideological repositioning.

In the Indonesian academic context, this war of position manifests in initiatives such as the development of the Garuda portal, the strengthening of national journals through SINTA, the design of alternative incentive systems based on local impact, and the creation of accreditation frameworks rooted in national needs. These efforts represent a structural struggle to reclaim epistemic authority from global institutions and relocate it within more socially relevant and context-sensitive knowledge systems.

It is crucial to recognize that the war of position requires patience, institutional perseverance,

and a shift in the academic actors' own consciousness—away from an internalized sense of inferiority that assumes external systems are inherently superior. By building alternative evaluation systems, opening space for local narrative styles, and promoting critical education on the colonial history of knowledge production, Indonesia can develop a symbolic counterpower—not merely to “participate” in the global system, but to help redefine its very rules.

Ecologies of Knowledges: Building a Just Knowledge Ecosystem

As a concluding reflection, it is essential to revisit Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2014) concept of ecologies of knowledges. He offers a path out of the monoculture of Western scientific knowledge toward a system that embraces epistemic diversity. As he asserts, “There is no global social justice without global cognitive justice”.

By fostering a pluralistic knowledge ecosystem, Indonesian academic journals do not need to reject modern science; rather, they must have the courage to place it alongside traditional, community-based, local, spiritual, and narrative forms

of knowledge. In this framework, knowledge should not be subordinated to a single model of writing, but should instead emerge from dialogues across epistemes, languages, and cultures.

National journals can serve as alternative platforms for articulating local experiences, creating space for multilingualism, and bridging the gap between global and local discourses. With the right strategies, Indonesia's publication ecosystem can not only survive amid global academic dominance but also emerge as a pioneer of a more just, context-sensitive, and socially grounded model of scholarship.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates how American academic standards—embodied in the IMRaD structure, APA citation style, the predominance of English, and technologies such as Turnitin, Grammarly, and reference management software—have been internalized within Indonesian scholarly writing practices, especially in journals indexed by SINTA. Such dominance extends beyond formal mechanisms, operating symbolically and institutionally through academic evaluation systems, incentive structures, and

digital infrastructures that enforce conformity to global academic norms. However, the findings also highlight emerging spaces of epistemic resistance and negotiation. A number of journals maintain non-IMRaD structures, adopt alternative referencing styles, and embrace the use of local and multilingual expressions as strategic efforts to preserve epistemic authenticity and cultural relevance. These forms of localized adaptation and editorial flexibility reveal that hegemony is not always uncontested; instead, it can be strategically negotiated through institutional agency and contextual awareness. Through the framework of decolonial theory, this article emphasizes the significance of epistemic freedom and epistemic disobedience as critical pathways toward achieving epistemic justice. Indonesia, with its pluralistic intellectual traditions and diverse sociocultural foundations, is well-positioned to cultivate a more contextually grounded, inclusive, and independent knowledge system. Academic decolonization, therefore, is not simply a reactionary rejection of global standards, but a proactive endeavor to reimagine and reconstruct a more equitable, relevant, and

locally rooted scholarly ecosystem.

COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

Herewith the author declares that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the assessment, review and revision, and publication process in general.

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The Feminine Label, the Masculine Voice: Baddiecore and the Racialized Gender Construction of Genre in Digital Metal Communities

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ABSTRACT

On 18 August 2023, "Baddiecore" emerged as a fan-coined label described as "metalcore with enough pop music crossover and sex appeal that normie hot people like it," according to a viral X post by Craig Reynolds. Although bands like Sleep Token, Bad Omens, and Spiritbox were initially associated with the term, "Baddie" itself is rooted in Black American digital and feminist culture. This creates a tension when the genre is visually and sonically dominated by white male artists. This study examines how Baddiecore reflects the gendered construction of genre in digital metal communities, using the framework of postfeminist sensibility. Employing content analysis, the study draws 108 public posts on X between August 2023 and December 2024, using keywords like "Baddiecore" and associated band names. Findings show that Baddiecore was initially met with contestation due to its feminized tone but later gained acceptance, particularly among women fans engaging through merchandise and aesthetic participation. However, genre ownership remains centered around white male artists, with only two solo women and one female-fronted band visibly linked to the term. Ultimately, Baddiecore reveals how genre can operate as a site of aestheticized neoliberal femininity, shaped yet remains a space historically dominated by white, male voices.

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INTRODUCTION

On 18 August 2023, Stray from the Path's drummer, Craig Reynolds, wrote on X (formerly Twitter) a new genre label, namely "Baddiecore", as "metalcore with enough pop music crossover and sex appeal that normie hot people like it" (Reynolds, 2023b). Metalcore is a subgenre that fuses elements of melodic death metal, hardcore, and crossover thrash (Hillier, 2020) and is considered among commercial metal styles (Weinstein, 2015). Although metal has been theorized as masculine or even hypermasculine as it has built on the existing gendering of rock music (Hill, 2023), Baddiecore marks a shift in aesthetic framing. Reynolds categorizes bands, such as Sleep Token, Bad Omens, Spiritbox, Architects, Motionless in White, Holding Absence, and Dayseeker, as Baddiecore bands as they are having metalcore's sonical intensity with "dulcet tones and demure yet dramatic demeanor of strands of R&B and hip-hop which was previously referred to as 'bedroom' music" with the "aesthetic that is thought of as hypersexualized (aka 'thirsty'))" (Sobande, 2025). These artists are frequently celebrated for their sleek

visuals and emotional intensity. Baddiecore draws its name from the term "baddie", a derivative of "bad bitch", usually associated with Black American cultural expression and referring to Black women who are seen as self-possessed and unapologetically confident (Sobande, 2025). The irony, then, is that this term, originating in a space of racialized self-assertion, is now applied to a scene overwhelmingly fronted by white, male artists.

While Baddiecore appears to subvert traditional metal masculinity through emotional openness, visual softness, and fan desire, it ultimately reasserts hegemonic gender norms. As Connell (1987) (in Windsor, 2015) argues, hegemonic masculinity defines itself through the desire for and possession of the feminine other, as a form of dominance that incorporates femininity only on its own terms.

In this framework, the feminine label is not celebrated autonomously but stylized to serve masculine visibility. In Baddiecore, male performers adopt elements such as vulnerability, beauty, softness, yet the genre remains tethered to white masculinity.

Feminized aesthetics are circulated, consumed, and aestheticized, but not by or for actual women or queer subjects. The “softness” exists not as liberation, but as a rebranding of dominance.

The fans of these bands responded with thirst X posts, TikTok videos, memes, and fan edits celebrating the *softboy* appeal of masked singers and brooding frontmen. In Reddit, fans leaned into this framing, with one user labeling a Reddit sub-thread of Sleep Token, “r/SleepToken” as “f---ing thirsty that it actually describes it really f---ing well” (Trapp, 2023). Another added,

as a middle-aged woman who's a huge fan of both Sleep Token and Bad Omens, I also want to be offended. But we are a thirsty bunch, and I don't even care. (Trapp, 2023)

These responses underscore how Baddiecore is less a fixed genre and more a fan-driven aesthetic discourse; one deeply entangled with gendered desire, emotional intimacy, and visual curation. Sobande (2025) argues that genre labels like “Baddiecore” reflect aspects of the racial, gendered, and sexual politics of metal. While they often embrace the aesthetic of “baddie”, which is originally rooted in Black feminist digital culture, it is often deployed in

ways that erase the term's Black feminist roots and sideline actual women artists.

The rise of Baddiecore reflects a postfeminist aesthetic regime. Gill (in Evans, 2023) found that postfeminist sensibility in media and consumer culture is characterized by several elements:

locating freedom, choice, and empowerment in forms of reassuringly feminine consumption; femininity as a bodily property, so that successful femininity is read on the body; a retraditionalisation through a return of biological essentialism; heightened forms of surveillance and discipline, for example where women's magazines zoomed in and highlighted women's body parts for others to look and judge; a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification; and, a focus on the makeover format. (Evans, 2023, p.2)

Thus, this article does not seek to evaluate the bands themselves, but rather the discursive construction of Baddiecore as a genre: how online fan cultures project, aestheticize, and negotiate gendered meaning through stylized softness, and ironic empowerment.

This article presents how Baddiecore, a fan-coined genre label within contemporary metalcore culture, reflects the gendered construction of genre in digital metal communities. By analyzing fan-generated content on X, it explores how a feminine-coded label is constructed, celebrated, and contested in online discourse. This article then contributes to critical discussions on gendered aesthetics, post-feminist sensibility, and the politics of visibility within digital music fandoms.

METHODOLOGY

This article is achieved through qualitative content analysis to examine how fans construct gendered aesthetics and articulate desire through the discourse of Baddiecore. Rather than relying on interviews or participant observation, this method centers on content analysis, which allows the researcher to trace how meanings emerge across a broad set of digital texts and practices.

Content analysis is defined as an objective, systematic, and quantitative approach to the measurement of media content and is concerned with the identification of broad empirical trends across a range of texts (Hodkinson, 2017).

Data collection will be conducted as follows:

Quantifying

Content analysis emphasizes objectivity; thus, it needs to quantify the frequency with which phenomena occur. This involves prior identification of types of content, counting of their number of occurrences across a sample of texts (Hodkinson, 2017). This study draws data from public posts on X where the genre label first emerged, and it continues to serve as a central platform for circulating and negotiating its meaning through posts, memes, replies, and fan-to-fan dialogue. While platforms such as TikTok also engage with Baddiecore discussion, this research privileges X due to its discursive richness, accessibility, and relevance to the initial formation of the genre. This choice allows for a deeper focus on language, affect, and performativity within a dynamic textual space.

To address this, a manual search strategy was implemented for the period spanning 18 August 2023 to December 2024, using X's advanced search function. Posts containing relevant keywords, such as "Baddiecore" and the names of bands originally referenced in Craig Reynolds's post (Sleep Token, Bad Omens, and

Spiritbox) were identified and archived in a Google spreadsheet document. Screenshots were also retained to preserve post context and formatting.

Categorizing and Coding

Categories must be mutually exclusive and not overlap with one another, so they should cover the full range of possibilities (Wimmer & Dominick in Hodkinson, 2017). This study employs three primary categories, such as "negative", "positive", and "neutral" stances toward Baddiecore. These categories are used to identify how fans emotionally and critically engage with the genre and its associated aesthetics.

Populating

To ensure that the sample accurately represents the broader population of content that a study is trying to conclude about, careful sampling parameters are established (Hodkinson, 2017). Thus, parameters are used to avoid sample bias and to be representative (Hodkinson, 2017). Parameters that are used to avoid sample bias and enhance representativeness are:

Timeframe

The sample was limited to content produced between 18 August 2023 to December 2024, reflecting key moments in the emergence and evolution of Baddiecore as a contested genre label within online metal discourse. The starting point, 18 August 2023, marks the initial coining of the term by Craig Reynolds on X. The discourse significantly escalated in December 2023, following the Nik Nocturnal Awards, where there is "Baddiecore Song of the Year" nomination.

In February 2024, the label re-entered public discourse through SiriusXM's "Octane's Baddiecore Mixtape," which sparked fan reactions. These key events are making it a productive window to examine how the term was received, aestheticized, and contested in fan discourse.

Keyword and phrases

Search terms included "Baddiecore" and the names of bands originally referenced in Craig Reynolds's post, such as Sleep Token, Bad Omens, and Spiritbox.

Language

Only English-language posts were included in the sample. English was selected due to its

dominance in global fan discourse around Western metalcore bands. Additionally, most of the referenced artists are English-speaking, and the originating post by Craig Reynolds was in English, establishing a precedent for the genre's digital vocabulary.

In addition to social media data, secondary sources such as online news and blog articles are included to contextualize the discourse within broader music journalism and subcultural commentary.

No direct interaction with users was conducted, and all materials analyzed were publicly accessible. The study does not seek to generalize about all metalcore fandoms, but rather to illuminate the gendered discourse practices within a specific digital moment. The data was then analyzed using Rosalind Gill's postfeminist sensibility.

DISCUSSION

Naming the Genre

Table 1. Summary of Baddiecore Discourse on X (August–December 2023)

No	Stance	Count
1	Positive	19
2	Neutral	20
3	Negative	13

(N = 60 manually collected posts)

Table 1 illustrates that a total of 60 posts were

collected between August and December 2023. The majority of posts expressed a neutral stance toward the term Baddiecore, often asking for clarification or participating in the broader discourse. A notable portion of the tweets were positive, expressing support or excitement about the genre. These figures provide a foundation for understanding the dynamics explored in this section.

Baddiecore first emerged on 18 August 2023, when Craig Reynolds, drummer of American metalcore band, Stray from the Path, coined the term in an X post describing "metalcore with enough pop music crossover and sex appeal that normie hot people like it". This post sparked immediate discussion surrounding the definition of Baddiecore and which bands could be considered part of it. Early mentions in the discourse included Dayseeker and Motionless in White.

The conversation then subsided until November 2023, when Spiritbox was nominated for the 66th Grammy Awards under Best Metal Performance, alongside Disturbed, Ghost, Metallica, and Slipknot. This nomination marked a moment of visibility for a soft-sounding, female-fronted band in a genre historically dominated "by and

for young, working-class, white men" (Coggins, 2023).

In December 2023, Baddiecore's discussion re-emerged. On 14 December 2024, Reynolds posted a photo of the "Bada Bing!" strip club sign, a fictional strip club from the HBO series about the mob, *The Sopranos* (Moser, 2023), with the caption "friday #baddiecore" (Reynolds, 2023a) as illustrated in Figure 2. This post marked a masculine reclaiming of a feminized label, using a hypermasculine pop culture reference, a fictional strip club associated with organized crime and traditional male dominance, to frame the genre.



Figure 2. Craig Reynolds' X about "Bada Bing!" strip club
Source: X.com/reynlord

On 17 December 2023, Sabian Lynch, guitarist of Australian metalcore band Alpha Wolf, wrote "Baddiecore noun Heavy music with grooves you can fuck to" (Lynch, 2023). Responses to this tweet further attempted to define the genre. One user clarified, "I've seen this misinterpreted often as heavy core music with hot, attractive

members" (BEAUTYY, 2023). Another user provocatively asked, referring to Alpha Wolf, "Does your band fall under baddie core or is it just shit like spiritbox and sleep token" (metalcore shawty, 2023). This illustrates how masculine voices attempted to reclaim and redefine a feminized label, often by reducing it to aestheticized desire. Even some women in the space also dismissed female-fronted bands, reinforcing internalized genre policing.

On 19 December 2023, Jeremy DePoyster, a singer and guitar player of American metalcore band, The Devil Wears Prada, wrote "Yeah... they're calling it Baddiecore, and I want in at 69,000 shares" (Depoyster, 2023) accompanied by a meme of Patrick Bateman, the hypermasculine protagonist *American Psycho*, wearing sunglasses and talking on the phone.



Figure 3. Jeremy DePoyster's X meme about Baddiecore
Source: X.com/jdepoyer

This post can be read as a sarcasm directed at the music industry, possibly mocking the

commercial pressure to conform to Baddiecore's marketable aesthetic. One user responded, "Baddiecore AKA daddy issue core AKA horny core AKA mid-bandcore" (Honest Hater VT, 2023), underscoring how the label was still being contested and ridiculed. Many users continued to contest the legitimacy of the genre, labeling it as "horny" and "cringe".

The term 'Baddiecore' is not formally defined by musical characteristics, but rather shaped by the bands that fans repeatedly associate with it. While Reynolds initially linked the term to Sleep Token, Bad Omens, and Spiritbox, early fan discourse identified different dominant associations: bands like Alpha Wolf, Sleep Token, Holding Absence, and Spiritbox appeared more frequently. It suggests that Baddiecore's meaning is not fixed by its coiner but is continually reshaped through collective fan discourse. These bands become shorthand through which Baddiecore is imagined, aestheticized, and contested; shaped less by sound than by the more by the affective, aesthetic, and gendered resonances fans attach to them.

Claiming Baddiecore: Gendered Ownership and Aesthetic Power

Starting in December 2023, Baddiecore began to slip from irony into identity. While many initial reactions had been sarcastic or resistant, some bands started referencing the label seriously.

Following Sabian Lynch's suggestive definition of Baddiecore, other metalcore bands began reclaiming the term. The Australian metalcore band Thornhill joined the discourse by tweeting "we're baddiecore as fuck" (Thornhill, 2023). On the same day, Lucas Woodland, vocalist of Welsh metalcore band Holding Absence, posted on X, "Okay, Holding Absence Baddiecore arc is in motion. I'm about to do some sit-ups" (Lu, 2023). Here, genre ownership becomes performance: ironic, aestheticized, and rooted in a soft masculinity that embraces visibility, humor, and curated self-image. Fans replied Woodland's tweet with memes, saying "slutty era", and labeling the fandom "horny".

Craig Reynolds also amplified the genre's embrace. In response to Lynch's X post, he replied saying "preach brother" (Reynolds, 2023c) and promoted his Baddiecore merch featuring the "Bada Bing!" strip club logo that he had

previously shared. This time, the original Bada Bing! logo was visually reworked as "Baddie Core!", mimicking the original font and layout (see Figure 4).

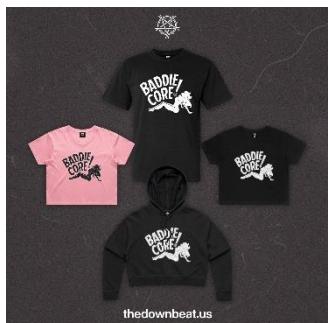


Figure 4. Craig Reynolds' Baddiecore merch.
Source: X.com/reynlord

On the official website of Reynolds' podcast and merchandise line, Downbeat, the product description for the Baddiecore t-shirt reads: "Hot People Music", "Metallic Glitter Print", "Cropped fit", "Vessel? More like Vajazzle", as shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Screenshot of Baddiecore shirt description from Downbeat website
Source: us.thedownbeat

Most Baddiecore tees are cropped and glitter-printed, suggesting a feminized

silhouette. However, these descriptions do more than sell a product, they signify how Baddiecore has become marketable, wearable, and ironic-yet-real. Through humor, body-targeted design and aesthetic signaling, the genre shifts from digital meme to embodied identity.

