Mediated Political Playground:

Popular Entertainment Culture and Public Sphere Engagement among

Young Adults in a Context of Political Contentiousness

Sarah Johnson-Palomaki

Garland, Texas

Master of Arts, Sociology, University of Virginia, 2017

Bachelor of Arts, Sociology, University of North Texas, 2013

Bachelor of Arts, Radio, Television & Film, University of North Texas, 2013

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University of Virginia

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the relationship between young people, their popular entertainment media, and playful engagement with politics in the civil/public sphere(s) within the context of a seemingly hostile political environment. Through qualitative focus group and follow-up diary and interview data, organized in friend groups and grounded in their popular culture, this project explores when and under what conditions different popular entertainment media may be a resource for *playful political engagement* or participation in the public sphere. Further, I explore when these media are alternatively, or additionally, used as a tool for *active avoidance* within this seemingly hostile political environment.

These questions are first explored via discussions around participants' entertainment television and popular music, culminating in the conceptualization of a "*Goldilocks zone of political play,*" with which I theorize the opportunities for and constraints around playful political engagement through popular culture. To explore such political play, I analyze young people's engagement with celebrity and cancel culture via a *typology of celebrity cancelation* to illuminate the variable levels of public-ness with which young people play (e.g., counter-/sub-/weak/dominant public or civil spheres). I further theorize the processes of and motivations behind such political play through popular culture in this analysis of celebrity cancel culture. Finally, through an analysis of young people's interactions with/in online spaces, I theorize the forms such playful engagement with politics may take: *cultivation and connection through similarity*, and *cohabitation and confrontation with difference*. Building on participant discussions on memes, I then turn to explore the implications of such play.

Thus, this dissertation theorizes popular entertainment media as a site of political play, explored through data on young people's media and everyday talk with friends. Ultimately, I theorize such playful engagement with politics, via popular entertainment media and in this contemporary ("hostile") moment, in terms of competitive games, or what Huizinga (1955) theorizes as the *agon*. I consider and frame these findings and their implications relative to Mouffe's alternative to liberalism, *"agonistic pluralism,"* and the

antagonism that threatens such pluralism (1999; 2000; 2005; 2013). Taking this popular play with

contentious politics seriously, both agonistic and antagonistic, I illuminate a nuanced, complex

environment of avoidance and engagement, silence and deliberation, hostility and pleasure, and creative,

active play within the democratic public sphere.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA AND FAILED POLITICAL BLINDERS

Every focus group for this dissertation started with a group of friends talking together about their favorite popular culture. After completing the obligatory paperwork, forcing an air of institutionalized formality, I ask these young people about their preferred cultural forms, instructing them to indicate among a list (with the opportunity to share additional types) what media they "frequently interact with," and circling popular entertainment culture that is "most important to them." The latter was often interpreted and explained in multiple respects, indicative of the nuanced ways that entertainment can provide different gratifications, at times simultaneously (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch 1973). This conversational foundation for the focus group content and tone grounded the discussion not only in their specific media tastes (often establishing shared media to be discussed throughout the conversation), but also grounded the next 90-120 minutes or so in a context of enjoyment: in a world (social and academic) where popular pleasures are often discounted and derided, these focus groups were quickly established as a space where I (a researcher representing an elite institution often, broadly, so critical of the popular) wanted to hear about what they enjoyed and why it was so fun, rather than judge their embrace of texts I have critiqued a priori. This starting exercise grounded the focus group discussions in *their* judgment and the social, collective context of such reception. This was generally a reliable way to overcome the initial research atmosphere of Informed Consent bureaucracy. It is from this foundation that we began a discussion on their popular entertainment media and related political engagement.

In one focus, friends Emma, Marianne, and Gio clearly seemed to be (like most participants) pop culture people, with all three enthusiastically sharing the significance various media have for them. While these different media came with different uses, the friends also illustrate, though, the autotelic pleasures

that can come from such popular entertainment. Speaking on music, which they all circled as important,

they say:

> Gio: With music, I feel like that would be common for everybody. It's part of people's cultures, it's
>
> very influential for sure. And it can really send out a strong message, whether it's subliminal or
>
> very outspoken.
>
> SJP: That's great, we're definitely gonna talk about when music has these messages.
>
> Marianne: For me, I would say music just gets me through my commute and my day. And online
>
> culture and celebrity culture aren't necessarily important to me but again it's just something to
>
> entertain me.
>
> Emma: With music, it's the same thing as Marianne, it just gets me through the day. It fits your
>
> variety of emotions, there are sad songs and happy, so it's like having a companion that you just
>
> have around all the time. And then with music and now with Spotify, it's easy to find music and
>
> charts… so it's easy to stay connected to what's happening [with] music now.

While this exchange illustrates particular uses, the media's significance/purpose that is most prominent in

this focus group (and throughout others) is this autotelic use of entertainment as "just something to

entertain," or put in other words, entertainment for entertainment's sake, with latent uses and purposes

alongside such pleasure. As such entertainment pleasure often helps people "get through the day," many

participants expressed that popular entertainment media often had the effect of "stress relief," leading to

at times the explicit use of this media for such relief.

By the end of the focus group, we have discussed a variety of media and integrated into this

various discussions around related politics. What television shows do they enjoy? Do they see politics in

their music? How do they feel about celebrities acting/speaking politically? How do they interact with

political memes? I do not ask about the group's view of politics in a broad sense before this, as I want to

observe how these perspectives might emerge in relation to their entertainment media consumption,

rather than their relationship with political media being framed explicitly by overarching (group)

considerations of politics as an institution. The integration of politics into our discussion has opened up

over this focus group, reflecting a typical sense of deliberative enthusiasm as the friends considered

issues varying in pollical-ity. After discussing television, music, celebrity, and online culture, I end the

focus groups, as I do here with Emma, Marianne, and Gio, by asking the participants to generally reflect

on their relationship with politics (though their opinions by this point have typically been made clear):

> SJP: Do you like politics?
>
> Marianne: They really stress me out.
>
> Emma: Yeah, it stresses me out.
>
> Gio: Yeah, stressful.
>
> Emma: Now, with [politics on] social media and everywhere [else], you want to take a break. You
> get this constant wave of just terrible news all that time. It sucks that we have the privilege that
> we can just turn it off when some people are directly impacted by this stuff but it's just, like, you
> just get thrown all this stuff all the time. Sometimes I just want to wear those things that the
> horses wear.
>
> SJP: Blinders!
>
> Emma: Yeah, I just don't care sometimes because it's just so much. It sucks, but it just gets really
> heavy...

Gio later describes this as an "ongoing struggle every day," and Marianne and Emma argue that political

engagement has become "just so hard" in this particular political context of the aggressive and

contentious so-called "Trump Era" in which these data were collected (summer 2017 to summer 2018).

Politics is "everywhere," it's "depressing," and I have found that many young people, including Marianne,

Emma, and Gio, actively, intentionally aim to use popular entertainment media as "blinders," narrowing

their field of vision so as to continue in their personal life without the added stressors of political conflict

and turmoil that are increasingly encroaching on all sides, and thereby calming and soothing through

entertainment pleasure.

This dissertation theorizes the pleasures (typically) in the consumption of popular entertainment

media, the frustration and avoidance (usually) expressed around political engagement, and the

relationship between the two. I explore the common perspectives with which young people view these

stressors of politics and the ways that they embrace popular entertainment media as blinders, often

actively and explicitly. The crux of the dissertation, though, explores how and when these blinders fail.

Despite Emma, Marianne, and Gio expressing a clear desire for, and active attempts towards, an

avoidance of politics through their consumption of popular entertainment media, I observed enthusiastic,

politically-minded (or "public-spirited") engagement through discussion on entertainment media

throughout the focus group. This engagement with politics through popular media, despite articulated

criticisms elsewhere, appeared to often still be pleasurable, appeared to still be entertaining, and

critically, appeared to be an extremely *playful engagement* with otherwise stressful public matters:

- In discussing television, Marianne shared that she watches The Handmaid's Tale, an explicit commentary on reproductive rights, but says she usually just watches "silly shows." They then proceed to discuss representations of race, gender, age, and fatness in various popular shows, emphasizing to and with each other the significance of diverse representation in order to see social pluralism reflected more broadly, "rather than just the same story over and over again, like, a rich White girl doing the same things."

- Regarding music, Gio discusses how he can't enjoy music if it includes lyrical messages that he disagrees with, then shares how he has "learned to cut off singers and stuff that stand against things that I believe in," even if he deeply enjoys the music and if the music itself does not contain such messages: he doesn't want "to be a hypocrite." Emma enthusiastically relates to Gio's presentation of this dilemma and shares a specific example about Columbian musician J. Balvin who showed support for Chris Brown after his violent attack on then-girlfriend Rihanna. She struggled more than Gio here in considering the relationship between cultural product, producer, and social messages/values: "So I saw that and I was like 'I know you fucked up' but I'm still gonna listen to him, sadly. But in the back of my head, I'm just like, 'He did it wrong.'"

- In a discussion on the Kardashians, Emma contributes to the group's deliberation on celebrity, public action, and authenticity (e.g., celebrity pandering in an amplified political environment). The friends are discussing Kim Kardashian's various civil and political expressions (along with her husband Kanye West's controversial connections to then-president Donald Trump). When her friends discuss Kim's advocacy for prison reform, Emma complicates the meanings attached to such action, thus commenting on the relationship between the popular, popularity, and the political: "But it came out on Twitter that she's making a documentary about [her advocacy]. So, like, thanks for doing this and stuff but, I don't know, maybe it comes out more as raising

awareness rather than just praising herself and stuff. Like, thanks for doing this but don't expect a big ass prize for doing the right thing."

- Finally, discussed in Chapter 6, the group has a discussion about the power of memes and their humor, as Emma shares a meme with the group (a humor-based critique of abortion regulations) and Gio shares a meme about Trump's "build the wall" policy. Preceding the remark about blinders, the group here discusses that such memes are "just funny" and can "keep the mood cool so you don't get too stressed about the real issue in a way," as long as people still "know it's a serious issue." The formal political-ity of these memes does not appear to produce any of the stress discussed minutes later.

While the focus group was firmly grounded in popular entertainment media, this group of friends who, when prompted, articulated a desire for avoidance through media, not only discussed politics in relation to their preferred entertainment (at times prompted, at times not), but did so with enthusiasm and shared, collective engagement, frequently talking over each other to contribute their own analyses and counterpoints. This group was diverse in gender, sexuality, race, and were all college students with varying class backgrounds (only one of the six parents has a Bachelor's degree, two had associate's, one some college, one high school, one less than high school). Politically, the group was moderate, somewhat liberal, and very liberal, and the average political index score, a measure of engagement and participation along a variety of dimensions, was an 8/12, just above the overall sample average of 7. The different participants in this focus group appeared engaged in different points of political deliberation, and the enthusiasm around one political topic or another was often not universal, but flowed across different speakers, shifting in emphasis with each piece of popular culture and media that a participant brought in through frequent interjections. Despite their articulated use of entertainment media blinders against "stressful," "depressing" politics, political considerations, broadly defined, appeared to be an enlivening aspect of their collective participation in popular culture. This popular entertainment media, for these friends and most of the participants in this dissertation, seemed at times, then, to be a resource for or site of *playful engagement with politics* within a context of active avoidance.

This dissertation explores the relationship between popular culture/entertainment media and political engagement (broadly defined) among young people in the context of a seemingly, reputationally hostile and uncivil public sphere and subsequent active avoidance. Speaking to the traditions of public sphere theory and the culturalist perspective on media and politics, I ultimately adapt the language and framework of *play* to theorize young people's engagement with political matters through their active popular cultural consumption and resultant deliberation. Specifically, I ask: *When and under what conditions can different popular entertainment media be a resource for (playful) political engagement or participation in the public sphere? And when is this media instead (or as well) a tool for political avoidance?* Further, what are the *processes of and motivations* behind such engagement through popular culture, given this context of avoidance, and how might such processes result in *variable levels of engagement with variable levels of public-ness*? In practice, what *different forms might such engagement take*: with whom are these young people engaging, and with what (deliberative) outcomes? These questions explore not if, but when, how, and in what ways popular culture may be a resource for or site of political engagement. Further, rather than assume a priori a negative, harmful relationship between such consumption and engagement, I ground the implications of such playful engagement in young people's own tastes, judgments, and experiences, marked by contradiction, ambivalence, and concern alongside entertainment and pleasure.

This dissertation is structured in two sections: the first half outlines the project, including Chapter 1, this introduction; Chapter 2, a review and analysis of the theoretical foundations for this study, including public sphere theory, the culturalist perspective, and theories of play; and Chapter 3, an overview of methods. I then turn to my data based primarily in focus group conversations with established groups of friends age 16-27, collected largely between summer 2018 – summer 2019, to

explore their relationships with politics, popular entertainment media, and the nuanced connections between the two.

Each of the three empirical chapters in the second half of the dissertation answers a different component of the key research questions, with each chapter including multiple parts that separately make semi-distinct arguments culminating in the broad claims of the chapter. In Chapter 4, I outline in Part 1 young people's relationships to politics in terms of *active avoidance*, similar to that seen in Emma's "blinders" above, and a *"new normal"* for politics that young people experience as an omnipresent pressure to engage in this contentious, hostile political environment. I then explore how these young people use (and/or critique the use of) entertainment television and popular music as *a tool for active avoidance*. In Part 2, I illustrate when and under what conditions young people paradoxically engage in the public sphere through their TV/music consumption/reception, despite such avoidance: I present such opportunities for engagement via the original theoretical concept of the *Goldilocks zone of political play*.

Chapter 5 explores popular celebrity culture and engagement with the public sphere through *the problematic critique* and *cancel culture*. Part 1 of this chapter presents an explanation of cancel culture and a typology of cancelations by case offense, illustrating the *nuance in consumer judgment and the varied public-ness of engagement*. Part 2 of the chapter explores *processes of playful struggle and negotiation* involved in celebrity cancel culture, further illustrating nuances in playful engagement that are not reflected in the broader criticisms of cancel culture. Part 2 also illuminates the diverse *motivators behind cancelation*.

Chapter 6 makes the necessary move to digital spaces of participatory entertainment and leisure, a central focus of popular, journalistic, and academic discussions on (the decline of) the public sphere and the state of contemporary politics. I first present in Part 1 the *unique, perceived causes and effects of hostile (political) conflict in online spaces*, according to participants' articulations of the larger reputation of online culture. Despite this negative reputation, and a unique resultant avoidance, many participants

shared experiences of participatory engagement online that, I argue, may benefit public sphere deliberation. In Part 2, I theorize such engagement in four forms: *cultivation and connection through similarity*, and *cohabitation and confrontation with difference*. In Part 3, I explore the medium that was for participants often the peak of the focus group discussion: memes. In investigating political memes, judgment of partisan memes, and *memetic engagement via humor, irony, and ambiguity*, I ultimately consider the limitations (and possible dangers) of such playful engagement, variable by different forms.

In the conclusion (Chapter 7), I first synthesize the multiple components introduced in Chapters 4-6 in a deep, demonstrative analysis of a relatively typical focus group, presenting here the totality of the dissertation's theorizations and arguments. I then consider the opportunities, risks, and limitations of playful engagement with politics through popular entertainment media presented across this analysis. Reflecting on the democratic assumptions behind public sphere theory (namely, around the goals of unity and consensus), I discuss the implications of such playful engagement in this contemporary ("hostile") moment in terms of competitive games, or what Huizinga (1955) theorizes as the *agon*. Ultimately, I consider and frame these findings and their implications relative to Chantal Mouffe's alternative to liberalism, "agonistic pluralism," and the antagonism that threatens such pluralism (1999; 2000; 2005; 2013).

Taking this popular play with (contentious) politics seriously, I illuminate a nuanced, complex environment of avoidance and engagement, silence and deliberation, hostility and pleasure, and creative, active *play* within the (anti-? post-? paradoxical?) democratic public sphere.

CHAPTER 2: OVERVIEW OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY, THE CULTURALIST TRADITION, AND PLAY

This dissertation is speaking to three broad theoretical traditions. Firstly, in this extended

theoretical framework analysis, I explore how critical public sphere theory has traditionally opposed

popular entertainment media and political engagement, often relying on a) distinctions between private

(consumption) and public (collective deliberation/action), and b) a distinction between "mass"

entertainment and art in modern societies. These distinctions have been problematized from multiple

directions, and further theorizations of democratic participation have extended these foundational

concepts in such a way that may allow for a more multifaceted, though often still negative, understanding

of this relationship between audience/consumer and citizen.

Secondly, the interdisciplinary culturalist approach to entertainment media (largely embraced in

media studies and British cultural studies) has theorized this relationship from surprisingly similar

(Marxist) origins as above (Kellner 2002). However, this approach is known for its great contributions to

reception theory and conceptualizations of (active) audience negotiation, struggle, control, and resistance

through textual interpretation and (collective) meaning-making. This tradition has informed

understandings of political engagement through popular culture that challenge those in the above

literature, at times quite directly. While some of these challenges appear relatively limited in their reach,

this field has also produced a type of "progressive optimism" (or a radical "cultural populism," as it is so

critiqued) that theorizes much greater power in entertainment media consumption than those outside of

the tradition (and many of those inside of the tradition) acknowledge.

Finally, I introduce the theory of play to these traditions. Drawing from and adapting the

literatures in developmental child psychology, animal and evolutionary biology, cultural history,

philosophy, and sociology, I present various components and outcomes of play that will be used

throughout the dissertation to understand and bridge the two above perspectives. Ultimately, these three broad theoretical traditions will be applied, critiqued, and extended as I explore when, how, and in what ways young people may engage with public/political matters through their consumption of popular entertainment media.

Part 1: Critical Theory and Theorizations of the Public Sphere

Connected through their associations of "mass culture" with weakened public power, the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and varied though related conceptualizations of the democratic public sphere (grounded in the work of Habermas and Arendt) have been central in framing widespread academic concern over the harms of popular entertainment media to political engagement.

Critical Theory and The Frankfurt School

Entertainment is betrayal.
(Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 1972)

The Frankfurt School of critical social theory, grounded largely in Marxist philosophies, has been a core framework for media sociology and many of the below perspectives. Critically concerned with the relationship between "mass culture" and exploitation (Peters 2003), the most famous of these social, cultural, political critiques is that of Theodor Adorno ([1938] 1977; [1967] 1975; Adorno and Leppert 2002) and Max Horkheimer ([1941] 1972). In particular, their seminal piece theorizing the "culture industries" (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 1994) condemns, with a strong, biting, and critical tone, the standardization of mass cultural products, panning producers, the different industries, and the shallow, meaningless products of mass, popular culture. This and similar Frankfurtian critiques draw a clear and significant distinction between (high) art and commodified mass culture, arguing that the latter are created only for the purpose of distributing simple, deceptive pleasures and shallow escapism, which

together can obscure the ideological manipulation and control that underlie such products very existence (Marcuse 1941; 1964). Critical art, alternatively, can allow for genuine, creative, productive escape into a world of emancipation, meant to inspire social change (the aesthetic methods of accessing such escape were greatly debated in this tradition, as seen in Bloch, Lukács, Brecht et al. [1977] 2007; further, Peters 2003 explores the extend to which this is not (just) a defense of high art, but accounts for liberation through folk at as well). Thus, there exists a qualitative, aesthetic distinction between art and entertainment in much of this school. This line of inquiry adopts a centralized view of power, which is based in the studios and the 'industry' driven by capitalist incentives for profit and expansion of elite bourgeois power.

This perspective of power has direct consequences for the relationship between popular culture and politics. While there does, to a limited degree, exist some potential in this tradition for a liberatory mass media (e.g., considering the capacities and confines of mechanical reproduction as theorized by Benjamin ([1935] 1969)), popular entertainment culture is largely theorized in this perspective as an ideological, oppressive, anti-revolutionary opiate with the power to deeply convince the audience that they are eager to participate in their own hegemonic deception. Though the tone of the Frankfurt School has often been criticized as elitist, these understandings of media are largely focused on industry and the resultant product, with little consideration of audience and the process of reading/reception/interpretation. This absence is reflected in the broader labeling of "hypodermic needle theory," signifying this understanding of an active, powerful communicator, a wholly effective communication medium, and a passive, sedated "mass" audience. The Frankfurt School's disdain for mass culture has long permeated research on popular culture and politics, most notable in continued oppositional conceptualizations of the passive mass audience and an active, revolutionary/resistant, dependent public.

Public Sphere Theory: The Decline of Public Influence and the Rise of Mass Consumption

      Theorizations on deliberative democracy, participatory citizenship, and the decline of both

with/in modernity focus on historical shifts of de-politicization and increased economization (Cohen and

Arato 1992). Many scholars of the (declining) public sphere have considered how mass culture/society

deteriorates, degrades, and deforms democratic political freedom as the power of collective citizenship

gives way to that of the consumer. Democracy requires active and collective deliberation and

engagement, with such action focusing on the inter-active collective, comprised of individuals leaving

behind their personal interests to rationally consider and debate the political interests of a united whole.

Popular (mass) culture thus threatens political deliberation and engagement through the increased

prevalence of passive, personal, and private(/social) entertainment consumption. The works of Jurgen

Habermas and Hannah Arendt clearly illustrate these concerns, though both theorizations might allow

for, in different adaptations, alternative conceptualizations of entertainment as a tool of, even a necessity

for, public participation (though, as above, still grounded in reductive understandings of mass

entertainment/art, as well as the idealized distinctions between public/private, now highly critiqued). I

will first review these broad theoretical understandings of (declining) public democracy, before discussing

the related negative understandings of mass culture, which I challenge with alternate considerations of

the popular.

      A student of the Frankfurt School in a rather complicated sense,[1] Jurgen Habermas' unique

divergence from and instrumental reshaping of Critical Theory (Calhoun 2012) maintained the tradition of

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[1] Horkheimer rejected Habermas' Habilitationsschrift, or post-doctoral dissertation, (ultimately released as "The Structural Transformation..." [1962] 1991) as "insufficiently critical of the ideology of liberal democracy," despite the approval from Adorno, under whom Habermas also studied. This rejection prevented Habermas' progression at the Frankfurt School and Habermas received professorship status elsewhere, further diverging in theoretical focus and argument in his conceptualization of traditional Critical Theory. He eventually returned to the Frankfurt School, ascending to Horkheimer's chair in philosophy and sociology (with strong support from Adorno), and led the distinct "second generation" of such critical thought (Kellner 2000; Calhoun 2012).

mass culture critique in his theorization of the bourgeois public sphere and oppositional framing of

consumption and deliberative citizenship. Habermas ([1962] 1991; [1964] 1974), foundationally argues

that there is an uncoupling of the system and the lifeworld in classic modern capitalism, as the action

systems of the state and the economy are related to but necessarily separated from everyday action

contexts. The institutional orders of the lifeworld are the *private sphere* of family and this *public sphere*,

whereby the family is linked to the economy through the medium of money and through the roles of

consumer and worker, while the public sphere is linked to the state through the medium of power and

through the role of the citizen. There is thus a separation of public and private on two levels: that of the

system (and the separation of the economy and politics) and that of the lifeworld (and the separation of

the economic family and the public citizen) (Fraser 1985; Calhoun 2013). Therefore, through the rise of

this public sphere, Habermas' focus as an essential component of modern democracy, individuals can

come together in the everyday (e.g., physically, in coffeehouses) and together deliberate matters within

the terms of the collective (bourgeois) values of "rationality, dialogue, truth, and transparency"

(Alexander 2006:276). It is within this public sphere that *public opinion* is formed, which can have

powerful political influence over the system of the state. Required of such rationality though is a) a

commitment to the interests of the collective, i.e., the public, and therefore a detachment from private

interests, and thus b) a clearly defined separation of the private and public spheres of the lifeworld.

Similar to the Frankfurtian theorists, then, Habermasian understandings of deliberative political

engagement and influence details an ordering of reality in which consumption supports the economic

system of the market, which is necessarily separate from (and oppositional to) active, rational, engaged

citizenship in the public sphere that has the capacity/power to influence a democratic political structure.

The role of the consumer is one of private, individual pleasure derived *from* the market while the role of

the citizen is an interactive one, rational, collective, and influential *on* the state.

Habermas' argument is in part one of increased collective influence and authority in modernity, as the rise of the public sphere allowed for rational, democratic debate that freely revealed the "morally unsavory assumptions hidden in the [modern] market and [state] bureaucracies" (Eliasoph 1998:11). The period of public (sphere) prosperity and engaged citizenship, necessarily reliant on a bifurcation of these political and economic systems, was, however, a brief one. Arguably more of Habermas' focus is targeted on the decline of the public sphere: as increased industrialization led to the "mass society" and welfare capitalism of late modernity, the bourgeois public/private division became blurred (Fraser 1985). As the barriers between the two systems dissolved, so too did the distinctions between lifeworlds and associated roles of the individual. Because of the ideological and technological power of mass society (Habermas' Frankfurtian foundations are clear here), the capitalist role of the mass consumer becomes the primary role of the hybridized lifeworld, through which all individuals interact with (and are acted upon by) the increasingly interconnected powers of state and market. This greatly impairs the critical capacity of the people as a collective (Cohen and Arato 1992), and therefore the critical influence of a collective on institutional power, such that democracy for the masses only delivers politics as products, free from the deliberative scrutiny of the rational, authentic public debate that once gave the collective public such influence.

The work of Hannah Arendt was clearly influential to Habermas' theorizations of the public sphere and its decline (though, for a variety of possible reasons was not cited as such in his early work, see Verovšek 2019; see also Habermas 1977; 1984). Grounding much of her understanding of democratic engagement in the idealized ancient Greek model, Arendt too stresses the necessary distinction between public and private, or in her terms, the realms of private life and public plurality (Arendt [1959] 2013; 1965; Dietz 2002). While the (private) life realm is defined by necessity, survival, and private subjectivity, the realm of (public) plurality is marked by collective, creative (inter)action and deliberation and a coming together of individual citizens who are constructed in the public as equals (Cohen and Arato 1992). This

emergent group or "polis" arises from deliberation and citizens "acting in concert" to gain political influence as a collective (Arendt [1959] 2013; 1965; Zerilli 2005). For Arendtian thought, this separation between public and private is again a crucial one: utility and survival are matters of the private and can be a *corrupting force* to the creative public.

As Habermas decries the fall of the public sphere, so does Arendt decry the invasion of the public by the private (as well as vice versa), a process which she terms the rise of the social, a key component to the uniquely modern "mass society" (Arendt [1959] 2013). The private sphere is meant to be a place in which individuals can retreat from the glare of the public (at times literally, in private property), and with modernity, this retreat is actually deeper, into the realm of intimacy. However, with the dominant rise of the social, this refuge of intimacy is defenseless and becomes hybridized with the realm of a now quasi-plurality (Arendt [1959] 2013). More central to Arendt's arguments and concerns, though, is the way the rise of the unbounded social damages and perverts the public sphere: once a space of collective pluralism and influence, any type of public environment now becomes a place to air private grievances rather than a space to imagine and discuss new and creative "culture-forming" possibilities for the diverse collective in their common world. As the private corrupts the public, via the spread of the social, action is no longer central to public inter-action, which instead becomes marked by the private acts of mindless consumption and repetitive production (Benhabib 1993).

As these perspectives theorize the decline of an influential democratic public, their shared association of consumption/mass society with this decline illustrates the centrality of considering mass/popular cultural products and media technologies as necessarily oppositional to deliberative/active engagement in modern society. However, both Habermas and Arendt do explicitly theorize, in the contexts of ideal democratic publics, a significant capacity for cultural products/media to be intimate sites of cultivation and self-exploration beneficial to and perhaps even necessary for democratic public sphere

interaction. Both theorists, though, understand such media of the public through a strong distinction of art and entertainment.