Yet this ironic marketing reveals deeper tensions around gender and genre ownership, particularly in the line "Vessel? More like Vajazzle". While referencing Vessel, the masked frontman of English metalcore band Sleep Token, it also references Vajazzle, the act of decorating a woman's pubic area (Oxford Languages, n.d.), as a punchline. The feminized body becomes both joke and brand, crafted and distributed by a man. Once again, feminine aesthetics are stylized, sexualized, and sold not by women, but through male-controlled platforms.

This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in Baddiecore discourse: women are central to the genre's aesthetic narrative, but largely peripheral to its authorship. Even as glitter, softness, and sensuality enter metal's visual language, these elements are often mediated and repackaged by men. Femininity becomes a commodity, not a voice.

Nevertheless, some women reclaimed the term through consumption. One user posted a screenshot of her Baddiecore shirt purchase with the caption, "Ordered the black one  #baddiecore" (Liz, 2023). The nail polish emoji symbolizes participation in the genre's feminized aesthetic. Another fan posted a photo of herself wearing the shirt, writing "baddiecore supremacy  @reynlord" and tagging Craig Reynolds directly (Penny, 2024).

Increasingly, women are also using the keyword Baddiecore in posts featuring selfies with merch from bands, like Bad Omens and Sleep Token. These actions reflect a postfeminist sensibility, where consumption is framed as empowerment, which Gill (in Evans, 2023) describes as "locating freedom, choice, and empowerment in forms of reassuringly feminine consumption".

McRobbie (2009 in (Evans, 2023) expands this critique through the concept of 'doubled articulation', where feminist discourses are simultaneously drawn on and refuted. In this framework, feminist demands, such as equal pay, are acknowledged, but it was redirected through appropriately feminine acts of consumption (e.g buying shoes),

leaving women with limited language to critique structural inequality. This redirection, McRobbie argues, often results in internalized frustration, which manifests as self-discipline or emotional distress (in Evans, 2023).

In the context of Baddiecore, such acts of consumption may appear empowering, but they also risk neutralizing the term's original feminist and racial significance, reducing it to aesthetic capital within a genre still largely dominated by white male creators.

In 2024, bands further solidified their association with Baddiecore. Thornhill posted, "obsession is the baddiecore anthem of 2024 slay" (Thornhill, 2024), referencing their song *Obsession*. Holding Absence's Lucas Woodland later affirmed, "I'm a baddiecore truther btw" (Lu, 2024). These artist declarations further legitimized the genre, shifting its status from internet joke to subcultural identity.

As artists and fans increasingly embraced Baddiecore, X users began to use the term with aesthetic pride and cultural capital. One user wrote, "I've never seen a hot person complain about the Baddiecore joke, just saying" (Flower emoji user, 2023).

Though many users do not identify their gender or race, the discourse around Baddiecore is heavily shaped by assumptions about attractiveness, aesthetic fluency, and postfeminist performance.

It aligns with Gill's description of postfeminist culture, where "successful femininity is read on the body" (Gill in Evans, 2023) and visibility becomes a site of empowerment and exclusion. As Sobande (2025) critiques, Baddiecore increasingly invokes beauty standards, drawing on aesthetics developed by Black women and trans women of color while rarely crediting them.

In this way, Baddiecore becomes more than a musical label. It becomes a cultural position, earned through irony, confidence, and visual appeal, rather than sonic innovation.

Table 2. Summary of Baddiecore Discourse on X (January–December 2024)

No	Stance	Count
1	Positive	30
2	Neutral	12
3	Negative	6

(N = 48 manually collected posts)

Table 2 shows 48 X posts collected in 2024, and positive stances significantly increased compared to 2023. This rise coincides with more

metalheads claiming the label, women posting selfies under the "Baddiecore" keyword, and greater visibility of feminized fan aesthetics. These shifts suggest that the community is increasingly accepting Baddiecore, both as a cultural reference and as a participatory identity.

Selective Visibility and Racialized Absence in Baddiecore

Despite the growing positive stance toward the term Baddiecore, the absence of female artists, especially black women, remains a recurring pattern.

On 19 December 2023, Nik Nocturnal, an American metal music YouTuber and Streamer, announced the winners of the Nik Nocturnal Awards 2023. The awards included a category titled "BaddieCore Song of The Year", which was awarded to Sleep Token for their track, "Rain" (Nik Nocturnal, 2023). While this institutional recognition gave the term Baddiecore further visibility and legitimacy, it also sparked criticism.

One user quote-retweeting the announcement wrote "'baddiecore' white people and the consequences of borrowing AAVE speech like i swear to god" (kale, 2023). This user

pointed out that how the genre name borrows from African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a dialect rooted in Black American speech culture, while excluding Black cultural agents. This X post echoes Sobande's (2025) critique that "Baddie", originally grounded in Black feminist online culture, is co-opted in ways that erase its cultural specificity and marginalize the very voices from which it emerged.

Moreover, as shown in Figure 6, most of the Nik Nocturnal Awards winners were bands composed of white male members. No Black women were among the recipients. Spiritbox, the only female-fronted band featured, also consists of white members. This reveals a persistent racial and gendered exclusivity.



Figure 6. Nik Nocturnal Awards 2023
 Winners
 Source: x.com/NikNocturnal

As previously discussed in the second section of the Discussion, Lucas Woodland of

Holding Absence posted about the band's "Baddiecore arc" in December 2023. In response, one user created a striking fan edit of Holding Absence's "The Noble Art of Self Destruction" (2023) album artwork. The edit added bold makeup, plumped lips, and long acrylic nails captioned "The baddie in the marble" (Heroine, 2023), as shown in Figure 7.



Figure 7. Fan edit of Holding Absence's "The Noble Art of Self Destruction" album cover, replying to Lucas Woodland's post
 Source: x.com/delicatexnature

While the original X post marked Holding Absence's humorous embrace of the term, the fan reply transforms the discourse by visually anchoring Baddiecore back into the aesthetic traditions rooted in Black and trans women's beauty culture. This edit directly references the "Baddie aesthetic" in the beauty practices shaped by Black women and trans women, particularly in digital and queer cultural spaces and characterized by beauty practices such as "lacefront wigs, highly

contoured cheekbones, heavily lined lips" (Rowe, 2021). This aesthetic is not merely stylistic, as Bryan (2025) notes, it involves routine acts of maintenance, wigs, acrylic nails, lash extensions, eyebrow tinting, waxing, and hair care, performed by many Black women to navigate societal expectations of beauty.

This fan-edited image operates as a moment of cultural redirection, centering the very identities so often excluded from the genre's mainstream narrative.

On 14 February 2024, Octane, SiriusXM's radio channel that plays rock music, releases Valentine's Day playlist titled "Baddiecore Mixtape". This playlist featured artists such as Bad Omens, Spiritbox, Sleep Token, Dayseeker, Bring Me the Horizon, Architects, Holding Absence, and more (see Figure 8).



Figure 8. The artist list in Octane's "Baddiecore Mixtape"
Source: x.com/SiriusXMOctane

Only three women artists appeared: Poppy, Amira Elfeky, and female-fronted band, Spiritbox, none of whom are black. Among them, only Amira Elfeky identifies as a person of color. In an interview, she notes being raised on her Egyptian father's Arabic music and her mother's classic rock (Wilkes, 2025). Her inclusion shows that POC (Person of Color) women exist in metalcore, but are rarely centered in genre-defining conversations, even when the genre borrows from racialized aesthetics.

This selection also drew immediate backlash. While the playlist aimed to represent the genre, it also featured bands like Falling in Reverse and Crown the Empire, whose members and frontman have faced public allegations of abuse and misogynistic behavior.

One fan quote-retweeted the announcement, writing: "Falling in reverse, crown the empire and atilla are NOT baddiecore btw. baddiecore is for people who respect everyone and definitely not for transphobes, misogynists and abusers. thank you." (Simon, 2024). Another wrote, "Interesting list you put on here. Putting multiple artists that have been known to be extremely hateful to women and minority groups to a term

heavily associated with women in the scene..." (Liv, 2024).

Ronnie Radke, frontman of *Falling in Reverse*, has been publicly accused of domestic violence and sexual assault (Fitzpatrick, 2024). Meanwhile, Crown the Empire's guitarist Brandon Hoover faced domestic abuse allegations in 2023 (Childers, 2023). These fan critiques represent not gossip, but a moral boundary-making process within the fandom. Fans are not just imagining what Baddiecore looks or sounds like, but also who it should and should not include.

A close reading of fan discourse from August 2023 to December 2024 found that 12 bands are associated with the term as illustrated in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Bands Mentioned Associated to Baddiecore (Aug 2023-Dec 2024)

No	Bands Mentioned	Counts	
		Aug- Dec 2023	Jan- Dec 2024
1	Bad Omens	2	9
2	Sleep Token	6	9
3	Spiritbox	5	4
4	Holding Absence	6	5
5	Motionless in White	2	0
6	Architects	3	0
7	Dayseeker	2	0
8	Poppy	0	1
9	Thornhill	1	3
10	Bring Me the Horizon	2	3
11	Alpha Wolf	1	1
12	Knocked Loose	2	0

This data confirms that the bands most frequently mentioned are Sleep Token, Bad Omens, and Spiritbox, showing how genre meaning is constructed collectively.

While women performers like Spiritbox, Poppy, and Amira Elfeky are present in the discourse, Black women remain absent. Even when women of color are included, their presence is tokenized, and whiteness still dominates. Although there are numerous POC and Black women in metalcore, including female-fronted bands, they remain largely excluded from the Baddiecore conversation.

Despite the genre's name, Baddiecore, drawing from cultural expressions rooted in Black feminist and digital aesthetics, Baddiecore remains dominated by white men, both in discourse and representation. What began as a playful, feminized label has become a site where hegemonic masculinity reasserts control over genre, visibility, and legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

Baddiecore first emerged as a site of contestation, a feminized label circulating in digital metalcore communities. Yet, it was soon claimed by women through acts of

aestheticized consumption. It reflects what Gill (in Evans, 2023) defines as postfeminist sensibility, where freedom and empowerment are in acts of feminine consumption. Such gestures are deeply entangled with neo-liberal logic, which frames ideal subjects as autonomous, self-managing individuals who express agency through consumption rather than collective resistance (Evans, 2023). In this context, Baddiecore becomes more than a genre, it becomes a neoliberal subjectivity: desirable, curated, emotionally available, and always marketable. However, as scholars have argued, the postfeminist subject is assumed to be white, cisgender, middle-class, and able to convert femininity into social and economic capital (Evans, 2023). This framing erases how structural inequalities, especially those around race, gender, and authorship, are repackaged as personal choice and aesthetic freedom. Within Baddiecore, it becomes evident when aesthetics rooted in Black and trans beauty culture are detached from their origins and commodified as branding. Ultimately, Baddiecore reveals how genre can operate as a site of aestheticized neoliberal femininity, shaped through humor, image, and consumption—yet still tethered to hegemonic structures. Despite its

feminized name and aesthetic, Baddiecore remains rooted in a sonic space historically dominated by white, male voices, reaffirming the gendered power hierarchies of metalcore.

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Reinforcement of Family Support to Overcome Religious Discrimination in Ibtihaj Muhammad and S.K. Ali's *The Proudest Blue*

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ABSTRACT

The present study analyses family and support systems in addressing religious discrimination, focusing specifically on Islamophobic incidents portrayed in Ibtihaj Muhammad's children's picture book *The Proudest Blue*. Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory and Talcott Parsons' functionalism, this research examines how religious discrimination manifests in educational settings and how various environmental support mechanisms respond to these challenges. Through the application of a qualitative research method, focusing on textual and visual elements, the study identifies specific instances of Islamophobic behavior, cultural misunderstanding, and social othering. In addition, it explores strategies employed by families in the face of challenges, peer relationships within these communities, and the responses of the community at large. The findings reveal that Asiya experiences religious discrimination rather than generalized racism, with incidents specifically targeting Islamic practices through the degradation of religious symbols. The analysis demonstrates that successful social integration occurs through adaptive processes that allow Muslim students to participate fully in educational communities while maintaining their faith practices. This study contributes to the understanding of the potential of children's literature to shed light on the challenges posed by religious discrimination, as well as the intricate nature of supportive environments within educational settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature for children has always played an important role in children's lives. In the early years of their life, more or less, the children need to know what is going on in our earth, even in our country (Junaid, 2017, p. 1). Literature has a profound impact on mental and psychological growth and is most effective when it avoids personal or biased language, instead presenting content in a clear, precise, and formally structured manner. When written appropriately, children's books can foster a sense of belonging and an appreciation for diversity by exposing readers to varied experiences and perspectives. For example, books that depict characters confronting prejudice can help children develop empathy and encourage them to stand against discrimination (Hoffman, 2000). The ability to foster critical thinking and self-reflection is attributed to literature. As a result, kids will have their minds awakened with regard to racism and other issues. Hence, it is important that children's books are written in such a manner that they provoke the readers' minds into critically examining them (Short, et al. 2013). Collier (2000, p. 2)

said that the use of African American children's literature throughout the school curriculum provides a powerful means to greatly enhance the educational experience of African American children by immersing them in the stories of their people and developing a cultural mirror image which would reflect their place in the world as valid, valuable, and voiced. In addition, Tatum (1997) argues that books dealing with racism help unlearn prejudices and teach kids how to assess people based on individual traits rather than relying on stereotypes. Therefore, child-friendly reading materials can create an ideal platform for parents, educators and young ones to talk about race-related matters as well as racism itself. Thus, children's literature offers age-appropriate methods for introducing complex topics and subjects, as well as creating significant dialogues (Tropp & Barlow, 2018). Furthermore, including stories that highlight racial discrimination in children's literature helps society stay alert about pertinent social problems. It provides a basis for teaching children the importance of impartiality, fairness and equal treatment.

Reported by CNN, a 42-year-old woman in Texas has been arrested for trying to drown a 3-year-old. CAIR says the victims were Muslim and Palestinian. CAIR wants the shooting to be called a hate crime. On May 19, Euless Police responded to a disturbance between two women at the pool, where witnesses said Wolf, who was intoxicated, tried to drown the child and argued with the child's mother. Wolf was confronted by police while trying to leave for being drunk in public. When they finished eating, Wolf sat the child's mother down and inquired about her country, and how many kids did she have? When the mother told Wolf, "You're being racist," he decided it was time for him to walk away. She said he told her she was not really American. Statement from CAIR National Executive Director Nihad Awad: "The safety and security of Sudanese-Americans, Muslim families in general" (Elassar, et all., 2024).

ABC News also reported a heartwarming moment when Hanan Shaheen, Wadea Al-Fayoume's mum, made a public statement calling for love and understanding for the first time since her sweet six-year-old daughter was tragically killed in an alleged hate crime. The awful incident, which took place on October 14

in their suburban Chicago home, seems to have been triggered by the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas. Shaheen and her son were victims of a terrible crime. Both of them were Palestinian and Muslim. Their landlord, 71-year-old Joseph Czuba, was responsible for this awful act of violence. Wadea was fatally stabbed 26 times, while Shaheen managed to survive despite being stabbed a dozen times. In a highly charged and truly moving manner, President Joe Biden addressed the nation recently, giving a status report on the tragedy of the killing of 6-year-old Wadea Al-Fayoume and the feeling of fear that Jewish communities are feeling due to the conflict going on between Israel and Hamas. He urged everyone to stand against both antisemitism as well as Islamophobia. After his speech, Biden had a heartfelt conversation with the boy's father and uncle, as reported by the White House. The Department of Justice is now investigating Wadea's death as a case of federal hate crimes (Deliso, 2023).

Reported by Public Integrity, Hai Au Huynh, a mother from Texas, talked to her local school board after trying for months to stop her two young kids from being bullied because they are Asian

at their elementary school. Even though many parents complained, the school did nothing about the racist incidents. I think the Huynh family is a good example. The Huynh family is quite illustrative of this point. Some people were being unkind to them. They used a lot of epithets and terms such as 'ching-chong-wing-wong', which was painful. His shirt, which was once worn by her older son, was soiled with a scribble of a swastika. Huynh was annoyed that the school did not intervene. She asked them to release a "stay away" order, but they declined. What the situation with two of her children shows is that it is only logical that their feeling of security and companionship was shattered (Sandhu-Longoria, 2024)

A study in the Journal of Osteopathic Medicine reveals a rise in reported racial incidents faced by Indigenous and Black children in the U.S. from 2016 to 2020. Conducted by Dr. Micah Hartwell and Amy Hendrix-Dicken, the study used data from the National Survey of Children's Health. CNN has stated that it found that reports of discrimination among minority children increased from 6.7% in 2016 to 9.3% in 2020, compared to a rise from 1% to 1.7% for White children.

Indigenous children faced discrimination at rates of 10.8% in 2016 and 15.7% in 2020, while Black children's rates rose from 9.69% in 2018 to 15.04% in 2020. Hendrix-Dicken emphasized the long-term health impacts of early discrimination, and both Hendrix-Dicken and Hartwell stressed the importance of culturally competent care and education to address these issues (Moges-Gerbi, 2024).

It is of great concern that children are experiencing racial and religious discrimination on numerous occasions. It is difficult to comprehend that any individual, particularly a child, should have to endure such treatment. With the availability of picture books that not only capture the interest of children but also adults, there is an opportunity to further emphasise the crucial role that the environment plays in addressing racism against children. By using the picture book that tells us about the experience of the author with facing racism, like in Ibtihaj Muhammad's book, *The Proudest Blue*, it can be seen how significant the role of the environment is in dealing with the racism.

The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family is a children's picture book written

by Ibtihaj Muhammad, an Olympic medallist and social justice activist, in collaboration with S.K. Ali, with illustrations by Hatem Aly. The book was published on 10 September 2019 by Little, Brown Books for Young Readers and has subsequently become a New York Times bestseller. Muhammad draws upon her personal experiences of wearing a hijab to inform the narrative, which is addressed to children aged 4 to 8. This New York Times bestseller was recommended by the Saitama Prefectural Health and Youth Development Council, which discussed the books that young people should read for Reading Week and Sai no Kuni Education Week, among the books recommended for residents in the prefecture and publishers. There are 30 books selected and one of them is 'Neesan no Aoi Hijab'. The story is hosted by Faizah who tells the story of the first day her sister, Asiya, wears the hijab to school and makes it look like she is a princess and together they go through the people who say bad things and laugh at her (Food Diversity, 2024).

This book presents a unique opportunity to examine issues from a different perspective. The book presents an alternative perspective to the typical approach of combating bullying by emphasising

socialisation and understanding. Instead, it explores a range of alternative strategies. The book illustrates the significance of familial and social support in fostering resilience and assertiveness in children. It thus appears appropriate to analyse the role of neighbourhood support in overcoming racism.

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to examine the extent to which the environment plays a role in addressing racism in children's picture books. The imperative for literature addressing racism to be composed in a way that is commensurate with the age of the target audience and that acknowledges diverse cultural backgrounds is pivotal. The analysis will consider not only the narrative and illustrations but also how metaphor, symbolism, and other literary elements are used to provoke critical thought and dialogue among young readers. It is vital for works addressing racism to be crafted in alignment with the developmental and cultural needs of children and to serve as a springboard for broader educational initiatives fostering fairness and social justice. When guided by these principles, literature has the power to catalyse positive

social change, engendering empathy, inclusivity, and resilience in its readers.

METHODOLOGY

This study applies the qualitative research method of content analysis, guided by the principles outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Creswell and Poth (2018). Qualitative research methodologies are selected for two principal reasons. Firstly, they are chosen for their ability to provide an in-depth understanding of non-numerical data. Secondly, they are considered to be particularly well-suited to the exploration of complex phenomena, such as individual thoughts, behaviors, and interactions. This study focuses on the analysis of the American children's picture book *The Proudest Blue* by Ibtihaj Muhammad, which serves as the primary data source. Secondary sources, including academic journals and books, are also utilized to establish a theoretical framework and ensure the reliability of the findings.

The primary data for this research is the American children's picture book *The Proudest Blue* by Ibtihaj Muhammad. Analysis focuses on both textual and visual elements, including character

actions, dialogue, narrative structure, facial expressions, and artistic style, as recommended by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). The data collection and analysis procedure follows these systematic steps. Firstly, thorough and repeated reading/observation of the book. Secondly, the extraction of key textual and visual data related to the research questions. Last but not least, categorization of this data into thematic codes relevant to racism, social support, and identity.

To ensure academic rigor and reliable interpretation, secondary sources, such as peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books, are integrated to frame the analysis and substantiate findings. However, the central analytic process is explicitly designed to answer the study's main research questions, focusing on how supportive environments are portrayed in addressing racism within the book.

In addressing the subject of data analysis, this study employs Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory to explore themes of racism, incorporating racialized Islamophobia, stereotyping, and cultural and gender racism. The framework assists in

highlighting the interconnected nature of identity and discrimination in the narrative. Additionally, Talcott Parsons' Functionalism Theory is applied to examine the supportive environment depicted in the book, emphasizing how social harmony and role fulfilment contribute to the minimization of racial issues. The analysis involves the organization of data, the application of theoretical lenses, and the interpretation of findings to draw meaningful conclusions.

This study concludes with a discussion of the findings from both the picture book and the theoretical frameworks, offering a comprehensive understanding of anti-racism strategies and supportive environments. This study combines qualitative content analysis with intersectionality and functionalism in order to provide a nuanced perspective on how children's literature can address complex social issues such as racism and cultural identity. This approach not only provides a response to the research objectives but also contributes to broader discourses on inclusivity and representation in media.

As demonstrated in the studies conducted by Yousef and

Alford (2023) and Permatasari and Murtiningrum (2023), the book plays a pivotal role in challenging stereotypes associated with the hijab. It is portrayed as a symbol of strength, faith, and resilience, rather than oppression or radicalism. Whilst the extant literature focuses on cultural representation and symbolic meaning, this study employs Intersectionality Theory and Functionalism Theory to analyze the book, thereby offering a more profound examination of systemic racism and social structures.

Other studies, including Shonibare's (2021) work on intersectionality in education and Sarah's (2022) analysis of digital learning through functional structural theory, provide additional context for the theoretical frameworks applied in this study. Shonibare's findings reveal how students perceive discrimination in straightforward ways, underscoring the need for intersectional approaches in education. Concurrently, Sarah's research highlights the capacity of functionalism to facilitate comprehension of systemic adaptations, such as the transition to online learning during the pandemic. These insights serve to

reinforce the applicability of intersectionality and functionalism in the analysis of social and educational dynamics. This study extends these concepts to *The Proudest Blue*.

The main differences between this study and the referenced ones are the specific focus on *The Proudest Blue* as a case study for the application of both Intersectionality and Functionalism theories. Whilst earlier works have explored related theoretical frameworks in different contexts, such as education policy or digital learning, this study is specifically concerned with the manner in which these theories offer insights into themes of racism, identity, and social support within the book. By undertaking this action, it contributes to broader discourses on representation, anti-racism strategies, and the role of literature in fostering inclusive societal structures.

DISCUSSION

Form of Religious Discrimination

By employing the lens of intersectionality, it can be investigated how the characters' multifaceted identities collectively shape their experiences, extending beyond the boundaries of

discrete categorizations such as race or religion (Adhitya et al., 2025). The forms of racism portrayed through texts and pictures in *The Proudest Blue*, according to Intersectionality theory, are racialized islamophobia, stereotyping and othering.

Racialized Islamophobia

Asiya, the older sister, is subjected to a form of racism that is compounded by her religious identity. Upon donning her hijab at school for the first time, Asiya becomes the target of racial and religious prejudice.

"Someone laughs from nearby. A boy, pointing at Asiya"



Figure 1. Students at school mocking Asiya (Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 18-19)

"I'm going to pull that tablecloth off your head"



Figure 2. Students at school makes fun of Asiya (Muhammad & Ali, 24-25)

Asiya's choice to wear hijab creates a stark contrast with her non-hijab wearing friends, demonstrating how religious

visibility fundamentally alters social experiences and peer interactions. Asiya experiences targeted religious discrimination that specifically attacks her Islamic practice and identity. The evidence demonstrates Islamophobic behavior rather than generalized racism, as the attacks focus directly on her religious symbols and practices. The most explicit example of religious discrimination occurs when a peer threatens, "I'm going to pull that tablecloth off your head" (Muhammad & Ali, 2019). This statement represents several forms of Islamophobic behavior that align with documented patterns of religious discrimination in educational settings (Torres-Zaragoza, 2024).

The comparison of the hijab to a "tablecloth" deliberately reduces a sacred religious garment to an ordinary household object. This linguistic choice demonstrates ignorance of Islamic practices while intentionally minimizing the religious significance of the hijab. Such degradation of religious symbols constitutes a form of cultural racism that targets religious identity markers (Hasan, 2023). The threat to forcibly remove the hijab represents more than verbal harassment, it suggests

potential physical violation of religious observance. Research indicates that Muslim students, particularly girls wearing hijab, face significantly higher rates of bullying and harassment in schools, with incidents often involving threats to remove religious coverings (CAIR, 2024; Torres-Zaragoza, 2024).

Stereotyping and Othering

The book provides further insight into processes of othering and stereotyping, especially through dialogue between Faizah and her classmates. The narrative reveals stereotyping and othering processes primarily through curiosity-based interactions rather than overt discrimination, with much of the tension filtered through Faizah's protective perspective as narrator (Traesar & Saktiningrum, 2024).



Figure 3. Students at school targeting Asiya (Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 11)

"What's that on your sister's head?" the girl in front of me whispers.

"A scarf," I whisper back. I don't know why a whisper came out.

I try again, louder now. "A
scarf. Hijab."

"Oh," She whispers

(Muhammad & Ali,
2019, 12-13)



Figure 4. Students at school being curious toward Asiya (Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 11)

When Faizah's classmate whispers, "What's that on your sister's head?" and receives the explanation "A scarf. Hijab", the interaction demonstrates cultural unfamiliarity rather than malicious stereotyping. The whispered exchange reflects what research identifies as natural childhood curiosity about religious differences, where "children are less restricted by social norms and conventions governing what people should look at", allowing them to "observe openly and unflinchingly" without adult social constraints (Ouellette, 2022). However, this curiosity creates othering effects by positioning Asiya as an object of examination rather than a typical peer, with the illustrations showing children pointing and staring that isolate her despite their non-hostile intentions. The othering process manifests not

through explicit rejection but through the marking of difference. Asiya becomes a curious spectacle among her peers, creating social distance even when interactions lack discriminatory intent.



Figure 5. Students at school asking Asiya about her hijab (Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 16-17)

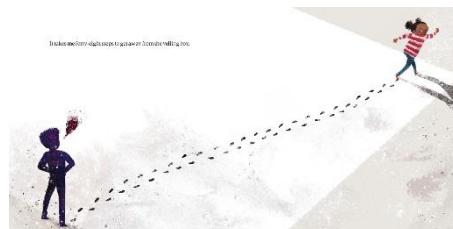


Figure 6. Asiya running from her bully (Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 28-29)

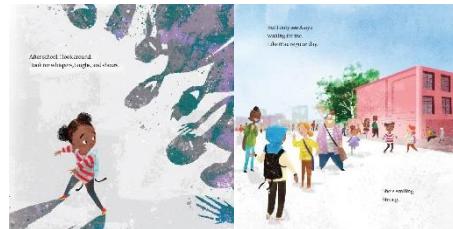


Figure 7. Asiya avoiding students at school (Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 30-31)

Faizah's protective anxiety serves as the primary lens through which readers experience these othering dynamics, reflecting research on sibling relationships where "siblings manage, utilize and are impacted by discrimination experiences" of family members (Szweada, 2013). Her whispered response "I don't know why a whisper came out", reveals her

internalized worry about her sister's visibility and potential social consequences. As the narrator, Faizah's perspective amplifies the significance of seemingly innocent encounters because she anticipates negative outcomes and protective needs throughout the story. This aligns with research on child narrators who "can openly examine volatile, offensive, tragic, controversial, or even repulsive issues in ways less likely to repel readers" while providing emotional authenticity to family protective dynamics (Seraphinoff in Ouellette, 2022). Faizah's consistent concern about her sister's reception demonstrates how sibling anxiety about discrimination can heighten the perceived threat of othering behaviors, even when peer reactions stem from curiosity rather than hostility.

The application of intersectionality to *The Proudest Blue* is not only a fitting approach but also a crucial one for achieving a comprehensive understanding of the story's themes and characters. This framework enables us to gain insight into the intricate nuances of the characters' identities and experiences, elucidating both the obstacles they confront and

the fortitude they derive from their intersectional identities. From this perspective, the book can be seen as an illustrative account of the beauty and resilience that can be found at the intersections of race, religion, and gender.

The Support of the Environment

By using Parsons' functionalism theory, the support of the surroundings can be classified into three parts. The first is social integration, the second is the role of family, and the third is norm reinforcement that would be discussed below:

Social Integration

The Proudest Blue illustrates the complex process of social integration through the lens of Muslim students navigating educational environments while maintaining their religious identity. The narrative follows Faizah as she witnesses her sister Asiya's inaugural day wearing hijab to school, demonstrating how religious visibility affects the socialization process within educational institutions. This experience reflects what Parsons (1951) describes as the transition from particularistic family values to universalistic societal standards, where

students must learn to function within broader social systems while maintaining their cultural and religious identities.



Figure 8 (Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 6-8)

"The first day of wearing hijab is important", Mama has said.
"It means being strong".

(Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 15)



Figure 9. Asiya feeling assured of her decision to wear hijab (Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 15)

Her mother's guidance exemplifies how families prepare children for this social integration process by reinforcing religious values while acknowledging the challenges they may face in educational settings. Studies show that teaching kids about Islam in a way that is open and accepting can help them understand the world better and make them treat others with respect. It also helps them fit in well with other cultures at school (Misliani, 2025).

The socialization process depicted in the narrative demonstrates how Muslim students negotiate their identities within educational contexts that may not fully understand their cultural and religious practices. According to functionalist theory, schools serve as "focal socializing agencies" that bridge the gap between family-specific values and broader societal expectations (Parsons, 1951). For Asiya and Faizah, this process involves maintaining their Islamic identity while adapting to school environments where their religious practices may be unfamiliar to peers and educators. The narrative shows how this integration process requires both individual resilience and family support, as students must develop strategies for maintaining religious identity while participating fully in educational activities. Research indicates that "Muslim students in their developmental period need to be equipped with the skills to understand and appreciate cultural differences and empathize with various perspectives" to achieve successful social integration (Construct Social Emotional Learning, 2024). The family's preparation and ongoing support help students navigate this complex process

while building confidence in their religious identity.

The book demonstrates that successful social integration for Muslim students does not require abandoning religious identity but rather involves developing skills to maintain faith commitments while participating in diverse educational communities. Parsons' theory suggests that education functions as a mechanism for role allocation and value transmission, helping students prepare for adult roles in society (Parsons, 1951). For Muslim students like Asiya, this process involves demonstrating that religious practice is compatible with academic achievement and active participation in society. The narrative's resolution, where Asiya maintains her hijab while continuing normal school activities, illustrates what research identifies as adaptive integration, the ability to maintain religious identity while successfully participating in broader social institutions. Research indicates that the establishment of inclusive school environments that embrace religious diversity has been demonstrated to engender enhanced student well-being and augmented academic outcomes. This finding lends further credence to the assertion that

the acceptance of religious identity is conducive to both personal well-being and social inclusion (Religious Identity, Bullying and Wellbeing at School, 2025). The book ultimately argues that social integration is most successful when educational institutions adapt to accommodate religious diversity rather than requiring students to suppress their religious identities.

Family's Role

Through this children's picture book, it can be seen how the role of the institution plays a significant part through Faiza and their mother's supportive reactions toward her sister.



Figure 10. Asiya conversing with her sister (Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 20-21)

"Some people won't understand your hijab", Mama has said.
"But if you understand who you are, one day they will, too".
(Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 21)

In class, I draw picture.
Two princesses in hijab having
a picnic on an island
Where the ocean meets the sky.
(Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 22)

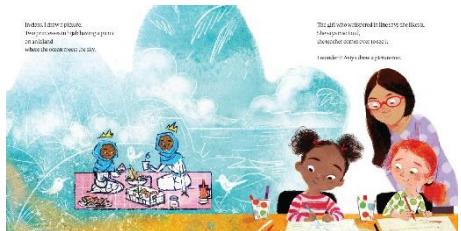


Figure 11. Faiza putting her vision into a picture (Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 22-23)

Saying I'll always be here,
"Like sisters.
Like me and Asiya".
(Muhammad & Ali,
2019, 35)



Figure 12. Faiza making a promise
(Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 34-35)

Asiya's hijab isn't a whisper.
Asiyas's hijab is like the sky
on a sunny day.
The sky isn't a whisper.
It's always there, special and
regular.
...
The first day of wearing hijab
is important, Mama has said.
It means being strong.



Figure 13. Asiya's empowered by her mother (Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 14-15)

Mama: "Don't carry around the hurtful words that others say. Drop them. They are not yours to keep."

They belong only to those who said them."



Figure 14. Asiya's mother's empowering words (Muhammad & Ali, 2019, 26-27)

Their mother and Faiza's support and affirmation of Asiya's hijab reflect the family's role in maintaining cultural traditions and passing them on to the next generation.

Parsons' theory is based on the idea that the family is the main way people learn social skills and values. This helps them to fit in with other people and to understand the wider society (Parsons, 1951). In this way, the family can help to keep traditions alive, even when they are different from the ideas of the wider culture. This can give girls a sense of stability and identity, even when they are facing pressure from other sources.

Norm Reinforcement

The concept of norm reinforcement in *The Proudest Blue* operates on multiple interconnected levels, demonstrating how individual actions both reflect and strengthen the social norms of religious and cultural

communities. From Parsons' functionalist perspective, norm reinforcement occurs through the process by which individuals internalize societal expectations and express them through their roles and behaviors, thereby maintaining social cohesion and cultural continuity (Parsons, 1951). Asiya's decision to wear the hijab represents what Parsons describes as normative compliance—the voluntary adherence to shared value systems that have been "introjected to form a constitutive element of the personality itself" (Bicchieri, 2011). This internalization process means that her choice is not merely external conformity but reflects deep personal commitment to the religious and cultural norms of her Islamic community. The mother's guidance that wearing hijab "means being strong" (Muhammad, 2019) exemplifies how families serve as primary agents of norm transmission, ensuring that religious values are passed from one generation to the next through socialization processes that begin in early childhood.

The mechanism of norm reinforcement operates through what Parsons identifies as role performance, where individuals demonstrate their commitment to

social expectations through consistent behavioural patterns. Asiya's visible religious practice serves multiple reinforcement functions: it strengthens her own religious identity through behavioural commitment, reinforces family values by demonstrating successful socialization, and contributes to community norm maintenance by providing a positive example for other young Muslims. Research confirms that "norms are clusters of normative attitudes in a group, combined with the knowledge that such a cluster of attitudes exists" (Brennan et al., 2013), meaning that Asiya's hijab-wearing becomes part of the collective knowledge about what it means to be a practicing Muslim girl. It creates what functionalists call positive feedback loops, where individual compliance with norms strengthens the norms themselves, making them more likely to be maintained and transmitted to future generations. The narrative demonstrates how religious identity formation becomes a mechanism for norm reinforcement, as "individuals' cognitive and motivational states give rise to structural group characteristics" while "group characteristics, such as structures, roles and norms, are internalized as part of an

individual's sociocognitive system" (Greenfield & Marks, 2007).

However, the book also reveals the complex dynamics of norm reinforcement when religious community norms encounter conflicting societal expectations. Parsons' theory suggests that strain occurs when individuals face competing normative systems, potentially leading to deviant motivation or social polarization (Alexander, 1981). Asiya's experience illustrates this tension: while she reinforces Islamic norms through hijab-wearing, she simultaneously challenges broader societal norms that expect religious invisibility in educational settings. The narrative shows how successful norm reinforcement requires not just individual commitment but also environmental support that validates and protects the expression of religious norms. The family's consistent affirmation of Asiya's choice demonstrates what Parsons identifies as social control mechanisms that help individuals maintain normative behavior despite external pressures. Research indicates that "when norms are internalized norm-abiding behavior will be perceived as good or appropriate, and people will typically feel guilt or

shame at the prospect of behaving in a deviant way" (Bicchieri, 2011). It is why Asiya maintains her religious practice despite facing discrimination—the internalized religious norms create stronger motivational forces than external social pressures. The book ultimately demonstrates that effective norm reinforcement occurs when individual actions, family support, and community values align to create what functionalists call system maintenance, ensuring that important cultural and religious traditions persist across generations even when facing external challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a significant contribution by highlighting the impact of Faizah's narrative perspective as a protective sibling on the significance of discriminatory incidents. Furthermore, it emphasises the pivotal role of family solidarity in addressing instances of religious discrimination. Her anxious observations throughout the narrative illustrate how sibling anxiety regarding discrimination can amplify awareness of othering behaviours, even when peer responses are more rooted in curiosity than hostility (Szweida, 2013). The book

ultimately contends that effective educational inclusion necessitates institutional adaptation to accommodate religious diversity, as opposed to the expectation of Muslim students in suppressing their faith identities. The analysis indicates that when environmental support systems, comprising family preparation, sibling solidarity and community affirmation, function collectively in a cohesive manner, Muslim students can concurrently sustain robust religious identity and accomplish social integration and academic success. This finding carries significant weight for educators and policymakers seeking to establish inclusive educational environments that support religious diversity, whilst addressing the specific challenges faced by visibly religious students in contemporary school settings.