Public Sphere Theory: Habermas and Arendt on Popular Entertainment Media

While the *reception of art* has potential benefits in the development of the citizen, the *consumption of mass (entertainment) culture* is framed negatively in association with modern democratic decline. The former prepares, even bridges, in a rich and rewarding manner, while the latter corrupts. Here, I will explore the perspectives of Habermas ([1962] 1991), reflecting in many ways his Frankfurt School background (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 1972), and Arendt (1961), who provides an essential theory of judgment. Both argue the importance of creative, material culture, though the distinctions between art and entertainment illustrate their disregard for popular media and culture to provide any benefit to the public.

Habermas and mass media

Habermas ([1962] 1991) explicitly discusses cultural products in theorizing two media. The first is a discussion of the rise of news in general and newspapers in particular as a type of shared public communication. The rise of the newspaper and the news industry coincided with the rise of the modern bourgeois public sphere, acting as the distribution medium of public communication. While public debate is typically in a physical place (e.g., coffeehouses), newspapers and news media provided a space in which, while in the private role of consumer within the home, individuals could engage with public discussion on their own terms, allowing for a transmission of differing views and opinions on public matters. Newspapers thus become a medium for public conversation. With the decline of the public sphere and the rise of mass consumption, this is under threat, so much so that Habermas (2007) has

called for financial funding and support from the state (in various national contexts) for struggling "leading" and "quality" media.

The other way Habermas theoretically engaged the media and consumption was through theorizing the novel, the "culture of letters," and the "literary sphere" (Habermas [1962] 1991). Habermas argued that the private, critical reception of art and literature could act as a pre-requisite to an entrance into and participation within the public sphere, as it is this intimate private space in which individuals constructed the foundation of a political subjectivity through "self-reflection and self-examination," using the shared language of a culture (Cohen and Arato 1992:215; see Backscheider 2000 for further discussion). The reader of a novel has the capacity to creatively interact with the text, and other readers of the text, using the fictionality of the text to imagine new worlds and new perspectives. Further, the audience of this literary sphere forms a type of intimate public, an (imagined) collective that cannot exercise public influence but can and does grow into political thought and political publics: the creative engagement with the text provides the reader with imaginative resources that can be used in public debate. This illustrates a mediated bridging between public and private that is productive and not destructive to the role of the citizen (as seen in his connections between consumption and the decline of the public). With the rise of mass culture, though, the literary sphere is eroded, leaving only the few experts, critics, and the mass consumers who seek the products of the Frankfurtian culture industries.

Below, literatures on alternatives understandings of publics and the literatures from the culturalist perspective complicate the distinctions Habermas makes of public/mass media. This dissertation aims to consider the hybridized consumer-citizen that Habermas so derides in late modernity. Habermas notes, though that "radio and television audiences are not just consumers, that is market participants, but also citizens with a right to participate in culture, observe political events and form their own opinion" (2007). While he argues for state funding of *quality* news here, I explore throughout how "mass" entertainment culture might also reveal how young people are "not just

consumers," and how they might form an audience-as-public to prepare themselves, through reception

and (peer) deliberation for a particularly challenging, pugnacious public sphere.

Habermas' critiques regarding the decline of the public have been adopted and extended

throughout the study of media, as scholars explore the decline in rational, public deliberation and action

(e.g., Shah, McLeod and Yoon 2001; Milner 2002; Fleming, Thorson and Peng 2005; Zukin, Keeter,

Andolina et al. 2006; Breese 2011; Schlesinger 2020; see discussion in Lunt and Livingstone 2013 and

subsequent volume regarding wide embrace of Habermasian thinking)[2] which show an increase in

consumption, particularly in entertainment television and other popular media corresponding to a

decrease in civic engagement (Schultz 2000; Bender 2003; Gabler 2003; Parvin 2017). Like the

Frankfurtians before, this research puts popular entertainment consumption in opposition to productive

and rational political engagement. The often-discussed work of Gitlin (2001), Postman (1985; see also

Garber 2017; and Illing 2018), and Putnam (2000; see also Tracy 2020) illustrates similar concerns. In fact,

Putnam argues that "dependence on television for entertainment is not merely *a* significant predictor of

civic disengagement... (it) is *the single most consistent* predictor" among those that he explored (Putnam

2000:250; I discuss the civil in more detail below). Recent work has also considered the exploitation of

such increased consumption to use mass media and mass culture as a tool of (fragmented) manipulation

for political means (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga 2020; Chambers 2021), suggesting a new form of media

harm.

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[2] This decline, or the continuation of this decline, has been challenged as well. See Stewart and Hartmann (2020) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2019b). Chapter 6 will also explore in detail the role of new media technologies in expanding and/or restricting public deliberation.

Arendt on mass media

While Habermas has largely captured the "fascination" of media scholars (Lunt and Livingstone 2013) Arendt's conceptualizations of public engagement have been much less explored in considerations of popular media consumption in/as politics. Like Habermas, and perhaps more so, her understanding of culture's benefits or detriments to democratic politics relies on both the necessary separation between public and private as well as the theoretical distinction between art and mass entertainment.

In Arendt's essay on "The Crisis in Culture" (1961), she speaks most explicitly about what she terms "mass culture," or rather "mass entertainment," what I am calling popular culture. Along with the above-mentioned realms of private life and public plurality, there is an additional realm of work and worldliness, the realm of material, durable creation (Dietz 2002). Arendt argues that this was once the world of culture, in which durable cultural goods were created and enjoyed. From this realm of worldliness came products to be enjoyed during leisure time, within the intimate sphere, but not to be *used* for instrumental purposes. Leisure time is "free from all cares and activities necessitated by the life process and thus free for the world and its culture" (Arendt 1961:205). Unlike the Habermasian case of the novel, Arendt argues that culture is not *used* for "self-expression," "self-perfection," or any type of cultivation, internal or otherwise. From culture, though, can come autotelic judgment and taste,[3] informed by subjectivity. Arendt builds on and challenges Kant's theorization of aesthetics to illustrate how, in its removal from any instrumental connection to the self and self-interest, the reception of culture, as an activity of taste judgment (and nothing else), is itself an activity of political judgment: "taste decides not only how the world is to look, but also who" (or what, in the sense of art) "belongs together in it" (Arendt 1961:233). Therefore, culture (referring to art) and politics "belong together because it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgment and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world, and the decision what manner of action is

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[3] Below, I also discuss the autotelic characteristic of some play.

to be taken in it, as well as to how it is to look henceforth, what kind of things are to appear in it" (233). Building on Arendt, Lupton (2014:288) makes this even more clear: "Judgment is the faculty that allows the individual to move from understanding works of art through acts of reflective evaluation to participating in political deliberation. Judgment, like art, implies a commons."

Arendt juxtaposes these cultural art products, not tools for but rather experiences of public engagement, to entertainment. Entertainment, she says, is purely instrumental, fulfilling a need, a hunger for amusement and distraction. While culture was related to leisure time, entertainment is related to vacant time: "mass culture" is a way to fill space. Arendt argues that "the products needed for entertainment serve the life process of society, even though they may not be as necessary for this life as bread and meat" Arendt (1961:205). Entertainment is used, devoured, consumed, and is as much about fulfilling a life process as eating or sleeping. Such products, then, are not necessarily, inherently, harmful: "The truth is we all stand in need of entertainment and amusement in some form or other, because we are all subject to life's great cycle, and it is sheer hypocrisy or social snobbery to deny that we can be amused and entertained by exactly the same things which amuse and entertain the masses of our fellow men" (206). However, in the modern age, this entertainment, grounded in consumption, spreads beyond vacant time, overtaking, destroying, manipulating culture into instrumental entertainment, thereby eliminating culture's intimate capacity for taste and political judgment.

However, Arendt argues that the larger threat to the destruction of culture is those who use culture instrumentally for the purpose of bringing oneself value, or "philistinism." It is those who use culture to gain cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) or for personal development that are to be criticized for the destruction of the realm of the cultural. The critique she makes, then, is not one directed at the ordinary "mass" consumer of popular culture. In fact, Arendt seems to argue for the protection of traditional instrumental entertainment as well as the more "intellectual" high culture, as they both have intrinsic significance to the private individual. It is the *use* of culture, though, that ultimately results in a

"mass culture" and a "mass entertainment" that drives out judgment. Further, Calhoun (2013) emphasizes the creativity of Arendt's political *action*, arguing that while Habermas aimed to "protect a space for deliberation and argument from intrusions," Arendt instead meant to "stress public action that could be creative and culture forming" (77). Could not the creative act of reading, interpreting, and discussing shared cultural products, if autotelic *and* entertaining (entertainment for entertainment's sake), have potential for the development of judgment that the (reader-)consumer may take into the public realm? Throughout the dissertation, I explore how young people certainly do use entertainment to fill vacant time, fulfilling the needs of the individual before they can enter(/handle) the public sphere. I also explore how young people express taste, judgment, and critique through playful, autotelic entertainment.

Habermas and Arendt are both ultimately critical of entertainment media, grounded in concerns about the rise of the consumer and a "mass culture" that is unproductive to the public at best and totally devouring at worst. However, the cases of the newspaper and literary public (Habermas [1962] 1991) and considerations of autotelic, artistic taste and judgment (Arendt 1961) illustrate a cultural capacity/element of public engagement, broadly. Critics of these scholars, though, have greatly complicated the essential distinctions between public and private in these public sphere theorizations. I present these criticisms below, along with extensions of these theories that conceptualize counterpublics/subpublics and the civil or "weak" public sphere(s), all of which ultimately suggest further nuances in the relationship between popular culture and political engagement than Habermas and Arendt alone can provide.

Critiques and Extensions of Public Sphere Theory and Implications for Understanding Popular

Media

While closely related, I will discuss these critiques in terms of those that complicate the

public/private distinction and thus those that argue for a multiplicity of publics or "spheres," and those

that complicate the art/entertainment distinction. Together, these create space for a conceptualization of

the public sphere(s) that more closely reflects the political engagement (and lack thereof) seen in the

data of this dissertation.

Feminist deconstructions of the private (sphere)/public (sphere) distinction

The public/private distinction, emphasized above as so central to healthy democratic

participation, has long been of interest to and criticized by feminist scholars' (see overview of key

arguments in Pateman 1983; see also Thorne 1992; Littlewood 2004; Meehan 2013). Within political

feminist theory, the work of Nancy Fraser and Seyla Benhabib, among others, has been instrumental in

complicating and advancing public sphere theory. Fraser (1985; 1990) has argued that the Habermasian

roles of worker, consumer, and citizen (and later, with the rise of the welfare state, the client), which

connect the individual to public and private systems, are problematic, gendered conceptualizations of

space and action. Habermas very briefly recognizes this in *The Structural Transformation of the Public*

Sphere ([1962] 1991). In defining the private sphere as that of the market and private property, he

discusses this also as the intimate sphere of the family, where (some) individuals could realize "love,

freedom, and cultivation," or put simply, humanity. Such opportunity was variable, however:

> The ambivalence of the family as an agent of society yet simultaneously as the anticipated
>
> emancipation from society manifested itself in the situation of the family members: on the one
>
> hand, they were held together by patriarchal authority; on the other, they were bound to one
>
> another by human closeness. (Habermas [1962] 1991:55)

Habermas' brief recognition of the "ambivalence" of the private sphere of family, with experiences variable by "the situation of the family members," is paired with a similarly brief discussion of women's exclusion from the political public and inclusion in the intimate literary public: "women and dependents were factually and legally excluded from the political public sphere, whereas female readers as well as apprentices and servants often took a more active part in the literary public sphere than the owners of private property and family heads themselves" ([1962] 1991:56). This recognition is insufficient for Fraser (1985; 1990), who argues that such gendered exclusion is grounded in broader hegemonic assumptions around participation in both public and private that Habermas does not acknowledge. While the private sphere of intimacy and family is seen as feminine and emotional (i.e., irrational, even in the literary realm) and the public sphere is framed as masculine, rational, and influential, Habermas' conceptualization of the mediums of power and money are presented as gender-neutral. Fraser argues that Habermas therefore fails to take into account, and in fact obscures and reproduces (through revisionist history), the ways in which hegemonic, gendered assumptions around participation itself, around what "we" do/can and do not/cannot consider public or rational, constructs the very values and ideals of rational, democratic participation and deliberation. This is seen in Habermas in his discussion of the novel, an intimate, emotional (feminine) cultural product, as opposed to the coffeehouse, a cultural space of (masculine) interaction: while the coffeehouse is a site of rational debate for Habermas (from which women are excluded), the novel primarily exists within a literary sphere (within which women are notably active), that is itself not cable of being a cultural space for deliberation. In other words, the literary sphere is a realm of "subjectivity as interiority and affect," a space for pre-political cultivation, but not a site of *real*, productive, direct political engagement (Dillon 2004). A feminist reading of Habermas critiques this distinction as being based in gendered notions of power, money/consumption, and politics.

Feminist critiques of Arendt, whose "entire body of work is engaged in identifying and policing boundaries" (Kautzer 2019), have been sharp. Quoted in Benhabib (1993) as exemplary of such critique,

Pitkin (1981) interrogates Arendt's ([1959] 2013; 1965) necessary distinctions and boundaries between public and private (and the rising social), ultimately arguing that such distinctions are often ambiguous beyond a foundation in gender power structure, and in *On Revolution* (1965), the clarity Arendt aims to provide regarding these distinction does not represent the equality in public action and engagement that she otherwise touts:

> Can it be that Arendt held so contemptible a doctrine-one that denies the possibility of freedom, a truly human life, and even reality, to all but a handful of males who dominate all others and exclude them by violence from privilege? And when the excluded and miserable do enter history, can it be that Arendt condemns them for their rage, their failure to respect the "impartiality of justice and law"? Impartiality! Justice! Where were these principles when that immense majority was relegated to shame and misery? (Pitkin 1981:336)

In this regard, critics of Arendt forcefully push against her separation of public and private, read as a relegation of some (e.g., women) to the private that results in a fundamental, definitional exclusion of their collective (read as inherently and uniquely motivated by private individual identity) from the public.

Considering this gender-based critique of the roles of the individual in relation to the public, the relationship between consumption and citizenship are dialectical in the above public sphere theorizations, necessarily defined against each other: while one is economic, the other is political; while one is private, the other is public; while one is feminine, the other is masculine. And consistently, as the public sphere transforms and degrades at the expense of the collective, it is private, market-oriented consumption (the most "shallow" of which is frequently, if not always, the feminine)[4] that is condemned. Feminist public sphere critics argue that a truly critical political theory must foreground these hegemonic assumptions behind democratic participation, thus foregrounding elements of exclusion, marginalization,

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[4] In particular, I discuss reality television in Chapter 4 and celebrity culture in Chapter 5, regularly described as counterproductive. "vapid" entertainment media.

and diversity in access to and expressions of citizenship. Originating in these critiques, public sphere

theory has expanded to address these elements in considering the multiple and alternative public*s*.

The multiplicity of publics

In considering the exclusion of women from the 19th-century bourgeois public sphere, Fraser

(1990) conceptualizes an alternative public of those excluded from the dominant, hegemonic,

Habermasian public sphere: the subaltern counterpublic. These counterpublics contest "the exclusionary

norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of

public speech" (1990:61). In these collective spaces, subordinated groups can come together to engage in

an alternative, discursive democratic sphere, forming an alternative to the dominant public opinion.

Greatly building on this concept, Warner (2002) argues that a counterpublic is consistently working to

"re-create itself as a public and in doing so finds itself in conflict not only with the dominant social group

but with the norms that constitute the dominant culture as a public" (112). Given this deeper challenge to

norms, such counterpublic engagement and deliberation is often not recognized by the dominant public

(this deliberation is after all outside of and often directed at the hegemonic public). It is essential for

public sphere theorists, as observers of such engagement, to acknowledge the novel and alternative

forms of this engagement, and to illuminate the ways in which a broader field of democratic participation

may be obscured by exclusionary assumptions[5] around proper, rational, collective participation. A

multitude of counterpublics and the discourses of such counterpublics have been explored in different

media contexts considering, for example, the deliberative, digital discourse of counterpublics-as-fandom-

audiences (e.g., Graham and Hajru 2011; Chatman 2017; Day and Christian 2017; Boisvert 2020)

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[5] While counterpublics are often discussed in perhaps sympathetic or supportive ways, Fraser (1990) briefly notes
that some counterpublics can be anti-democratic, in that they are founded on their inclusion to the exclusion of
other groups. I consider such *antagonistic* counterpublics throughout the dissertation, e.g., in discussing the memes
of the far-right in Chapter 6, and in great detail in the dissertation conclusion (Chapter 7).

Alexander (2006) argues that considerations of counterpublics illustrated that "vigorous public life existed in nonbourgeois communities, that these alternative publics provided vital bases for opposition to capitalism and to such other forms of domination as gender and race, and that, though the bourgeois public did decline, other, more viable public spheres often arose to take its place" (276). These other public spheres though cannot simply be categorized as either dominant or counter-, but surely, as I illustrate in Chapters 4 and 5, exist on a spectrum of distance to the dominant, hegemonic public. Warner (2002) provides language for this, though with little elaboration beyond an initial presentation:

> There are as many shades of difference among publics as there are in modes of address, style, and spaces of circulation. Many might be thought of as subpublics, or specialized publics, focused on particular interests, professions, or locales. The public of *Field & Stream*, for example, does not take itself to be the national people or humanity in general; the magazine ad dresses only those with an interest in hunting and fishing, who in varying degrees participate in a (male) subculture of hunters and fishermen. Yet nothing in the mode of address or in the projected horizon of this subculture requires its participants to cease for a moment to think of themselves as members of the general public; indeed, they might well consider themselves its most representative members. (117)

I am interested in this multi-dimensional mapping of publics, considering the distance from the dominant core and related boundary enforcement. I explore how people (use popular culture to) move between and draw from these different spaces and levels in their public deliberation.

Finally, in considering the multiplicity of publics, the critiques of foundational public sphere theory suggest a necessary consideration of public-ness. Rather than emphasizing just the (ideally bifurcated) public and private spheres, some have proposed spaces that bridge these poles. "Weak" public spheres have been defined as spaces of public opinion formation without the capacity for influential decision-making (Fraser 1990), though this definition seems to be a difference in degree but not in form of engagement. Engagement with the weak public sphere appears elsewhere to be much more a hybridization of self-realization and public deliberation. The week public sphere has also at times

been explicitly considered in terms of civil society (Benhabib 2008), which has been much more deeply

(and also inconsistently) theorized.

Theorizations of the civil sphere, and the decline of the civil, may use this language to refer to

respect and courteousness in pluralism, community involvement, collective solidarity, or regulated order

that exists outside of the state and economy (Keane 1988a; 1988b; Alexander and Smith 1993). While it is

not always clear what distinguishes public engagement from civil engagement, much of this work in

regards to media focuses on media's role in the critical decline of the civil sphere (in terms of community

involvement and identity in Bennett 1998; and Putnam 2000; in terms of respect in pluralism and shared

cultural understanding Mason 2018) or the use of media, possibly an institution of the civil sphere

(Alexander 2006), to prepare for more formal political deliberation (in terms of informing the public

Milner 2002; and Boulianne 2016; in terms of the civic as a tool for alternative engagement with public

matters Dahlgren 2003; and Zukin et al. 2006; and Mihailidis 2020). In this dissertation, I consider the

weak public sphere and the civil sphere in complementary ways, drawing on different theorists to

consider different levels of public-ness. Most central though is the conceptualizations of Alexander

(2006), who discusses mass, entertainment media as a civil institution and resource for learning and

cultivation of the self (variations of the Habermas [1962] 1991 news(paper) and novel), as well as tools for

exploring and considering different (coded) public discourses. Considering, for example, the

assimilationist coding of *Will and Grace* as compared to the pluralistic coding of *Queer Eye*, Alexander

shows how entertainment media can act as a shared culture, a shared language of the civil sphere, and

can be a way for "Americans to express their civil judgments in figurative rather than intellectual

language, which made it easier, in turn, to identify with one or another solidary group" (79). Again, the

distinction between civil deliberation (coded, mediated debate above) and public deliberation is

ambiguous, but Arendt's focus on action may be a useful guide.

The central argument in these literatures though is one of the multiplicity of (and variability in)

publics. Initiated in feminist critique, these literatures illustrate the hegemonic exclusivity around that

which is considered legitimate for the public sphere and further illustrates variation in available and

accessible tools for public consideration and deliberation, particularly those outside of the public sphere

(in terms of exclusion/marginalization and/or public-ness). Given these complications, and before turning

the culturalist perspectives on these interactions, these arguments must be considered beyond the

public/private dialectic to interrogate the boundaries between "mass" entertainment media/culture and

high-quality art (Gayraud 2019). Doing so makes theoretical space in these traditions to consider the

limited benefits of private reception (conceptualized before the decline of the public) in relation to

consumption in the hybridized counter/sub/weak/dominant public/civil sphere*s*.

Interrogating the popular entertainment/quality art dialectic in critical theory

Considering the above focus on gender distinctions, media theorists have long been interested in

the ways the very perceptions of media quality, often categorical judgments, are also rooted in gender

(e.g., see van Zoonen 1994; Ang and Hermes 1996; Hermes 2006b; Tasker and Negra 2007). It could be

argued that Habermas' early praise of the novel and the newspaper are rooted in a masculine

understanding of media "use" as connected to quality. While the newspaper was the medium of the

public, with content from outside of the domestic space to be considered before again leaving the

domestic space, the novel was grounded in and confined to domesticity. Not only did this ground the

benefits of the literary sphere, and the readers themselves, to the domestic realm, but it also linked

judgments of the medium to the private, *feminized* realm of emotion rather than collective, *masculine*

action (Laugero 1995). Scholars have explored, though, how even the most feminized of mass

entertainment media may allow for self-realization and cultivation in the Habermasian literary sphere

while also providing opportunity for the consideration of and even interaction in various spheres of

public-ness. For example, scholars have explored what feminized/popular culture, seen neither as

masculine nor as art, might contribute to the public, considering, for example, soap operas and drama

(Modleski 1979; Hobson 1982; Cantor and Pingree 1983; Ang 1985; Geraghty 1991; Brown 1994;

Brunsdon 2000; De Kosnik 2011; Boisvert 2020) and talk/reality TV (Andrejevic 2004; Lunt and Pantti

2007; Morley 2009; Graham and Hajru 2011; Deller 2019; Lovelock 2019). My work aims to further the

implications of this literature, exploring how popular culture, though often feminized and dismissed in

society, might have the potential to bridge the private/public, and the consumer/citizen, beyond an

affective literary sphere.

Much of the literature in the below culturalist perspectives builds off of Habermas and his

theorization of the novel as a proto-political tool. I above argue that Arendt may perhaps provide

additional and varied theoretical tools for an exploration of popular culture in our understandings of

political engagement. However, this perspective necessarily defines entertainment against art. Even if her

understandings of entertainment are not inherently negative, the spread of (utilitarian) "mass culture"

certainly is. Pitkin (1981) addresses this as well, with a continued biting tone:

> The exclusion of "everything merely necessary or useful" from political life means simply the
> exclusion of the exploited by their exploiters, who can afford not to discuss economics, and to
> devote themselves to "higher things," because they live off the work of others. (336)

This reading of Arendt, referencing exclusionary elitism in the autotelic and highbrow requirements of art

(and its subsequent judgment and critique) is generally susceptible to the theoretical criticisms that

illustrate that the private, instrumental use of entertainment (e.g., reading romance novels to escape) can

also bridge to the public. For example, Radway's influential work (1984) discusses the romance novel as a

utilitarian tool for emotional comfort, support, and survival within a felt context of gendered ill-treatment

(Radway's housewives say they read the books "so we won't cry"), but also illustrates how the act of

reading, particularly for these women immersed in this genre, can develop taste, judgment, and critique,

applied to both the quality of the text and to the actions of the heroine, which they even express in

understanding their own lives. This highlights the problems with an Arendtian reading of popular culture in which tools for survival necessarily pollute the non-utilitarian contributors to the public. Implications of this critique are discussed below through a survey of the culturalist perspective, illustrating how Arendt's elitist distinction between entertainment and art obscures how the romance readers' cultural products can "do both" (explored in Chapter 4). Besides Pitkin's critique of elitism here, Fraser (1990) and Benhabib (1992) have argued for a broader understanding of the acts and practices of participation in general (e.g., alternative forms of engagement in a counterpublic), thereby taking into account other pathways to deliberation and interaction not traditionally seen as political (e.g., 19th-century women's reform associations or contemporary debates over media gender representations). In what ways might popular culture fulfill a need for entertainment *and* allow for the emergence of political judgment and taste (in, at times, non-dominant publics)? If the theoretical boundaries between art and entertainment fall, along with those between the private and a sole public realm, perhaps such blurring in the social also comes with an expansion of the culture-forming capacities of media, in both autotelic and creative/productive contexts.

For these adapted readings of political theory to consider a positive relationship between popular entertainment media and any public engagement, they must necessarily include an understanding of an *active* consumer of cultural products, oppositional to the "cultural dupe" conceptualization underlying Critical Theory. Habermas' separation of the literary sphere from the public sphere and Arendt's connection between judgment and culture/art (but not entertainment) both suggest that the consumption of popular/mass entertainment culture is a passive one, in which the messages and meanings of entertainment are simply imposed onto the consumer, who often doesn't *do* anything with such messages and meanings other than consume. The culturalist perspective of media (and politics) provides this, grounded in audience reception research, and illustrates how consumers play a role (to varying degrees) in the construction of cultural meanings through the active reading of media texts.

Part 2: The Culturalist Approach to Popular Media and Political Engagement

The sociological study of media and popular culture with a deep and nuanced focus on audiences is interdisciplinary at its core. Largely influential in the shift from text/production to audience and interpretation was the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. This line of theoretical inquiry, grounded in empirical analysis, deconstructed one of the most central organizing principles of earlier work on media: that the meaning of a text, regardless of power or any "effects," existed within the text, constructed by the producer and then communicated to the consumer. Stuart Hall (1980) and other scholars in the British cultural studies tradition interrogated and greatly complicated this assumption, and in doing so, released traditional readings of popular culture and politics to new theoretical possibilities. Below, I discuss the trajectory of this audience-centered analysis. After examining the foundational theoretical contributions of Stuart Hall and British cultural studies more broadly, I follow the tradition to John Fiske in the late period of the Birmingham School, known for taking theories of the active audience to (or perhaps beyond) their limit. Following this section, I then turn to the culturalist tradition to explore how audience reception studies has expanded the theoretical resources for considering the relationship between popular culture and political engagement (in the public sphere(s)).

Stuart Hall and Active Audience/Reception Theory

The foundation of the British cultural studies tradition was a pairing of philosophy with critical responses to the contemporaneous influences of elitism in literary criticism and a strong positivistic structural-functionalism in sociology. Adopting a Weberian influenced "interpretive, hermeneutic approach to questions of meaning" (Schulman 1993), Stuart Hall's work (e.g., 1981; Hall and Jhally 1996) clearly reflected these foundations, or perhaps these foundations reflect his influence. In particular, his

classic work on the encoding and decoding of meaning, in and from texts ([1973] 1980), has been

instrumental in conceptualizing the *reception* of a text. Hall argues that the process of reception, and the

act of reading, is a primary (but easily and often overlooked) component of the meaning production

system around cultural products. This understanding of (mass) communication clearly complicates the

boundaries and power structures seen in the Frankfurt School between the roles of producer and

consumer in the (assumedly linear) meaning-making process around a text. Hall theorizes that cultural

texts are imbued, or encoded, with particular meanings by their producers. As production occurs within

an open cultural circuit of meaning, the production and encoding are themselves framed by cultural

ideologies, assumptions, and "other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political

structure of which they are a differentiated part" (119). When the text is communicated, it is then read,

or decoded, by a receiver-consumer through a separate (but often related) meaning structure, also

informed by the social, cultural, and political structures (of the reader). Thus, the meaning goes through

multiple transformations in the process of communication, some of which occur within reader reception

and interpretation.