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Reconstructing the Orient: A Postcolonial Analysis of AI-Generated Erasure in Trump's Gaza Video

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a critical analysis of an AI-generated video, circulated in early 2025, which depicts a fictional plan by former U.S. President Donald Trump to reconstruct Gaza as a hyper-modern, Westernized urban space. Through a postcolonial lens informed by Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, this research examines how the video functions as a digital artifact that reproduces colonial power dynamics. The analysis reveals that the video—featuring luxury amenities, a monumental Trump statue, and the complete erasure of Palestinian people—constructs the West as a benevolent savior while symbolically eliminating indigenous presence and agency. Specific visual tropes, such as faceless children moving toward a futuristic city, the glorification of Trump as a heroic figure, and scenes of elite leisure, aestheticize systemic oppression and reframe military occupation as benign intervention. By converting trauma into spectacle and domination into development, the video exemplifies how AI-generated content can perpetuate Orientalist ideologies under the guise of satire or innovation. This research concludes that such digital representations are not politically neutral but actively reinforce imperial narratives, marginalize Palestinian voices, and normalize hierarchies of power. It underscores the urgency of critically engaging with emerging media technologies as sites of ideological reproduction in a post-9/11 world marked by enduring Islamophobia and digital Orientalism.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the global landscape has been significantly shaped by a persistent and escalating phenomenon of "Islamophobia," markedly intensified following the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States (Bakali & Hafez, 2022). This sociopolitical climate is characterized by pervasive fear, suspicion, and prejudice toward Islam and Muslims, which have become systematically embedded within Western mainstream media, political rhetoric, and state policies (Esposito, 2011; Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008).

These representations frequently construct Muslims as existential threats to Western security and values, thereby legitimizing structural and institutional discrimination (Lean, 2017; Beydoun, 2018). Notably, such discourse is not confined to Western contexts but has proliferated globally through digital media networks and ideological dissemination, reinforcing transnational stereotypes and animosities (Bridge Initiative, 2021; Kumar, 2021).

To critically examine the operational mechanisms of Islamophobic and Orientalist narratives, it is essential to situate them within one of the most protracted and

symbolically charged conflicts in the Muslim world: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The historical roots of this conflict can be traced to the early 20th century, coinciding with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent imposition of British colonial authority under the Mandate for Palestine (Khalidi, 2020).

The 1917 Balfour Declaration, which endorsed the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, catalyzed escalating tensions between Zionist settlers and the indigenous Arab population (Pappé, 2022). The proclamation of the State of Israel in 1948—celebrated in Zionist narratives as a moment of national liberation—was concomitantly experienced by Palestinians as the Nakba (catastrophe), involving the forced displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians and the systematic erasure of their political, social, and material presence (Masalha, 2012). Since then, the conflict has been defined by repeated wars, military occupation, settlement expansion, and entrenched systemic inequalities (Finkelstein, 2018).

The United States has played a pivotal and often decisive role in shaping the

trajectory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Israel's principal international ally, the U.S. has consistently furnished substantial military aid, diplomatic cover, and political legitimacy to Israeli policies (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007).

This unwavering support is frequently exercised through the use of its veto power in the United Nations Security Council to shield Israel from international accountability (Falk, 2018). Although U.S.A administrations have periodically positioned themselves as neutral mediators—most notably during the Oslo Accords in the 1990s—critical scholarship has underscored how American policy has persistently favored Israeli interests, thereby exacerbating power asymmetries and undermining Palestinian self-determination (Chomsky, 2015; Said, 1994).

The Trump administration, in particular, adopted a conspicuously partisan stance by unilaterally recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, suspending funding for Palestinian refugee aid programs, and advancing the so-called "Deal of the Century"—a proposal that was widely rejected by Palestinians as negating their

fundamental rights (Hazbun, 2020). These actions reflect a broader pattern of U.S. engagement that reinforces colonial dynamics and contributes to the systemic marginalization of Palestinian narratives and agency.

A poignant illustration of this ideological alignment is an AI-generated video circulated online in early 2025, depicting Donald Trump's fantastical plan for the reconstruction of Gaza. The video portrays Gaza transformed into a hyper-modern, affluent urban landscape complete with luxury shopping malls, casinos, and a monumental statue of Donald Trump, while entirely erasing any presence of Palestinian people, culture, or sovereignty. Although the video may superficially appear as satire or speculative fiction, its narrative framing positions the West—embodied by Trump—as a heroic savior figure, capable of single-handedly redeeming a devastated region, while rendering the indigenous population invisible and irrelevant (El-Shewy et al., 2025; Teggin, 2025). This representational strategy resonates profoundly with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, which critiques the Western tendency to construct the East as an inferior, passive, and chaotic

Other, thereby legitimizing Western intervention and domination (Said, 1978).

Said's Orientalism provides a critical framework for understanding how Western discourse has historically produced and perpetuated reductive representations of non-Western societies (Said, 1978). Orientalist ideology operates by framing the East as inherently deficient, irrational, and in need of rescue or guidance by the more "advanced" West (Lockman, 2009). This epistemic violence not only facilitates political and military domination but also operates through cultural and symbolic means, including media, literature, and popular discourse (Gregory, 2004). In the contemporary digital era, these representational patterns have been reconfigured through new media technologies, including AI-generated content, which reproduces colonial tropes under the guise of innovation, humor, or entertainment (Nakamura, 2020).

This study examines how the AI-generated video functions as a digital artifact of Orientalist discourse, reinforcing Western hegemony and symbolically erasing Palestinian identity, memory, and resistance. By situating the video within the broader contexts of U.S. foreign

policy, the historical dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the theoretical framework of Orientalism, this analysis demonstrates that such representations are not benign or apolitical. Rather, they perpetuate enduring legacies of exclusion, epistemological control, and ideological power, illustrating how emerging technologies can serve as vehicles for the rearticulation of colonial narratives in the 21st century (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology as outlined by Creswell (2014), which emphasizes the exploration and interpretation of meaning in social phenomena. Qualitative research focuses on understanding human experiences, ideologies, and representations through non-numerical data. It is context-sensitive, interpretive, and aims to uncover how individuals or texts construct meaning within specific cultural or political frameworks. In this study, the primary data consist of an AI-generated video titled "Trump's Gaza Reconstruction Plan," released in early 2025. Secondary sources include scholarly literature on Orientalism, Islamophobia,

postcolonial theory, and digital media representation. Both visual and linguistic elements are analyzed to examine how ideology and symbolic power operate within the video.

This research applies a transnational approach. The transnational American Studies investigates how American narratives and power structures circulate across borders and influence global discourse (Adi, 2020; Sujiwa & Munandar, 2024). The AI-generated video is treated as a transnational artefact that symbolically projects onto Gaza, while erasing Palestinian presence and identity. By examining how the video constructs Gaza as a Westernized, modernized, and consumer-oriented space under Trump's leadership, this study reveals how digital content can reproduce colonial ideologies in contemporary forms.

This research employs a postcolonial theoretical framework to explore how digital media functions as a site for ideological inscription and symbolic domination. The analysis draws upon Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1979), which posits that Western discourse systematically constructs the East as inferior, irrational, and dependent to legitimize

colonial authority. Said's concept provides a critical interpretive lens for examining how the video portrays Donald Trump as a heroic savior figure while rendering Palestinian subjects invisible and voiceless. Through the operation of Orientalist discourse, the East is reimagined as a symbolic "Other" that must be rescued, reshaped, and silenced under Western intervention. By employing this framework, the study reveals how digital media, even when adopting satirical or ostensibly neutral forms, can reproduce colonial hierarchies and perpetuate global asymmetries of power.

DISCUSSION

The AI-generated video titled "Trump's Gaza Reconstruction Plan" presents an imagined version of Gaza that reflects distinctly Orientalist ideologies as theorized by Edward Said. The visual narrative does not merely depict a satirical reconstruction plan but rather reinforces the symbolic domination of the West over the East. Gaza is shown as a depopulated, modernized city filled with Western architectural icons and imaginary, while Palestinians the subject of the supposed reconstruction are absent or rendered voiceless. This

erasure aligns directly with Said's observation that the Orient is constructed not to reflect its reality, but to serve the ideological interests of the West.

Symbolic Journey from East to West



Figure 1 - Escaping the Cave: Symbolic Journey from East to West.

This image starkly visualizes the core Orientalist binary as articulated by Edward Said, where the Orient is constructed as the West's contrasting other. The dark, confining cave from which the children emerge is a potent symbol for the Orientalist conception of the East: a place shrouded in ignorance, backwardness, and stagnation, requiring external enlightenment. Conversely, the radiant, futuristic city bathed in sunlight embodies the West: a beacon of modernity, rationality, and progress. This deliberate juxtaposition is not merely aesthetic; it is a fundamental act of ideological representation that reinforces a hierarchy of civilizations.

As Said argued, this binary serves to legitimize Western influence and intervention, framing it not as domination but as a necessary and benevolent guide for a region perceived as incapable of self-determination (Said, 1978). The children's journey, therefore, is framed as an escape from their own inherent condition towards a salvation only the West can provide.

The children themselves are rendered as anonymous, passive vessels within this ideological narrative, effectively stripped of any individual or collective agency. Their facelessness is a critical element of this representation, denying them specific identity, history, or voice and reducing them to generic symbols of the "Oriental" masses awaiting rescue. They do not actively conquer the darkness; they are merely drawn towards the light, embodying a passive receptivity to Western-led salvation. This portrayal aligns with the Orientalist tendency to deny the subject peoples the capacity to shape their own destiny, instead casting them in a perpetual state of waiting for the transformative touch of the West. Their silence and lack of distinct features ensure they cannot challenge or complicate the narrative being imposed upon them. They become

what Said described as figures to be "spoken for," their reality defined entirely by the Western gaze that claims to know what is best for them (Said, 1978). In this schema, their only role is to validate the West's self-proclaimed heroic destiny.

The entire scene thus functions as a powerful metaphor for the Western "civilizing mission," a core tenet of Orientalist discourse. The narrative implies that true progress and hope are not inherent to or achievable from within the East itself, but are commodities that must be imported from the West. The futuristic city is unmistakably Western in its architectural aesthetic, symbolizing that the only viable future for the region is one that is built in the West's image and on its terms. It represents a form of symbolic erasure, where local culture, knowledge, and paths to modernity are deemed invalid and are overwritten by a foreign blueprint. The image suggests that leaving the "cave" of one's own culture and history is a prerequisite for entering the modern world, a deeply colonialist notion. Said critiqued this very impulse, noting that Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having

authority over the Orient" by defining what constitutes legitimate progress (Said, 1978, p. 3).

Ultimately, this visual construction is a contemporary digital manifestation of the enduring power dynamics Said exposed. It perpetuates a fantasy where complex geopolitical realities and traumas are simplified into a singular story of Western benevolence and Eastern passivity. The image avoids any acknowledgment of the historical violence often accompanying such "interventions" or the resilience and voices of the people it symbolically represents. By framing this dynamic as a natural and hopeful progression, it sanitizes the power relations at play and presents Western hegemony as an inevitable and universally desired outcome. The children's passage from darkness to light is presented as an unquestionable good, effectively masking the ideological work of asserting Western superiority and justifying interventionist policies. This exemplifies how Orientalist tropes persist, adapting to new media like AI-generated content to continue producing what Said termed "a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a

manifestly different world" (Said, 1978, p. 12).

The Disappearance of Real Gaza



Figure 2 - Hope, branding, and the Disappearance of Real Gaza

This image powerfully employs the figure of an anonymous child to execute a quintessential Orientalist maneuver, as defined by Edward Said. The young subject, devoid of any specific cultural markers, historical context, or familial ties, is reduced to a universalized symbol of innocence and vulnerability. This deliberate de-contextualization is not a neutral act but a strategic one that empties the subject of its authentic identity. The child ceases to be a person with a particular history and becomes a blank canvas upon which Western fantasies can be projected. Said (1978) argued that Orientalism operates by representing the Orient as a passive, empty space waiting to be filled with Western meaning and intention. Here, the child embodies that vacant space, a symbolic vessel for a narrative crafted by and for the West, rather than a

representation of a people with their own agency.

The child's movement towards the opulent, glowing structure branded with Trump's name directly romanticizes and naturalizes Western intervention. The heart-shaped balloon signifies a simplistic, emotionally charged hope that is explicitly tied to the figure of Donald Trump and the architectural symbol of his power and influence. This visual rhetoric suggests that salvation, safety, and prosperity for the vulnerable Orient are singularly achievable through alignment with this specific Western authority. The scene evokes a fairy-tale-like ascent towards a majestic palace, framing geopolitical dominance as a benevolent and aspirational destiny. It aligns with the Orientalist tradition where, as Said noted, the West positions itself not just as a ruler but as a "redeemer", crafting a narrative that obscures the realities of power and control under the guise of charitable rescue and guidance (Said, 1978, p. 40).

It is a profound exercise in representational control, where complex realities of conflict, trauma, and resistance are symbolically displaced by soft, marketable, and emotionally manipulative

imagery. The potential trauma of displacement or the historical resistance of a population is entirely erased, replaced by a singular, heartwarming image of a child seeking solace in a Western icon. This process is a hallmark of Orientalist discourse, which, according to Said (1978), functions by substituting the actual, complex humanity of the East with a series of simplified, often sentimental, stereotypes that are more palatable and useful to the West. The harsh political dimensions of intervention are thus laundered into a story of emotional rescue, making the underlying power dynamics more acceptable and obscuring the very history and identity of those being "saved".

Ultimately, this AI-generated construction is a contemporary digital instrument of Orientalism, leveraging emotional manipulation to validate a Western geopolitical project. The image is designed to elicit an affective response—pity, hope, inspiration—that bypasses critical thinking about the concrete consequences of such interventionist fantasies. By focusing on the innocent child and the gleaming palace, the narrative avoids any uncomfortable questions about sovereignty, occupation, or

cultural imperialism. It exemplifies how old colonial tropes are repackaged through new media technologies, continuing a long tradition of what Said described as the West's power to manipulate the image of the East for its own purposes. This power is not merely to represent but to actively create a reality that serves its interests, demonstrating that "Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker" (Said, 1978, p. 204).

Trump (West) as Hero



Figure 3 – The Golden Statue of Trump: Who Gets to Be the Hero?

This image, depicting a monumental golden statue of Donald Trump, serves as a potent symbol of what Edward Said identified as the Western tendency to position itself as the central, heroic actor in the narrative of the Orient. The statue, bathed in warm, adulating light and surrounded by faceless onlookers, does not merely acknowledge Trump's presence but actively elevates him to the status of a

deified, civilizing figure. This iconography directly echoes the savior trope that is central to Orientalist thought, where Western figures are inserted as the primary agents of progress and history in regions deemed incapable of self-determination. The scene enacts a symbolic occupation of the landscape, where Western dominance is not just presented as a political reality but is glorified as a benevolent and celebrated necessity. As Said (1978) argued, such representations are a means by which the West asserts its authority, restructuring the Orient through a lens that privileges its own power and narrative. The statue becomes a permanent, imposing marker of this authority, claiming physical and symbolic space in a land not its own. This visual rhetoric asserts that the future of this region is inextricably linked to and dependent upon the magnanimity of Western power.

The crowd of anonymous, admiring onlookers is crucial to this Orientalist narrative, as they function as a silent, homogenized chorus whose sole purpose is to validate the greatness of the Western hero. Their lack of distinct features, individual identities, or voices strips them of any agency, reducing them to passive recipients of

Western benevolence rather than active participants in their own destiny. They exist within the frame only to gaze upwards in awe, their presence serving to reinforce the hierarchy between the active, monumental West and the passive, grateful East. This complete absence of Palestinian agency signifies what Said described as the representational control inherent in Orientalism, where the subaltern is denied the capacity to speak for themselves and is instead spoken for (Spivak, 1988, as influenced by Said's framework). The populace is rendered as a backdrop within their own land, their consent and admiration assumed rather than earned or depicted with any authenticity. Their silence within this constructed narrative reinforces the power dynamic where the West defines, builds, and is celebrated, while the East is merely present to observe and approve. This transforms a complex societal and political reality into a simplistic spectacle of Western triumph.

The opulent, Western-style boulevard and the statue's grandiose aesthetic participate in the Orientalist logic of "modernizing" the East by remaking it in the image of the West, thereby erasing its indigenous

character and history. The transformation of the landscape into a sleek, modern space adorned with a foreign icon represents a fantasy of control and pacification, where local identity is subsumed by imported symbols of power. This visual erasure of Palestinian culture and architecture is a form of symbolic violence, overwriting a painful and contested history with a sanitized vision of Western-led development and luxury. Said (1978) noted that Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 3), and this image is a literal manifestation of that restructuring. The potential ruins of conflict are imaginatively replaced not with a vision born from within the culture, but with one imposed from outside, reflecting the Orientalist desire to tame and domesticate the unfamiliar. The scene promotes a vision of peace that is contingent upon the acceptance of Western hegemony and aesthetic dominance. This constitutes a form of political storytelling that justifies intervention by presenting it as the only path to modernity and order.

Ultimately, this AI-generated construction is a stark example of how digital Orientalism repackages

colonial fantasies for the contemporary era, presenting domination as benevolent development and erasure as progress. The image moves beyond mere satire to articulate a serious ideological desire for control, leveraging the perceived neutrality of technology to advance a deeply political vision. By framing this overt power projection as an inspirational and aspirational future, the narrative sanitizes the realities of occupation and intervention, making them palatable for digital consumption. It demonstrates that the core tenets of Orientalism—the binary of Western superiority and Eastern inferiority, the need for Western guidance, and the silencing of the Other—remain deeply embedded in modern media forms. As Said (1978) contended, this discourse is sustained by a will to manipulate and incorporate what is different, a will that is clearly visible in this fabricated monument to Western supremacy. The image thus serves as a warning that emerging technologies like AI are not neutral tools but can become potent apparatuses for re-inscribing age-old imperial logics onto the digital landscape.

The Projection of Western fantasies



Figure 4 - Poolside Politics: Power Relaxed in a Silenced Landscape

This image of Trump and Netanyahu lounging poolside in a luxurious Gaza is a quintessential example of what Edward Said termed the Western projection of its own fantasies onto the Orient. The scene operates by constructing a reality where the complex, fraught geography of Gaza is emptied of its actual political meaning and historical trauma. In its place, a new, sanitized reality is imposed—one designed for the leisure and consumption of Western and allied elites. This act of imaginative reconstruction is a fundamental exercise of Orientalist power, which, as Said (1978) argued, is the power to define, represent, and ultimately dominate the Orient by controlling its narrative. The poolside setting is not a neutral backdrop but a potent symbol of this dominance, representing a vision of the region where its only value is to serve as a recreational

space for those in power. This transforms a site of enduring resistance and humanitarian crisis into a tranquil oasis that exists solely for Western pleasure and comfort.

The portrayal systematically obscures the realities of systemic oppression and occupation through a process of "peace-washing," where aesthetic pleasure is used to launder political violence. The luxurious amenities, relaxed postures, and serene environment create a visually pleasing image that actively disguises the structures of control and violence that enable such a fantasy. This aligns perfectly with the Orientalist mechanism described by Said (1978), where the West has the prerogative to reconstruct the Orient, making it "not only as a place of romance, exotic beings, and haunting memories, but also as a place of Western redemption" (p. 57). The painful history of blockade, displacement, and conflict is deliberately overwritten, not with a vision of Palestinian sovereignty or self-determination, but with one of subservient pacification. The image suggests that the ideal future for Gaza is not one of political freedom but of servile tranquility, effectively erasing the

Palestinian struggle for liberation from the narrative.

Through an Orientalist lens, this visual transformation directly converts a symbol of resistance into a site of recreation, thereby neutralizing its political threat and domesticating its identity. Gaza, in reality a potent symbol of defiance and resilience, is remade into a passive playground, its agency and history subdued under the gaze of its occupiers and their powerful ally. This act is a profound demonstration of symbolic power, illustrating how Western authority can redefine the very meaning of a landscape to suit its own ideological needs. Said (1978) contended that Orientalism is a "distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts" (p. 12); this image is its contemporary digital-aesthetic text. The desire to pacify and domesticate the East, to render it harmless and available for consumption, is a classic Orientalist impulse that here finds expression in AI-generated fantasy.

Ultimately, this scene serves as a stark reminder that Orientalist discourse is not a relic of the past but a

living ideology that adapts to new media to perpetuate hierarchies of power. The AI-generated content functions as a modern tool for re-inscribing colonial logics, presenting a future where domination is repackaged as development and erasure is framed as entertainment. The shared leisure between Trump and Netanyahu visually cements an alliance that operates over and above the Palestinian population, who are conspicuously absent from their own land in this vision. Their absence is the most telling feature, confirming Said's (1978) observation that Orientalism denies the Orient the capacity for self-representation. The image does not envision a future for Palestinians; it envisions a future without them, where their land is redefined as a resort for the very powers responsible for their oppression, thus completing the cycle of Orientalist erasure.

The Exotic Orient



Figure 5 - Dancing on the Ruins: When Exotic Becomes a Distraction.

The depiction of figures dancing upon urban ruins presents a complex layering of meaning that, through an Orientalist lens, functions to aestheticize suffering and obscure historical causality. The scene initially masquerades as a universal celebration of life and resilience, using the act of dancing to signify an innate, almost primitive vitality within the Eastern subject. However, this apparent celebration is strategically detached from the very material conditions that produced the ruins—the destruction and trauma of conflict. This deliberate disconnection is a classic Orientalist maneuver, which, as Said (1978) argued, involves separating the Orient from its history and representing it through a simplified, often romanticized Western filter. The ruins become a depoliticized stage set, a visually intriguing backdrop stripped of its painful context, thereby allowing the viewer to consume the image without confronting the uncomfortable realities of violence and displacement that it implies.

The dancers themselves are rendered as generic, symbolic figures, devoid of specific cultural identity, nationality, or personal history. This lack of distinct

markers is not an oversight but a fundamental aspect of the Orientalist representation, which prefers to deal in homogenized types rather than complex human individuals. They are transformed into an anonymous, "exotic" spectacle, their movement serving not as an expression of their own agency but as a performance for an implied Western viewer. This reduction of people to symbolic ciphers aligns with Said's (1978) critique that Orientalism denies the Orient its humanity and multiplicity, instead producing a singular, manageable image of the "Other." Their dance is not presented as a specific cultural practice with its own meaning but as a generalized display of emotion that can be easily interpreted and consumed by an external gaze, effectively silencing their authentic voice and experience.

By transforming profound loss into a consumable spectacle, the narrative engages in a complete evasion of political and moral accountability. The image actively avoids any acknowledgment of who is responsible for the destruction or who must endure the consequences of living amidst its ruins. This erasure of cause and effect is a powerful ideological tool that

protects Western audiences from confronting their own potential complicity or the actions of their allies in creating such conditions of devastation. The focus on performative joy displaces any space for mourning, resistance, or anger, emotions that would directly challenge the viewer and implicate broader power structures. Said (1978) described Orientalism as a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, and ultimately dominating it; this spectacle is a clear example of authorizing a view that dominates by simplifying and de-politicizing.

Ultimately, the scene reinforces the foundational Orientalist hierarchy where the West retains the position of the defining observer, and the East is reduced to a performed object to be observed. The dancers exist to be interpreted, while the power to assign meaning to their actions—to define whether it represents hope, ignorance, or simple exoticism—rests solely with the external, presumably Western, consumer of the image. This dynamic perfectly illustrates what Said identified as the Western authority to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming or emerging. The East

is once again confined to the role of a performance, its reality contingent upon Western interpretation. This AI-generated vision, therefore, is not a neutral depiction of joy but a modern digital continuation of the colonial impulse to manage, pacify, and control the narrative of the Other by turning their trauma into a harmless spectacle.

Overall, the video shows that Orientalism has not disappeared but has instead been reshaped through AI and digital media. The visuals continue to reflect Western dominance over the East, particularly in how narratives, power, and hope are constructed. The East is portrayed as silent and in need of saving, while the West takes the role of storyteller and decision maker claiming the right to define, rebuild, and speak on behalf of others.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that AI-generated digital media is not just a technological product but a powerful force in reconstructing new colonial discourses in the postcolonial era. A critical analysis of AI videos featuring Donald Trump and an imagined Gaza reconstruction project shows that Orientalist narratives persist under the guise of

satire and innovation, portraying the Western world, represented by Trump, as the "civilizing agent" while erasing Palestinians by rendering them invisible, voiceless, and significant. The video's imagery from creating a deserted utopian city, glorifying Western figures, to beautifying pain and sanitizing occupation reflects deeply unequal power structures consistent with Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, where the East is depicted as the "Other" and continually narrated through Western perspectives. Although presented humorously, this media form reinforces silencing and exclusion, turning political history and cultural identity into consumable images. Ultimately, the study argues that AI-generated content is neither neutral nor apolitical but acts as a new mechanism for reproducing imperialist logic, often erasing the voices of the oppressed by disguising domination as progress and erasure as entertainment, highlighting the urgent need to critically challenge the ideological foundations of digital representation and resist the normalization of colonial hierarchies in new storytelling forms.

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Dynamics of Change in United States Policy in the Syrian Crisis: Analysis of the Transition from Diplomacy to Intervention

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ABSTRACT

The United States' policy toward the Syrian crisis (2011–2019) was marked by a significant and often inconsistent transition from diplomatic caution to direct military intervention. This article analyzes the dynamics of this policy evolution, moving beyond traditional state-centric explanations to examine the influence of cross-border flows. It argues that the transition was not a linear progression but a reactive and fragmented process driven by the interplay of three key factors: the failure of established international diplomatic mechanisms to resolve the conflict; the transnationalization of the threat landscape with the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS); and the powerful, albeit fluctuating, influence of global media narratives depicting humanitarian atrocities. This study maps the critical junctures that compelled policy recalibration by employing a qualitative process-tracing methodology and discourse analysis of official documents, presidential statements, and media reports. The findings demonstrate that key decisions from the "red line" ultimatum to the initiation of Operation Inherent Resolve were profoundly shaped by forces that transcended national borders, forcing policymakers to react to non-state actors, global information flows, and normative pressures. The research embodies an analytical and process-oriented approach that systematically investigates the evolution of US foreign policy during the Syrian crisis, emphasizing the underlying dynamics that prompted the transition from diplomatic engagement to direct intervention.

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INTRODUCTION

The Syrian crisis, which erupted in 2011 amid the broader upheavals of the Arab Spring, swiftly evolved from a domestic protest movement into one of the twenty-first century's most complex humanitarian and geopolitical conflicts (Blanchard, 2025). For the United States, the conflict posed a moral and strategic dilemma—balancing the ideals of democracy and human rights with national interests and regional stability (Lynch, 2016). At the outset, US policy toward Syria emphasized diplomacy, economic sanctions, and multilateral engagement to encourage political reform under Bashar al-Assad's regime (Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). However, as the violence escalated and the humanitarian crisis deepened, Washington's approach gradually transformed into more direct forms of intervention, ranging from support for opposition groups to targeted airstrikes and participation in the international coalition against the Islamic State (Sterling-Folker, 2013). This shift reflected a fundamental reorientation of American foreign policy in the Middle East.

The transition from diplomacy to intervention did not occur abruptly. Instead, it was the product of a complex interaction between structural, institutional, and contextual factors. Among these were post-Iraq "intervention fatigue," the diffusion of global power, the persistence of transnational terrorist threats, and the resurgence of rival powers such as Russia and Iran (Mesgarpour et al., 2020). Domestically, debates within the Obama administration revealed the tension between moral imperatives to protect civilians and the strategic caution to avoid another protracted military engagement (Brands, 2017). President Obama's decision not to authorize large-scale strikes following Assad's use of chemical weapons in 2013 epitomized this ambivalence, even as later US involvement in counterterrorism operations signaled a re-engagement under different justifications (GERGES, 2021). These fluctuations underscored the adaptive and often contradictory nature of US foreign policy in times of crisis.

From the perspective of Transnational American Studies, the Syrian case provides a valuable lens through which to examine how US foreign policy

operates within a global network of interactions rather than in isolation. US power is mediated through transnational institutions, allied states, advocacy groups, and international media discourses (Lionberger, 2017). The shift from diplomacy to intervention in Syria thus cannot be understood solely as a reflection of domestic decision-making, but also as a response to transnational pressures—ranging from humanitarian advocacy and public opinion to the constraints of international law and alliance politics. This framework underscores the dialogical nature of American influence: its ideals of democracy and responsibility are constantly negotiated and reinterpreted within the global political order (Chandler, 2015).

Bureaucratic and institutional complexities within the US foreign policy apparatus further shaped the dynamics of this policy transformation. Competing agencies pursued divergent agendas: the Department of State prioritized diplomatic resolution, while the Department of Defense and intelligence agencies emphasized limited intervention to counter terrorism and curb regional adversaries (Geremedhn & Gebrihet, 2024). Meanwhile,

congressional polarization and public scepticism toward new wars constrained decisive action (PILLAR, 2018). The result was a fragmented, reactive policy marked by oscillations between engagement and restraint, idealism and pragmatism—mirroring the broader ambivalence of American global leadership in a multipolar world.

This study analyzes the dynamics of change in US policy toward Syria by examining the processes and rationales underlying the transition from diplomatic engagement to military intervention between 2011 and 2016. It aims to identify the turning points in this policy evolution, the domestic and international drivers behind them, and their implications for the future of American foreign policy. The central argument advanced here is that this transformation was not a sudden rupture but a gradual adaptation shaped by moral imperatives, security concerns, and institutional inertia within the US foreign policy establishment (Krenn, 2022; Nguyen, 2013).

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative approach, employing process tracing and discourse analysis of official statements, policy documents, and secondary literature. It draws on

speeches, congressional hearings, and reports from international organizations to reconstruct the sequence of decisions and contextual dynamics that defined US engagement in Syria. By situating the analysis within national and transnational frameworks, the study contributes to broader debates on foreign policy change, interventionism, and the evolving nature of American hegemony.

Ultimately, the Syrian crisis serves as a critical case for assessing the endurance of liberal interventionism in an era marked by declining US primacy and rising multipolar competition. The shift from diplomacy to intervention reveals how the United States negotiates the tension between its self-perceived moral responsibility and the constraints of global politics. Understanding these dynamics sheds light on the trajectory of American policy in Syria and provides insights into the future contours of US engagement in international crises.

To substantiate this thesis, this analysis focuses on the period from the beginning of the uprising in 2011 to the territorial defeat of ISIS's caliphate in 2019, covering the critical policy decisions of both the Obama and Trump

administrations. The following section will outline the theoretical framework, combining Foreign Policy Analysis with a transnational lens. Subsequently, the article will trace the policy evolution through three distinct phases—from diplomatic maneuvering to the reluctant intervention against ISIS and the eventual normalization of a US military presence—before concluding with the findings and their implications for understanding US foreign policy in a globalized world.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design that integrates process-tracing with discourse analysis to investigate the complex dynamics of US policy change in the Syrian crisis.

Research Approach: Qualitative Process-Tracing

The primary analytical approach is process-tracing, a highly effective method for explaining historical outcomes by examining the sequence of events and causal chains that lead to them. Rather than simply correlating an input (e.g., a chemical attack) with an output (e.g., a policy shift), this approach reconstructs the decision-making pathway to identify critical junctures and

understand how specific factors became influential. For this study, process-tracing will be used to map the evolution of US policy from 2011 to 2019, pinpointing key moments, such as the 2013 Ghouta chemical attack, the rise of ISIS in 2014, and the 2017 Khan Shaykhun attack, to analyze how these events were processed within the US foreign policy apparatus and why they resulted in a transition from diplomacy toward intervention (Schoon & Duxbury, 2019). This approach is particularly well-suited to uncovering how transnational pressures were filtered through domestic political and bureaucratic structures to effect change.

Data Source

The research is based on a comprehensive review of primary and secondary sources to ensure a robust and triangulated analysis. Primary sources are crucial for understanding the official positions and internal logic of US policymakers. They include: official White House press briefings and policy statements; presidential speeches and executive orders; State Department cables and diplomatic communications (made public through archives or sources like WikiLeaks); congressional testimonies and reports from relevant committees; and United Nations Security Council resolutions

and debates involving the US. This data provides a direct window into the formal justifications and declared rationale for policy decisions.

Secondary sources provide critical context, expert analysis, and alternative perspectives. They consist of: peer-reviewed articles from leading journals in international relations, security studies, and American studies; in-depth analytical reports from reputable news organizations (such as The New York Times, The Guardian, The Wall Street Journal, and Al Jazeera); and policy reports from non-partisan think tanks (e.g., the Council on Foreign Relations, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the International Crisis Group). This material is crucial for corroborating official accounts and understanding the broader strategic and political environment.

Methods of Analysis: Discourse Analysis

Complementing the process-tracing approach, this study utilizes discourse analysis to examine how the Syrian crisis was framed in language and why these frames mattered. Foreign policy is not only enacted but also discursively constructed; how a problem is defined shapes

the range of perceived solutions. This analysis will systematically examine the rhetoric used by US officials to describe the conflict, its actors, and the stakes for America. Key discursive shifts will be analyzed, such as the framing of the conflict evolving from a "civil war" to a "humanitarian catastrophe" and, most critically, to a "transnational terrorist threat". By analyzing the language surrounding pivotal events, such as President Obama's "red line" statement and the official justifications for airstrikes against ISIS, this study will demonstrate how discourse enabled and constrained policy options, intervening in a strategic choice and a narrated necessity. This method is vital for revealing how transnational media narratives were absorbed and re-articulated by policymakers to justify the shift from diplomacy to intervention.

DISCUSSION

Analysis: Phases of Policy Transition

The evolution of US policy in the Syrian crisis was not a linear progression but a series of reactive shifts driven by the failure of existing tools, the emergence of new threats, and the influence of powerful

transnational narratives. This analysis traces this transition through three distinct phases, demonstrating how the US moved from a position of diplomatic caution to becoming an active military participant in the conflict.

Phase I (2011-2013): The Primacy of Diplomacy and the "Red Line" Discourse

In the initial phase of the Syrian conflict, US foreign policy was heavily influenced by a desire to avoid engaging in another protracted military commitment in the Middle East, which stemmed from a widespread "war weariness" following the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Obama administration's strategy was fundamentally anchored in diplomatic efforts complemented by rhetorical pressure aimed at the Assad regime, exemplified by the pivotal proclamation in August 2011 that President Bashar al-Assad "must step aside" (Mahmood et al., 2021). This declaration symbolized a normative stance rather than a clear operational intent, leading to limited policy tools that mainly encompassed sanctions and attempts to cultivate an international consensus for political transition through United Nations channels (Shen, 2025).

However, the effectiveness of such diplomatic approaches was consistently thwarted by the opposition from Russia and China, both of whom issued multiple vetoes at the UN Security Council, thereby protecting the Assad regime from significant international repercussions (Kwuelum, 2024). This consistent failure of established diplomatic mechanisms highlights a critical driver of policy change; international institutions' ineffectiveness in imposing change in Syria emphasized the limitations of a purely diplomatic strategy in addressing the complexities of the civil war (Kwuelum, 2024).

The turning point for US policy came in August 2012, when President Obama's informal remark about a "red line" regarding the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime transformed into a significant discursive commitment. The subsequent chemical attack in Ghouta in August 2013 thus placed the US in a policy dilemma: a preemption of military intervention was expected, positioning the administration to act decisively. However, the choice to retreat from possible airstrikes in favor of a Russian-brokered agreement to dismantle Syria's chemical arsenal was viewed globally as

a retreat, which not only achieved a non-proliferation objective but also underscored the administration's deep-seated reluctance to intervene militarily (Gammeltoft et al., 2022). This episode signaled a decisive moment wherein the administration's diplomatic-only approach was revealed to be inadequate in the face of escalating violence and the recalcitrance of both the Assad regime and its allies.