The process of reception can result in various degrees of symmetry in communication: the extent

to which the producer's and consumer's meaning structures are similar or otherwise compatible denotes

a level of symmetry or "understanding." The readings of cultural texts can vary in their symmetry, at

times leading to an active and creative negotiation between the two meaning structures, with adaptive

and oppositional elements, as well as misunderstandings, contradictions, and direct, deliberate resistance

to encoded meaning. As meaning systems are informed, in part, by producer and consumer-receiver

socio-cultural and political position and environment, identity, context, and power can affect not only

how a text is understood, but also, in relation to the above literatures, how this text might connect a

reader with their political (public) environment.[6] Through dominant/hegemonic readings, ideology in and

through distraction or leisure may be transmitted in straightforward ways. Negotiated and oppositional

readings though (and perhaps even hegemonic readings) may allow for self-reflection or cultivation

(similar to the Habermasian novel), judgment and critique (while retaining the autotelic intention of "just

entertainment"), or even *resistant deliberation* on the product and it's encoded meaning structures of

(socio-political) power. Perhaps all three can occur simultaneously, as readers work through the

misunderstandings and contradictions in their reading of a text. I explore the varied opportunities

presented here, grounded in Hall's reception theory, in Chapter 4 on the "Goldilocks zone of political

play," illustrating how these considerations of interpretation and understanding (rather than just linear

consumption) can (possibly, at times) connect the role of consumer and the role of citizen in

(civil/weak/counter-/sub-) publics. Further, this relationship between reader-consumer and citizen may

thrive without a predetermined submission to mass industries' ideological message (Horkheimer and

Adorno [1947] 1994), without a collapse of the citizen into an uncritical consumer (Habermas [1962]

1991), and without the philistinism of either value extraction or fulfilling the hunger for amusement and

distraction (Arendt 1961).

Given the role of readers and their interpretations in constructing the varied meanings of media

texts, the context in which media is consumed was central for the Birmingham School and the broader

active audience tradition. This includes a focus on the physical environment of consumption, as seen in

Morley's (1986) and Gray's (1992) explorations of television viewing habits within the domestic family

environment. For these scholars though, an exploration of the context of viewing is not limited only to

physical context, e.g., the home (or, in representing the center's interest in media change, the context of

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[6] Further, as an open circuit of communication, meaning structures interact with those of those people around them, positionally, such that those with similar meaning structures will likely decode and interpret a text in similar ways. A leader of the reader reception approach in the field of literary criticism, Stanley Fish (1976) theorized this collective component of decoded meaning in terms of "interpretive communities." Such collective interpretations were particularly of interest in the below culturalist explorations of subculture.

space (Plant 1997)), but also refers to the social context of consumption, considering gender and media

interpretation/viewing practices within the domestic family-centered environment. More broadly, the

British Cultural Studies tradition was integral to bringing gender (Brunsdon 1991, Hobson 1982, McRobbie

1991) and other social characteristics, like class (Morley and Brunsdon 1999, Morley 2009), race (Hall and

Jhally 1996), and (later) sexualities (McRobbie 2011) into the considerations of media scholarship in

general and active audience studies in particular.

The influence of Hall's reception theory and the Birmingham School was clear: media scholars, at

least those concerned with the socio-cultural, *had* to contend with the notion that interpretation, which

is necessarily grounded in the social/cultural/political organization and power, matters for understanding

meaning and impact. Audiences are active participants in the process of mediated meaning construction,

suggesting that consumers hold may a *degree* of interpretive power and autonomy in this process, to the

extent that they can or must negotiate communication grounded in varied meaning structures. These

theoretical moves suggest a significantly larger capacity for political engagement through popular culture

than the above political theorists alone might suggest: I illustrate in this dissertation capacities and

opportunities for judgment and critique, struggle and negotiation, micro-resistance, and engagement on

the levels of self-realization and collective interaction with various publics, all through, necessarily, the

playful reception, interpretation, and negotiated working-through of popular entertainment media. In

theorizing active audience reception, though, some scholars have been criticized for taking this

interpretive power of the consumer and thus the active political potential of popular cultural reception to

a far and at times seemingly unbounded limit. While also a key (and to some, beloved) figure in this

cultural studies tradition, perhaps no scholar attracted more controversy or widespread, dismissive

criticism regarding such "unbounded" interpretive power than John Fiske.

John Fiske: Popular Resistance through Pleasure or "Cultural Populism"?

Culture is the constant process of producing meanings of and from our social experience, and such meanings necessarily produce a social identity for the people involved… Within the production and circulation of these meanings lies pleasure.

John Fiske ([1989] 2011:1)

Fiske (1986; [1987] 2010; [1989] 2010; [1989] 2011; [1993] 2016; [1996] 2016) worked to explore how consumers' active interpretation of media very frequently (almost always) contains opportunities for "localized resistance" (Jenkins 2010:xvi). Audiences, Fiske argues, struggle to make sense of the hegemonic, popular cultural ideology that is embedded in media, while their individual lives are often also marked by domination or subordination in some regard (as, at least, members of the "masses," but Fiske also explores specific race, class, gender, oppressions). However, this is not (just) a struggle of imposed domination, but such readings and their struggles are also connected to creative personal pleasures, and the resources for creative struggle are inherent to and ingrained in the very popularity of the (polysemic) cultural product itself: "if the cultural commodities or texts do not contain resources out of which the people can make their own meanings of their social relations and identities, they will be rejected and will fail in the marketplace. They will not be made popular" (Fiske [1989] 2011:2).

In crafting a pleasurable understanding of these dominant, ideological media texts in the context of their variously-dominated socio-political positions, audience's creative interpretations of popular texts often resist, in an everyday manner, the ideological dominance and social control that may be intended in mass media production and distribution (Fiske [1989] 2011; [1993] 2016; [1996] 2016). For example, Fiske ([1987] 2010) theorizes television and television culture in terms of "popular cultural capital," through which television, despite its embedded intentions of capitalistic gain through ideological entertainment, can become a shared, convertible resource used in making sense of the social world. In this sense, the "consumption [of television] involves making meanings, constructing identities, and finding pleasure," *through an active struggle with and resistance to* the embedded hegemonic meaning system

of the Frankfurtian "culture industries" (Jenkins 2010:xxx). Fiske also explores this in terms of collective

"popular agency" and "popular control," considering, for example, popular sports and the provocative

celebrity of Elvis (Fiske [1993] 2016).

Fiske has argued that this does not always and necessarily translate into oppositional politics, and

when it is oppositional, such resistant interpretation can be a "progressive (though not radical)" tool for

political engagement ([1989] 2010:21). However, his theoretical empowerment of the reader through

conceptualizations of "popular autonomy" and, even more so, a (relatively) free and open "semiotic

democracy"[7] brought about great criticism (then and now) of Fiske romanticizing the audience's power

and capacity for resistance and thus overestimating the extent to which resistant readings and meaning-

making can produce social change. Such criticisms, in fact, often emerge from the political-economic

approach to media's relationship to power and engagement, at times explicitly building on the above

critical public sphere theories: Robert McChesney famously appeared to aggressively attack Fiske's work,

though not by name, as a "trivialization of politics" (1999:544-545) that was ultimately "politically timid

and intellectually uninteresting and unimportant" (McChesney 1996:540) (compared, of course, to his

work on media structure and regulation policy). Jim McGuigan (1992; 2005) argues that Fiske's response

to the "cultural elitism" of the above scholars (those critical of the popular) resulted only in a shallow

"cultural populism," which McGuigan uses pejoratively in criticizing Fiske's work as "wholly illusory and

ideologically naïve" (Chandler and Munday 2011). Fiske's vast contributions to theorizations of the media

and civic/political engagement (among those of others, e.g., Jenkins 1992, a frequent defender) thus

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[7] While semiotic democracy was ultimately one of Fiske's most famous and most criticized theoretical concepts, it was actually only used very briefly (see Fiske [1987] 2010:95,239) and is often misunderstood. However, the language itself easily communicates the broad foci of Fiske's work and has been adopted in other disciplinary contexts, making it an appealing starting point for critiques. In his defense of Fiske's importance in the contemporary study of media and politics, Jenkins (2005; see also 2010) observes: "Today, even many of Fiske's former students act as though studying under him was a youthful indiscretion on the order of wearing leisure suits or a mullet. 'Semiotic democracy? I can't believe we used to talk that way!'"

often stand opposite those grounded in the above public sphere literature (Turner 2021). However, the culturalist perspectives on political deliberation and participation, while more firmly grounded in the (British) cultural studies tradition, often complicate, in extension, the Fiske tradition in the considerations of broader socio-cultural effects and the (limited) resources for individual engagement (beyond pleasure).

The Culturalist Perspective

The culturalist perspective on media and public engagement with politics is one that takes the socio-political world and individual's interactions within it, and not the cultural product/media/text itself, as the focus of study. Explorations of these interactions, through this perspective, are broadly centered on "the relationship between culture and power, and in acknowledgment of the role of human agency" (Block 2013). While Fiske's "radical" "cultural" populism has been challenged and largely perceived as being too individualized and stripping away too much of the Birmingham School's original focus on media's power, even for an active reader (Street 1997; Dolber and O'Baoill 2018), his focus on *popular culture* as a particularly significant site of politics continues to disrupt the necessary distinctions made by the public sphere tradition above (between public/political participation and "mass" entertainment media consumption). This has largely been explored in terms of the resources that popular culture can (but, as I explore in Chapter 4, not always and necessarily does) provide public citizens. Below, I follow this tradition, detailing how popular culture has been theorized in such a way that disrupts these assumptions behind political engagement. Popular culture, the culturalist perspective argues, has the potential to provide individuals with resources for the construction of an individual and collective identity, tools for affective engagement with the public and the political, and in some cases, the foundations of collective action, all of which suggest different opportunities for political deliberation. I then discuss the brief literature that explores *when* these resources are mobilized, or, when an audience might act as a public, a question at the foundation of this dissertation.

Popular culture as a civic/public "Trojan horse": Resources of identity, emotion, and engagement

Much of this work considering the role of popular entertainment media is responding, more broadly to what van Zoonen (2005) calls a "television malaise": this malaise is representative of scholarship on media, building off of public sphere theory, in which scholars argue that media are not providing a proper space for democratic deliberation (McChesney 1999; Lawless 2015; Schlesinger 2020) and that the quality of deliberation has weakened, becoming just entertainment and shallow consumption, as the public has become a group of individual spectators rather than participants in the rational public sphere (Postman 1985; Putnam 2000; Bender 2003; Sloam 2014; Parvin 2017; Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga 2020). In addressing this malaise, culturalist scholars have presented a multitude of counterarguments, providing a more optimistic reading of popular cultural engagement that is more limited and grounded than that seen in Fiske. Shea's edited volume (1999) contains multiple case studies arguing that entertainment media can act as a "Trojan horse" for politics in which viewers, through entertainment, are led to consider political issues. In this sense, popular culture has the capacity to contribute to an individual's knowledge and consideration of the matters of the public sphere. Some of this work has dealt with explicitly political entertainment: a strong and explicit "Trojan horse" phenomenon has been observed in television like *The West Wing* (van Zoonen 2005; Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013) and more recently, *Scandal* (Warner 2015; Chatman 2017; Griffin and Meyer 2018) with the latter often considering raced and gendered power in such receptions. Similar work has been done on the popularization or entertainment-ization, intentional or otherwise, of formal political races and figures like Bill Clinton, Barack and Michelle Obama (often as *Black* political figures), Hillary Clinton (as a *woman* politician), and, of course, Donald Trump (Street 1997; van Zoonen 2005; Milner 2016; Heiskanen 2017; Ross and Rivers 2017; Street 2019; O'Boyle 2021; Paz, Mayagoitia-Soria and González-Aguilar 2021), as well as the integration of formal, electoral political processes into popular entertainment (Buckingham

1997; Kim, Chen and Gil de Zúñiga 2013; Thorson, McKinney and Shah 2016; Penney 2017; 2019; Feezell

and Ortiz 2021). In exploring this often incidental exposure to political content through popular culture,

the outcomes are often discussed as opportunities. However, the study of such exposure and learning

online is instead often theorized in the negative, as explored in Chapter 6.

The problem with an assumed divide of popular entertainment and the public sphere goes

beyond the content that might obviously bridge this gap, like popularized politics and politicized

entertainment media. In fact, in Chapter 4 on entertainment TV and popular music, I find that such

content appears quite ineffective in engaging the young people in this study in political deliberation.

However, scholars researching media and identity have also long been interested in less explicitly political

content which appears to have a significant relationship to the civil. Earlier works on television within or

adjacent to the Birmingham School (Hobson 1982; Cantor and Pingree 1983; Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner

et al. 1989; Geraghty 1991; Press 1991; D'Acci 1994; Brown 1994; Joyrich 1996; Brunsdon 2000) explored

this via resources through media that provide viewers with tools for individual and collective identity

development (often with a focus on gender and class), with implications for the public sphere. In

considering these private and personal readings of popular culture (e.g., talk/reality tv and soap operas),

scholars importantly, in the tradition of Hall, relate these readings that might (or might not) speak to

identity to public, socio-political positionings and beliefs. As such, the general mechanisms through which

private entertainment and the public sphere are linked have been less theorized than the relationship

between specific media products or genres and specific identities (regarding, for example, gender, race,

and class). Therefore, this project explores the broad processes by which these specific relationships are

formed in the first place.

In considering the *broad* connections between entertainment and the public sphere, Lunt and Pantti (2007)[8] argue that the distinctions made by public sphere theorists in their conceptualization of the public sphere (i.e., the relationship between politics/citizenship and the culture/consumption) rely on a traditional distinction of emotion and reason that is complicated, in part, by this research on media and identities, which illustrates both the emotional *and* rational foundations of people's understanding of self-as-citizen. Street (1997, 2013) has made a similar criticism regarding this distinction between reason and emotion, arguing that an individual's personal, private feelings and public political identity are linked and in part formed through popular culture, proposing that "popular culture's ability to produce and articulate feelings can become the basis of an identity, and that identity can be the source of political thought and action" (Street 1997:10). In other words, popular media and culture can act as a means of articulating identity through both emotion and rational judgment, all of which (can) become central to the formation of a political subjectivity. Wahl-Jorgensen (2019a; 2019b) speaks broadly of an "emotional turn" in media and cultural studies' interest in the public sphere suggesting that these fields are now greatly considering the emotional components of mediated public sphere participation, be in a positive or negative consideration. Particularly for new media, such integration of emotion is extremely mixed, considering pleasure, anger, and belonging (Jackson and Valentine 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019a; Wollebæk, Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen et al. 2019), as explored in Chapter 6.

This process illustrates what van Zoonen (2005) refers to as the "cultural dimensions of political citizenship," and she argues that both media and political scholars must broaden their understanding of the public and the political to include such cultural dimensions, even if they are initially formed outside of the (formal/dominant) public sphere. Hermes (2006, 2007) and others (Susan, Kerrie and Michael 2002; Zobl and Drüeke 2014) make a similar call, arguing that broadening our understanding of politics and

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[8] Of note, though, is that despite their broad theorization of this relationship, Lunt and Pantti (2007) still rely empirically on a specific genre, the talk show.

political identity formation will reveal the processes of everyday, emotionally informed meaning-making

that are foundational to the formation of public opinion, shared identity, and eventually, formal political

action, though some scholars theorize this in terms of civic rather than public resources (Dahlgren 2006;

Bennett, Wells and Rank 2009; Askanius 2019). This expansion of understanding is reflected in this

project's methods, in Chapter 3, and analysis.

While the affective dimension of popular media consumption can inform identity, scholars have

argued that entertainment media also relate to the public world of politics through what Raymond

Williams (1977) has termed "structures of feeling," conceptualizing how individuals understand what it

means to be a member of a society at a certain time. Fiske (1996) and others (Dahlgren 1995; 2018; Zou

2020) have argued that it is in and through these structures of feeling that popular culture can help shape

a sense of collective identity. Combined with the above resources for individual identity formation,

popular culture, then, could theoretically be seen as a private resource for *entrance into* the public

sphere (Livingstone 2005), forming and linking individual identity to a sense of the public collective

through affective engagement. Importantly, Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham argue that "public

issues… involve more than just 'social belonging or expressions of identity'" (2010:6), but still suggests

that many (though not all) interactions with media contribute to some sense of a potentially-political

public connection, through this collective identity (Couldry et al. 2010:75; see also Nieguth 2015).

This literature argues that popular culture, as a resource for political action, can act as a semiotic

and affective environment, a civic culture (Dahlgren 2003; 2006; 2018), or a weak public sphere (Dahlberg

2007), through which the political public sphere can be understood, opened up, and made personal.

Popular culture might act as a stimulus for public engagement, possibly through civic engagement, as a

precondition to more formal political action (Inthorn, Street and Scott 2013; Street et al. 2013; Vromen,

Loader, Xenos et al. 2016; Askanius 2019). Participation in popular cultural consumption, however, does

not necessitate direct participation in the *formal* public sphere, but rather, it is one of many contexts

through which an individual political identity, as well as a sense of the collective public, is constructed and mediated. This literature also finds that, at times, popular culture can also be a tool for disengagement (Couldry et al. 2010; Vromen et al. 2016; Parvin 2017; Paciello, D'Errico, Saleri et al. 2021), as expected by the critical public sphere theorists. This dissertation explores this variability in bridging disengagement, civic engagement, and public(s) by exploring when and under what conditions popular culture can encourage political engagement, broadly defined. *When and under what conditions* can different popular entertainment media be a resource for or site of (dis)engagement or participation to these varying degrees? In other words, "when is an audience a public?" (Livingstone 2005:6). This is where the dissertation begins. I then extend this question by exploring the process of (variable) engagement, and the different forms such engagement may take. Exploring the nuances of this engagement through the lenses of both the public sphere and active culturalist perspectives reveals a recurrent characteristic among the young people I observed: though these are often contradictory, even frustrating interactions with both popular culture and public-minded matters, young people's engagement in the public sphere(s) through popular entertainment media is, often, *playful*.

Part 3: Play Studies, From Children and Apes to the Deliberative Public Sphere

Using the literature on play requires at times translation of work from child developmental psychology and animal psychology. However, contained within this rich literature are broader descriptors and features of the activity of play that seem to typify young people's engagement with the public (often seen as hostile, as discussed in Chapter 1) by way of the accessible, entertaining popular. Here, I present the key concepts from this literature that will allow for a deeper theorization of this relationship.

Henricks (2020) presents in his history of play a series of traditions in the play scholarship. This includes child development and animal psychology, as well scholarship focused historically on play and modernity, play through traditions, and of more interest for this study, the role of imagination and the

processes of learning, recreating, and healing in play. Beloved play scholar and developmental

psychologist (and folklorist) Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) similarly presents key rhetorics in the play

scholarship, also including children's play and imagination, and additionally, among others, frivolous play,

and "play as identity" pertaining to individuality but also community and power. Linking these many foci

of the field, despite the dominance of psychology in many theorizations, is the legacy of cultural historian

Johan Huizinga ([1949] 1980): "play is not simply the joyous ramblings of children [and apes]; it is central

to all forms of creativity and communicates the highest ideals of communities" (as discussed in Henricks

2020:118; addition my own).

Defining play has perhaps been the biggest challenge and point of conflict within play studies

(Burghardt 2011). To what extent is play just the production of fun? Is play always fun? How free must

play be (if at all) from utility and work? How many players are required for play? Real or imagined

players? Centrally, do we all play? Do we all play in the same way? Does play vary between adult and

child? Human and animal, ape and bird and fish and snake? Sociologist Thomas Henricks (2008:170),

building off of Huizinga ([1949] 1980), illustrates how sociological tools might contribute to these

questions:

> We should see play instead as what social scientists term an "ideal type," that is, a distinctive
> form or model for behavior that can be used to judge the character of real-life events. Only then
> can we decide whether an activity in question is "false" or "true" play, whether it is more or less
> "playful," or even how it is being altered by the organizations that control it.

This is a useful methodological consideration, but, like most of the field, this provides little guidance in

even a flexible application. It is such typification that is debated: "Once classified, it is easy to provide an

ostensive definition, pointing to the behavior patterns in question and saying: 'That's what I mean by

'play'" (Burghardt 2011:3). The problem, of course, is in classification. Therefore, in order to explore the

presence of play in political engagement through popular culture, I pair the above sociological emphasis

on interpretive understanding from Henricks (2015; inspired by Huizinga [1949] 1980) with the

determinable characterizations of comparative psychologist and evolutionary biologist Gordon Burghardt

(2005).

Burghardt presents five elements for play, all of which must be met in some regard for the action

to be considered play-ful. While largely applied in child development and evolutionary animal psychology,

this understanding of play has also been used to theorize humor (Morreall 2009), the work of hackers

(Söderberg 2008), the agricultural labor of young African children (Fouts, Neitzel and Bader 2016),

archaeology and musicality (Morley 2018), and other subjects in varied fields, with more or less strict

application. I consider these five elements (quoted from Burghardt 2005), along with others below, in an

interpretive understanding of play:

1. *Play is "not wholly functional" and "includes elements… that do not contribute to current survival."* This means that play can be functional, but not exclusively so. For example, creating a fort to hide behind before a snowball fight is functional, but not in a purely survivalist manner.

2. *Play is "spontaneous, voluntary, intentional, pleasurable, rewarding, reinforcing, or autotelic."* Noting the "or," play needs to only meet one of these descriptors. Of significance, here, play is not required to be pleasurable (therefore, not necessarily fun). Further, play is often, but not necessarily, autotelic (significant for readings of Arendt above).

3. *Play is structurally and/or temporally separate from "serious performance."* This has clear implications for entertainment media consumption in comparison to the "serious performance" of formal public sphere engagement.

4. *Play is repeated in similar (but not rigidly so) acts* during "at least a portion of" development. This emphasis is meant to eliminate pleasurable one-offs that aren't a significant, patterned play. Further, *"repeated actions also facilitate the use of play in learning or improving skill."*

5. *Play behavior can occur only when core basic needs are met (e.g., food, shelter) and individuals are not under relatively severe stress (e.g., physical danger, critical illness, social instability).*

While I do not strictly apply all five elements in considering political play in this dissertation, such

sensitizing concepts have informed my interpretive understanding of such actions and often do ultimately

co-exist.

After defining play, there is the larger matter of understanding its implications. Huizinga ([1949] 1980) reflects the field's universal consensus on the significance of play: "In play, there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something" (Huizinga [1949] 1980:1). But, as above, there is varied emphasis on which "something" to focus.

Much of the play literature is grounded in imagination. Sutton-Smith (1997) at times focuses on this specifically in terms of art and literature, discussing how the great Romantic writers created imaginative spaces for exploration, but it is the reader of such texts, playing in these settings and narratives, who actively imagines. Such imagination can, most immediately, encourage creative learning (similar, for example, to the exploratory readers in Radway 1984). Much emphasis elsewhere regarding this function or outcome of play focuses on developmental learning in children, which also illustrates the ability to learn new skills (or perhaps new discourses) through play. Given this grounding in imagination, such playful learning can be broadly unsettling as the player pushes outward on their world through the expansion of imagination (Sutton-Smith 1997:126-129).

Clearly, such imaginative learning is not solely contained to children's development of skill. Play can also be a broader exercise in self-realization, a learning and cultivation of identity. Henricks (2015) argues that, in fact, the *main* function of play is to "help people refine their general understandings of who they are and what they can do" (82). Starting his defense of this claim, he illustrates the submerged self-realization that can develop from playing ping-pong with a friend. Of course, the opportunities for such self-realization are more conceivable in other playful contexts. Henricks discusses play as "a pleasurable escape into a carefully defined micro-world" (2015:82), clearly imaginative, which can lead to exploration of identity similar to that from the Habermasian novel ([1962] 1991). Further, Henricks (2015) builds on the symbolic interactionism of George Herbert Mead to argue that play can expand our understandings of self, including the more stable "me" and active "I." Considering the contributions of

Charles Cooley, Henricks argues that such self-realization (and play with identity) can develop and expand understandings of the "we" and "us" as well (and therefore, the "you," "them," and "it"), illustrating opportunities for collective identity realization and development through play, tied to the imaginative component of play theorized so richly by Sutton-Smith (1997). Henricks connects these meanings of play: "Imagination is a collective as well as individual matter. Players act out roles in publicly acknowledged stories as well as in their own fantasies. In so doing, they learn what it means to be part of the human community" (2020:133). Of course, there is variation in *forms of play*, and different play may encourage different forms of realization, as discussed in Chapter 6.

However, as stated, play, and thus imaginative development through play, is not always wholly comfortable or pleasurable. A key aspect of Huizinga's ([1949] 1980) definition of play is that there is chanciness in play, often risk, which evokes tension. This is reflected in Geertz's (1972) application of deep (cultural) play (building off of philosopher Jeremy Bentham). In deep play, players are "in over their heads," and such play will likely bring "net pain rather than net pleasure" (15). While play can otherwise certainly bring net pleasure, the chanciness is clear. For Geertz, what is at stake for the Balinese cockfighters is money, but also the symbolic risks of "esteem, honor, dignity, respect," and thus, status (16). Yet, separate from "serious performance" (Burghardt 2011), "the cockfight is 'really real' only to the cocks" (Geertz 1972:443). In these playful spaces of chance, risk, and tension, imagination still drives play, illustrating how such pushing outward (Sutton-Smith 1997) might foster such risk.

With this imaginative, self-realizing, risky play comes, as suggested by the above literatures, a capacity for resistance. In *Play and the Human Condition,* Henricks (2015) provides a sociological analysis that grounds individual acts of play within "fields of relationships" (73), including the psyche, the body, environmental context, culture, and (historical) social structures. "We play 'in,' 'with,' and sometimes 'against' elements of these sorts" (Henricks 2020:120). So, while *not always* playing "against," Henricks theorizes a "playful resistance" that may be, in its separation from "serious performance" (Burghardt

2011), a "celebration of independence... as alternative life strategies are inevitably fashioned and tested" (Henricks 2015:195). In a particularly Fiske-adjacent conceptualization of cultural play, he states that "play is a seeking of alternatives to established cultural patterns; it may even be a rebellion against forms and forces of any sort" (205). However, the limitations of such cultural play are considered by Henricks as well: as modern play can also be in the form of a game, this can be "amoral and technical in spirit, [celebrating] partisan achievement instead of moral and spiritual exploration" (195).

Thus far, concerning popular entertainment media, this literature has been most seriously considered in the field of video game studies, given its clear connection to game-play. Yee (2006) explores video gameplay as productive work, containing both fun/pleasure and struggle/tension. Denning (2021) applies this field of play to historical video games, exploring those set in Nazi Germany in particular. This analysis explores the relationship between historical understanding and collective identity development in a context of play which is "deep but rarely broad," given the medium (197). Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman (2004) drew from this literature, specifically Huizinga ([1949] 1980), in their presentation of game design fundamentals, thereby considering such complex outcomes of play in the literal engineering of play. This dissertation will consider all of the above components of play (imagination, learning, individual and collective (identity) development, risk/tension, resistance, and the implications of such play) across varied mediated contexts (television, music, celebrity, and online spaces/memes), to consider the relationship between such media consumption-participation (often pleasurable, autotelic, rewarded, and repeated) and public sphere engagement (a "serious performance").