The early phase of US policy in Syria demonstrates an intricate tension between normative commitments and practical limitations within a fragmented international order. The intractability of the Assad regime's position, fortified by international support from states like Russia, illuminated the challenges facing US diplomatic efforts and foreshadowed a subsequent shift towards a more interventionist posture in response to evolving circumstances on the ground (Harvey-Valdés et al., 2025; Poghosyan, 2024).

Phase II (2014-2016): The Transnational Threat and Reluctant Intervention

The dramatic emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fundamentally transformed the calculus of US involvement in the Syrian

conflict, representing the second and most critical driver of policy transition. Unlike the Assad regime, whose brutalities were contained mainly within Syria's borders, ISIS's expansive territorial ambitions and its direct threat to Western security prompted an urgent reevaluation of US foreign policy (Krenn, 2022).

The key shift occurred during the summer of 2014 with the harrowing public executions of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff. These acts were emblematic of a carefully orchestrated media strategy by ISIS, designed not merely as battlefield violence but as transnational provocations aimed at eliciting a decisive response from the West (Asuming et al., 2022). The framing of ISIS as a "network of death" and as a significant apocalyptic terrorist threat with global ambitions marked a critical discursive shift in Washington's perception of the conflict. This reframing allowed the Obama administration to advocate for military action on firmer grounds of counterterrorism and national security rather than contested humanitarian principles, such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) (Lammich, 2025).

In response to the escalating threat posed by ISIS, the United States undertook military operations under Operation Inherent Resolve, which involved targeted airstrikes and support for local partner forces, particularly the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This military posture represented a definitive end to the previous non-interventionist stance, as the US transitioned into a direct combatant in the Syrian conflict (Kobakhidze, 2022). Though the intervention was characterized as limited and focused on the immediate threat of ISIS, it nonetheless marked a substantial shift in US policy, demonstrating a willingness to engage militarily in a conflict that had once been deemed a distant civil war.

This intervention's calculated yet restrained nature reflected the complexities of US strategic interests in the region, balancing the immediate need to combat a predatory group like ISIS with the broader goal of avoiding a full-scale military engagement reminiscent of prior conflicts in the area (Kounalakis, 2015). This dual approach highlighted the evolving nature of threats in a globalized era and the challenges of enacting

effective foreign policy in an increasingly intertwined international landscape. The rise of ISIS necessitated a swift and strategic US response, fundamentally reshaping its involvement in Syria and underscoring the complex interplay between evolving security threats and decision-making processes in US foreign policy (Asuming et al., 2022).

Phase III (2014-2019): The Normalization of Intervention and Competing Interests

By the time the Trump administration took office, US direct military involvement in Syria had become a normalized aspect of American foreign policy. The ongoing anti-ISIS campaign continued to evolve, yet a significant shift occurred following the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack in April 2017. This incident marked a critical juncture in US military engagement, contrasting sharply with the previous administration's more cautious approach after the Ghouta chemical attack in 2013. President Trump's immediate response was to order a swift Tomahawk missile strike on the Shayrat airbase, signifying a decisive and rapid military action that had not been characterized before US interventions in Syria (Gammeltoft et al., 2022).

A pivotal factor behind this shift in policy was the influence of mediatized humanitarian narratives, representing the third driver of US policy change. President Trump publicly cited the harrowing televised images of children suffering from the gas attack as a crucial motivation for the airstrike (Asuming et al., 2022). This narrative of suffering allowed the administration to frame its military action as a necessary humanitarian intervention, projecting an image of American resolve and decisiveness that contrasted with the perceived inaction of the Obama administration. By employing such performative acts of intervention, Trump aimed to establish a commitment to addressing humanitarian crises while simultaneously reasserting US power in the region (Bolan et al., 2020).

The decision to strike the Shayrat airbase demonstrated a critical evolution in US foreign policy in Syria, showcasing a willingness to engage militarily based on the immediate need to respond to atrocities rather than extensive deliberations about long-term strategies or consequences. This shift not only marked an acceptance of military action as an available tool but also illustrated a

broader expansion of US strategic objectives beyond merely defeating ISIS, also to include containing Iranian influence in the region. This repositioning further entrenched the American military presence in a complex multi-sided proxy war involving various state and non-state actors operating in Syria (Wenani et al., 2023). The Trump administration's response to the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack encapsulated a significant policy transition that reflected a potent mix of media influence, US strategic interests, and the prevailing humanitarian discourse. The normalization of military intervention in Syria underlines the complexities of US foreign policy, illustrating how immediate perceptions of humanitarian crises can dramatically influence decision-making within the framework of realpolitik in the Middle East (Bolan et al., 2020; Wenani et al., 2023; Gammeltoft et al., 2022).

The Undercurrent of Transnational Narratives

The influence of transnational narratives throughout the Syrian conflict has been profound, shaping the moral and political environment within which US policymakers have operated. These narratives, which flowed across

borders via global media and the internet, helped maintain the visibility of the human cost of the conflict, ensuring that it remained a pressing issue on the international stage. Notably, pivotal images such as the viral photo of toddler Alan Kurdi, who tragically drowned while fleeing the conflict, humanized an otherwise abstract refugee crisis for a global audience. This single image significantly impacted public sentiment and increased pressure on Western governments to respond more decisively to the unfolding humanitarian disaster (Gammeltoft et al., 2022).

Similarly, the haunting image of Omran Daqneesh, covered in dust and sitting dazed in an ambulance after an airstrike in Aleppo, emerged as another powerful symbol of civilian suffering. These images transcended geographic boundaries, resonating emotionally and prompting calls for action across various media platforms (Zeno, 2022). Transnational non-state actors, particularly groups like the White Helmets, who documented rescue efforts and attacks through social media, played a critical role in bypassing state-controlled narratives and providing a continuous flow of information regarding the crisis. This need

for transparency regarding human suffering added a layer of moral pressure on policymakers in the US and elsewhere.

While these narratives did not directly dictate policy decisions, they created significant moral justification and urgency for interventions, such as the 2017 missile strike on Shayrat airbase following the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack (Mocca, 2020). The imagery associated with these events ensured that the humanitarian impact of the ongoing violence could not easily be ignored, framing the crisis as a global human event rather than merely a distant geopolitical problem. Consequently, this constant flow of information and emotionally charged visuals contributed to windows of political pressure that influenced the timing and nature of US military actions, evidencing how public sentiment can indirectly drive foreign policy decisions in times of crisis (Wenani et al., 2023). The persistent and powerful influence of transnational narratives illustrates the complex interaction between media, public perception, and policymaking in the context of the Syrian conflict, underscoring the reality that humanitarian crises are not

merely political or military challenges but deeply human issues that compel action (Geremedhn & Gebrihet, 2024; Tsourapas, 2025). As policymakers navigated this landscape, they faced the dual challenge of addressing immediate security concerns while responding to humanitarian imperatives shaped by global narratives.

CONCLUSION

This article analyzed the dynamics that drove the significant shift in US policy toward the Syrian crisis, from an initial posture of diplomatic caution to one of direct military intervention. The analysis has demonstrated that this transition was not a coherent, strategically planned progression but a reactive and often fragmented process. The evidence traced through three distinct phases supports the central thesis that this evolution was propelled by a convergence of factors that transcended traditional statecraft. The failure of international diplomatic frameworks created a policy vacuum, the emergence of ISIS as a potent transnational threat provided a new and compelling justification for action, and the persistent undercurrent of mediatized humanitarian narratives shaped the political and moral context for key

decisions. The U.S. was not a wholly independent actor but was pushed and pulled by global forces that it could not fully control. The findings of this study offer a significant contribution to the field of Transnational American Studies by providing a clear case study of the modern American state's porous nature. It challenges purely state-centric or geopolitical interpretations of US foreign policy, arguing that such a lens is insufficient for understanding 21st-century global engagement. The Syrian crisis illustrates how the boundaries between the "domestic" and the "foreign" are increasingly blurred. Transnational phenomena—whether a non-state actor like ISIS using social media, a viral image of a suffering child, or the global flow of refugees—are not external factors but are integral forces that penetrate and co-constitute the decision-making processes of the state. This work reinforces the argument that to study "America" in the world today is to examine its complex entanglement with global dynamics that it simultaneously shapes and is shaped by.

The implications of this transformation are profound. Strategically, the inconsistency of U.S. engagement in Syria undermined its

credibility among allies and adversaries, raising doubts about Washington's willingness to enforce international norms. Morally, the selective nature of intervention-focused primarily on counterterrorism rather than civilian protection—exposed the tension between liberal ideals and pragmatic restraint. Politically, the United States' cautious posture allowed rival powers such as Russia and Iran to fill the ensuing power vacuum, reshaping the regional balance and signaling a decline in American dominance in the Middle East.

COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

Herewith, the author declares that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the assessment, review and revision, and publication process in general.

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Black Vietnam Veteran, Trauma and Identity: Analysis of Historical Trauma in Spike Lee's *Da 5 Bloods*

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ABSTRACT

As part of the postnational study, this study aims to identify the trauma Black Vietnam veterans suffered in the present time and their stance as Americans in *Da 5 Bloods*. Using a qualitative method in collecting the primary data from the conversation that happened in the film, as well as finding secondary data from books, journal articles, and the internet related to the study to support the analysis, this study also used historical trauma theory by LaCapra to help define the meaning behind the conversation and construct a more comprehensive view on the traumatic aspect in history. Based on the discussion, this study finds that Black Vietnam veterans are still most likely to suffer from PTSD in the present time because of their mistrust toward the VA and other Vietnamese despite being an ally. At the same time, the experience Black Vietnam veterans had from serving their country thus defines their perspective toward the government and the US as a whole because of how they were and are treated. In the end, the experience from the war made their stance against the war and its cruelty become crystal clear.

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INTRODUCTION

As a war that ended 50 years ago, the Vietnam War is notorious due to its nature and the fact that the US lost it despite its attempts to fight against growing communism in Vietnam. Starting in 1965 and continuing until 1973, when the US withdrew its military support from Vietnam, the war in which the US was involved was not solely fought by Whites; rather, it was a conflict in which people of color, especially Blacks, participated. In terms of percentage, Black soldiers comprised around 10-11 percent of the US armed forces in Vietnam, according to Westheider (2007). Hence, many would consider the Vietnam War a historical conflict without any racial segregation occurring between Whites and people of color.

However, digging deeper into its historical aspects, many parts of the war itself have been written not only from the perspective of the losers but also defined by Whites as the majority, with little consideration given to the involvement of people of color. In addition to demonstrating that segregation still exists even among US citizens, it also reveals that the history of the Vietnam War and its accounts made by the US have become less impartial, even in the present

time. In the same report, the reason why non-whites, including Black Vietnam veterans who participated in the military struggle, find it difficult to open up about their past is due to their lack of education and economic opportunity, as well as their skin color (Wood, 2016, p. 27). In other words, the marginalization of Black Vietnam veterans in expressing their trauma from the war arises from limited access to education caused by the low incomes earned by Black people.

Though nowadays the history of the Vietnam War has become more accessible, with diverse perspectives from people of color sharing their memories of the past through biographies, memoirs, and fiction, including films, these media rarely address the narratives of Black veterans in Vietnam. Relating film to the veteran experience in Hollywood, Beattie (1998) explained that, due to the culture within the Hollywood industry, where maximizing profits is crucial among numerous competitors, the messages in cinema have become negotiable to satisfy consumers' desires rather than conveying the truths of Black Vietnam veterans in this context.

Connecting historical narrative, trauma, and film produced in the US, LaCapra (2014) notes that to define a

more thorough historical narrative through trauma, the narration of fiction can be employed, as it comprises a structure and events that convey meaning to the audience. Hence, examining the meaning or signs depicted in a narrative reveals how trauma contributes to the historical narrative. Although there were many arguments about whether film is part of literature, the relationship between both can be observed through visual elements, dialogue, and narrative created in the reader's mind (Cruz, 2014, p. 39). Cohen (1979) also argues that, as film possesses certain images that depict meaning and words can produce meaning and images based on the reader's imagination, both literature and film share the same system of meaning despite differing forms.

Films then possess both close characteristics and opportunities similar to literature in explaining the relationship between trauma and history. This, in turn, gives Black Vietnam veterans a platform to share their experiences serving their country in Vietnam. Among the many films that use the Vietnam War as their backdrop, *Da 5 Bloods* prominently utilizes the perspective of Black Vietnam veterans in modern times. The film tells the story of four

Black Vietnam veterans who return to Vietnam to find the remains of their fallen squad leader and retrieve the gold they hid. It employs flashbacks to help viewers understand why they act as they do in the present. By depicting their trauma, struggles, and perspectives on their identity and their nation, *Da 5 Bloods* not only reminds the audience of the Vietnam War that occurred in the past, but also illustrates that the struggles faced by Black personnel in Vietnam continue beyond the casualties and racial segregation during the war.

Considering the explanations provided previously, this war was notable for its contradictions, both to the public and to the veterans themselves, as evident in historical accounts. Even if one thoroughly examines historical records, there may still be some bias or absence, especially concerning minority groups. As skepticism over the historical narratives presented by the US has grown recently, alongside rising civil awareness among minorities, a change in the historical narrative has become necessary, particularly when the past relates to trauma that can help define history through the experiences of those who firsthand endured the event as victims (LaCapra, 2014; LaCapra,

2016). Consequently, as *Da 5 Bloods* used Vietnam and Black Vietnam veterans as its primary focus, the film revealed how their trauma from the war persists even well after the conflict ended, reflected in their memories frequently portrayed in the movie, alongside their conversations and actions influenced by the past. It demonstrates that the film did not solely rely on entertainment purposes; it also serves as a tool to unveil the hidden struggles of Black Vietnam veterans in contemporary society.

The article presents the issue of historical trauma experienced by Black Vietnam veterans in the present, as illustrated in *Da 5 Bloods*. Furthermore, given that the discussion surrounding Black GIs and their service in Vietnam has been insufficient thus far, this article explains the depiction of Black GIs' trauma from the Vietnam War in the present day, and the portrayal of Black GIs' stance as Americans in *Da 5 Bloods*.

METHODOLOGY

Since this article focuses on *Da 5 Bloods* and the issue of trauma affecting the victims, or Black veterans in this case, the post-national perspective is implemented here to help redefine values that the US once

held, particularly through the eyes of minorities. The post-nationalism perspective in American Studies exists because of the need to reconstruct the value that the White majority has constructed through the opposition of the minority, because of its nature to recognize the existence of other people in the US, for the sake of redefining the old values the US had (Pease, 2001, p. 5). Therefore, this perspective exists to allow the Black community, who are minorities, to alter the perspective of the US shaped by the White majority in the past.

The theory of historical trauma is utilized to examine *Da 5 Bloods* and its correlation with past trauma in contemporary times. LaCapra (2014) notes that since history and trauma are seldom connected, this theory provides a framework for analyzing both through the event and its structure. By exploring specific traumatic historical events from the perspective of the victim, who is not confined to the traumatized, through documentary and radical constructivism or the narrative structure that encompasses performative elements, rhetoric, ideology, and political standpoint, this theory offers a more comprehensive understanding of

traumatic historical experiences.

LaCapra (2016) also explains that trauma often affects individuals in a manner that leads them to react repetitively and compulsively to their traumatic memories through nightmares, overreactions, and various other responses long after the traumatic event has occurred; thus, the victim remains in a state of acting out or is unable to relieve the past. In applying LaCapra's historical trauma theory to *Da 5 Blood*, the data collection process begins by watching the movie to gather conversation between characters and scenes that depicts trauma suffered by black Vietnam veterans, specifically the ones that represent acting out. Furthermore, the analytical process uses qualitative analysis by understanding the themes used in the narration or conversation (Creswell, 2009). It is continued by identifying both the absence (empirical lack) and the loss (which once existed but was taken away).

DISCUSSION

Da 5 Bloods is a film directed by Spike Lee, who used the Vietnam War as a backdrop and focuses on the experiences of Black GIs serving in Vietnam during that time ('Spike Lee Breaks Down Black History in *Da*

5 Bloods I Netflix', 2020). Emphasizing his statement that many of the historical narratives in the US are false, this film becomes a piece that depicts various facets of the historical trauma caused by the war, which endures in the present, as well as the stance of Black GIs as part of US citizens. These findings are discussed in the following section.

Black GI and Trauma in the Present Time

In *Da 5 Bloods*, PTSD is one aspect that depicts how the trauma brought from the Vietnam War becomes part of Black GIs' lives in the present time, which Paul represented.

PTSD and Its Relation to Mistrust toward Veteran Affairs

According to LaCapra (2014), the state of melancholic, impulsive, and repetitive acts of remembering and re-living the trauma is a part of the acting out or state of being haunted by the past. While connected to PTSD and its symptoms caused by exposure to traumatic events in the past that remain in one's memory in the present time, it cannot be denied that the past within that individual has not yet been worked through. Hence, by understanding the troubles of the past, it not only shows the

cause of the trauma but also opens the history through the eyes of the victim. In one conversation between Paul and Otis in the present, his trauma and its cause are still an issue, although the war has long been over.

Otis : Whoah, whoah, whoah. Blood, we're all broken
Paul : Not like me, man. Norm and I were holding those gooks back when the man bought it. I see him. I saw him die, man.
Otis : So what, you're Blaming yourself?
Paul : You don't even know.
Otis : Paul, when we get back to the world, I'd like you to come with me to a meeting.
Paul : Man, I don't do dat sit in a Circle whinin' 'bout your Shit Group Thing, man. I don't do it. Never have and I never will.

(Lee, 2020, 54:26 - 55:12)

The conversation shows the absence of being able to protect his comrades, which is caused by the loss of a comrade, leading to PTSD for them, especially Paul. Paul's personal flashback of how Stormin' Norman, his leader, dies during an ambush in front of his eyes (Lee, 2020,

2:06:34-2:07:04). Hence, through the combat condition where Norman's death is sudden, it is in line with a study by Dohrenwend et. al. (2008). Though PTSD and trauma have nothing to do with one's ethnic or racial background, the exposure to combat that Black GIs witnessed in Vietnam apparently plays a role in defining their trauma. Therefore, what Paul implied here was the reality that the exposure from constant combat in Vietnam, and Stormin Norman's death, affected the way he thought of himself and the VA, which did nothing and understood nothing about the war.