While public sphere theorists often dismiss entertainment media and its pleasures, or perhaps point to the rise of such consumption as a cause of civic and political decline, cultural studies in the active audience reception tradition can tend to downplay power and structure while exploring entertainment's subjective (and often resistant) pleasure (O'Connor and Klaus 2000; Kerr, Kücklich and Brereton 2006). I

have presented literatures that bridge this gap, and extend such traditions throughout this dissertation. In

exploring when popular entertainment media may be a resource for political (dis)engagement, as well as

the processes and forms of such engagement, I take seriously the ways in which young people *play with*

politics through their media consumption. Therefore, I theorize in this dissertation the contextual

opportunities and constraints on political play, theorize mediated political play as a (nuanced,

challenging) social process, and theorize the forms of playful engagement, while throughout considering

the implications of such playfulness.

CHAPTER 3: DATA AND METHODS

This dissertation explores this relationship between young people, popular entertainment media, and playful engagement with politics in the civil/public sphere(s) within the context of a seemingly hostile political environment. This chapter outlines the methods adopted in this exploration, which aim to answer the following research questions, informed by existing research:

- When and under what conditions can different popular entertainment media be a resource for (playful) political engagement or participation in the public sphere?
- When is this medi   a instead (or as well) used as a tool for political avoidance, given this seemingly hostile political environment?
- What are the processes of and motivations behind such engagement through popular culture
- How do people then play with/on variable levels of public-ness (e.g., counter-/sub-/weak/dominant public or civil sphere(s))?
- What different forms do such engagement take: with whom are these young people engaging and with what outcomes?

To consider these questions, I explore a critical intervening stage between popular cultural consumption and the playful political engagement through such consumption: talk and deliberation. Central to public sphere conceptualizations of engagement (particularly for Habermas [1962] 1991), political talk has also been used as a proxy measure of political engagement by those studying popular media specifically (Graham and Hajru 2011; Inthorn et al. 2013; Boulianne and Theocharis 2020). Others have argued that small, everyday political actions, like low-stakes political deliberation among friends, are critical to understanding an individual's entrance into and their richer interactions within a public sphere (Jackson 2009; Thorson et al. 2016; Wasburn and Adkins Covert 2017). Thus, in this project, I also ask the following secondary research questions:

- To what extent and in what ways might everyday talk about popular entertainment culture encourage broader discussions about socio-political phenomena?

- How might pop-cultural talk within young adult peer groups in particular be a space for such playful engagement?

This dissertation explores the above research questions through focus group (and follow-up) data, organized in friend groups and grounded in their popular entertainment media, observing when, how, and in what way various matters of the public sphere are discussed. Below, I first elaborate on the methodological choice to focus on young people, and then outline the operationalization of various key concepts in the study, namely, "popular entertainment media/culture" and "politics"/"political engagement." I then detail the methods of data collection (phase 1: peer-based focus groups, and phase 2: diaries and interviews) and sampling/recruitment strategies. Finally, I present a summary of the final sample and briefly discuss data analysis.

Why Talk with Young People?

In considering when and how people become politically engaged citizens, and what resources they may use in doing so, the literature on political socialization has long been interested in youth, and in particular, late adolescence. With its roots in the 1950s and 1960s, the political socialization literature has four major theoretical groupings (Wasburn and Adkins Covert 2017): The "persistence perspective" argues that childhood is the most critical life stage for political socialization, and while political learning does continue into adulthood, the majority and more important periods of socialization occur "at about the age of three and is basically completed by the age of thirteen" (Davies 1965:11). For this perspective, then, the family is the most powerful source of socialization (though media is increasingly discussed). Alternatively, the "lifetime openness" perspective argues that "age is irrelevant" to the establishment and maintenance of political identity or orientation (Wasburn and Adkins Covert 2017:7). Contemporary concerns of polarization complicate this, suggesting movement in political identity at any age, though with assumedly limited directionality (Prior 2013; Klein 2020). For this perspective, the media, particularly

new media, can be seen as a powerful resource (Farrell 2012). Between these two models lies the "impressionable years perspective," which argues that "late adolescence and early adulthood [is] a particularly critical period in the life cycle for developing lasting political orientations" (Wasburn and Adkins Covert 2017:7-8). Finally, the "life cycle perspective" also emphasizes the importance of these "impressionable years," but also argues that different stages in life might correspond to different cohort political and ideological dispositions, e.g., increasing conservativism with age. Incorporating these four paradigms, many scholars show via independent models and composites (Zukin et al. 2006; Wasburn and Adkins Covert 2017) that late adolescence and early adulthood are critical periods for political socialization.

Media as a socialization agent, and entertainment media in particular, are important in investigating this "impressionable" period. Young adulthood is theorized as a period of transition, where the influence of one's "family of orientation" begins to give way (possibly to a new family of choice, but also as a result of leaving the home). The impact of school will eventually wane, giving way to the socializing agent of work, while throughout, media remain an impactful socializing agent (Quintelier and Vissers 2008; Wasburn and Adkins Covert 2017). Along with media, peers are a particularly important socializing agent at this time, as Thorson et al. (2016) find that "teens' interest in politics depends largely on whether this interest will connect them with their peers..." (16). The importance of these two socializing agents, media and peer groups, during such formative years have led me to take as my site of exploration friend groups of young adults discussing popular entertainment culture. Importantly, childhood socialization literature has also moved beyond discussing socialization as the process that happens to young people, or as something that people passively "go through," and instead considers active, participatory, creative self-integration (Corsaro 1992; 2005), a theorization that pairs appropriately with theories of active citizenship as well as active audience and reception theories (Hall [1973] 1980).

Therefore, rather than discuss how media and peer groups socialize young people, I explore how young

people use media and peer talk to creatively participate in their own civic and public socialization.

In speaking of young people and media as a political socialization agent, the socialization

literature speaks mostly of news as an agenda-setter, a primer, and a framing agent, as it provides

viewers with an understanding of what political topics are of issue, how they might be judged, and what

those judgments might be (Buckingham 1997). Of note is how, particularly for young people, the

consumption of traditional news media has generally declined and traditional news outlets are no longer

a major source of media use, but rather, boundaries between news and entertainment are blurring

(Williams and Delli Carpini 2011; Edgerly 2017), and exposure to news is frequently incidental (Boulianne

2016; Feezell 2018; Feezell and Ortiz 2021), though often still accomplishes the same functions of

agenda-setting and priming. Such incidental exposure, however, may lead to a distancing from politics,

intentional or otherwise, rather than continued, active development and engagement (Kim et al. 2013;

Lawless 2015; Park and Kaye 2020). While work has been done on the relationship between

entertainment media, socialization, and personal identity (Jackson 2009; Thorson et al. 2016), this work

has less frequently considered entertainment media in relation to the public and political deliberation

among young people. My work aims to speak to and further this literature by taking as my site friend

groups of young people discussing popular entertainment media and politics (defined, as discussed

below, broadly).

Variables of Interest: Defining the Popular and the Political

Considering the above research questions, there are a number of variables of interest that

require definition. While I define play in Chapter 2, the other key conceptual components to this study

need more elaboration: popular entertainment media/culture and political/public engagement.

Through the dissertation, I use variations in language to discuss the popular through which young

people are engaging. In deconstructing the notion of the popular, Hall (1981) argues that common

understandings of the popular have changed over time, making the distinction of a cultural product as

popular itself a cultural distinction, as well as an economic and likely an aesthetic one. Contemporary

understandings of the popular could be defined in a few ways: Hall dismisses an economic, market-based

definition whereby a product is popular because many people are consuming it. This definition is flawed

in that it tends to either a) construct the consumer as a cultural dupe and a passive pawn of the market (a

product is popular because the producers deem it so) or alternatively, it b) constructs popular culture as

wholly autonomous from broader socio-cultural powers (the people vote with their money and this

democratically determines popularity). Hall also dismisses a purely descriptive definition of popular

culture/media, which would still be defined by and against elite culture. Instead, he settles on a third

definition, a contextual one, whereby the popular has "roots in the social and material conditions of

particular classes; which have been embodied in… traditions and practices" (Hall 1981:235). This context

is central to my theoretical understanding of popular culture, as it is grounded in Hall's broader analysis

of cultural products while still taking into account the hegemonic social conditions in which the products

are consumed. Historically, the popular is rooted in structural domination, reflecting both the cause for

critique in the Frankfurt School and the dismissal and debasement in public sphere theory. However, it is

still grounded in the context of classed experiences that affects subsequent meaning structures.

More clearly operational definitions of popular culture include "those shifting sets of social and

cultural relations, meanings, and texts which in varying ways emerge as contemporary forms of pleasure,

leisure, style, and identity" (David Rowe cited in Shea 1999), and "mass-produced or mass-consumed

forms of entertainment – such as video games, popular music, Hollywood movies, talent shows, soap

operas and situation comedies" (Street et al. 2013:8). It is from these theoretical and operational

definitions that I draw the varied language with which I use to describe the phenomena of interest. While

the significance of "popular" remains constant, the term "mass" is often used when in the critical context. Further, the focus is often "media," but at times the popular is seen as a mediated popular "culture," in which it is the culture and not the medium itself that is of interest (e.g., the reputational online culture discussed in Chapter 6). Finally, the language of "entertainment" is critical, distinguishing such media from that of the popular press, for example. However, at times, "leisure" more accurately reflects the consumer's connection to the popular, and as discussed in Chapter 2, "pleasure" is often, but not always, a part of popular play. Therefore, building on this language, I often speak of popular entertainment media or popular culture to reflect these products, practices, and phenomena of interest, though I will at times discuss leisure, pleasure, and mass media/culture.

To explore popular entertainment culture/media, then, I operationalize popular cultural consumption in terms of the following products: entertainment television (typically fictional, but including reality television), popular music (excluding classical, (institutionalized) jazz, experimental/avant-garde, etc.), celebrity culture (including "micro-" celebrities/influencers and sports celebrities), and online culture (often viewed reputationally, e.g., on Reddit, Twitter, and through memes). I have chosen to explore these four popular media because of their variability in technologies, affordances, and rich independent literatures, discussed throughout. Participants were not limited to just discussing these forms, and often brought in other media.

The second major variable of interest is political/public engagement. Given the focus of this dissertation on theorists in the deliberative democracy model (Habermas [1962] 1991; and to a lesser extent, Arendt [1959] 2013) I consider engagement as both talk and debate as well as more direct action. Defining public and political is more complex. Considering variation in theoretical understandings of civic and counter/sub/weak/dominant public sphere, the boundaries around participation in each sphere are indistinct. Further, given criticisms over the naming of public or political and the unequal access to such recognition as a result of marginalization or exclusion of the dominant public sphere (Fraser 1990;

Benhabib 1992; 1993; 1997), a narrow understanding of politics as a struggle for power between the (consensus of a) public and the state necessarily overlooks alternative forms of engagement that may shift (hegemonic) public opinion from the outside. Therefore, I adopt a broad definition of politics from the culturalist perspective (Livingstone 2005; van Zoonen 2005; Hermes 2006a; Jackson and Valentine 2014; Askanius 2019; Naerland 2020; Stewart and Hartmann 2020), exploring the ways in which groups struggle for power and influence via civic/public engagement with identity, community and boundary-making, and judgment as well as explicitly deliberating matters of governance. For example, I consider in Chapter 5 how deliberation around R. Kelly's sexual violence, Cardi B's transphobic slurs, Kanye West's support of candidate and then President Donald Trump, and the general role of celebrity in the public sphere are all acts of deliberative political engagement (that, for some, lead to collective action via cancelation). These cases, though, vary in political-ity and public-ness, meaning, how central they are to the democratic public sphere of hegemonic opinion and influence. This application is further explored in Chapter 5.

Further, beyond the observation of engagement via deliberation, I also measure participants' general political engagement with an index comprised of different measures taken from Thorson, McKinney, and Shah (2016) and others (see Methods Appendix for materials). These measures are intended to quickly assess formal political participation as well as those that may be seen as civic or weak public action. Index objects are sorted into three categories: formal political participation, political talk (within the intimate sphere), and digital interactions with explicitly political media. This index was included in a pre-focus group demographics questionnaire, and participants were all given a score without weighting according to reported engagement. With a maximum score of 12, the average index score for political participation was a 7/12. Participant scores are discussed throughout.

Data Collection Methods

To explore these variables of interest, I adopted a modular methodology. The first phase and often most significant points of data came from *focus groups made up of young adult friends*. Frequently used in market research, the focus group method allows researchers access to collective group dynamics and more naturally emergent group discussions (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013). Focus groups are often used, however, out of convenience: as focus groups often include between six to eight participants (Liamputtong 2011), the method is frequently adopted as a way to quickly interview a large number of participants, often strangers. However, in order to a) more accurately observe "natural" group dynamics, b) more accurately observe "natural" expressions of individual beliefs, values, political perspectives, and c) create an atmosphere of casual, rather than formal conversation, I necessarily conducted focus groups comprised of established friends, rather than strangers.

Focus groups varied in size from two to seven friends, though groups of three to four were most typical, and varied in length: the shortest focus group was around 40 minutes and the longest around 160 minutes, though they typically fell between 90 and 120 minutes. Focus groups often took place in college or public libraries, coffee shops, outdoor, public places, and people's homes. Funding also allowed me to secure one professionally organized and moderated focus group towards the beginning of the study, which gave me helpful insight into the method and single-moderator techniques.

This peer-based focus group method proved to be extremely rewarding. I address this throughout the dissertation, reflecting the secondary research questions above. Generally, participants appeared comfortable in the focus group setting, at times in surprising ways, as their relatively long-standing group dynamics quickly came to govern the tone of the conversation rather than one of distanced, formal research dynamics. I believe this also reduced any effects of likeability bias, as they were already comfortable with most of the group (with myself being the exception). Friends often played off of each other's comments, but also did not appear hesitant to challenge each other, thereby reducing the risk of

group-think. While at times these established group dynamics were difficult to manage, as I had less authority as researcher when existing as an outsider within their group, I adapted to this pattern and learned to manage what was ultimately the valuable benefit of observing the seemingly, relatively natural enthusiasm of friends discussing popular culture and politics.

Before the start of these focus groups, individuals filled out a short demographics and political engagement questionnaire. I then opened the conversation with questions about their favorite popular culture, as discussed in Chapter 1. Focus groups were then semi-structured explorations of the above-discussed media (TV, music, celebrity culture, online culture). A sample focus group schedule is included in the Methods Appendix. As each section started with a general discussion of the media, these focus groups allowed me access to examine how socio-political talk could emerge from conversations around popular culture. An example of such emergence is seen with these friends:

> SJP: So let's move on and talk a little about TV. What TV shows do you watch?
>
> Mia: I watch, like, Jane the Virgin.
>
> Jessica: I love that show I just finished it.
>
> Mia: I was just watching Empire.
>
> SJP: Oh yeah, I've heard that show can get pretty wild.
>
> Mia: Well it has a message. Like, once people have power they start to think that because they have money they can do anything, it's like...
>
> Gloria: Donald Trump?
>
> [Laughter]

While politics rarely came up this early and with this ease, similar conversation structures were common. Further, while this schedule allowed for the ongoing conversation to be grounded in their shared media, I did at times ask participants ask about other popular cultural products and phenomena that were frequently discussed in other focus groups. Such introductions were typically after their tastes had been explored at length and established or "triggered" as "known culture" (Fine 1979) in the focus group dynamic, as friend-group rapport had largely "taken over" the atmosphere of the meeting.

To supplement these focus groups with more grounded data, I also conducted a second phase of study, comprised of unstructured in-depth interviews with select focus group participants regarding specific popular culture in their daily lives. In between the focus group and the interview, participants were also asked to keep a media diary in which they track their media diet and conversations they have about popular culture over a three-day period in a small notebook provided to them with instructions (see Methods Appendix). These diaries provided particular cases of consumption and engagement which were then explored in the interview, often in reference back to the previous focus group meeting.

Therefore, the various types of data in this study contribute different information and insight, enriching the overall substance of the analysis:

Method	Contribution
Questionnaire (Phase 1)	• Demographic Information • Political engagement index • Media preference survey (beginning the focus group)
Focus Group (Phase 1)	• Allows for a more "natural" emergence of friend group dynamics • Allows for a more "natural" expression of political values, beliefs, and perspectives • Allows for an atmosphere of casual, rather than formal talk
Media Consumption/Conversation Diary (Phase 2)	• Grounding interviews in everyday consumption/talk • Provided specific examples of popular culture (e.g., memes)
In-Depth Interviews (Phase 2)	• Exploration of everyday consumption/talk in diary • In-depth exploration of focus group themes

Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were largely recruited from three locales along the mid-Atlantic of the U.S.: a large, medium, and small city, with focus groups fairly equally distributed across the sites. Exploring the relationship between popular culture and political talk for young people, I actively recruited people between the ages of 19 and 24. However, as these focus groups were made up of self-organized friend

groups, there was more variability in age than expressed in recruitment: After connecting with a potential participant, that individual became the focus group organizer, gathering other friends to participate and organizing a time and space where everyone can meet. Thus, they at times recruited friends outside of this age range. This also resulted in some relatively too-small or too-large focus groups. Beyond age and location, recruitment sought to achieve diversity in class and education as well, recruiting via college listservs, organizations, and campuses, as well as public spaces like auto shops, gyms, public libraries, local eateries, and laundromats. Sample recruitment materials can be seen in the Methods Appendix.

In obtaining multiple departmental and college-funded grants, I was able to provide most participants with compensation of some form. I brought a pizza to focus groups with college students, and some were offered an opportunity to continue to phase two of the data collection, the media diary and interview, for which, if completed, they received $20 in cash or through Venmo/PayPal. When funds were available, non-college students received $25 if they organized a focus group, to compensate them for this labor in logistics. All who participated in the focus groups, including the organizer, could get $5. There was often the opportunity for the additional $20 for participating in phase two as well.

After meeting with a group, I collected contact information to follow up regarding potential phase two participation as well as snowball-sampling opportunities, from which other focus groups were derived.

Final Sample

A table with final sample data is attached as an appendix for reference. All participants have chosen or been assigned pseudonyms and identifying information has been obscured, though they are listed by focus group, relative to their peers (also anonymized). In total, I conducted 39 focus groups and 41 follow-up diary-based interviews, speaking to a total of 143 individuals. 36 of these focus groups were conducted in the mid-Atlantic region between the summer of 2018 and the summer of 2019: three

follow-up focus groups aimed at verifying patterns seen among conservatives took place in Montana in 2021.

The average age of participants was 21.35, with a range between 16 and 27. 35% of the sample identified as men, 57% as women, with the remaining identifying as other, non-binary, or trans. 40% of the sample identified as White without another racial identifier, making 60% non-White or multiracial. 77% identified as straight. 72% of the sample were students (which is considered in the dissertation analysis). Class is loosely considered via participant's educational achievement level as well as parental education, disclosed in the table.

Politically, 66% of the sample identified as liberal (somewhat liberal, liberal, or very liberal). 19% of the sample identified as moderate and 11% as conservative. Given the high percentage of college student participation, as well as location, this distribution is not surprising. I often found, perhaps because of these environments, that moderates and conservatives often expressed similarities in their critiques of the contemporary political context (e.g., in their critiques of cancel culture in Chapter 4), so I frequently consider these together. Four participants identified as apolitical and three as other, within the same focus group ("Black Independent," "whatever I feel is right," and one simply as other). As discussed above, the political index score had a maximum score of 12, which was also the sample maximum, and the sample minimum was 1. The average score was about 7 (7.39).

Data Analysis

With some support from grant funding, all focus groups and interviews were transcribed by myself or a service from audio recordings, with precautions taken to ensure proper speaker identification, as much as is possible. I open-coded these transcripts, along with contemporaneous notes and any media diary entries, to explore themes and patterns relevant to the sensitizing concepts in the literature

(Charmaz 2006). Ultimately, the following codes, ordered in relation to dissertation presentation, emerged from the data as significant to the study (though not all were ultimately included here):

> Political aversion, importance of popular culture, popular culture as waste/distraction, escapism, listen/watch deeply, messages in lyrics, emotion and relatability, politics of representation, connecting with politics in popular culture, nostalgia, learning through popular culture, problematic, separate the art from the artist, drawn to presentation of politics, pandering/genuine, celebrity power/platform, online conflict, online humor and irony, memes

While analyzing the data with these emergent codes, I composed memos reflecting on the relationship between codes and the public sphere and culturalist literatures. Considerations of play emerged from these memos, which ultimately structured this dissertation.

By observing peer talk grounded in shared popular entertainment media, I was able to observe in a relatively comfortable environment young people's casual play with politics through the popular. In part two of this dissertation, I address the questions at the top of this chapter by exploring such playful engagement through popular entertainment television and popular music, celebrity culture, and online culture and memes.

CHAPTER 4: POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA, POLITICAL AVOIDANCE, AND OPPORTUNITY IN THE GOLDILOCKS ZONE OF POLITICAL PLAY

(*Vanderpump Rules*: too vapid. *The Handmaid's Tale*: too political. *Jane the Virgin*…. just right.)

About half a year into Donald Trump's presidency, I completed my first formal focus group for this dissertation. Shortly after, I had a follow-up interview with participant Isabelle. Isabelle was relatively quiet compared to the rest of her group, so I was looking forward to hearing her share her media diary and get a perspective on popular culture in this contemporary time from a queer, Black, 19-year-old. When television comes up in the interview, she remembers our focus group discussions around current events and preemptively tells me "I don't like watching the news. I just don't feel like watching it cause I'm like 'okay, I get it, it's happening' and I can't help it. I don't feel like seeing it every day." I note her frustrated expression of powerlessness and shift her back towards popular entertainment. When going through her media diary, she shares that she watched an episode of MTV's *Floridabama Shore* with her sister. This reality TV show, modeled after the pop culture phenomenon *Jersey Shore*, follows eight young adults living together in Panama City Beach that are "hoping to keep the real world at bay just a bit longer" ("Floridabama Shore" 2017). While the show largely focuses on "hookup drama" and other similar "coming-of-age" reality TV narratives ("Floridabama Shore" 2017), Isabelle took note in her diary of politics on the show, including the "surprising" civility of a Trump supporter in the house.

I asked her if she and her sister were talking much about this participant and his plotline when she wrote this down or if she just observed it on the show. Her sister "kind of" talked about it, but they mostly just talk about the drama on the show. I further probed her terse responses, trying to explore when and why the politics of a show might lead to a broader discussion around such matters, as I consider in this chapter, and Isabelle says it just depends on if it comes up in the drama. After a short

pause, she added, with exasperation, "I'm just tired of hearing about it. It comes up all the time, like, I

don't even want to see this. I'm just tired of hearing it." She tells me this is why she watches and enjoys

shows like *American Horror Story*, because it's "not about the politics." As it's still early in the interview, I

back off this line of inquiry for now, so as to revisit her relationship with politics later without total

exhaustion, but I take note of this example she presents: Isabelle is taking refuge from the aggressive

hostilities of contemporary politics by retreating to the *AHS* settings of, for example, Season1) a 2010s

"murder house," a S2) 1960s "insane asylum," and S4) a 1950s "freak show" stalked by a "mysterious,

deformed killer clown" (Wikipedia Contributors 2022a; season promotional artwork below, Img. 1).

Further, this horror show that Isabelle uses for escapism and avoidance is also well known for its classic

generic blending of social commentary/critique and horror/fear (e.g., Reddit post by fan

[BenjiAnglusthson] 2018; see also Janicker 2017).[9]

(See Img. 1 below.)

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[9]The show often remarks on identity-based politics, for example, critically addressing gender, race, and ability in multiple seasons (*Murder House*, *Coven*, *Freak Show*, as well as Isabelle's currently airing season, *Apocalypse*). Even more surprising, the show references formal politics as well: the season previous to this interview, S7) *American Horror Story: Cult*, "takes place in the fictional suburb of Brookfield Heights, Michigan, during the year 2017, and centers on a cult terrorizing the residents in the aftermath of Donald Trump winning the 2016 U.S. presidential election" (Wikipedia Contributors 2022a). The current season airing during this interview, S8) *Apocalypse*, explores life after a nuclear fallout, instigated by the Antichrist. I face, this season is discussed by another participant later as something that is "too political." I am surprised to hear Isabelle list this as an example of the type of apolitical entertainment she prefers as she tries to avoid the aggressive politics around her, but such contradictions in and between participants are not unusual, as I explore below.

Image 1 American Horror Story DVD art, seasons 1-4 (first row) and seasons 5-8 (second row), presented in order. Seasons 1, 2, 4, 6 (direct ties to Trump's election), and 7 are mentioned above. One of Isabelle's refuges from politics.

My early interview with Isabelle, which I will return to throughout this chapter, was influential throughout data collection, as the themes of the meeting reoccurred well past saturation and in different and diverse friend groups. Isabelle's expressions of exhaustion/annoyance and her articulated entertainment preferences for media that is "not about the politics" reflect a widespread desire for political avoidance seen throughout my data that is frequently associated with popular entertainment escapism. The long theoretical literature on popular culture and politics has often associated the two: while art might allow for a type of political resistance, or at least allow for the skill development of the judgment or critique needed in public deliberation, entertainment distracts people from serious public matters, enabling and even encouraging a disconnection from the meaningful collective. This is harmful

for democracy and for the people. Part one of this chapter explores these claims by interrogating the experienced reality of such mediated avoidance. Looking at the media of popular entertainment television and popular music, this chapter first explores (Part 1a) the broad context of political avoidance in relation to the work of Nina Eliasoph (1998), illustrating how a "new normal" may complicate Eliasoph's arguments. Further, in emphasizing the importance of entertainment media in this context (which is not taken into serious consideration by Eliasoph) I then explore (1b) avoidance *through* popular culture, as theorized relative to the public sphere and in the criticisms of my participants (where criticism is at times also directed at the public sphere from which they must escape). I further explore (1c) avoidance when, as many public sphere theorists have feared, the political public invades their popular entertainment escape: like Isabelle, many young people expressed frustration when politics intrudes upon their (escapist) entertainment, which they suggest only leads to further avoidance.

However, I greatly complicate the assumptions about these observations in Part 2 of this chapter. After an earlier introduction of theoretical foundations, I show that, while young people do avoid much overt (though to varying degrees) representation of politics in popular culture, and often see popular culture as itself a (helpful) distraction from political engagement, they also (2a) often do enjoy *some* public-spirited content in their entertainment media, resulting in playful considerations of and engagement with the public sphere. I then go on to explore (2b) exactly *when* it may be that young people have such opportunities for engagement. I theorize the area of opportunity as a variable *Goldilocks zone of political play*, and discuss some of these variables affecting an individuals' Goldilocks zone: Different people have different thresholds for political content and therefore experience different opportunities for playful engagement with the discourses and deliberation of the public and civil spheres. Political play occurs within the Goldilocks zone, when the perceived (though not wholly reader-determined) politicality of a text is "just right" for a particular individual, leading to both entertainment

and engagement. However, along with variance by individual, as well as by text/content, Goldilocks zone opportunities are influenced by the conditions of medium and context of consumption.

This chapter thus contributes to the broad scholarship on popular entertainment media and public sphere engagement in multiple ways. Engaging directly with Eliasoph (1998), I illustrate a change in the social context of political talk (the "new normal" and active disengagement) and demonstrate the importance of exploring entertainment media as a necessary cultural context of such talk (or lack thereof), which Eliasoph's seminal work fails to seriously consider. Beyond avoidance and frustration, though, this chapter initiates the idea that popular entertainment media can provide opportunities for playful engagement with politics and deliberation in the public and civil spheres, <u>even in this context of active disengagement</u>, thus arguably making such opportunities particularly valuable. Taking these engaged conversations among young people seriously (engaging with the media, engaging with public-minded issues, and engaging with their friends with whom they are discussing), I move beyond the argument of *if* such opportunities for political play exist in popular culture and ask *when* might different young people come across such opportunities. My original conceptualization of the *Goldilocks zone of political play* illustrates the contexts and conditions around such engagement, thereby allowing for a deeper, richer understanding of how popular media might expand, rather than collapse (Putnam 2000), public sphere engagement.

Part 1: Avoiding Politics (in and through Popular Culture)

1a) From Apathetically Avoiding Politics to an Active Disengagement in "New Normal"

Theories of popular culture's relationship to the public sphere are typically founded in a generalized concern with political disengagement. Central to research on the latter, Eliasoph explored the processes of political disengagement, specifically in groups and communities, in her influential work *Avoiding Politics* (1998). While she doesn't focus on popular media as distraction (though does look in the

context of popular consumption), she investigates how everyday people avoid discussing politics in their Goffmanian frontstage. This is not because they are necessarily ignorant or don't care about politics, but rather they don't have the interpersonal, conversational context to discuss political, "public-spirited" matters on a public stage. Of particular interest is her focus on the Buffalos, people who gathered at local country-western dance clubs, as opposed to the more overtly public-minded volunteers and activists. Brought together by popular culture (country-western music and dance), though this shared culture is not of significant focus, these individuals treated the shared space as a collective frontstage where discussion of politics was seen as a waste of time (1998:129). Instead, people strove to be seen as anti-political. This is not to say that the Buffalos weren't political: privately they shared public-spirited concerns. However, paired with a sense of distrust about their potential to make change, public political deliberation and action became linked with the act of protesting, which was foolish as it didn't (couldn't) accomplish anything. Therefore, even though many of these Buffalos were privately concerned about public issues, there was little opportunity for public deliberation on such issues (of concern to the Habermasian public sphere tradition), as everyone avoided such public sphere interaction in favor of the (entertaining) social (of concern to Arendtian thought).

Eliasoph's work has been greatly instrumental, as it illuminates the processes behind political avoidance, exploring how widespread political apathy and disengagement can be produced and maintained, socially and discursively. While then certainly in a time of political turmoil,[10] concerns of avoidance grounded in the contemporary political moment (e.g., the "Trump-era") have only seemed to grow. Popular perceptions, in the press and my data, reflect a sense that higher levels of political participation in terms of voting as well as adjacent action like donating, organizing, and protesting may be *"the new normal"* (Schmitt 2021), differing from Eliasoph's context of wide normalized apathy. *However*,

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[10] Four days after *Avoiding Politics* publication, Bill Clinton became the first-ever sitting US president to testify as the subject before a grand jury, leading to his impeachment four months later.

this increased engagement is rarely discussed in terms of broad, positive democratic interest, but rather as hyper-polarization among those most engaged (Mason 2018), a further engagement of the "political class" that does not reflect "normal people" (Fiorina 2017). Instead, many fear this increased (but polarized) participation will lead to further disengagement and avoidance on the part of an increasingly "exhausted majority" that is disinterested in such aggressive, contentious politics (Hawkins, Yudkin, Juan-Torres et al. 2018). This appears to be an even greater concern for young people's political (dis)engagement (or at least formal political engagement, as discussed in Sloam 2014; Parvin 2017). Young people's general disinterest and distaste in (formal) politics appears to be clearly linked to increased (perceptions of) partisanship (Lawless 2015), though this is often expressed in my data with a general disillusionment with the state of politics more broadly. Further, as Isabelle's interview at the top of the chapter suggests, this perception of politics (and generally of the public sphere) is associated with exhaustion, hopelessness, and ultimately, avoidance.

The "exhausted majority" appeared in much of my data. However, they often seemed more like the less common "cynical Buffalos" in Eliasoph's study, reflecting active, vocal, "strenuous disengagement" (1998:154) rather than the private Buffalos, discussed above, whose apathetic avoidance resulted from the lack of a context of political discussion (or much pubic talk at all). Here, I will explore what political avoidance looked like for my participants, before turning to popular culture's role in such (active) avoidance. In doing so, I aim to illustrate the particular characteristics of the political moment that suggest a different context than that of Eliasoph's Buffalos, therefore suggesting a different type of avoidance. Later, after looking at popular media's role in this avoidance, I ultimately illuminate opportunities for playful public engagement that Eliasoph does not consider, made visible in exploring both socio-political context and popular culture as context. Firstly, I present the general socio-political context of avoidance, as reflected in focus groups and interviews.

At the end of every focus group, after discussing popular culture (music, TV, celebrities, and online culture/memes) and its relationships to politics, I asked participants, simply, if they liked and/or enjoyed politics. The frequent enthusiasm behind the answers to this question made the concerns about youth disengagement in the public sphere unsurprising. The resounding "NO" to the question of enjoyment was often explained in terms of a deep frustration with "the system" as a whole, referencing politicians, parties and partisans, legislative corruption, and other structural concerns that were separate from "the issues." As discussed, this did not reflect Eliasoph's private Buffalos, as the conversation rarely reflected an apathetic disinterest from a system that didn't help them: this was a *passionate, active disengagement*. For example, during a group response of frustration, some seeing near-humor in the absurdity of such a question, Matthew quickly interjects, overlapping his friends' remarks to critique with great enthusiasm:

> I hate it. I hate politics with a fiery passion. I couldn't even tell you directly. I understand the necessity and I understand the importance of everyone participating and everybody being involved but I just think that most politicians are snakes and (exaggeratedly) it just doesn't interest me.

Clearly, this is not the apathetic avoidance of a private Buffalo. The message, language, and tone of Matthew's enthusiastic criticism suggest a different type of avoidance and disengagement, one that is much more actively contemptuous.

Friends Lee, Addison, Carl, and Elizabeth are also passionately critical of the political system throughout the focus group, but expand this, as many did, to the broader, polarized public sphere, as seen in their expressions of avoidance (reflecting the concerns around disengagement and youth, e.g., Sloam 2014; Parvin 2017).

> Lee: I don't like political conversations because they always go in circles. The truth is life isn't black and white, but everyone wants to believe in one thing and stick to that.
> …
> Addison: I hate politics, I think politics is corrupt. I think government is important, but I don't like

politics. I really hate it. I think the issues are important that go through politics but I hate politics themselves, so I tend not to talk about them. And I think there's a difference between politics and social issues. If it comes up I might talk about social issues, but I hate really politics. I don't like political parties. I don't know… I just don't like it.

…

Lee: It's kind of gotten mixed up with celebrity culture with all the idolizing.

Carl: It's like a sports team kind of culture right now. Either you're with us or against us. I consider myself liberal but if I say "hey, this conservative guy is saying some reasonable thing" someone will be, like, either you're with us or against us.

Addison: I agree. I think everyone's all or nothing right now. On both sides. Super liberal people will not listen to super conservative people and super conservative people will not listen to reasonable liberal people.

…

Addison: It's just wild because most people are moderate, most people are in the middle, but it's the intense sides…

Lee: They're the loudest people.

Addison: Yes, everyone else just kind of gets lost.

For these friends, despite claims of just not talking about politics, the discussion of their dislike of politics is very animated[11] and repetitive, to the point of appearing as though they do in fact want to discuss and deliberate such matters. Regardless, the system of contemporary politics, including the politicians, parties, and partisanship are passionately avoided. The "social issues" were widely recognized as important, even interesting, but associations with politics spoiled many concerns. Similar to the Buffalos, the group agrees that they "don't like political conversations" and avoid personal and interpersonal

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[11] Further, this group's various discussions of popular culture and politics throughout our meeting (as well as many other groups') are quite animated. The anger and frustration appear very particularly applied to specific realms/understandings of politics, while others that weren't "too political" could be tolerated, even enjoyed, as discussed later in the chapter. While everyone in the group reflected a Goldilocks effect in which some public-spirited media could be (and was) deeply engaging, other media was seen as "too political," often explicitly because it was associated with that which they critique here.

engagement with politics. However, they do seem to relish discussing the system from the outside as a critic.

Participants' hatred of politics was often also linked to exhaustion and a sense of powerlessness, but was still presented with enthusiasm and frustration rather than apathy. Sheldon, Sally, and Sadie all say that they hate politics, eagerly talking with and over each other. I ask with a sense of sarcastic questioning "so it sounds like you don't enjoy it?" and Sally literally throws up her hands in frustration:

> Sally: I have better things to do with my time. That's a time suck and an energy suck that I just can't afford. And I don't want to have negative emotions for something that really won't affect me. I mean, I can get all huffed up and red in the face about it but in the end what will I do. In the end, it's not up to me, it's up to a complex system of checks and balances and *bureaucracy* (with emphasis) that I have nothing to do with.

Despite her claims of apathy, she does clearly have negative emotions and is affected by these political problems, at least in mood, but seems to be pretty desperately running from such effects.

Finally, such forms of avoidance (active and critical, from frustration and exhaustion) often presented themselves even before the final broad question on positive political engagement. When asked about "social messages in music," friends Hunter and Elicia begin discussing musician Hosier's relationship to the queer communities, and Hunter asks if they seek out that kind of music. Chris, who was not discussing Hosier, interjects with an abrupt change of tone and an intended comedic presentation:

> I tend to avoid political content because it makes me angry. I am but a small man and the world goes on around me. I'm waiting on the world to change and it's not changing in a way I agree with, but also, I don't feel like I have any real chance to make a push back against it. (Laughs) Welcome to existential hopelessness with Chris. I just find music that I enjoy.

While this felt sudden and unexpected to me, Hunter and Elicia don't flinch, conversationally, and the discussion jumps to considering musician's role in the public sphere (should they "stay in their lane" or do they have a responsibility to speak to public-minded issues?).

While Eliasoph's private Buffalos do not have the frontstage context in which to address politics, these cynical, frustrated, exhausted young people feel that politics is everywhere on their front stage. Oppositional to the Buffalos, they felt they must retreat to private consumption (though through shared popular culture) to escape this political public that is ever-present and demanding. This is an active, even enthusiastic distancing that contains thoughtful deliberation *on* (though not within) the public sphere, containing both logical reasoning ("it's up to a complex system of checks and balances and bureaucracy" and recognition that the most polarized are "the loudest people") and personal emotion ("I hate politics with a fiery passion."). Critical and personal, though also collective, this is an engaged (i.e., active) disengagement (i.e., breaking away).

Regarding methods and media: Eliasoph suggests that observations like these, in which the typical American (i.e., not engaged) appears to participate in profound political discussion(/critique), may be the result of methodological error: "So, while Americans are able to reason about politics *if given the kind of opportunity that the sympathetic, open-minded interview researchers give them*, this opportunity almost never presents itself to most Americans [in their everyday context]" (Eliasoph 1998:151, emphasis mine). However, this loosely-structured focus group context, centered on friend group's shared media, did not lead to young people being observed "away from the respondents' friends or usual associates" (19) or discussing content exceedingly distant from that already common to the group.[12] Considering the enthusiasm and apparent comfort with the conversation among most groups (including those with diverse political ideology identifications), I believe their differentiation from the Buffalos is not due to methodological differences in accuracy, but suggests a richer explanation.

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[12] As discussed in Chapter 3 on methods, I did at times ask about other media, when frequently discussed in other focus groups, but this was typically after their tastes had been explored at length and established or "triggered" as "known culture" (Fine 1979) in the focus group dynamic, and the group rapport had largely "taken over" the atmosphere of the meeting.

These data suggest a shift in expressions of political avoidance (at least for these young people), from that of the "private people," Eliasoph's majority so focused on the backstage and distanced on the public-facing front stage, to the cynical Buffalos, fervently speaking of and deliberating on the public, though in an ultimate effort to actively and proudly distance and avoid. While there is still avoidance (Eliasoph even suggests greater distance from the public sphere for the cynics than the private people), there also appears to be deliberation, not within the public sphere, but on the state and nature of politics and the public generally. This shift in type or expression of avoidance may be a reflection of the "new normal," in which politics is perceived as more aggressive, so participants' avoidance must be aggressive as well. Additionally, by exploring this avoidance in the context of media consumption, these focus groups further illustrate disruption of the private consumption/public engagement theoretical distinction such that I gained access via friend groups to the semi-public sphere deliberation these young people are having through semi-private consumption in semi-civil media spheres (Alexander 2006). While obviously complicating such theorization of "spheres" (discussed further below), including the context of popular culture/entertainment media consumption when exploring how people avoid politics, my data can reflect that "which [is] 'public' but not yet 'the public,'" (Livingstone 2005:26). I believe the significant changes observed in what political avoidance looks like can be explained by these factors: changes in socio-political context, and methodological considerations of shared popular cultural context.

Chris, above, and Isabelle, at the top of the chapter, suggest a possible relationship between this enthusiastic avoidance in an aggressive, polarized political context and their entertainment media consumption discussed throughout the focus groups. Chris "tend[s] to avoid political content because it makes [him] angry" and instead just aims to find music that he enjoys (presumably, therefore, music that is not particularly public-spirited). Isabelle is tired of hearing about politics, doesn't want to see political content, and instead seeks out entertainment that is "not about the politics," so she can get a break. Including, of course, getting a break through the relaxing escape of *AHS*'s psychological horror and

premium-cable-streaming gore. I first will review the academic literature on this relationship before turning to young people's reflections on this relationship in both discourse and action.

1b) Popular Entertainment Media as Avoidance and "Escape," Academic and Participant Perspectives

These concerns of political avoidance have long considered the harmful effects of popular culture. Foundational to this is the cultural criticism of the Frankfurt School. While there was some limited optimism about the role of entertainment media in this approach (e.g., Benjamin [1935] 1969), this central literature was largely disparaging of the oppressive "culture industries" (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 1994). Popular, capitalistic entertainment was seen as manipulating emotion so as to prevent resistance to capitalism, thereby preventing change and revolution (Marcuse 1964; Adorno and Leppert 2002). Popular entertainment media and technologies are therefore tools for "control and domination" (Marcuse [1939] 1998:41) that not only suppress but actively prevent, via ideological control, any critical political deliberation.

Avoidance, or rather, escapism, is central to this argument, as it has been central to the philosophy and sociology of politics, art, and aesthetics (e.g., see conflicts on expressionism, realism, and politcs between Bloch and Lukács, Brecht/Benjamin and Lukács, Adorno and Brecht, Adorno and Lukács... collected, edited, and printed in [1977] 2007). Traditionally, such counterproductive escapism has been associated with shallow entertainment, while true art engages and allows for growth (see Laurenson 1978). There is emancipatory potential in art, even (to some) in art's more genuine imaginative escapism and negation of the existing world (Adorno [1966] 1973; also see Fischer 1997). But that which is sold as "escape" in the commodified "purposelessness" of popular entertainment culture only serves that which true critical deliberation would threaten: the oppressive social and political order.

While diverging to varying degrees from the Frankfurt School, foundational public sphere theory's understandings of consumption and engagement, including that which Eliasoph and above scholars have built on, often reflected this aversion to popular entertainment media. Despite his departure from the Horkheimian Frankfurt tradition, in part fueled by what he saw as an overly pessimistic disdain for culture, Habermas' "reshaping [of] Critical Theory" retained a denunciation of mass (media) consumption (Calhoun 2013). The rise of mass entertainment media (as opposed to literary art and print media cultures) was theorized as a large contributor to the decline of the bourgeois public sphere and productive, rational deliberation among citizens (now just largely acting in the role of consumers) that is necessary for democracy and justice (Habermas [1962] 1991). Similarly, Arendt ([1959] 2013; 1961) differed from Habermas in her relationship to Marx, Critical Theory, and broad understandings of political theory/praxis but shared his concern for popular cultural consumption and its threats to a healthy (active) public. The works of both Habermas and Arendt have been criticized, often from a feminist perspective, for their insistence on the necessity of separate public and private spheres for a healthy, free, just society (Fraser 1985; e.g., Benhabib 1992; Benhabib 1997; Canovan 1994; Calhoun 2013), thereby complicating any clear requirement for a division between private (pop-cultural) consumption and public sphere action and/or deliberation.

Nonetheless, the critical perspective on popular entertainment and its harms to social progress has waxed and waned in influence over time and discipline. Postman's highly influential criticisms of television in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), reflected these concerns (as well as those of McLuhan (2003), discussed later in this chapter). The technology and media of contemporary entertainment, Postman argues, have simplified communication, culture, and politics to a point of being trivial. Beyond ideological, the content and foundational media are now only superficial, and the masses, now only as audience and not public, are especially vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation. Others have made similar arguments about entertainment as distraction from the public and civil spheres (e.g., Gitlin 2001).

In his work often discussed alongside Eliasoph, Putnam (2000) theorizes the disappearance of a strong

public as well, focusing on the requisite civil sphere rather than only formal political engagement.

Television, specifically, takes time away from potential civic engagement, but also fosters attitudes that

compound problems of disengagement, leading to solidarity and increased privatization and

individualization. "Dependence on television for entertainment," he writes, "is not merely *a* significant

predictor of civic disengagement. It is *the single most consistent* predictor that I have discovered"

(Putnam 2000:250, original emphasis). While much of this academic work has shifted to focus on the

internet,[13] the works of both Postman and Putnam have been revisited, with the dangers of popular

culture being discussed alongside concerns around democracy in the age of Trump (Illing 2018; Foust

2017; Garber 2017; Tracy 2020), and academic concerns about the harms of "junk entertainment" to the

public sphere remain (Syvertsen 2017; Klikauer 2021).

However, there do also exist more optimistic theorizations of this relationship.

Pop culture and political engagement? A review of alternative literature.

Counter to the above perspectives, others have proposed a potentially productive, potentially

resistant relationship between popular culture and politics. Even fellow Frankfurtian Walter Benjamin

([1935] 1969) challenged the assumptions and implications of his colleagues, arguing that entertainment

"represents a site in which political thoughts and actions are shaped" in the positive (discussed in Street

et al. 2013:12). Raymond Williams (1974) struggled with the contradictions of popular culture,

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[13] I will revisit popular culture and political avoidance in Chapter 6 on online culture, affordance, and memes. I am not including that analysis in this chapter as 1) I argue that the participatory medium of online entertainment results in a radically different context of politics and of consumption than for television and music, discussed here, and therefore, 2) the act of avoidance in/through popular culture (TV/music or memes) differs qualitatively as observed in my data. While there are still opportunities for political play online, as I explore with TV and music here, I later examine the online context and the case of memetic play online to illuminate the different forms playful political engagement may take and show that the participatory medium may complicate our theoretical understandings of these forms.

considering the ways in which popular culture may be of and for the people (through lived interaction

with the product) and/or, reflecting his Marxist positions, may be from the elites but intended for the

people, ideological and imposed from above. The largest challenge to the above negative theorizations

though came with the growing influence of audience research in cultural and media studies (e.g., the

Birmingham School in the 60s and 70s, as well as Williams, both before and after his parting with the

CCCS), and perhaps culminating in the work of John Fiske, theorizing power and (potential)

empowerment in the reading and re-working popular cultural texts.

Fiske (1986; [1989] 2010; 1989) put forth a drastically oppositional perspective, theorizing

popular culture as an "optimistic" and "progressive (though not radical)" tool for political engagement

([1989] 2010:21). Such engagement can come from consumer/fan interaction with popular fantasy,

creative and active identity development, collective and subculture-based meaning-making, and most

importantly, resistant pleasures in popular culture, existing within the interpretive context of readers'

"semiotic democracy" (Fiske [1987] 2010). Fiske's optimistic view of popular culture was often labeled as

unwarranted, a "trivialization of politics" (McChesney 1999:544-545) and his response to the "cultural

elitism" of the above scholars critical of the popular was itself deemed a "cultural populism" (McGuigan

1992; 2005).[14] However, his contributions, among others at the time (e.g., Jenkins 1992), shaped a clear

debate regarding the potential benefits popular culture may have to civic/political engagement (Jenkins

2010; Glynn, Gray and Wilson 2011; Turner 2021).

Thriving in cultural studies, and in particular active audience research (e.g., Morley and Brunsdon

1999), this debate on popular culture as a tool for engagement has been incorporated into the above

critical work on the public sphere, with influential scholars exploring entertainment media's relationship

with identity and civic connection (Hermes 2006a; 2007; Dahlgren 2009; Couldry et al. 2010; Nieguth

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[14] While Fiske's broad optimism of empowerment and resistance has largely fallen out of popularity, so to speak, many have argued that this negative reputation of naïve populism lies in reductive readings of Fiske's more nuanced arguments (e.g., those in Fiske [1996] 2016; see Jenkins 2005; 2010).

2015; Goren 2016), the cultural semiotic context of the public (Dahlgren 1995; 2003; 2009), and the

values and beliefs of significance to public discourse (Press and Cole 1999; Hermes 2006a; 2007; Lunt and

Pantti 2007). Livingstone (2005) states that the question is, not *if* an audience can act as/in a public, but

when, complimenting Habermas but furthering the disruption of public/private, political/consumption,

and ultimately defining the difference as one of collective aim/action. As well, much of this literature has

considered conceptualizations of the civil sphere (e.g., work in Alexander 2006; Zukin et al. 2006), instead

(or as a prerequisite to) a more active public sphere engagement. As such engagement turns to more

intentional "political consumerism" (Endres and Panagopoulos 2017) or a type of citizenship through

consumption (Bennett 2003), political engagement through consumption may contribute to increased

political knowledge, political interest, and ideological commitment (though, given correlation, this could

occur in the reverse direction, though some longitudinal work in online spaces (see Boulianne and

Theocharis 2020) could suggest the initial causal direction). I explore what such engagement might look

like to these young consumer/citizens. John Street and others (Street 2003; 2011; 2019; 2020; Street,

Inthorn and Scott 2012; Inthorn et al. 2013; Street et al. 2013) have suggested both civic and political

engagement can occur through popular culture through talk, briefly describing this, without elaboration,

as "play."

     The rest of this chapter addresses this longstanding theoretical tension regarding the harms

of/opportunities for popular culture to the public sphere. In the rest of part one, I explore 1b) to what

extent do young people use pop culture to "avoid politics"? Outside of practice, how do they understand

this relationship between the two? Ultimately, I do find on the outermost layer of participant

presentation an admission of, as well as the desires for, using popular culture as distraction, escape, and a

tool for avoidance (addressing 1b). However, participants also (often simultaneously) reflect this criticism

in their own discourse. This supports the critical theorizations presented above, *even while participants*

themselves express this critique. Two interesting outliers are presented in the chapter appendix.

Other public sphere theorizations (particularly Arendt 1961) argue there is and necessarily should be a division between private cultural consumption (speaking more so to "entertainment," a life need) and public engagement (advanced common action). While young people are aiming for this, the Habermasian critique suggests these young people are so by eliminating the role of citizen in expanding the role of consumer. Alternatively, given this perceived "new normal" or an aggressively expanding public, I ask 1c) what happens when young people's private sphere of entertainment is invaded by the political? How do young people understand the perceived offensive on their retreat? Most people, with even greater frustration than that seen in 1a, are highly critical of this intrusion, expressing active and passionate rejection of such entertainment media. However, the line threshold that marks something as "too political," and therefore invasive, appears inconsistent and contradictory in the data as a whole, and most people enjoy *some* sort of public-spirited popular entertainment media. I then move into part two, to further explore these latter observations given this above cultural studies tradition.

Popular perspectives on popular culture as distraction, escape, avoidance

Participants recognized that entertainment media, like television and music, was used by themselves and those around them to distract and escape from the "serious" matters of the public. This was often discussed in three ways: criticism of such escapism (reflecting awareness of the above concerns of the Frankfurt school, Postman, and others), a guilty recognition of such escapist pleasures (often combined with critique), and an embrace of such distraction and escape as necessary (reflecting the Arendtian basic need for entertainment, though through what they admit is "mindless"). All three perspectives were used in discussion of popular reality television analyzed here, which was almost universally recognized as a particularly shallow distraction (despite the embedded realism that often reflects the socio-political world (Bignell 2013).

Firstly, some participants explicitly criticized popular culture as a wasteful distraction, agreeing with the theoretical implication of critical and public sphere theorists that sees the rise in contemporary popular entertainment as a detraction from public matters. This was expressed by a minority of participants, though still a theoretically significant perspective (the chapter appendix below provides a preliminary exploration of two cases of these criticisms in terms of counter- and sub-public discourses). In an otherwise "average" focus group that turned to the Kardashians, Irelyn brings this into the discussion:

> Sometimes it reminds me of *1984*... Like when all the [latest drama on *Keeping up with the Kardashians*] was going on I was like 'What the fuck is Trump doing right now?' you know? I was like 'He could be doing some really messed up shit but all we're [watching] is this Kardashian stuff.' Which, like, we're allowed to have fun and be obsessed with celebrities but when they become so pervasive that I'm not paying attention to everything else I have to take a step back. I think that's how they keep political power, is they find a way for us not to be political if that makes sense. And that's a political stance because you're choosing not to do anything.

The focus group was initially considering reality television/stars and the ways in which they can be or have been political (or rather, speak on "social issues," e.g., Kim Kardashian's "awakening" to social justice (Van Meter 2019)). Irelyn though contributes to the discussion in considering the ways in which such entertainment distracts from the legitimate, formal, (assumedly) more serious and consequential realm of politics. Illustrative of the above reasons for distraction, she also reflects clear frustration with the state of politics, the public sphere, and popular culture's role in their decline. Further, striving to be a good citizen of the public sphere, Irelyn feels like this requires taking "a step back" from popular culture to focus more on what is really important. Popular entertainment culture is fun, but it is a distraction that can overwhelm that of more significance, while politics is clearly unenjoyable but vital: the two realms and roles are defined against each other. Further, Irelyn considers how this distraction is a tool for or at least advantageous to the political elite. Presumably, this is of most concern to the elites representing a political ideology Irelyn opposes (Trump), but of significance is the recognition of the power behind popular culture's role in distraction. In this sense, rather than being the "cultural dupe," so-called, that

Critical Theory might suggest, Irelyn adopts a critical approach out of frustration with the public sphere. While distinct from Fiske's optimistic theorization, Irelyn as an active reader recognizes the mass manipulation in entertainment media and adopts a critical perspective. In the chapter appendix, I briefly explore this critical approach in terms of counterpublics (Mark) and subpublics (Ruth). However, unlike the ideal, critical revolutionary that would reject such oppressive, domineering media, many criticisms of this type often occurred alongside continued consumption.

People often recognized popular culture as retreat from the public, an arguably necessary role that entertainment can fill according to Arendt. However, such escape was still at times discussed in negative critical terms, resulting in critique alongside consumption. In a follow-up interview with Irelyn, she again shows an oppositional understanding of popular culture and politics. She discusses a media diary entry in which she was talking about an extremely popular (and criticized) dating reality show, *The Bachelorette*, with a friend. Irelyn does watch the show, but happened to not discuss it in the focus group with her sorority sisters. In finding out that this friend also watches though, Irelyn says that was surprising, and I asked her why:

> Irelyn: She's just such an activist… I guess I didn't expect her to also participate in that kind of stuff. But, you know, we all have our vices, I mean, it's not even a vice, but maybe because she is engaged in more serious things than I am, or at least in different serious things, she needs an outlet like that. But yeah, I was like 'Oh dang.'
>
> SJP: What makes it vapid or a vice?
>
> Irelyn: I think *The Bachelorette* is vapid to me because… Well one, it's foundationally based on heterosexual relationships and the desires of classically beautiful people. It's not expanding our worldview or teaching us new things. You know, it's something to watch as a distraction to other things that are going on or a way to pass the time. In that way, I think it could be defined as a vice if that's how you watch it. A vice to me is something that temporarily makes you feel better but, in the end, isn't actually solving the real problems.

Irelyn quickly and clearly contrasts being an activist to vapid popular culture, specifically reality TV, implying that politically engaged, public-spirited people don't typically consume vapid popular culture

that doesn't contribute to one's public mindedness (expand one's worldview). Here, she reflects the public citizen/private consumer dichotomy, in a way that is closer to Critical Theory than public sphere theory, in that she argues that such engagement in vapid entertainment is definitively, as a vice, bad, and is concerned both as an embarrassed citizen and as a critical, though sheepish, consumer.