Another matter that is also shown through the conversation above did not end with exposure to combat, which caused PTSD; it also portrays the absence of the Veterans Affairs (VA)'s understanding in dealing with PTSD for Vietnam veterans, leading to the loss of trust toward the VA, worsening Paul's condition as a Black Vietnam veteran. Paul is shown to be fonder of talking to Norman's ghost than going to the rep talk that the VA provides for returning Vietnam veterans. His reasoning for not going to a VA is that it knows nothing about the war and only makes his trauma worse (Lee, 2020, 1:56:12). It aligns with the

condition many Black GIS undergo. A study explains that psychologists should start reconsidering the way they approach returning veterans with PTSD, where bonding becomes important to make them both feel accepted, as well as making a comfortable environment for them (Garcia, 2017, p. 59). However, for some other Black veterans, it is more than just finding the right way to be comfortable; it is about a lack of trust toward the VA that is controlled by whites, since they control the war itself (Westheider, 1997, p. 32).

Besides the exposure from combat, including witnessing Stormin Norman's death, the absence of proper understanding from VA regarding PTSD and trauma that black Vietnam veterans may worsen their mental condition in the present time. With the combination of personal mistrust and belief that the VA knows nothing about war, including some traumatic past, Paul shows how acting out is still being carried out by many Black veterans despite the long-gone war in Vietnam. Though the causes of PTSD are varied and cannot be defined with one view only, what Paul has been through shows that both the exposure to battle, the treatment he receives that does not meet the need for

Black Vietnam veterans, including their viewpoint for the VA, may also take tolls in shaping their trauma in the present and memory of war.

Mistrust toward the Vietnamese

Looking back at PTSD and its symptoms that might have occurred to Black Vietnam veterans in *Da 5 Bloods*, there was one concept of mistrust toward the Vietnamese that the movie portrayed that also needs to be examined. The melancholic state in historical trauma did not end in its repetitive nature; emotional explosion related to memories also plays its role here (LaCapra, 2014, p. 21). In this case, the Vietnam War acting out the movie also refers to the act of blaming and despising the Vietnamese people in the present time.

Paul : Hey, man, what the... what the fuck are they staring at man?
Melvin : Who?
Paul : Those two right there. Shit. Those two over there, they've been staring at us for the last ten minutes.
Eddie : Just chill, man. Just chill
Paul : Chill? People staring at me, man. Staring at all of us

Vinh : Those gentlemen just buy you this drink. They are formers Viet Cong and wanna welcome you all back to their country.
(Lee, 2020, 9:45 - 10:15)

Looking into this data through historical trauma (LaCapra, 2014), it can be determined that the loss and absence through symbolism in a fictional work can be determined through the narration and interpretation behind it. Hence, from the conversation, the lack of trust to the Vietnamese despite their kind remark cause by the loss of comrades, shown through Paul's statement that his suspicion toward the Vietnamese is because the people who buy the drink may be the one who killed Stormin Norman, their leader (Lee, 2020, 10:46 - 10:56). Along with this case, another datum also provides how different Paul with Otis and Melvin when it comes to Vietnamese. It shows how Paul's stance with the Vietnamese was as if Charlie or Viet Cong still existed in the present time, despite Vinh being on their side.

Otis : Where were we?
Melvin : What about right here?
Otis : But I think that Vinh should...
Paul : Mmm-mmm. Mmm-mmm. Vinh is out. He in

cahoots with Charlie
(Lee, 2020, 1:35:15 - 1:35:30)

Although it occurs later in the film, the themes of absence and loss discussed here remain constant: the lack of trust towards the Vietnamese due to the loss of comrades plays a significant role. Paul's viewpoint of the Vietnamese is partly rooted in the trauma he experienced, influenced by how his friends interacted with various Vietnamese individuals. While understanding generally that the suspicion between the US and Vietnam intensified due to a clash in perspectives, with the US embracing a futuristic, optimistic, and profoundly faith-based view of technology, and Vietnam characterized by patience, caution, and adherence to old superstitions, both sides struggle to amend their relationship. The attitude of Black veterans towards the Vietnamese was more positive compared to that of White veterans, as they witnessed the inequality faced by the Vietnamese (Westheider, 1997).

It stems from the concept of being oppressed by the White majority and the perception of the war as a racist conflict against the Vietnamese, aligning with a statement by

Brown, who observed how White personnel lower the Vietnamese through their actions (Terry, 1992, p. 319). The recurring emotional breakdowns Paul exhibits not only depict his struggle to process the trauma of witnessing death in the past but also indicate that his mistrust and anger towards the Vietnamese are not rooted in hatred; rather, encountering them serves as a stressor for his mental condition.

Black Vietnam Veterans and Their Perspective as US Citizens

Besides showing the trauma that persists in the present time, *Da 5 Bloods* also brings up the issue of being part of US citizens from the perspective of Otis, Paul, Eddie and Melvin as Black veterans returning to Vietnam. Throughout their journey, it is revealed that their stance as Americans changes not only because of their race but also because of the war.

Doubt and Mistrust toward the US government and the Nation

The involvement of Black GIs in the Vietnam War has a similar yet distinct perspective on the conflict. Although their participation in the war is not clearly portrayed, a statement later in the film mentions that they are

being forced to join the war because white college students were evading the draft (Lee, 2020, 36:52 - 37:02), suggesting that they were not privileged enough to escape recruitment to Vietnam. To worsen their condition as Vietnam veterans, one dialogue raises questions about their government and nation.

Paul : On the real man, we got back from Nam, we didn't get nothing but a hard damn time
Eddie : Folks called us Baby Killers
(Lee, 2020, 7:26 - 7:46)

Taking the data above to the theory and historical account, many reports of returning Vietnam veterans dealt with prejudice from the US public because of the war. The cause of the assumption that the war was unjust and immoral appears because of the damage the US inflicted on Vietnam, which was portrayed by the media, thus leading to a prominent hatred of returning veterans, even of the Black GIs (Randolph, 2021). For example, Ford described how people considered his service in Vietnam dirty despite some encouragement and relief from his family and friends. In the same book, Kirkland also mentioned how people around him called him crazy for serving in Vietnam (Terry, 1992). Though the scene above did not yet say

anything about racism that often conflated with the condition Black GIs had, their perspective in that dialogue showed that being unappreciated was one part of being a Vietnam veteran despite one's racial background or that, as written In some reports, there were fear in some Black veterans that the prejudice for them might occurred concerning the racial and anti-war riot back in the US during their service (Westheider, 2007, p. 161).

Their stance, being doubtful of the government and the nation, cannot be separated from the background that shapes their understanding. Since historical trauma also relies on the memory and the past that shape an individual into who they are, flashbacks from memory also play a role in the way it may affect their consciousness, changing their identity or even perspective on something. In one flashback, racism plays a role in fostering mistrust toward the government and nation, as seen through the character named Stormin' Norman.

We ain't ripping off Shit! Who feel like they're ripping something off? WE was the very first People to die for this Red, White and Blue. Yea that's right. It was a soul brother, Crispus Attucks at the motherfuckin' Boston Massacre. We been

dying for dis Country from the very get, hoping one day they'd give us our rightful place. All they give us was a foot up our black Asses. Well, fuck that. I say The USA owe us! We built dis Bitch.

(Lee, 2020, 26:51 - 27:54)

As the leader of the platoon, Norman shapes the understanding the surviving veterans had, and one of his views, which his fellow shares heavily in the present, can be seen through their attempt to repossess the gold for their kin.

According to the statement, Norman's point pertains to the social condition of the Black community in the US. The awareness of being used by the government negatively increases as the civil movement gained momentum. Though in the process of being part of US citizens during the Vietnam War, the Black community are allows to be a high-ranking officer or join the war for economic or career influence, they have to fight for their place amongst other white officers because of the hesitation happened within the military caused by the probable threat despite the equivalency in aims and rights (Randolph, 2021; Westheider, 1997). Even during the fight against North Vietnamese for what many believe as patriotism and the attempt to be admitted as part

of the US citizens, the government's approach to the war and its use of manpower that relies on the economic and educational status of the population, make many people from the Black community in an unfavorable position have no other choice but to be sent to Vietnam as an Army infantry (Philips, 2012, p. 198).

This condition is contradictory to the ideal of equality that the US offers as a nation, as believed by many people, as a nation that gives equality to its people. Sending off mostly Black people to the Army, where they are stuck in the infantry due to a lack of knowledge required in other sections of the military, adds to the rising casualties Black GIS suffer, thus making the war in Vietnam and the intentions of the US government questionable to White, including Black communities. Norman's statement about having a foot up their Black ass indicates that Black GI involvement in the war that is unjust does not stop in the racism; it has a relation to the way the government send them to fight or die in a battle in Southeast Asia.

In addition to what is related to how the government treated Black GIs, it is depicted in one narration that Paul does. Though it is meant

to be a narration directed to the audience, he explains how many of the US military policies take effect in the growing mistrust the Black GI has, even in the present time.

This fucking place here... Bathed me in that lymphoma Agent Orange herbicidal stew. Those army bastards, they scorched the earth with it. spray that shit in the air and the water, my bloodstream, my cells, my DNA, and my motherfucking soul! But I ain't dying... from that shit. You will not... kill Paul. You hear me? Hear me.

You will not kill Paul. And the US government will not take me out. I will choose, when, and how I die. You dig, you couldn't kill me then, with three tours, you sure in the fuck can't kill me now.

(Lee, 2020, 1:55:10 – 1:58:06)

Several key points that reveal the cause of mistrust in both the government and the nation can be highlighted. First is the usage of Agent Orange or chemical herbicide under government surveillance. Though the use of Agent Orange is to kill the plantations in Vietnam that the enemy uses to conceal themselves during the ambush, it had an impact on people who were exposed to the substances in both the short and long term. According to Westheider (2007), not only

does the government pour more than 1 ton per gallon of Agent Orange into Vietnam and other regions near it, but they also deny the effects of the chemical that the veterans suffer. Specifying what Paul says about Agent Orange that remains in his body, it is related to how the government treats Vietnam veterans who are exposed to the chemical. Though the government is aware of the effects Agent Orange have on their military personnel in Vietnam and is willing to give compensation to them, there is a record stating that the government do not ask for the veterans that they are indeed exposed to the chemical through many procedures, only later to be proved ineligible by the government (Wilcox, 2011).

The condition from Agent Orange thus leads to the second aspect, which is the complete belief that the US is the one that also took part in the killing plot in Vietnam. The interpretation of Paul's statement on the government can be seen through his service. Early in the movie, he tells us that he serves for three tours, from 1967 to 1971, and he survived all of the combat and operations thrown by the government, including Operation Junction City (Lee, 2020, 17:52-18:04), an operation to destroy North

Vietnamese forces near the Cambodian border. While this operation is said to be necessary to cut their supply lines and communication and disrupt their military power, it is shown that in the fights, especially for Black GIs, they suffered around 14 per cent of casualties despite the falling number after 1967 (Westheider, 1997, p. 13). Therefore, Paul's statement that the Government cannot kill him is connected to the number of casualties and the strategy the government threw to US military personnel in Vietnam, which added to the turmoil even amongst Black GIs in Vietnam.

By combining all the explanations above and focusing on the data, the absence that caused Black GIs to lose trust in the government and their nation comes from the feeling of not being treated as equals in the war that had been promised in the past. As LaCapra (2014) explained, the lack of a strong foundation affects the fundamental beliefs that people hold, which in this case applied to Black Vietnam veterans. Although a counterargument may arise from patriotism and the need for economic and career stability, this presents a contradiction due to the lack of equality value that the government and

the nation show towards these Black veterans.

This inequality is evident in how they are treated during and after the war from the perspective of the victims. From being overlooked for their service and labelled as baby killers despite fulfilling their roles, to facing mistrust from their fellow White Americans both in the military and during the war, and even becoming victims of Agent Orange and the government's military strategies, all these factors contribute to the loss of trust among Vietnam veterans as depicted in the film. This situation was not only traumatic for Black individuals who were sent to Vietnam without appreciation, but it also represents a paradox in which they became sacrificial offerings by the US for the sake of freedom from communism.

Hatred of Conflict: Black Veterans Against War

The Vietnam War and Black veterans had a rather unique relationship. Not only did it develop their identity as part of the Black community, but it also changed their perspective on war. Though it was not explicitly stated, two events showed how Black veterans saw the war as an unnecessary cause. In a discussion between Black veterans after meeting

with a handicapped Vietnamese boy who begged for money, Eddie's comment depicts his distaste for war.

Melvin : Now he got more in his damn cup than I got in my wallet.

Eddie : Man, they'll take you

Paul : Shit.

Eddie : It's a damn shame

(Lee, 2020, 7:11-7:21)

While in the end, the US mostly relied on their and their allies' military power, they also attracted the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people by providing humanitarian aid. One of the aids the US provided was a medical civic action program (MEDCAPS) and medical readiness training exercises (MEDRETES) where medics from the US were present to treat the Vietnamese from the impact of the war (Jenkins, 1988, p. 4). While the MEDCAPS were present as it was for the Vietnamese, the impact was completely the opposite, as despite its attempt to prevent aggressive intervention and attract Vietnamese hearts, the impact on the US and Vietnam was relatively minimal, as the program's potential is poor in execution (Wilensky, 2004, p. 129). This then led to further struggle for better health examinations for the Vietnamese

and the morale of the war. Adding to the argument before, Black GIS and their opposition to the war occurred because of a critical realization that the war was unjust for the Vietnamese and Black people, who also struggled with discrimination by the White people, which came from Mohammed Ali and Martin Luther King Jr. (Cortwright, 1990, p. 52). Hence, as Eddie exclaimed, it indicates that both the war and its medical program, which is done in Vietnam, do no good for other Vietnamese who are also victims of the war.

In another event, symbolism described how the war should never have happened in the first place. In this case, symbolism provided a deeper meaning of certain ideas, emotions, and specific events. Relating to LaCapra (2014), the significance of symbolism with historical trauma highlights the absence and loss that must be revealed to understand the context behind an event as depicted in narration. In one conversation in the film, Eddie compared the past and present to argue how the war was supposedly conducted back then.

Otis : Wow! Will you look at this?

Melvin : It's a whole different place.

Paul : I can't believe this

Eddie : They didn't need us. They should've just sent Mickey D's, Pizza Hut, and The Colonel, and we would have defeated the V.C. in one week.

(Lee, 2020, 17:42-17:52)

By using chain restaurants to defeat V.C., Eddie indicates that the military approach the US government took in the past was unnecessary, as Vietnam could have developed to a completely different place compared to the past, especially when connected to the purpose that put the US in Vietnam in the first place. Following the historical record, while the US and its involvement in the Vietnam War was because of the emergence of communism during the Cold War and to have a more democratic nation, the fight in Vietnam also was the chance the US took because of the possibility for building a free market within the country, though it is not the sole aim for the US to infiltrate Vietnam in the beginning (Dole, 1995, p. 38). Because of the thought that Vietnam was a poor third-world country that would not survive without the help of the US, it became an intriguing approach for the US to intervene.

Although the military approach is meant to be

limited, the war lasts longer than the government expected. Moreover, though the Black community may find the war as an opportunity to prove themselves as Americans and improve both their economic and career prospects, another narrative by Paul portrays how Black veterans saw themselves in the war, as well as how the war was a ruthless act.

See, we're bloods. We got a bond. We fought... in a immoral war that wasn't ours, for rights.. for rights we didn't have. They're my brothers

(Lee, 2020, 2:10:10-2:10:32)

Two points correlate with one another. When Paul says that the war is an immoral war that was not their doing, despite the growing spirit to serve the US during its early involvement, the Vietnam War is a war without purpose and importance for US society, especially the Black community. Referring to history, the change in view Black veterans have from pro to against the war has a relation with the awareness coming from civil awareness back in the US, where the opportunities and equality that the US said to them as second-class citizens were absent (Westheider, 1997, p. 132). Furthermore, Philips (2012) explains that despite the offers to have a stable

income and career in the military, racial segregation still exists in positions, military policies, including those of other White officers. In the war itself, many times Black veterans explain their relationship with Whites are not good because of racial segregation happening in Vietnam that often put both into a fight amongst themselves, as well as putting an awareness that the war in Vietnam are a war for Whites from the way, as Edward states, because of how some individuals put a Confederate flags, a flag that was symbolize a white supremacy and slavery (Terry, 1992, p. 18).

Hence, judging from the conversation and narration, the loss of faith in the good cause of war happens due to the absence of both the purpose of the war that Black GI feels, as well as the acknowledgement of Black GI for their service. Since LaCapra (2014) argues that a perspective can be defined through events and structures that still concern people in the present time, the conversation that Eddie brings about the war being shameful, comparing the military aggression in war with the chain restaurant to defeat the enemy, including Paul's remark of the war as immoral thus reflecting a truth that the war

is worth to be against at because of how it is inhumane for the Vietnamese, as well as how it did not put Black community in a better situation despite being sent to a war that is considered as not their war.

CONCLUSION

The answer to the trauma that persists in the present time with Black Vietnam veterans in *Da 5 Bloods* is depicted through the mistrust toward the VA and other Vietnamese, despite being their partners during and after the Vietnam War. It is proven to be caused by the absence of understanding the Black Vietnam veterans' experience thoroughly, even after losing Stormin' Norman. On the other hand, Black Vietnam veterans' stance as Americans is portrayed through their loss of trust in the nation and government because of the absence of equality that Black Vietnam veterans feel as part of the US citizens; their stance as veterans who lose the faith toward war as the answer in Vietnam came through the absence of shared purpose and the acknowledgement for the service that Black veterans can feel. This article contributes to developing an extensive understanding of Vietnam War history through the eyes of

Black Vietnam veterans who are often ignored in US history.

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Book Review: Teori-teori dan Metode Pengkajian Amerika

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ABSTRACT

Quests in American Studies, along with discussions about the theories, methods, and practices that shape it, have been growing for decades as the study of American culture and society has undergone various changes in line with shifts in various scientific disciplines and changes within American Studies itself. Henry Nash Smith's article (1957, 197-208) entitled "Can American Studies Develop a Method?" explains that American Studies, in his understanding, is "the study of American culture, past and present, as a whole"; and by "culture" or "the way in which subjective experience is organized." As Smith's statement can be broad, Ida Rochani Adi offers readers of theories and methods in American Studies with broad, multi-faceted knowledge of America as a complex, diverse and dynamic nation, and its relationship with the broader world, within the myth-and-symbol school and transnational/post-national American Studies in her book entitled "Teori-Teori dan Metode Pengkajian Amerika". Adi's systematic, coherent, comprehensive, and applicable presentation makes this book a required reading for exploring and understanding American Studies, particularly in relation to theories and methods in interdisciplinary studies.