Many people, including those like Irelyn making such criticisms, still partook in these entertainment "vices." Viewing popular culture in this negative way, which often led to guilt or "guilty pleasure" around consumption, appeared to be common in young people's lives. In speaking of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, Marcella makes what appears to be a sheepish admission to her friends that she's a fan of the show:

> Marcella: I'm obsessed with it but I wish I wasn't… (laughing) I'm ashamed!
> SJP: [Why are you so ashamed?]
> Marcella: I spend too much time… learning all about the Kardashians, like, dedicating that much time to following that as opposed to spending that time [on] something more important, like, I'm just so ashamed of myself.
> (Group laughter)

After some discussion of the reality TV world as a "waste of time," friend Jordan, also in this focus group, reveals that she also is a guilty fan that should spend her time on "something more important." Later in the focus group and in her individual interview, Marcella says she thinks she should be more knowledgeable about politics than she is, suggesting that this is an area that is "more important" than popular culture, leading to the guilt from her pleasure in consumption. This is a position of particular interest in this "new normal": individuals feel pressured to escape the public realm, while also, given this heightened political context, feeling pressure to engage, and thereby feel guilty for such escape. The negotiation of this conflict, emotional and discursive, will be explored further in Chapter 5 on cancel culture. This does show, however, active reading of the text and political environment that is certainly still

escapist, but is simultaneously an aware reading that seeks to fulfill the human "need" for entertainment

and leisure in a context of intense pressure the engage.

Some people recognized the need for escapism, recognized their own escapism, and embrace

such media, like reality TV, without guilt (and even at times with pride). Friends Bobbi, Teddy, and Charlie

discussed *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, also using the word "vapid" to describe the show and its stars

and framed the show as a distraction/escape. Teddy argues that it is so successful because it doesn't

"challenge" you or make you think about larger issues. Bobbi, who watches the show and agrees with this

assessment, explicitly does not frame this critically:

> Bobbi: A lot of people, like, hate to love them.
>
> Charlie: Is that you? Is that what you're saying? [laughing]
>
> Bobbi: No, I love to love them! I don't feel like it's a guilty pleasure for me to be following them.

At times, this escape was seen as fair, valid, and necessary, even when people recognized the importance

of socio-political matters: escapism was also important. Such valid escapism often came in the language

of seeking "mindless" or "stupid" entertainment. Sara tied this directly to politics:

> I watch mostly sitcoms and I frankly watch a lot of Bravo [reality TV] because when I sit down to
> watch television I don't really want to be engaged. Like, I work in [reproductive] rights research
> and I don't think I'll ever watch the *Handmaid's Tale* because I don't really need to imagine that
> kind of thing happening. My all-time favorite show is *Vanderpump Rules*, just a reality show just
> about stupid waitresses in LA... so yeah, I feel like I avoid TV that makes me think too much 'cause
> I do that enough in other ways.

Her socio-political work is directly opposed to her pop-cultural consumption. She does not see pop

culture as a *harmful* distraction from her political engagement, as some of the above-quoted participants

do, and it is still an escape. This would not be theorized as an active contribution to the public sphere, but

Habermas and Arendt would argue that such separation, a place of entertainment and leisure to which an

individual can retreat, is necessary for a healthy public sphere, *if* such escape allows for, and does not

replace, engagement. In the below section, I discuss this "mindless" viewing as only one particular

context of viewing, while such escapism is not necessarily present in other contexts.

In defining the popular culture that these young people interact with as things that won't make

them "think too much," these young people clearly reflect critiques of escapism, at times personally

expressing this critique. On its face (according to participants' critique) there is no public sphere

interaction that emerges from this pop-cultural diet, particularly for reality TV. There can be, however,

even in consumption, critical recognition of a) the socio-political harms of popular culture, like reality

television, and b) the stressors and pressures from the public sphere that push people to such avoidance.

This active, at times critical, judgmental escapism into popular culture does not reflect the

straightforward mindless absorption of ideology of critical theorizations (Adorno [1938] 1977; [1967]

1975; Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 1994; Postman 1985), nor the capitulation of the active role of

citizen to a passive, *apathetic*, private consumer (Arendt [1959] 2013; 1961; Habermas [1962] 1991;

[1964] 1974; Eliasoph 1998; Putnam 2000). Instead, by exploring *how* young people seek escapism in

reality television, given the context of this "new normal," I argue that such escapism is often an active

statement on (though not in) the public sphere itself (Syvertsen 2017), thereby a possible extension of

public-spirited deliberation (including, as seen in the appendix, from outside of the dominant public

sphere).

Of note: while much of this at-times critical discourse is seen in young people's discussion of

reality television, such active avoidance was not typically expressed for popular music. In fact, there was

generally much less expression of avoidance in music (possibly due to medium distribution/structures and

fragmentation), as the sense of "guilty pleasure" as linked to escapism and avoidance was never

discussed (perhaps due to the differences in identification through the medium). Instead, those few who

were critical of pop-music-as-escapism/distraction (often alongside criticisms of television), expressed

this from a largely unique perspective, using a sub- or counter-public discourse. These outliers are my

focus in the chapter appendix below, along with a reflection on power, marginalization, pop music, and a popular Critical Theory.

In part one of this chapter, I have thus far explored the ways in which young people view such avoidance through popular culture in the context of the "new normal," broadly and at times critically. Many participants discussed, though, how this avoidance was actually quite difficult to accomplish. As Isabelle says, politics "comes up all the time," including in their realm of escape. Next, I explore the attempted avoidance that occurs *in* (rather than avoidance *through*) popular entertainment television and popular music, investigating what happens when the explicitly political invades escapist entertainment. Rather than the role of consumer overtaking that of citizen, many young people believe that the intrusion is, aggressively, moving in the other direction.

1c) When the Political Invades the Popular: Active Avoidance of Political Content in Entertainment Media

As so many people turned to popular entertainment media to escape the contentious concerns of the public, the often expressed intention is to also avoid any politics in their media. However, the seemingly ever-present political commentary of the "new normal" often did manage to invade their popular escape. While the presence of such matters was likely intended to inform, influence, and mobilize, I heard many frustrations with such incorporations. Many young people found popular politicized entertainment media to be obnoxious, an annoyance when they are in this realm of entertainment to specifically get away from such discourses. Further, this was often seen as more evidence of manipulation, from the political realm but also from the source of entertainment, as such media was seen as just "pandering" to partisan trends.

The intrusion of politics into entertainment culture is an intrusion into leisure time, in an Arendtian sense (1961). While Arendt appears more focused on the effects of invasions on the political

public sphere, the protection of a private realm is also a necessity. Friends Ian, Jesse, Michael, and Buffy

reflected this perspective in their focus group. In talking about music and what makes good lyrics, Ian

presents an argument for at least some degree of apparent separation:

> I think you can get really bad music that tries to be political and meaningful, but you can't just say
> things directly either as in, like, if you're just like "screw Trump" and that's your song... you don't
> just want to say what you mean.

The group agrees that if music is too political, too overt, it detracts from the entertainment value. In this

case, that makes it "really bad," and there is general agreement that they all do not like this in popular

culture. When any connection between pop culture and politics is too "obvious," as is later stated, such

entertainment is no longer a sufficient escape. Therefore, the group prefers content that maintains some

semblance of a divide between private/public, or entertainment needs/political engagement, as Arendt

suggests is necessary. Further, they want this escapism to be imaginative (enough), a marker of quality of

entertainment (or for Adorno [1966] 1973, art).

Friends Joe, Tony, Derrick, and Sebastian reflect this as well, with even more obvious annoyance

at this intrusion, in discussing streaming and watching stand-up comedy specials:

> Derrick: I watch a lot of stand-up comedy but I hate when they talk about politics.
> SJP: Why?
> Derrick: I just, like, don't even care anymore.
> Joe: You can't go anywhere without hearing people talk about an election or politics in general
> and that gets really frustrating when you're trying to not talk about serious things when you're
> out or at a party and people are talking about that. So when I watch TV, I kind of want that escape
> from it. I'm trying to not talk about that in my television.
> Derrick: Yeah, definitely. I just like when it's relatable to myself and my life. I'm trying to laugh
> and relax and have a good time and I don't like when it gets so serious.

Joe and Derrick are in agreement over the frustration of the politics in their entertainment. Joe expresses

avoidance of (some) media he deems too political, and Derrick reflects this avoidance as well. They are

clearly avoiding politics both in and through entertainment media, intentionally.

This intrusive political entertainment is particularly disliked, and avoided, when it's seen as shallow, manipulative, or as often described, "pandering." Friends David and Liz agree on this in this 2021 focus group,[15] despite David being "very conservative" and Liz "very liberal":

> SJP: Are you drawn to any movies or TV because it ever has any messages or commentary or reflections of society or anything like that?
>
> David: If they're really trying to make me see something, it just makes me laugh.
>
> SJP: So you'll notice it when they're failing [in their socio-political messaging]?
>
> David: Right. Sometimes it's just excessive… It annoys me you know. I don't care.
>
> Liz: I feel like every creative thing has some level of politics to it [these days]. … Like, I watched this season of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* where they were all about being the "good cops" and it was complete, like, peddling almost. (chuckles) Like, I came to watch this funny show (chuckles) I don't really want you throwing it in my face every two seconds.

The entertainment media that is too political, that "peddles" socio-political commentary is often comically transparent, such that it loses value, to David's point, or is at least less enjoyable. While David says he gets humor from this, he largely avoids such entertainment, and Liz is ultimately pushed away from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and did not continue watching the show. Despite their seeming polarization, identifying on wholly opposing ends of the ideological scale (this is a friend group of relative moderates), and both with high political index scores (10/12), they dislike and avoid that which is deemed too political for their entertainment, thus reflecting the criticisms of Arendt ([1959] 2013; 1961) and others (e.g., Zerilli 2005) concerned with the public's invasion of the private as well as the private or the public. Further, this invasion led to disengagement in both realms: as Liz stopped watching the show, she had to seek entertainment/escape elsewhere and importantly, retreated from a cultural product that might have otherwise (as was likely intended) engaged Liz in a public discussion on power, law enforcement and race.

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[15] This focus group, unlike most, occurred after the Black Lives Matter/George Floyd protests of summer 2020, leading to Liz's comments about "good cops."

Because Liz saw behind the curtain of entertainment, so to speak, she saw the political intent, and that disrupted her escape.

Such avoidance of the political in the invasion of the popular may suggest that any integration of political messaging into popular entertainment media will likely not succeed in any intended "campaign effects," of either mobilization around a specific cause or increasing general engagement/considerations. Above, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*'s intended effects regarding the public deliberation of law enforcement post-summer 2020 clearly failed, given Liz's disengagement. However, there is evidence to complicate such a straightforward reading of failed engagement, stated no more clearly than in a focus group with Lee and his friends. We were talking about the friends all becoming "woke," politically conscious liberals:

> SJP: Do you feel like pop culture at all facilitated this "getting woke"?
> (Nods, remarks of agreement)
> Lee: Hard yes. If it comes off as mildly educational it's a turnoff but if it comes into something that I thoroughly enjoy, I would pay attention.

According to Lee at least, while there is definitely avoidance of political content, popular culture may also have the capacity to act as an accessible opportunity for influential political engagement: This group of liberal friends agrees, and it's a "hard yes" from Lee, that popular culture can and did plays a role in their relatively increased engagement, indicative of the "new normal." But as Lee suggests, this is only under particular conditions (including how overtly political the content is). Below, I explore the relationship between individual and text that shapes and constrains opportunities for engagement, along with other contextual variables, theorized as the *Goldilocks zone of political play*. Part two of this chapter explores such opportunities, presenting both reported and directly observed instances of young people's (playful) engagement with the public sphere through popular culture.

Part 2: Playful Political Engagement through Popular Culture

While popular entertainment media is clearly a tool for political avoidance and escape, part one of this chapter also illustrates how such a tool can be used critically. Further, As Lee suggests, this may in fact be a multi-purpose tool: In part two of this chapter, I continue to consider this avoidance through popular entertainment television and pop music while also exploring 2a) the more nuanced (and perhaps less aggressive) ways that young people engage with and actually enjoy *some* public-spirited content in their entertainment media. These findings complicate Eliasoph, in considering the discursive context of entertainment media consumption. Further, I challenge the pessimistic literature of the Critical Theory and public sphere theory, by illuminating how the role of consumer interacts with, and even motivates citizenship. This furthers cultural and media studies' work on popular culture and public sphere engagement, though in a limited fashion, as I outline the constraints around such engagement in 2b) *the Goldilocks zone of political play*. This section will explore such opportunities for engagement through a comparative focus on entertainment television and popular music.

2a) Enjoying Politics in/Despite Context of Escapism?

Most participants shared with me, between enthusiastic rejections of the political, that some of their favorite TV shows and pop music did actually still have *what they recognized as* socio-political content, though that is often (to varying degrees) not why they turned to such entertainment. In fact, if they found something entertaining that was not *too* political but *did* include messages that encouraged them to reflect on public concerns, this could be a "bonus" or "side-benefit" to the product. These data show that popular culture has/can have the capacity to be made more entertaining with the inclusion of such messages and commentary (under the right conditions, discussed in 2b).

In comfortably chatting about television, Sara (discussed earlier as an unapologetic fan of *Vanderpump Rules*) and her friends share how they might (hypothetically, perhaps) engage in political

content sometimes, but they typically seek escape. Then, bringing up a few shows she already mentioned

enjoying, Sara challenges the premise of this point of discussion:

> Actually, I feel like the best TV shows and the TV shows I love the most are the ones that can do
> both of those things. They're not super heavily social but they have some social context and
> sometimes that be as simple as 'Oh, they're actually using a Latina actress to play a Latina role,'
> or, like, 'They're talking about trans issues and what it means to be trans.' *Supergirl* is an example
> where there's [politics] and there's a lot of feminism and they had a trans superhero for the first
> time this season and that was great but at the same time, like, I wasn't watching it because I was
> trying to think deeply about those issues, it was more about an escapism for me that had the
> benefits, like, the side-benefits of 'Oh, this is actually really empowering and it's letting me learn
> things,' like, I just started watching *Jane the Virgin* and I'm mostly watching it as an escape cause
> it's a telenovela but in an episode that I was watching a couple days ago they were talking about
> how illegal immigrants that are put into a hospital can basically be discharged because they're
> illegal immigrants and then I looked it up afterwards and was like 'Yo, this is fucked up. Why isn't
> there more talk about this?' And so I think *The L Word* is another good example where it's
> escapism but at the same time it resonated because of my identity and I'm learning things from
> watching it.

I later discuss the forms of such engagement, like learning (in *cultivation* and *cohabitation*), in Chapter 6,

and the process of judgment of such messages in Chapter 5, both of which relate to her identities as a

liberal queer woman. However, elsewhere Sara says she tries to avoid politics as much as she can because

it is so negative and so destructive that she sees it as harming her mental health. She also is critical of

shows like *American Horror Story: Cult* (mentioned in the introduction to the chapter), for being "too

political, too soon." Here, however, she clearly illustrates that some public-spirited commentary in

popular culture can be tolerated, and can even improve the entertainment and enjoyment value of the

product,[16] allowing for escape alongside engagement. Sara also reflects this in the focus group's

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[16] While popular television and music that could "do both" was entertaining and even made more enjoyable, this
was not always the case. In Chapter 5 on celebrity cancel culture, I explore how some of this popular culture could
be quite challenging, a playful, entertaining, but not necessarily "fun" engagement.

conversation on music, discussing her love of Sara Bareilles, who helps her "make sense of the world," and, as she later states, "talk[s] about things that have broader themes," as opposed to the music of Taylor Swift,[17] "who just writes about relationships."

Pieces of popular culture that "do both," can engage *and* allow for escape, were wide-ranging. While one might expect for Sara's examples above to spark consideration of public matters, Bobbi, Teddy, Trent, Charlie, and Sophia discussed, in a different focus group, their own engagement in public matters while watching the "mindless" reality TV dating show *Love Island* ("it's really bad") and reality show *Big Brother* ("so dumb"). *Love Island* was a show discussed as a shallow escape by other focus groups because of its "trashy" reputation. Even in this particular focus group, *Love Island* was discussed as a "zone out" escape show, while a more explicitly political show, *The Handmaid's Tale*, was discussed as an engagement show. (This distinction in viewing context is discussed below in section 2b.) Here, I am trying to isolate when these young people might want to engage in the public sphere through television, as the group shows me that they do this, actively, even when trying to avoid politics:

> SJP: So you want to watch TV, when are you, like, "I want to zone out and watch *Love Island*" and when are you more "I want to think more and watch *The Handmaid's Tale*"?
> Trent: I don't think you necessarily have to disengage, like, I've only watched *Love Island* a bit but, like, I feel like it's, and maybe it's just a symptom of our contemporary political scene, but I think it's somewhat impossible to completely dissociate politics from even the mindless TV that you're watching, like, [Charlie] brought up *Big Brother*, and there's always some kind of political issue where, like, one of the house guests is a racist or something and that's a plotline of the show.
> Charlie: And there's a lot of sexism on *Love Island.*
> Bobbi: So much!
> Trent: ... and we're watching whatever, like, mindless TV but these themes and these questions are still coming up and we're still commenting on them.
> Charlie: Yeah, and I'll say, like, we've devoted a lot of talk time where we're not watching the

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[17] The Taylor Swift case is particularly interesting in this regard, discussed below in section 2b on the Goldilocks zone. Here, Sara uses Swift as the archetype of apolitical, "shallow" music, while other participants introduced her (in different ways) as a typical case of (shallow) politics in music, to be avoided for that reason.

>   show and the show's over and we've been discussing it for, like, hours.
>
>   Bobbi: That's true!

Contrary to Horkheimer and Adorno's and Habermas' predictive concerns, though perhaps in line with Arendtian concerns, it is because of the pervasive nature of the public sphere, rather than the pervasive nature of the popular that popular culture can act as a catalyst for public sphere interaction. The lines between private/consumption/audience and public/political/citizen are clearly blurred, which is recognized by these friends as they move between audience interpretation and critical/deliberative members of a public. Trent seems to argue that, despite their best efforts, their avoidance is at times unsuccessful, as they enjoy such deliberation. Through talk and conversation, the friends almost accidentally, unintentionally fall into (semi-)public deliberation around social inequality (racism and sexism) by way of tying the seemingly shallow, vapid, stupid (realism of) reality television to the public sphere. Eliasoph's work would not anticipate such engagement, which is certainly affected by, as Trent says, "our contemporary political scene," but also the context of entertainment media consumption, and the resultant popular/public-spirited deliberation that can occur "for, like, hours" that popular culture seems to charm them in to. The group discusses this with music as well, telling me about how they would share with each other music that really engages them. When I ask them what types of messages they're most likely to discuss, Teddy says:

>   Half the time it's like, let's party, and the other half it's like a deep, profound message about
>   society. And I think more often than... you'd be surprised by how many times it's the latter.

Teddy had a 12/12 political index score, so his own engagement, without longitudinal data suggesting effects, is not particularly surprising. However, Bobbi, a moderate with an average engagement score of 7, agrees with him, and shows that despite not knowing or caring about politics (in her language), it can be enjoyable to discuss with friends in the context of popular culture. After Trent's discussion of the "contemporary political scene," I ask them to reflect on their expressions of political avoidance earlier:

>   SJP: Is that [working through the show in a political way is] enjoyable or does that take away from

the show's entertainment?

Bobbi: We enjoy talking about that!

Charlie: Yeah, it doesn't take anything away.

Bobbi: It only adds to, like, when it comes to reality TV, like, even though it is a way to chill out…

Charlie: To calm down…

Bobbi: To de-stress, yeah, I think it is enjoyable.

Trent: I think problematizing it though is part of the entertainment.[18]

The blending of entertainment media and public matters can be enjoyable, even when these young people turn to such entertainment specifically to escape politics. Further, the engagement with the public sphere through popular culture exists in but also beyond the identity and value development of the civil sphere (Dahlgren 1995; 2009; Hermes 2006a; 2007; Lunt and Pantti 2007; Couldry et al. 2010; Nieguth 2015; Goren 2016; as seen in Alexander 2006; Zukin et al. 2006). These friends inter-act, deliberate, pass on resources of engagement, growing and encouraging each other to grow as public citizens. John Street and others (Street 2003; 2011; 2019; 2020; Street et al. 2012; Inthorn et al. 2013; Street et al. 2013) have suggested both civic and political engagement can occur through popular culture, briefly but shallowly using the language of "play." These friends enthusiastically tell me that they quite regularly discuss and engage with public issues *if and when* grounded in conversations about popular culture, as seen above, otherwise resulting in avoidance. Such engagements are, to them, entertaining, fun, and most importantly, *playful*.

Observing the group dynamics of such discussions provided rewarding feedback on the friend-based focus group organization and method. I was clearly able to see the shared passion in their avoidance of politics. But I was also not only *told* by participants that they still regularly had public-spirited discussions around reality television or Taylor Swift, for example, but I was frequently able to *see such discussions unfold*, observing a sense of familiarity within the group that reflected ideocultural group

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[18] This development of judgment, key to Arendtian conceptualizations of art, is explored further in Chapter 5 on cancel culture and, as Trent reflects here, the "problematic" critique.

dynamics. These conversations (and those reported in interviews) often appeared to be a common way these friends would *play* with shared entertainment interests and at times with the otherwise exhausting and overwhelming matters of the public sphere.

Play has long been associated with the imaginative and the creative (Huizinga [1949] 1980; Henricks 2020), which may at times (and perhaps may often) challenge or "push against" that which is being played with (Sutton-Smith 1997). Above, the application of public critique to *Love Island* and the use of *Love Island* to create public critique is a collective, imaginative engagement with both realms of life (the theoretically, ideally separate private/public), in a way that, as well, may push against both. Specifically, in creatively engaging, applying, sharing, and deliberating politics and public matters in an autotelic, pleasurable way, centered on entertainment and "separate from serious performance" (Burghardt 2011), these young people, are exploring and engaging their own roles, positions, and perspectives in the public matters. Through peer talk, they play "in," "with," and "against" politics, at times in preparation for the public sphere (e.g., Sara, above, *cultivating* her political principles) or in active participation (Trent, Bobbi, and Charlie deliberating on gender politics through the critical judgment of *Love Island*). The playful engagement I observed often appeared to be an organic component to these friend groups (as play often is). While still in a research setting, there were clear moments where I sat on the edge of a discursive playground: I often had to redirect groups, some multiple times, back to the loosely structured schedule from their shared, enthusiastic, political analyses of the entertainment products they regularly discussed. The longest focus group, at two and a half hours, reflected this, as the politically diverse group of friends playfully wrestled through their shared fandoms. Even the shortest focus group, 39 minutes, had an enthusiastic conversation about the "wack" politics of Kanye West that was clearly building on past discussions in the group, complete with jovial teasing and name-calling.

While the conversations discussed above show recognizable play, generally describing *how* these young people played with politics is a more complicated task. Like a kid playing with building blocks, I saw

these young adults use, stack, build, and share different political perspectives, couched in the context of entertainment media.[19] Therefore, taking this creative engagement seriously within the continued context of active avoidance, I now turn to explore when and under what conditions this political play through popular entertainment media is available.

Directly following Bobbi, Charlie, and Trent's acknowledgment of their playful fun, their friend Sophia (high political index score of 11) remarks that she avoids this play at times, turning to Bobbi and Trent throughout:

> But I mean, also, I have definitely been in the position where I turn on something cause I just want to watch it and someone tries to bring up a political issue and I just, like, don't want to engage with it cause I'm just like "let me have this moment where I don't engage" cause in some cases it does ruin it for me. There are times where I love talking about that with friends cause it adds another layer of understanding but I've definitely had it before when I don't want that and I get really upset when someone tries to ruin a show for me. You can't do it all the time.

While Trent, Teddy, Charlie, and Bobbi use popular culture to engage, and Sophia says this is enjoyable and fun at times (it heightens her engagement with the entertainment product as well), she shows that this opportunity for play still exists in the context of avoidance, and shows that such engagement with these friends, even playful, can still be too much a "serious performance" to be playful and can "ruin" the entertainment. Given this, the line between viewer/listener and member of the public is clearly variable (Livingstone 2005), and *when* someone crosses this boundary and begins to play appears dependent on individual and text, medium, social and political environment of engagement, and among the likely many other variables. To understand the opportunities for play, we must explore these other influences on engagement.

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[19] I also saw young people manipulate, break, reject, and very seriously struggle in such play. These complexities will be explored in Chapter 5.

2b) The Goldilocks Zone of Political Play: Contexts and Conditions around Opportunities for

Engagement

In this section I introduce the *Goldilocks zone of political play*, exploring the relationship between

consumer and texts that structures the opportunities for playful engagement with politics through

entertainment media. I then explore two other variables affecting such opportunities: medium

affordances and social/political environment of consumption. This illustrates not only if, but *when* and

under what conditions popular entertainment media can act as a resource for civic and active public

engagement, deliberation, and action.

Individuals avoiding and engaging political/entertainment content: The variable space for a "just right"

interaction with media that "does both"

While the above section explored how young people can be drawn to media that "does both,"

engages and entertains, this is clearly not all points of consumption with all media for all consumers. Part

1b shows Irelyn and others distancing themselves from (or for some, just embracing) the shallow

escapism of vapid reality TV that "isn't actually solving the real problems," and 1c shows Liz distancing

from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* when it got too preachy, pushy, and political. Quoted above, Sara discusses her

escapist entertainment in comparing two television shows:

> When I sit down to watch television I don't really want to be engaged … I don't think I'll ever
>
> watch the *Handmaid's Tale* because I don't really need to imagine that kind of thing happening.
>
> My all-time favorite show is *Vanderpump Rules*, just a reality show just about stupid waitresses in
>
> LA… so yeah, I feel like I avoid TV that makes me think too much cause I do that enough in other
>
> ways.

As reflected here and elsewhere in this chapter, Sara presented two extremes: entertainment that is too

demanding (or tries to be) and too political (*The Handmaid's Tale*), and entertainment that is "*just*

entertainment," and does not require any serious engagement (*Vanderpump Rules*).[20] However, the

above section's illustration of media that can "do both" for people suggests there is a *Goldilocks principle*

in effect that illustrates the opportunity for such play with politics through entertainment media. I

conceptualize the space of this opportunity, constructed from consumer/media product interaction, as

the *Goldilocks zone of political play*.

The Goldilocks principle broadly is a concept analogous to the classic fairy tale, describing the

success of an outcome in terms of particular, narrowly-defined contexts and conditions. This narrow band

for success is positioned between two different poles of failure (e.g., in the fairytale, Goldilocks ultimately

favored the "just right" porridge existing between the extremes of "too hot" or "too cold"). In this sense,

success occurs in the in-between, where it provides the necessary benefits from both poles, without the

failure of the extremes. Perhaps most famous of the applications is the Rare Earth hypothesis (Hart 1979;

Ćirković 2007; von Hegner 2020) and the broader popular theorizations by Paul Davies (2008) and

Stephen Hawking (2010), which discuss the Goldilocks "habitable zones" of planets (and universes) by

temperature (too hot/cold), size (too big or dense/small), location relative to other matter (too close/far),

and other variables. This analogy has also been used for understanding complex phenomena in a variety

of other fields, including economics (Gordon and Stock 1998; Grodzicki and Możdżeń 2021),

pharmaceutical research (Sommer and Bertz 2000; Zhang, Robin, Liao et al. 2011; Selwood 2017; Sherlock

and Petrov 2017), machine learning (Nikhil 2017; Allan, Oren, Hutchison et al. 2021; Ko and Wren 2021),

cognitive and developmental psychology (Weiskopf 2010; Kidd, Piantadosi and Aslin 2014; Dumuid, Olds,

Lange et al. 2021), and psychical therapy research aimed at the "just right" strategies for improving

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[20] The latter, media framed as "just entertainment" could be embraced as escape or criticized as such (Irelyn in part one), though both were recognized as mindless media engagement, for better or worse, and still defined against more serious, public-minded media.

activity (i.e., physical engagement) (Straker, Mathiassen and Holtermann 2018; Holtermann, Mathiassen and Straker 2019; Lerche, Vilhelmsen, Schmidt et al. 2020).[21]

In this case, I am developing the Goldilocks zone concept to illuminate the unique opportunities for political engagement in popular cultural consumption: There exists a "just right" that, if positioned in this space between "just entertainment" and "too political," and with the right conditions and context, popular entertainment media could "do both," providing entertainment, even escape, and allow for *playful* engagement (despite the broader context of avoidance). Sara's Goldilocks zone, therefore, in terms of her comments on specific entertainment media, can be represented as such:

(See Fig. 1 below.)

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[21] I have not found any serious application of this metaphorical concept structuring in literatures related to this project, though, while not discussing media, political scientists Prato and Wolton (2016) use the analogy to theorize the ideal "Goldilocks voter": they discuss, reflected in this dissertation, scholars' frequent criticisms of publics' low interest in politics. However, in separating voter interest in candidate from campaign interest and from policy, the authors illustrate how there exists a Goldilocks effect in which voters that are *too interested* in politics, as well as those that are *too disinterested*, can both lead to issues with voter attention and "poor democratic performance" (Prato and Wolton 2016:727). The implications for this finding are directed at campaign effect predictions (though in other words). While not directly related to levels of engagement with/through media (instead, focused on the effects of direct and formal political engagement), the connection between the two uses of this metaphor is thought-provoking, as in my use of the analogy, increased political interest in the success or "just right" outcome. Throughout this dissertation, and of central focus in the conclusion, I explore the implications of this Goldilocks engagement for the democratic public sphere.

"JUST ENTERTAINMENT"
- Seen as "stupid," shallow, without deeper meaning
- Doesn't "make her think too much," part of the desired escape, can lead to enjoyment
- E.g., *Vandepump Rules*

- *Also, could be too shallow, can lead to avoidance*
- *E.g., Taylor Swift ("just about relationships")*

JUST RIGHT

"TOO POLITICAL"
- "Makes me think too much," at a time/in a context when she's trying to escape the aggressive, ever-present political world
- Can be harmful to her mental health
- E.g., *The Handmaid's Tale*, *American Horror Story: Cult*
- Leads to avoidance

Sara's Goldilocks Zone:
Opportunity for Playful Political Engagement

- "Does both"
- "Not super heavily social but they have some social context": capacity for education on and engagement with public issues
- Can help her "make sense of the world"
- Listed examples:
    - *Supergirl*: "escapism" with "empowering" "side benefits" of considering feminism, race, trans-issues
    - *Jane the Virgin*: "mostly watching it as an escape," but led to learning and research on immigration issues (preliminary public sphere engagement)
    - *The L Word*: identity development through escapism
    - Sara Bareilles: "talks about things that have broader themes" (learning and civic engagement)
- → "There are times where I love talking about that with friends cause it adds another layer of understanding." (Public sphere deliberation)

Figure 1: Sara's Goldilocks zone, description and examples.

The Goldilocks zone is the space where popular culture may be used for public sphere engagement. Without rejecting media as too political, young people have the opportunity here to move past "just entertainment" and play with the political in a creative way outside of serious performance associated with the public sphere in the "new normal."

As evidenced by the media products discussed so far, the Goldilocks zone differs by person, even in considering the same text. Some individuals and groups of friends, appeared to inherently place certain entertainment media in a different sphere zone ("just entertainment," Goldilocks zone, and "too political"), as if natural categories, despite this variation among people. One of the most prominent examples of this was the music of Taylor Swift. While Sara describes her in terms of the shallow "just entertainment," others described Swift in discussing the political invading the popular. In one focus group, Sherry, Nancy, and Jill all agreed that Taylor Swift was being too political as she started to speak out under pressure, largely because they didn't see this as authentic but just pandering to meet the political "trend" of the new normal. While Sara focused on how she wasn't (and hadn't been) a public actor, Sherry's group saw Swift's pro-LGBTQ+ messaging in her music video "You Need to Calm Down" as "calculated," "disingenuine," and ultimately just speaking to the current heightened state of politics (which they are tired of) without actually doing or saying anything of more depth. Though the focus groups were held only a few weeks apart, Taylor Swift and her music were framed in very different ways by these different people, leading to different positions within Goldilocks zones: this is too shallow for Sara and too political for Sherry and her friends.[22] Of course, there are also people like who saw Taylor Swift and other pop musicians as generally inappropriate figures for the public sphere, wanting to keep such politics out of their music (either in general or specifically considering Swift's politics). Despite the

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[22] While Taylor Swift was too political for Sherry and her friends, the resultant avoidance is still grounded in political critique: who should speak in the public sphere, and how? And how should this speech interact with private consumption? Despite avoidance, deliberating and criticizing the boundaries of public and private is itself a public matter, as students/critics of public sphere theorists have shown (Benhabib 1997; 1993; 2008; Fraser 1985; 1990; Warner 2002; Livingstone 2005; Calhoun 2013).

shared text, the music of Taylor Swift fell outside of many people's Goldilocks zones, though for different

reasons. Elsewhere, though, friends Liz and Fred had a conversation about Taylor Swift's socio-political

message ultimately discussing Gen Z electoral participation and Donald Trump. Clearly, some people (and

friend groups) possess differently defined Goldilocks zones than others (noted by the controlled variable

of text).

Some individuals and groups reflected a much larger Goldilocks zone than others, with a greater

tendency to "deeply" engage with content others may seem as shallow (like reality TV), and/or with a

higher tolerance for (some) political content. Some young people, for example, Bobbi and her friends

above, clearly engaged "deeply" with reality TV more than Sara might. In a different direction (lower

boundary), Hunter and Elicia reflect a higher "boundary" tolerance for political media in discussing *The

West Wing*, a piece of explicitly political entertainment. Elicia illustrates why this show resides in her

Goldilocks zone of political play:

> Hunter: I think it's so weird how much nostalgia people our age[23] have had about The West
> Wing.
> Elicia: I started watching it after the (2016) election, my mom and I both started watching,
> because, like, we need to see something about people who actually knows what they're doing,
> even if it's not real.

During the Trump era, Elicia enjoys escaping from politics, as many others expressed, but rather uniquely

by imaginatively playing with a different image of what politics can be. In this sense, Elicia's playful

engagement is an escape from the specific politics of today, i.e., the political world of President Donald

Trump, and is instead "a pleasurable escape into a carefully defined micro-world" (Henricks 2015:82) of

President Jed Bartlet of *The West Wing*. Thus, while the show is clearly too political for many, for Elicia it

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[23] Of course, Hunter is actually speaking to people their age that they know... Outside of Hunter and Elicia, as well as Sebastian, below, nobody discussed *The West Wing*.

does both: she can escape via play into entertainment while she engages with public considerations. This

is due, though, to her high upper boundary for political content.

In a different focus group, friends Tony, Derrick, Sebastian, and Joe are discussing the television

that they "zone out" to when they're stressed, and Sebastian brings up his enjoyment of political dramas:

> SJP: People usually discuss *The Office* and *Friends* as background shows.
>
> Derrick: You just described him (Sebastian) exactly.
>
> Sebastian: Both of those, I'll put those in the background cause they're mindless. My big show,
> though, it's the *Sopranos*, and it's *The West Wing* for sure. I'm a big fan of that show. That's me. I
> watch a lot of the political shows, *West Wing*, *House of Cards*, *Madame Secretary*, *Scandal*, just
> go down the list…
>
> SJP: Oh Scandal? I didn't know that was still on, actually…
>
> Sebastian: Yeah. By the last two seasons, they started doing a lot of things based on the real
> political environment. Like, they had a character that was really similar to Trump and I was like,
> 'okay, Shonda, you were doing so well…'
>
> Tony: And now it's just annoying.
>
> Sebastian: … 'and now you're just, like… I want to watch this because I want to imagine some
> functioning world, not this one, and you're just bringing it back.'
>
> SJP: Why didn't you like that?
>
> Sebastian: Because, like, all the political shows that I want to watch, I want an alternate world of
> what politics could look like. Like, I know what dysfunction and messiness looks like already. I
> want to see something different. Show me something that I'm not already seeing.

Sebastian, who expressed great frustration with the state of the public sphere (polarization, conflict,

incivility), felt he needed to escape when the politics of today invaded his entertainment, and did so by

escaping to the politics of "an alternate world," again "doing both" in this play, despite the avoidance

than many participants would have regarding these explicitly political shows. The "upper boundaries" of

the Goldilocks zones of Elicia and Sebastian were much higher than many participants, as they were much

more willing to play with more explicitly political content. Unsurprisingly, the young people enjoying

political entertainment were often the most politically engaged. It seems that Elicia's lower limit was

extended as well, as she and her friends clearly discussed popular culture in public-spirited terms frequently (therefore, she generally had a larger Goldilocks zone, regarding both boundaries/thresholds), Sebastian made a clear distinction between escapist entertainment and engaging entertainment, stating that he still went to popular culture to escape at times. Therefore, while Sebastian's tolerance for political content is higher, he maintains a more typical boundary between "just entertainment" and Goldilocks, preserving a large space for mindless escape.

In arguing Goldilocks zone variance by consumer, however, I am not suggesting a wholly agentic "semiotic democracy" (Fiske [1987] 2010) of unbounded meaning production in audience reception. While some texts, like the music career of Taylor Swift, appeared to be greatly polysemic, with variation across individuals and groups in Goldilocks zone placement, the content of the text clearly affected the probability of receiving a public-minded reading. Of course, texts varied to the extent that they suggested a public-spirited reading, given the shared significance of encoding as well as decoding in the meaning-making process (Hall [1973] 1980). Therefore, not all texts, based on their content, had an equal opportunity to be placed in the Goldilocks zone. As reality TV was clearly so frequently discussed as shallow, vapid, and meaningless, as seen in part one, such "shallowness" prevented a more "serious" engagement for many people, in that the text itself did not appear to viewers to actually be *calling for* political engagement. Alternatively, some texts, like *The West Wing* for many, or *The Handmaid's Tale* for Sara, present themselves and perhaps demand for serious performance/political engagement, in plot, setting, and/or genre/reputation. Therefore, they are less likely to be engaged by most of these young people, as the text itself demands some level of serious public sphere interaction that makes *playful* engagement seem less accessible. Perhaps Sara's *Jane the Virgin*, *Supergirl*, or *The L Word* have more textual capacity for generally meeting Goldilocks requirements, among these less likely media products. However, the specific interaction between reader and text can also bend these thresholds. How does the reader understand the kinds of textual demands of engagement: do they feel the text makes them "think

too much," in challenging their thoughts with new assertions ("shoving it down my throat")? Or might it inspire thought and consideration/deliberation of public matters, as *Jane the Virgin* did for Sara? Further, while *some* textual demands for engagement were seen as too aggressive, others, surprisingly, were embraced, in a seeming extension and warping of the Goldilocks zone. When participants discussed avoiding politics in their entertainment media, it was not always clear, for example, if stated avoidance was of formal contemporary politics, broader public discussion, public-minded issues, just contentious issues, "identity politics," civil concerns, current events more broadly, or otherwise, and some might be read as more aggressive or demanding than others. For example, "identity politics," as a contentious but potentially relatable politics to be embedded in a text, could signify media as too political and too pushy (as it was by many), or as a prime piece of Goldilocks media that might otherwise, without such a connection, be avoided.

Therefore, the consumer's thresholds for political engagement, the textual propensity for political readings, and the nuanced, interpretive relationship between the two can all affect the Goldilocks zone for political play, i.e., the opportunity for public-minded engagement through popular entertainment media. Any individual's apparent Goldilocks zone often came with nuances and exceptions, given these complex variables and interactions with many other unknown conditions for play. However, even with such variation, almost everyone I spoke with displayed, sometimes in extended exchanges, evidence of their Goldilocks zone and its boundaries.

In a powerful example, with their friend Marie, I see Pedro and Kevin start to open up, illuminate their Goldilocks zones, and get deeply invested and involved in a discussion on music. Kevin is a Black 27-year-old man, who identifies as a moderate with a 4/12 political index score. While Pedro, who is Hispanic/Black and 27, has a political index score of 9, he asks me what apolitical means (listed next to "other" for political identification on the questionnaire) and enthusiastically checks it when I explain (though he later clarifies that he cares about the issues, just not politics). Both of them "really don't care

about politics" and say there's not much politics in their TV or music. Fellow focus group participant and

friend Marie probes them, though, about Kendrick Lamar, who she knows Pedro, her boyfriend, really

enjoys:

> Pedro: So, Kendrick Lamar, he's definitely more politically minded and will talk about it more. He
> focuses more on his California base cause that's where he grew up, that's where he's from, that's
> what he's seen, but he's not… Same thing with J. Cole. They're not trying to… I feel like a lot of
> people are trying to ride the Black social train and it's, like, 'we're about to ride on this train and
> talk about how we're down and Black people are being kept down,' while J. Cole and Kendrick,
> they talk about how African Americans face inequality but they're not just focused on that,
> they're focused on everybody in general. Being lower class, even being middle class, not having
> things available to you.

> Kevin: J. Cole talk about a lot of categories. Yeah, he may talk about, you know, Black men being
> down, but he also talks about how it's time for Black men to step up. You gotta step up for your
> family and stuff, you know. He also talks about how we as a community has to do things to help
> our next generation, to help our kids. Black kids, White kids, all kids in general. He'll speak on
> political stuff or things happening in communities. That's why I like J. Cole.

> Pedro: Another thing I like about them, they're not just focused on, like, awesome, they have
> their own political views, and they have some fire-ass music, but they also focus on mental issues.
> Like, a lot of men don't talk about stuff like that.

> SJP: Like what?

> Pedro: Like depression…

> Kevin: Men just don't talk about their feelings like that, we're not like girls where we can cry, I
> mean, we hold everything. It's bad, you know what I'm saying?

> Pedro: But we feel like we have to do that.

> Kevin: Exactly, that's what our family members did, the men that we looked up to do. They didn't
> talk about depression or anxiety or they was scared or problems they had.

> Pedro: They sucked it up.

> Kevin: They suck it up and kept going.

Pedro and Kevin are clearly engaging with a civil sphere here, discussing community-based patterns

around mental health by race, class, and gender in a way that suggests they did not consider or discuss

(as much) such issues until given the Goldilocks opportunity through this popular culture. Importantly, this is a recognition of these musicians, and each other, as members of a (sub)public. Towards the beginning of the exchange, Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole are talking to "you," their audience, but that shifts to "we hold everything in," as Kevin and Pedro discuss how "we have to do that" and "that's what our family members did." Here, they are clearly, engaging in this collective via self-realization from/in this play (in terms of Henricks 2015 use of Mead and Cooley). Pedro and Kevin are more open to deep, public-minded engagement with this music than their other entertainment and, until then, than their presumed Goldilocks zones suggested to me. It was quite meaningful to observe them responding so profoundly, engaged more with each other as Black men and fans (simultaneously) than with me, a distant, White, woman researcher from the University of Virginia, who was asking such guiding questions. Further, despite their stated avoidance of the political in popular culture, they both recognize and are open to the political messages in this music and thus have related Goldilocks opportunities for play, not because they have a high tolerance for the political, but because of affective and collective connection to the content, *despite* its political reputation.

This exchange between Pedro and Kevin, which seems so stimulating and organic, illustrates the complexity of the Goldilocks zone of political play. The individual and shared thresholds of Pedro and Kevin for civil/public engagement, the texts of Kendrick Lamar's music, and their relationship(s) to it given its demands/inspiration for thought relative to their identity as Black men, all had effects on the ultimate successful occurrence of political play, placing such entertainment media within their Goldilocks zones. However, many other factors here are at play. As the Rare Earth hypothesis denotes a "just right" zone (regarding distance from a Galactic Center, distance from a particularly aged star, number and size of neighboring planets, distance from nearby planets, terrestrial similarity and size, as well the Goldilocks considerations for "life" (Ward and Brownlee 2000)), so does the Goldilocks zone for political play necessitate consideration of numerous variables that might shape social thought, deliberation, and

action, in this case, in the context of popular entertainment consumption embedded in political

avoidance.

Now, I will consider two of the many possible broad variables that can contribute to opportunities

for political play: the medium (affordances) of the entertainment and the social/environmental context of

consumption.

Considering other Goldilocks variables: The medium may allow for a different playful message…

McLuhan famously argued that "the medium is the message" (1964; 1967), meaning that "each

medium, independent of the content it mediates, has its own intrinsic effects which are its unique

message" (McLuhan n.d.). McLuhan largely focused on technological changes in medium, analyzing the

introduction of print, railroad, movies, TV, and presciently, internet technologies, and the ways that such

changes (as opposed to changes in content) "[shape and control] the scale and form of human

association and action" (McLuhan 2003:15). McLuhan's claims have been criticized as technological

determinism, but this renowned work continues to encourage the consideration of not (only) what is

being communicated, but how, and taking seriously the ways in which this "how" may greatly affect the

ultimate communication of any message and meaning. To explore this, I consider differences in the media

of popular entertainment television and popular music, and theorize how different medium affordances

might affect location in or outside of the Goldilocks zone, separate from the consumer/reader,

text/content, and their relationship. These differences also suggest a variety of ways into the Goldilocks

zone, with different media forms being "just right" for different reasons.

Research that has explored civic or political engagement through television (Zaborowski and

Dhaenens 2016) often focuses on collective identity formation through fictional narrative or large group

or national fandom (Ellis 2000; Slavtcheva-Petkova 2013; Al-Rawi 2018; Griffin and Meyer 2018; Naerland

2020) or how viewers use character and narrative to contemplate and at times deliberate identity and

power, and thereby, I argue, could *play* with gender and sexuality politics (Becker 2006; Weitz 2015; Loreck 2018; Boisvert 2020; Naerland 2020), the politics of race and ethnicity (Butcher 2009:12; Smith-Shomade 2012; Moran 2015; Warner 2015), and other forms of "identity politics." This is seen in the reality television literature as well, reflecting opportunities for play, even in the "vapid," as I have seen in this data (Lunt and Pantti 2007; Graham and Hajru 2011; Deller 2019; Lovelock 2019). The (smaller) field of popular music reception (Zaborowski and Dhaenens 2016) historically focused on the construction of a collective through propaganda (Dewey 1939; Adorno [1967] 1975; Ciantar 2016), and later on active meaning-making and music as subcultural resistance/protest (Street 2003; Martinelli 2017). Music can also act as a tool for identity formation, and while this certainly can result in a heightened collective identity (necessary for such subculture resistance), this is discussed in both a collective sense (e.g., through live concerts, Dowdy 2007; Lamont 2011), and in individual, highly personalized listening (Gracyk 2001; Lamont 2012; Hesmondhalgh 2013). Overall, while much of the literature on television reception and engagement focuses on *identification and judgment through narrative*, much literature on music engagement focuses on *growth and connection through affect and emotion*. This focus is reflected in my data, as participants turned to their entertainment media for different *kinds* of consumption, regardless of content, and thus had different opportunities for play (existed in the Goldilocks zone for different reasons and with different engagement benefits).

For example, friends Raquel and John, joined by their friend Darius, are discussing politics in their television (building off an enthusiastic collective description of the show *Black Lightning*), and Raquel discusses why she enjoys this show (while she avoids politics elsewhere):

> Raquel: Nowadays I think TV shows are real, like, focused on real-life issues and stuff like that and can relate to what's really going on.
> SJP: (in a somewhat surprised tone) And you like seeing that?
> Raquel: Yeah.
> John: It's a different way to get to people just besides music. It's opening their eyes watching

stuff that is going on out there but it's on a show that you love to watch.

John explicitly differentiates engagement opportunities through television from those through music, building off Raquel's statement of television being relatable. John does express engagement through music, but here he shows how it's a "different way" to engage, because of the (unarticulated) medium affordances. While this show may be seen as too political for some (perhaps too pushy or transparent) and being too close to that which they are trying to escape, Raquel acknowledges that this can actually act as an advantage to the medium, expanding opportunities for playful engagement. Therefore, television's technological affordances of realism might allow for a playful engagement through the Goldilocks zone that is particularly grounded in and applicable to practical, public action and deliberation. While Postman's well known theoretical critiques of television in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) are grounded in a McLuhanian attention to the technological medium, Raquel, John, and Darius' excited engagement and deliberation with race, power, and policing suggests such medium affordances Postman criticized might allow (some) audiences to *entertain themselves to engagement*.

Engagement through music in the Goldilocks zone often looked, and felt, different. In a 2021 focus group (in Montana), Soraya, Craig, and Jim, all musicians themselves, discuss engagement with politics in music. Before this, Jim was very critical of political content that was being "shoved down [his] throat," and here Craig shows a desire for escape and avoidance, but they then illustrate the opportunities for engagement in the medium:

> Craig: I mean, there's some sides of [politics being in music] that are good or bad because, you know, sometimes I just want to get rid of all the politics and just listen to some damn music. But other times it reminds you of this meaning of what's going on at the time.

While Raquel and John spoke on representativeness and realism relating to narrative, Craig shows the potential of music through the "meaning" of issues. Jim then describes a metal band he likes, Periphery, that released a song called "Garden in the Bones." The song is about the (intergenerational) traumas and

abuses of the Trail of Tears[24] and resulted in him considering the history of colonization around our

physical space in the Western U.S., which he ultimately shared and discussed with Craig shortly after

finding the song. He says:

> Jim: I think when I was hearing about [the Trail of Tears and Westward Expansion] in school, I had
>
> some form of detachment but as soon as it was brought into a musical context, I have cried
>
> during that song… I don't get into lyrics always, but I could definitely feel pain and guilt.

Instead of connecting with the realism of narrative, Jim connected emotionally with the music, to the

effect of deeper civic and/or public consideration and deliberation. While Jim and Craig are certainly not

activists, and this resultant guilt is not action, this music allowed them an entrance into public-spirited

discussion through an emotional contemplation of meaning. Public sphere theorists would fear this

blending of affect and the public, a sphere a reason, but such affect itself constructs and is a construction

of the civil and public (Ahmed 2015).

Of course, these are by no means clear and strict distinctions regarding how to engage through

each medium. Many people were drawn to narrative-structured music, which could be a similar type of

interpersonal "character" identification, and participants at times reflected deep, personal(ized)

emotional connections to television. I argue, though, that the long-form (now bingeable) format of

entertainment narrative television, often character-driven, may result in particular opportunities for

engagement (those that are more "relatable" through identification), while the personal, emotional

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[24] A chorus from "Garden in the Bones" (Periphery 2019):

The claim we stake

A land within our wake

A garden in the bones

A headdress down in the soil we own, whoa

We build it on the bullshit

Or build it upon the burial

A garden in the bones

A headdress down in the soil we own, yeah

connection to music might engage differently at different times (in ways that the lister might not necessarily identify with, but might still be emotionally moved by). In this sense, the different affordances from the media affect how they might fit into an individual's Goldilocks zone, and therefore, how one might play with politics.

Further, beyond the narrative/affect differences, participants discussed practical, more concrete distinctions between the media forms that might explain the varying opportunities for play with politics. After discussing both, I asked Veronica and her friends if they found that their TV or their music was more political. Veronica answers quickly, speaking to opportunities of music and restraints on the *medium* of TV rather than the *content* she enjoys.

> Music. Yeah because [musicians have] their own narratives and they can really dive deep into what they're interested in whereas TV, they pander to a really wide audience and sometimes they have to be censored. So I'm thinking of *Queer Eye*, they are trying to do something politically, but they have to do it in a diplomatic way. They can't be too overt and they can't be too radical, but you can be as radical as you want if you're a musician because it's your own voice. You really have to censor yourself on TV.

After I ask for clarification, Veronica says that her music isn't very radical, but that musicians just have more freedom. Veronica's comments speak to the variation in both collaboration and distribution constraints for different media (Becker 1982). In this sense, due to inherent properties of the product, TV may be more limited in the options for certain types of Goldilocks zone engagement, as they are limited in the type, strength, and presence of political messages in content, given their mass audience format/structure (though, of course, this has changed greatly with increasing media fragmentation). Musicians, theoretically, have more autonomy given this distribution format, as the barrier to entry is significantly lower and audiences do not need to be (as) large to sustain support for production. Since there is less (visible) collaboration in music as well, the listener can potentially feel more connected, affectively, to the producer and their message than with the highly collaborative medium of television.

This may be the case with Pedro and Kevin's relationships with Kendrick Lamar's music: Lamar has from the medium (theoretically) the relative freedom in production, a more "personalized" or intimate connection of author to reader, and the affective influence of lyricism/rap/poetry, all combining with Kevin and Pedro's personal openness to such content due to identity (individual and collective), resulting in a successful position in the Goldilocks zone and the ultimate engagement by Kevin and Pedro through popular culture to broader public-spirited consideration.

Finally, my data suggest that these different media may have different propensities for political deliberation, and therefore different opportunities regarding the civil sphere or the public sphere. Given the above variance in connection through the medium, there may be a potential for deeper, more emotional, more personal(ized) engagement through music, leading to more self-realization and personal reflection through the popular media of the civil sphere. Alternatively, television, as one participant states, is "fun to talk about." Veronica notes that television generally reaches a wider audience than music, and there is still an opportunity for identification with the television one enjoys. Perhaps, therefore, television allows for more active and discursive engagement, particularly with friends who share similar pop-cultural tastes, and thus can collectively play with politics (and different political discourses) through television narrative. In comparing engagement through music and television, Alfredo, Ed, and Liz reflect both of these different opportunities:

> Alfredo: I think it's a little more niche with music, more personal than TV, and that lets [politics] just slide in without you really noticing it. And even liking it. It can connect to the person more.
> Ed: It's easier to interpret personally.
> Alfredo: Yeah, it's easier to establish a connection and introduce new ideas when it feels personal.
> Liz: But because music is so niche, TV and movies can reach a more widespread audience more. And it can be such a social event, like, movies, and you may not be as open to the message but they go out and watch it because their friends are watching it.

Medium matters for understanding when and how these young people use popular culture in the

Goldilocks zone to engage in the civil and public sphere. Along with medium, content, and individual

consumer, another variable of interest affecting the boundaries of political play is the context of media

consumption.

Considering other Goldilocks variables: (Social and environmental) contexts of consumption

Sara, above, noted enjoying engaging in her Goldilocks zone at some points, but not all the time:

analyzing *Love Island* could be fun, but other times it could "ruin" the entertainment experience. As I

considered when this engagement might occur and when a viewer/listener might be put off such

engagement, I turned to the recurrent theme of "zoning out" to/through music and television as opposed

to engaging deeply in the listening/watching. McLuhan (1964) discusses a similar concept with medium,

differentiating between hot media that require high focus but low participation (content is spoon-fed,

e.g., movies), while cool media requires much more participation to fill in content gaps (e.g., traditionally

broadcast television). My argument, however, pertains to content and not medium. Closer is

theorizations in advertising and marketing of high and low involvement (Hansen 2003). Combining these

concepts, I theorize how different viewing/listening contexts can impact the likelihood of play with

politics, according to participants: If the *context is too hot*, the demands of political engagement are too

high for success. If the *context is too cold*, "zoning out" prevents engagement. But if the *social and

political context of consumption is just right*, there is opportunity for political deliberation, action, and

play.

After recognizing the contextual element of "zoning out" and engaging, I began explicitly asking

focus groups (though it often came up without prompting) when they would listen to music to "zone

out," to disengage, and when they might "listen deeply," probing to explore if this meant engagement in

any potential public-spirited message in the music. Anne spoke to this in her focus group with friends:

Anne: It depends on just my stress level and mood.

All: Yeah.

Anne: If I'm super tired or with friends then having a political discussion would just be, like, a headache. I might just want to turn on something that doesn't require a lot of thought honestly, just to, like, recharge.