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American Studies, as a discipline, was established in the early 20th century and is considered a new paradigm for studying American culture. The study of American culture was driven by the rapid development of the United States as a new nation since its independence in 1776. Following its independence, America has faced and experienced a long history and experiences since the 16th century, which are subsequently reflected in American literature and thought. This long history of America makes it a compelling subject for in-depth study (Adi, 2015)

Scholars argue that America is too complex an object of study to be analysed within a single discipline. Therefore, American Studies offers an interdisciplinary field encompassing methods and theories that help understand the relationships between politics, economics, values, art, literature, and ethnic, racial, and gender identities. In other words, from its outset, academic American studies have offered sites for myriad debates and negotiations over content, theory, method, structural arrangements, and membership. In general, the history of academic American studies can be seen as an unevenly developing and often

contested movement toward enlarging the content of the field, diversifying the theories and methods brought to bear on that content, strengthening the often-unstable institutional arrangements for the field, and achieving greater cultural diversity. The writer of this book is aware that the emergence of American Studies can be considered as a tool to break through the old tradition of monodisciplinary thinking and move towards interdisciplinary research, with research now being highly diverse.

This book discusses how American Studies as a methodological discipline can stand alone. However, its development is inseparable from changes in social and cultural structures within society. This naturally presents various challenges for researchers. These challenges include advances in humanities studies like literature, history, language, and culture, the rise of interdisciplinary studies, changes in "momentum" due to social pressures, the interconnectedness of disciplines with society, and external forces.

Opening the book of theories and methods in American

Studies, in the first chapter of the book, Adi discusses "Teori-Teori dan Metode Pengkajian Amerika", inviting readers to pay attention to the relationship between American Studies and American history. Adi welcomes readers to trace back to the early time when the Puritans found what they called "A New World". Adopting the quote from Turner (1920) mentioning the distinctive and valuable experiences faced by the frontiers into new regions to create peaceful societies with new ideals in the successive vast and differing geographic provinces, Adi reminds the reader that American identities are initially constructed by comparing the American "New World" to "the Old World", referring to Europeans. Turner's ideas are not the only ones discussed in this book, Adi includes other references that readers can use to understand the historical foundations of American Studies, starting from American history itself. In one of the references presented, Adi mentions Leo Marx's "The Machine in the Garden" (1919), in which, like Turner using the term 'vast', he uses the word "machine" to refer to how America's expectations as a country that wants to develop its New World, based on the experiences of previous

immigrants. With an identity like this, it is not surprising that America as a country has developed rapidly in various aspects. What makes the starting point of the discussion of this book seems easy to understand is that Adi begins the discussion about the theories and methods systematically used in American Studies. First, she builds the reader's initial insights on early American history through the thoughts of Frederick Turner. Then, Adi serves information about American culture through Louis Parrington's writing in *Main Current in American Thought* (1927), which became the basis for Gene Wise's thinking in *Paradigm Dramas in American Studies* (1979). Finally, Adi mentions the role of literature used as a window to see American culture as put forward by Henry Nash Smith (1957).

Although American Studies is increasingly establishing itself as a new discipline, these breakthroughs are still considered less established because the methodology is not as strong as other disciplines that have existed for a long time and are used in the academic world, such as philosophy or anthropology. Therefore, in a previous article entitled "Pendekatan Intersisipliner dalam Kajian

Amerika", Adi (1998) stated that American Studies is a discipline that is still in its infancy. To support this idea, in this book, Adi quotes the statement of Cecil, F. Tate (1973), who stated that American Studies does not have a clear method, American Studies only focuses research on literary studies and the history of American thought, and American Studies only offers an organic holism paradigm that weakens American Studies itself.

The previous concerns were not proven true, especially because of the influence of the socio-cultural revolution in America and abroad, which caused American Studies to become popular with the offering of American Studies as a discipline. Amazingly, the existence of the *American Quarterly* journal from the University of Minnesota which became a forum for Americanists, researchers, and teachers to express their thoughts about America. In the first chapter of this book, Adi explains the common thread between American Studies and Area Studies clearly so that by reading this book, readers increasingly understand that after many crises experienced by American Studies as a discipline, American Studies was able to strengthen the

methodology used in the academic world, namely an interdisciplinary approach, which involves various fields of science, such as African Studies, Asian Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Chicano Studies, Islamic Studies, and many more. Thus, the research areas of American Studies are increasingly open, including how American popular culture can increasingly internationalize the study of American culture. Adi's expertise as a writer in connecting American Studies, which was initially considered part of history, into a discipline with a broad scope, is one reason why this book is required reading for readers interested in studying or conducting research in this area.

After an in-depth discussion of American Studies as a discipline, Adi, quoting Creswell (2009) continues with an explanation of research design in American Studies, which refers to research methods and strategies that include paradigms, theories, methods, approaches, and research strategies that can be applied to conduct researches on American covert culture, subculture, counterculture, and popular culture. Adi emphasizes that selecting an appropriate research design

will enable researchers to analyse the topic or problem raised broadly and deeply.

Referring to the research interests, Adi began her explanation of American Studies research by explaining paradigms. From this, it can be understood that the main idea underlying this is because paradigms are the basic things that direct research, research questions, and research approaches. Referring to the four types of paradigms according to Cresswell (2009), namely post-positivism, constructivism, advocacy, and pragmatism, Adi stated that the paradigm used can be adjusted to the research focus raised. American Studies that culminate in an understanding of American culture, and this culture concerns people can use post-positivism as the research paradigm for American Studies at this university. Other paradigms, such as constructivism can be used in the perspective of transnational American Studies, which places itself within the world it studies, such as research of the connection between America and Indonesia.

Thus, Adi clearly provides guidance on which paradigm is appropriate to apply to research with a particular focus. Paradigms are, of

course, closely related to research approaches. The post-positivism paradigm focuses on quantitative approaches, often applied to the exact sciences, while the constructivism paradigm focuses on qualitative approaches, often used in the social sciences and humanities. In this book, Adi meticulously explains that American Studies does not rigidly apply a single approach to research, but rather, as a discipline that borrows various procedures and methods from other disciplines, employing an interdisciplinary approach that emphasizes the synthesis of knowledge. Possible approaches include mixed methods, quasi-methods, or a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Adi believes that interdisciplinary studies by applying mixed methods can answer both existing phenomena in America and broad and complex research problems to obtain complete knowledge related to matters related to America from interdisciplinary relationships. In addition, the selection of theories and methods in American Studies serves to examine the issues raised in research. "These theories and methods are used as approaches. And approaches are used as tools for analysis," Adi explained.

As an expert in American Studies, Adi, as the author of "Teori-Teori dan Metode Pengkajian Amerika", fully understands the rapid development of American Studies, from initially researching American social and cultural issues to exploring how to research America from outside the United States. This, of course, is inseparable from the role of globalization and transnationality in American Studies. Therefore, as a writer, Adi offers a more in-depth discussion of the origins of American Studies in the theory of *Myth and Symbol*, embodied in Henry Nash Smith's work entitled "The Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth." The virgin land is often referred to as The New World, as Alexis de Tocqueville claimed that this new world has different characteristics and features from The Old World.

In the application of the *Myth and Symbol* theory, the Transnational American Studies school emerged, arguing that to analyse matters surrounding America, the analysis must begin with myths, symbols, and historical elements in America. By studying this, America's identity as a nation-state will be revealed. Critically, Adi conveys that American superiority has existed since America proclaimed itself as a

chosen nation, or a city upon a hill. Because of the strength of the myths and symbols built by Americanists, the term *American Exceptionalism* emerged, which refers to America as a country with abundant resources. Trachtenberg (1979, p. ix) mentions, "*a symbol has its place in the mind of the collective imagination of Americans.*". Referring to this, Adi highlights the point that the *Myth and Symbol* school builds high nationalism and patriotism among the American people, as the depictions, images, and symbols of American character depicted in American literature are considered representations of American culture itself. Society needs utopia to provide a myth that might serve as an ideology to guide America in history. Adi proposes the idea that research on American Studies in the view of traditional Americanists will probably be related to American utopia, or what is famous as the term *American Dreams*. Looking at the details explanation from this book, this book is highly recommended as a compulsory reading for researchers who are new in the field of American Studies as Adi's explanation of the research design is not just comprehensible but also coherent.

The discussion of the theories of *Myth and Symbol* is the initial discussion conducted by Adi to initiate further explanation of American Studies. Adi, in the second part of this book presents "American Studies in Global Perspective", which discusses the broader scope of American Studies from a traditional perspective. that views America internally through its culture, to societal developments that discuss the influence of globalization and transnationalism on the development of culture and American studies. This book is not just written to provide information about stagnant American Studies, because as a contemporary writer, Adi tries to build a dialogue about the debates and criticisms that occur in American Studies, namely how the perspective of *myth and symbol* must be redefined due to global developments. Reading this book, readers are invited to think critically, as done by Rowe (2012, p. 12), "Cultural politics also refers to the processes through which the prevailing values of a society are internalized and lived by subjects who identify with the imagined community fashioned and reproduced ...". Moving from the initial theories used by traditional Americanists to analyse culture in America, Adi

discusses new theories in American Studies, which emerged due to the influence of the phenomenon of globalization.

Aware that world civilization entered a new era towards the end of the 20th century, Adi critically included a discussion of how the new era, called the era of globalisation impacted American Studies due to its influence on social, cultural, and community activities in various aspects of life throughout the world. The rapid development of technology and information has made this world into an interconnected global village. One of the most obvious things highlighted by the author in this book is the beginning of the fading of the specificity or uniqueness of a country due to increasingly unlimited interactions. In the context of American Studies, Adi refers to Faist (2010) and Davis (2013) is the existence of a transnational concept that connects all forms of social formations that transcend the boundaries of intercultural mobility, so that the study of American Studies no longer looks at American culture from within the country itself, but rather takes into account America's influence on the world stage. In addition to that, Adi also quotes Rowe (2000, p. 6) that

transnationalism refers to American Studies done by international scholars outside the US, especially scholarship that emphasizes the influence of America abroad. Therefore, Adi focuses the discussion on the role of America in various countries in the world with the application of *transnational theories* of American Studies.

According to Adi, the phenomenon of popular culture not only highlights the expansion of the scope of American Studies due to the influence of the globalization era but also capturing another fundamental aspect in the development of American Studies. In this book, Adi highlights that *American Exceptionalism* is no longer relevant. The perspective used to view America is not only from within America itself, but also considers minorities such as blacks, women, non-whites, and others who have been marginalized and considered 'the others'. Through the growing popularity of popular culture that displays various topics favoured by the public, the boundaries of American hegemony are increasingly declining. The phenomenon of popular culture that gives rise to the discourse of the dichotomy between 'colonizer' and 'colonized' due to the emergence of the courage to

voice their rights, expressed by *American Exceptionalism*, which measures things outside America by American standards that consider themselves exceptional.

From here, Adi opens further discussion about post-nationalist American Studies theories. In line with Philip Fisher's (1991) statement in his work "The New American Studies," which mentions a revolutionary shift in aesthetic authority from the national landscape to the international marketplace, Adi explains why post-nationalist American Studies as a new school in American Studies can answer the needs of the global community who criticize the dominance and hegemony of American culture over other cultures. This post-nationalist American Studies is also considered a field of study that provides spaces for American minorities or other nations to build their identities within the 'imperialism' of the American majority. For Pease (2001), post-nationalist American Studies is not a separate concept from the national concept, but rather how all parties related to America can highlight their respective existence in the process of globalization and transnationalism. In simple

language, Adi explains that post-nationalist American Studies is the construction of identity, ideology, and hegemony of American culture over other cultures and/or vice versa.

In Chapter 3, Adi attempts to connect theories in American Studies with interdisciplinary theories such as structuralism, post-structuralism, and neo-Marxism. She begins with structuralism, which Adi believes can be used as a theory, approach, method, and paradigm all at once. In American Studies, structuralism originated from the desire of Americanists to make the study of myth and symbol in America more scientific. In this section, Adi explains the relationship between structuralism and the myth and symbol school in American Studies. The emergence of structuralism in American Studies led to a shift in views on the concept of culture, which previously focused solely on noble culture and then began to consider the study of popular culture. Adi added that the influence of structuralism has made research in American Studies more socially positivist.

In addition to structuralism, Adi also discusses the influence of semiotic theories from

Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Geertz, and Barthes, which can be used to analyse cultural studies issues in American Studies. Furthermore, Adi also explains the use of representation theory in reading symbols in detail in this chapter. Through Hall's representation theory, the study of American popular culture cannot be separated from the discussion of hegemony, ideology, and power because the authorities will use all kinds of production to expand their power or hegemony, for example, through popular culture in the form of media. Adi also mentions how power and representation are underlined by Foucault, who said that representation leads to the production of knowledge through discourse.

After explaining the relationship between American Studies and structuralist theories, in chapter 3, Adi also elaborates on the relationship between American Studies and post-structuralist theory. As a reaction to structuralist theory, he refers to five French philosophers: Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Roland Barthes. These philosophers emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Their thoughts influenced the development of American Studies

in the 1980s. These theories question the truth or objective reality that emerges through signs. In this section, Adi provides an example of research using Derrida's theory of deconstruction to analyse film as a product of popular culture to examine minority issues in American society.

In the same chapter, Adi explains the relationship between American Studies and Neo-Marxist theories as a continuation of the Old Left, both of which are related to the Marxist movement and ideology. Adi explains that in its development, due to the strong growth of industry in America, the Frankfurt School produced two schools of thought. The first, this school of thought places literature and art in a social perspective, and the second is social criticism. This condition is closely related to the American tradition that is full of chaos, with the emergence of minority rights movements. Regarding American Studies, the New Left movement influenced the change in American Studies research which is the flow of myth and symbol, which is criticized as American Exceptionalism. Theories in Neo-Marxism that are then often referred to in American studies include Herbert Marcuse's social science theory, Antonio

Gramsci's theory of hegemony, George Lukacs's concept of reification, Louis Althusser's structural Marxism, Raymond William's theory of cultural materialism, and Mikhail Bakhtin's semiotic Marxism. By adopting these theories, research in American Studies takes the object of research in the form of American popular culture and media products, as does the field of cultural studies. The influence of Neo-Marxist thinkers triggered the emergence of an interdisciplinary approach by combining textual, economic, political, and social analysis in capturing phenomena occurring in America or other countries influenced by American culture. According to Adi, the term culture industry is key in understanding the process of mass cultural industrialization and commercialization. Denning stated that theories of American studies are a weak alternative in accommodating Neo-Marxist thought because initially American studies only focused on American Exceptionalism (Denning, 1986). Gurian added that the difference between American studies and Neo-Marxism is that the focus in the beginning still concentrated on the superiority of American values, while Neo-Marxism looks more at existing reality (1969).

Through Neo-Marxist thought, the object of study is no longer a noble product but everyday culture, such as popular culture in the form of commodified cultural products or culture that then becomes a commodity.

The development of the concept of globalization and the technological and information revolution has brought about a major shift in the paradigm of American Studies, from the traditional myth and symbol school to transnational or post-nationalist American Studies. Adi stated that as a consequence of globalization and the technological and information revolution, there has been a cross-cultural interaction between countries, leading to debate and re-questioning of identity and the nation-state. Furthermore, Adi added that the rise of popular culture has influenced changes in the behaviour and identity of some people. Identity has become the most significant issue to be criticized and highlighted as an impact of popular culture. Quoting Hall, Adi added that identity, culture, and power are important factors or aspects that must be considered in this era of globalization and transnationalism. In this sub-chapter on cultural studies

theories, Adi provides explanations of figures and concepts regarding popular culture, for example, those brought by Hall, Storey, Fiske, and also Nachbar and Lause. The relationship between identity, culture, and power is greatly influenced by the development and changes in welfare and social systems in society at a certain time. From a cultural studies perspective, a cultural product is inseparable from the power hidden within it, as it indirectly constructs actions, beliefs, and reality. In short, cultural studies theories aim to analyse the influence and role of popular culture in production mechanisms and the influence of American popular culture on other cultures. Adi added that the key concepts in researching popular cultural products in cultural studies are representation and meaning.

After providing explanations and examples in the first three chapters of this book, in the final chapter, Adi provides readers with several research themes that often appear in American Studies. The discussion in this chapter is divided into three parts. The first theme is themes related to history, religion, language and literature. Adi provides three examples taken from three research about diaspora identity from different points

of view. It proves that American Studies research can work on many kinds of topics. The second part contains an explanation of research themes in popular culture. On the second part, Adi also gives two examples of popular culture. Both research use popular culture products (popular literature and film) as the source of data to see the American culture. The final part discusses themes in minority groups. In this subchapter, the examples are taken from two research regarding minority issues. The first one is related to the educational rights of the minority and minority ideology. In this chapter, apart from explaining research themes, Adi also provides more examples of research that raised these themes in American Studies research. This chapter provides an interesting overview for readers, especially researchers or students who want to conduct research in the field of American Studies. By providing examples of research that has been conducted in the context of American Studies, readers will be able to determine themes that can be addressed in research in the field of American Studies. The explanation of paradigms, concepts and theories explained in the first three chapters is applied to the discussion in

the final chapter through examples of research that have been carried out. Therefore, this book will be very useful for academics who are involved in the field of American Studies as well as students and researchers who want to discuss American culture.

COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

Herewith the author declares that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the assessment, review and revision, and publication process in general.

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As Rowe (2014) asserts, “‘Transnationalism’ also refers to American Studies done by international scholars outside the U.S. especially scholarship that emphasizes the influence of the U.S. abroad” (p. 1).

This research assigns the researcher to be the key instrument in his or her own research (Creswell, 2009, p. 211).

The New York Times (2020) interviewed their gay readers to reveal about the dynamics of gay relationship:

I am in a same-sex relationship, and we are regularly flummoxed by how our heterosexual parent friends don't split nighttime child care and sleep loss...In our house, parents are parents. There is no artificial distinction like fathers do this and mothers do that.

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