…

Anne: I'm going to bring up the Kavanaugh thing that happened a few weeks ago, like, there was a lot of political unrest going on, and, like, I wanted to engage with it so I listened to a bunch of music that was super political and energizing and stuff and then after that I kind of chilled out a little bit.

Three factors, according to Anne, structured her openness to deeper listening, and in this case, political play in popular culture: mood, social setting at the time of cultural consumption, and (interest in) the relevant socio-political environment. Mood was likely the most discussed factor, and clearly had a relevant "temperature," a personal "climate." Political engagement requires *energy*, so if young people were particularly mellow or tired (cold) or especially frustrated, stressed, or busy (Burghardt 2011 discusses how play cannot occur in times of severe stress) (hot) they avoided political popular culture, including political readings of products that may normally be in there Goldilocks zone. While many people reported *talking* with friends about political popular culture, they also said they wouldn't necessarily turn to all of that pop culture if they were consuming (listening/watching) with friends (perhaps too cool of an environment, marked by lightness and relaxation). However, this varied by medium: political (readings of) TV shows were more acceptable to watch socially than political music was to listen, assumedly because of the potentially more personal, individualized connections to music discussed above. Finally, socio-political environment: I often heard about people getting "hyped up" by current events, which led to more engagement through popular culture. Other times, however, current events that led to political conflict added to mental exhaustion and political avoidance. The political environment needed to be just warm enough (for that particular person/text/context).

Such context conditions were reflected in a focus group with Dani, Rebecca, Kelly, and Aang, as a group expressing a variety of contextual conditions for when they would engage:

> Rebecca: Yeah, I feel like if I've been doing a lot of work or something then I just go for something mindless. But if I have the whole day then I can watch something a little deeper.
>
> Kelly: Yeah.
>
> Rebecca: It's your mental energy.
>
> Dani: Also for me, it's, like, who I'm watching with as well. Like, over winter break or summer break when I'm home with my brother we'll watch things, like, *Jack Ryan* and the was an intense show but we had a really great time watching it because we both didn't have work to do. But during the school year that's not something that I'd want to watch because I'd be really stressed out.
>
> SJP: Yeah, I know what you mean.
>
> Kelly: Unless it's something that I'm really looking forward to. Like, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a great example of that cause when new episodes came out I feel like that'd be one of the shows I'd watch on Wednesday night, like, I'd still go and watch that with my friends during the week.

First, Rebecca suggests that mood is an important contextual factor, and Kelly and Dani agree. It requires particular energy/temperature. Dani does note that she watched a political action show with her brother, providing an appropriate social context and suggesting again a difference in medium (listening to politically-minded music with friends or in a group was extremely rare). Kelly's last point complicates that as well, suggesting that perhaps if there is a lot of "hype" around a public-spirited cultural product (therefore a warm and friendly socio-political environment for consumption, given the heightened interest), this could overcome mood and social setting, leading her to continue to watch the political product (in this case, the reproductive rights centered *Handmaid's Tale*, a show often rejected by others).

In theorizing the Goldilocks zone of political play, I have suggested multiple factors that impact the opportunities for public sphere engagement might through entertainment media consumption: individual tolerance for political content/critique, the *type* of political content, how the content calls for engagement, and the unique relationship between consumer and entertainment product are all central in

defining the Goldilocks zone of political play. Further, medium (affordances and production/distribution

constraints) and the social/environmental context of consumption (mood/energy/temperature, social

setting, and broader socio-political environment) may also affect the shape and boundaries of any

consumer's Goldilocks zone as well. More work should be done in further developing and expanding on

these factors to better understand *when* and *under what conditions* entertainment media can overcome

avoidance and allow young people to play with politics in what is felt to be an aggressive public sphere.

Discussion

Part one of this chapter shows that young people are still avoiding politics, especially when it is

too "obvious" or explicit in their popular entertainment media. This data may show, even, a more

exhausted, frustrated, <u>active</u> avoidance of the political than that of the past disengaged Buffalos

representing disengaged America (Eliasoph 1998). In the context of the "new normal" of heightened

polarization and engagement pressures (or at least the perception as such), popular cultural media, like

entertainment television and pop music, are used for escapism and avoidance. This avoidance can be an

active and critical one in the context of popular culture, but nonetheless, one that seemingly discourages

participation and deliberation. As well, the boundaries between the private sphere and the public sphere

are clearly blurring, with musician-celebrities speaking on electoral politics (e.g., the polysemic case of

Taylor Swift) and contentious partisanships entering even into the most stupid, escapist reality TV (e.g.,

Floridiana Shore). In what to many is a concerning distortion of democratic engagement (participants and

critical public sphere theorists), young people face hyper-contentious politics invading their realm of

popular culture, further pushing them away from the public sphere and into a disrupted private realm

where they can no longer escape and recharge.

However, of course, the latter half of the chapter complicates this. These data show that, despite

claims of avoidance, young people do have a tolerance for public-minded popular culture. In fact, in their

Goldilocks zone of political play, engaging with such appropriately public-minded media can be an enjoyable, accessible way to explore political identities, discourse, and deliberation, including through peer talk. Such opportunities for engagement vary by person, product, medium, context of consumption, and likely many factors. Given the right combination of factors, many of the young people I spoke with discuss and reflect such engagement in the public sphere, relatively protected from the exhaustion, stress, and "serious performance" that the formal public requires for any recognition of participation or action. Quoted earlier, Teddy stated of his music listening habits, "half the time it's like, let's party, and the other half it's like a deep, profound message about society. And I think more often than... you'd be surprised by how many times it's the latter." While I certainly am not arguing that deep engagement occurs half of the time my participants are listening to popular music, and I am not arguing that such political engagement can occur with any popular music, for any listener, at any time (the constraints around such engagement have to be "just right"), I do argue that, given the historical and contemporary concerns in academia, the press, and the public, it is quite surprising how and when pop cultural consumption *could* reflect the latter reading.

In this chapter, I have taken these entertainment-situated opportunities for political play seriously. Such playful engagement is significant for our understandings of the highly mediated lives of young people experiencing a hostile political environment. The observation of such playful engagement and the constraints around such opportunities also pose additional questions: While the context of television and music consumption is relatively low-stakes in terms of vulnerability in the public sphere (more a mediated political playground than a serious performance), the spread of politics into the popular has spread the perceived dangers and threats from politics as well. How do these young people handle political play when the popular culture reflects the contentiousness of the "new normal"? How can/do they continue to play when the risks are higher? What are the social and cultural processes through which young people engage through play in this environment? And what forms might this playful

engagement take? In considering these questions in the next two chapters, I ultimately consider what the implications of such engagement may be for the democratic public sphere.

Chapter 4 Appendix: On Pop Music, Power, and the Undefined Spatial Distinctions of Subpublics and Counterpublics

Many scholars have theorized beyond public sphere theory in conceptualizing a multiplicity of spheres, particularly focusing on alternative publics. Fraser (1990) critiqued the Habermasian public sphere as exclusive rather than an ideal democratic forum, arguing that women's marginalization from the physical space of coffee houses resulted in the creation of their own alternative organizations and spaces for public deliberation. These spaces, deemed counterpublics, "contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech" (1990:61). Warner (2002) furthered the development of the concept of counterpublics, defined as being "formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and [a] context of domination" (63). Thus, counterpublics necessarily reflect the exclusionary power of the public sphere and the discourse(s) of a counterpublic challenge such exclusion and domination. Warner also briefly proposes the concept of the subpublic, a smaller collective within the larger dominant public that has its own idiosyncratic interpretive readings of the social and political world. It is unclear from his work however the extent to which subpublics, which are largely included in public deliberation (and thus not counter to such deliberation) still reflect and circulate mainstream discourses of the larger public, or if there is room for deviation in these discourses while the subpublic itself remains relatively free from marginalization. The concept of counterpublics has been applied to the media and popular culture to theorize for example: the popular music, literature, and television audiences of diverse Black counterpublics (Black Public Sphere 1995; Squires 2002; Day and Christian 2017); the use of television, classic film, and celebrity gossip in "the gay community"/queer counterpublics (Siegel 2010; Breese 2011; Alexander 2006; Filippo 2019); age solidarity and a "childhood counterpublic" through popular music

(Bickford 2012); gender, sexuality, and race-focused comic book/manga fandoms-as-counterpublics (Wood 2006; Landis 2016; Fawaz 2020); and, of course, digital technologies (see Chapter 6).

In this speaking to young people about their popular culture preferences, I did see evidence of counterpublic and subpublic readings of entertainment media, as well as creative play with the discourses of different publics, which I discuss below in the chapters to come. Of interest here, though, is not only the exercising of counter- and sub-public discourses around/through media, but also against media. In particular, the broader criticisms made of pop music reflecting the above Critical Theory perspectives came almost exclusively from such alternative publics, while there was great agreement on the shallow, vapid, unproductive "nature" of reality television.

Mark, and Critical Theory from a counterpublic

One such example comes from Mark, a Black man working as a technician, high school educated, who, despite an average political index score, is clearly very engaged in counterpublic discourses. For political identification, he wrote in "Black Independent," and discussed his enjoyment of getting in political debates with friends, family, and strangers, in-person and online. The first major topic of discussion in the focus group was music. He was relatively quiet at the beginning when I asked about the music people enjoyed, but when I asked if they focused on the lyrics of their music, Mark very enthusiastically opened up, as if beginning a lecture to those gathered around the focus group's free pizza, or perhaps initiating a debate on race, rap music, and the Frankfurtian culture industries in a radically alternative bourgeois coffee shop:

> Mark: For me, no, I don't really listen to lyrics. A lot of the music I listen to has a great sound but maybe not the best lyrics. That's why music can be used as a weapon. As long as the sound is good, the message can be bad for the most part, as long as I can use my brain to filter out what it says. Which is why a lot of times I'll try to find instrumental versions of songs that are used as weapons.

SJP: What do you have in mind when you talk about music being used as a weapon?

Mark: What I have in mind is rap music. Rap music is definitely used as a weapon. We have two big major corporations that run and control the rap music game. Black people get a taste of that music and it's very influential with us, especially with the deep history of a connection with music, and that is one of the weapons. The lyrics get filtered in there and the next thing you know you end up with Black people who end up valuing certain things that they shouldn't. That's how you end up with run-down neighborhoods, people getting high off the wrong type of music. That and the crack epidemic, heroin… You look back at the 1960s and Black people weren't playing no games with anybody and after that, the powers-that-be came in and were like "we can't have this happen again, these Black people are wising up and everything," so… one of the weapons that was used against us, especially in the early 80s was the music. That influenced us in many wrong ways. You end up with where we are now where, look around, the black working class isn't really *working*. You have white people coming in, like "we're gonna fix up the neighborhood" without benefiting Black people. When it comes to music, I just try to focus on the sound and filter out the lyrics.

As Mark is speaking, his two friends listen interestedly, with nods of agreement at various points, but without the exceptionally notable enthusiasm coming from Mark. Unsure where to start with that response and equally curious about friends Lenny and Jay's reactions, "What about you two?"

Lenny: Well, there's this band from Canada I listen to, ironically named (inaudible) and they speak on political issues and they're really, like… They express their emotion when it comes to the whole upper echelon people and how there's a lethargic nature of people out here who don't do too much to combat these forces that they may be oblivious to. I tend to reach out to other areas. Like there's another band from Australia that I like, and they speak about some really eye-opening things.

Mark: That's another thing with music targeting Black people. We also have a lot of people whose lyrical game is on another level. Their intelligence is on another level. And once they sign with these big labels they're not allowed to show that intelligence. I know this one guy who signed with Diddy, who's Black, but we all know what's up with Diddy, this guy is a genius at a type of rapping called alphabet slaughter, it shows how big your vocabulary is. Now in his underground days, this guy was coming up with words, like, Z words… He was coming up with Z words that made me think. I didn't even know Z occupied that much space in the dictionary. The guy has a

gigantic vocabulary. So he was supposed to release an album about white supremacy, about growing up in the rap game and everything, and then Diddy got his hands on him and the album ended up being just a bunch of rapping about nonsense. Rapping about drugs. Rapping about women. There's a very huge message that's getting sent to us about "degrade your women, drive a BMW you can't afford, make sure your house is for." I call it n****-trance. That's the ignorance on our behalf.

Lenny: But, like, I don't want to call it forced conforming, but it kind of feels forced on a subconscious level.

Jay: Absolutely. My love for music is because it gives you an opportunity to expand your horizons and experience things that we might otherwise not be able to. A lot of the music that I listen to isn't necessarily on the radio. Cause I do listen to lyrics, lyrics are very important to me. So I can listen to certain rap music but I can't get into it as much as I would other music.

Mark is presenting, in a somewhat traditional form, public sphere judgment, critique, and rational argument, that is simultaneously very much grounded in a resistant/radical and emancipatory counterpublic discourse. While I do believe that some of his animation may come from an eagerness to share his critique with this White student researcher from the University of Virginia (similar in age and surely, he might presume, little else), his friends seem to react to his long address with a knowing sense familiarity. They clearly respect what he is saying, but it seems to be more Mark's "thing" than their own. Therefore, while he presents a distinct, refined commentary on industry power and ideological oppression, Lenny and Jay focus more on, as discussed above, the music that they connect with in a positive sense and opportunities for engagement within that.

Ultimately, I do get an answer from Mark about the music he enjoys, beyond a focus on that which harms, exploits, and oppresses:

Mark: There's this guy coming up around here, King Tut. He speaks on some deep stuff. But maybe that's it, the underground people speak the most truth, cause once you get to the big labels, the big labels are like 'oh, this is empowering music, this is gonna make Black people start thinking."

Here gives a brief answer, before turning back to a nearly ideal blend of Frankfurtian and "Black

Independent" counterpublic criticism, appreciating the endangered folk art of the counterpublic and

decrying the "filter of the culture industries" (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 1994) that sustains elite

ideological control and suppresses emancipatory thought, discourse, and action (presumably, in the

dominant public sphere).

While Lenny and Jay (along with most other participants) focus on the music they connect with,

and thus present less criticism of escapism than is seen within discussions of television above, Mark,

whose membership in a counterpublic appears quite salient, speaks on popular culture using the

discourse that counters the exclusion he sees from both dominant media/music and the dominant public

sphere. This critical judgment and understanding of popular culture appears to be compatible with

counterpublic positioning to the dominant public sphere. However, such rare critique of music as

distraction/detraction also appeared in some discourses more central to the public.

Ruth, and Critical Theory from a subpublic

When Warner (2002) briefly introduced the concept of subpublics, he was generally discussing

public culture, the world-making capacity of a public. He speaks (117-119)of the hunting and fishing

magazine *Field and Stream* as media that is not wholly representative of the general public, considering

the "(male) subculture of hunters and fisherman" more broadly, though the members of this subculture

themselves are clearly members of a dominant public, and perhaps "might well consider themselves its

most representative members" (117-119). While Warner moves past the matter of subpublics to further

explore Fraser's (1990) conceptualization of counter-, oppositional, and subaltern publics, the concept of

subpublics seems to be a useful tool for understanding patterns of judgment, critique, and, political play

through entertainment media.

While Mark above reflected a rarely observed Frankfurtian critique of pop music (typically reserved more for "stupid" television) and presented such criticism from a counterpublic orientation, Ruth also presented a rare criticism of popular music, though in a very different way. Ruth and her friends were all Asian women, students, and either slightly conservative or conservative. Both of Ruth's parents earned advanced degrees (as did most of this group's parents). Most importantly, Ruth, her friends, and (based on what was shared) all of their families were very religious. All of the friends were members of a largely Asian-American church, and discussed the church multiple times throughout the focus group and follow-up interviews, illustrating the centrality of the organization and institution to their lives and identities.

After sharing what music they were all interested in (including Chinese music, K-pop, Christian contemporary), I ask if they pay much attention to the lyrics of their music. Ruth then shared the following:

> Usually, when I'm first listening to a song I'll look up the lyrics and if there's something that I don't agree with or something that's not helpful for my growth then I try not to listen to it. Because I think what you fill your mind with is what actually comes out of you. So if you fill your mind with music with lyrics that you don't actually agree with or aren't really wholesome or uplifting I think that's naturally what you'll share with other people and what you'll become. We're what we eat and we're what we listen to. I think that's why it's really important for me to, like, even if I'm listening to music and I'm not consciously focusing on the lyrics and I'm doing something else it's still important for me to have lyrics and have songs that are helpful.

Throughout the rest of the focus group, Ruth says she isn't too greatly invested in (formal) politics, but rather expresses deep concern for shared social values in a civic sense, particularly through discussions about gender politics and religion/gay rights/sexuality. Later, she mentions that "there are a lot of areas [in which] artists can do a lot of good that's outside of the realm of politics," suggesting that musicians should promote "good" social values, though this doesn't need to be political. As well, along with music

that reflects poor values and artists/lyrics that aren't "wholesome," she is also critical of "superficial"

music (and pop culture in general) that "has no greater significance."

While in an extremely different tone and to very different ends, Ruth, like Mark and the

Frankfurtian critique, finds much pop music to be shallow, restraining, and counterproductive. Unlike

Mark, this does not necessarily come with a critique of power, though she does show me materials from

her church in our later interview that discuss the entertainment industry with an accusatory critique (e.g.,

how they (the industry) try to get you addicted so their products in an effort to make money, but they

aren't helping you become a better person for yourself, loved ones, community, or God). Given the

similarities, as well as stark differences, Ruth and Mark's expressions of the rather infrequent criticisms of

popular music complicate the already murky distinctions between sub- and counterpublics. While work

has aimed/claimed to clarify the fundamental characteristics of a counterpublic (Squires 2002; Fraser

2009; Breese 2011), it remains relatively unclear what might determine the variation in centrality to or

marginalization from the dominant public, thereby determining the relative counter-ness, sub-ness, or

public-ness. While Mark is clearly speaking from a counterpublic, and speaking counter-to the dominant

public, Ruth's intersectional positionality in terms of race, gender, sexuality, class, political identity,

student status/location, and her particularly salient connection to religion, may suggest contradictory

theorizations of public-ness. She does not view herself as part of the dominant public, namely as a

Christian and a conservative on a college campus, and seems to view herself and her friends as actively

(having to) push against the hegemonic messages within the popular. However, despite this experience of

difference and marginalization and her related criticisms of popular culture and society, her claims

certainly do not seem radical relative to Mark's, and though she might challenge such a statement, I

believe her voice here (perhaps representing a discursive subpublic) is much more tolerated within larger

public deliberation.

Defining the subpublic, counterpublic, and a usable distinction between the two is beyond the scope of this project. However what these cases show are different perspectives on popular culture and politics from sub-/counter-public positions through the use of variably sub-/counter-public discourses, perspectives that were not reflected by the majority of those more centrally positioned to a mainstream, dominant public. These cases, along with those in broader analysis, illustrate the presence of a multitude of publics with varying degrees of centrality, or dominant public-ness. While the characteristics distinguishing Mark's discursive argument (from a possible counterpublic) from Ruth's critique (embedded in a possible subpublic) are unclear, it is clear that such discourses and publics can be more or less dominant, more or less counter-dominant/radical, and perhaps it is between these poles that subpublic can exist with variable power. I explore this variation in public-ness further in Chapter 5, but illustrate here how playful critique might vary in how, when, and to what it is applied according to the centrality of critic to the dominant public and type/distance of any marginalization of their alternative public(s). In considering the importance of the reader to a text's position within a Goldilocks zone of political play, such nuanced variation must be considered.

CHAPTER 5: YOU'RE CANCELED: ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA, "PROBLEMATIC" CREATORS, AND POLITICAL PLAY THROUGH CULTURAL CRITIQUE

While writing this dissertation, *Harper's Bazaar* published a letter signed by 152 well-known journalists/media personalities, cultural figures, and academics entitled "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" ("A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" 2020). Though not referring to it by name, this letter admonished what has come to be known as *"cancel culture."* This cultural discourse/framework associated with liberals and young people is a type of boycotting of public, political, and/or celebrity figures due to what is seen as *"problematic"* or unsatisfactory behavior, e.g., racism, sexism, expressing immoral positions. However, for many people across the political spectrum, such engagement and critique reflects a counter-democratic, mob-mentality forcing "ideological conformity" and a "stifling atmosphere" that "silence(s)" free speech and healthy debate. In the *Harper's Bazaar* letter, the signees discuss the historical context of this phenomenon, as well as the fears held by so many regarding its effects:

> Powerful protests for racial and social justice are leading to overdue demands for police reform, along with wider calls for greater equality and inclusion across our society, not least in higher education, journalism, philanthropy, and the arts. But this needed reckoning has also intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity…. We uphold the value of robust and even caustic counter-speech from all quarters. But it is now all too common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought. The restriction of debate, whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society, invariably hurts those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation. The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away.

Notable among the signees is J. K. Rowling, author of the popular *Harry Potter* book series, who herself

has faced cancelations multiple times due to transphobic comments. In Fall 2021, Dave Chapelle was

canceled by some because of transphobic comments he made in a stand-up special. He was commenting

on the Rowling controversy, defending her, and ultimately, critiquing cancel culture. Some people,

including the famous and powerful, are worried about the clout and consequences of cancel culture.

However, this media-based "culture" is more nuanced (an engagement) than the critics suggest.

        In a focus group with Raquel, John, and Darius, the friends react to the very different celebrity

cancelations of Kanye West (a Trump supporter) and R. Kelly (then charged/since convicted of multiple

violent sex crimes), who both feature heavily across focus groups and within this chapter. Their brief but

excited exchange illustrates the nuances of celebrity cancel culture:

> SJP: There were people saying Kanye was canceled.
>
> Raquel: Canceled! He's canceled.
>
> SJP: What do you think about people getting canceled? Do you think it's okay to cancel people?
>
> John: Yes, if it's a good enough reason, yes, but if it's a dumb reason then no.
>
> SJP: Have y'all heard about the R. Kelly stuff?
>
> Raquel: Canceled!
>
> John: Canceled! Canceled!
>
> SJP: So I've heard people saying R. Kelly needs to be taken off of Spotify…
>
> Raquel: Of course! Canceled. Bye!
>
> SJP: Should Kanye be taken off of Spotify?
>
> Raquel: No, no, not that canceled. He should just chill.
>
> Darius: If he's just expressing himself that should be okay.
>
> John: That's what I'm saying, Kanye's just being Kanye.
>
> Raquel: He's not being Kanye.
>
> John: I'm voting for Kanye 2020. He gonna win.

This exchange in discussing celebrity is observably enthusiastic, a moment in which the friends are

notably animated in physical expression (which I note during the focus group) and are actually louder

(which I notice in transcription, subjectively and then with verification from the decibel output on the

software). This exchange illustrates 1) the nuances in cancel culture and in specific cancelations that can result in nuances in playful engagement; and 2) variation in individuals' relationship to celebrity cancel culture, in outcome (canceling, not canceling, or in-between) and in process (struggle and motivation). The way that these friends engage in the nuances around the discourse of cancelation allows for a play with/in the matters of the civic/public spheres (here, as I will discuss later, with gender/sexuality values/politics, racial politics, and formal electoral politics). I will return to this exchange between Raquel, John, and Darius throughout this chapter.

In a broader context of the *Harper's Bazaar* letter and similar popular concerns, this chapter is a sociological exploration of this phenomenon of cancel culture and the "problematic" critique among young people. While there are many fears and criticisms around cancel culture, as well as many supporters (though not always by name), there is little sociological understanding about this cultural phenomenon, the participants and their actual participation in this phenomenon, and the broader social, cultural, and political implications. In part one of this chapter, I define and explore the phenomenon of the problematic critique and cancel culture presenting a typology of pop-cultural, celebrity-centered cancelations. I show here how celebrity cancelations can be a form of playful engagement with broader civic and/or public deliberation and, as seen in this typology, such engagement is not as homogenous, or as many participants said, as "black and white" as its reputation suggests. In part two, I then ask why some young people reject or struggle with cancel culture, and, for those who do cancel celebrities (including those they enjoy in their pop-cultural entertainment), what their motivations may be in doing so. In exploring these complex negotiations and motivations for a concept that has been seen as very binary (to cancel/"silence" or not), I theorize cancel culture and the "problematic" critique as a complex process of resistant play with political power through entertainment consumption.

This exploration of contemporary engagement with politics through popular culture furthers the tradition of Fiske ([1996] 2016; [1989] 2010), Street et al. (Street et al. 2013; Inthorn et al. 2013; Street

2020), and others (van Zoonen 2005; Lunt and Pantti 2007) that take seriously the role that popular

culture can play as a tool for political engagement. I also consider the limitation on such engagement in

the chapter appendix. This chapter shows that the play with politics that emerges from pop-cultural

interaction can be marked by serious, sometimes difficult and challenging consideration and deliberation

on the part of the consumer, illustrating a playful struggle of/in public sphere engagement. Illuminating

this complex play reveals a process of everyday, (pop) culturally informed meaning-making that is

foundational to participation in the public sphere.

Literature Review

Public Sphere Theory

Critical public sphere theories are useful in theorizing cancel culture, and in particular the fears

around cancel culture. The Frankfurt School and neo-Frankfurtians have long opposed popular culture

and political engagement/action, which suggests that cancel culture distracts from real political work.

Following what has been categorized as the hypodermic needle approach, Marxists Horkheimer and

Adorno ([1947] 1994) argue that popular culture, particularly entertainment media, is a tool of the elite

to inject ideology directly into the heads of mass consumers, thereby making them docile citizens. Given

cancel culture's mediated roots, particularly those so embedded in young people's lives (i.e., digital and

social media) this does not have the politically emancipatory potential that some advocates suggest, but

are rather shallow, superficial, entertaining imitations of resistance.

Public sphere theorists also leave little room for political engagement. Arendt ([1959] 2013)

defines political power as emerging from interaction and people "acting in concert" and Habermas

(Habermas [1962] 1991; [1964] 1974) defines the public sphere as the space where rational citizens come

together (in a coffee house, for example) to discuss, debate, and ultimately form public opinion: to both,

the connections between entertainment consumption and public engagement/politics are of concern, as

the separation between these realms/sphere is central to both theorizations. Concerns with the contemporary democratic public are often focused on the extent to which the private realm (on interest here, entertainment) is dangerously corrupting public action/deliberation (Habermas [1962] 1991; Arendt 1961; Canovan 1994; Calhoun 2013). Further, as this occurs, the public also invades the private, leaving less "safe" space for personal development: this reflects, in part, the concerns of those in the *Harper's Bazaar* letter: "As writers we need a culture that leaves us room for experimentation, risk taking, and even mistakes" ("A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" 2020).

Arendt and Habermas' critics have complicated this narrow notion of public sphere engagement. Benhabib (1992; 1993; 1997) and Fraser (1985; 1990) in particular have brought feminist analysis to this tradition, complicating the notion of the public/private divide and thereby (along with the culturalist discussed) complicating the divide between consumption and public engagement. These literatures have also discussed the historical exclusion of marginalized groups from the formal public sphere. Fraser (Fraser 1990) discusses the exclusion of women from the dominant, bourgeois public sphere and their formation of "subaltern counterpublics" in which these marginalized people came together to take alternative civic and politically-minded action. Warner (2002) greatly elaborated on this concept of counterpublics, constructing them as definitionally "formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment" (62). In this sense, audiences that form a critical discourse counter to the dominant public sphere can act as a counterpublic even through the context of more theoretically "private" consumption.

An international group of scholars have explored this audience and counterpublic connection in the realm of television (Hu and Wang 2020) and radio/music (Salois 2014), as well as critical, cancel culture-adjacent action, like and #YesAllWomen and #MeToo. Using feminist standpoint theory, Jackson and Banaszczyk (2016) propose the concept of oppositional counterpublics, a smaller, less publicized counterpublic (#YesAllWhiteWomen) meant to criticize and complicate the arguments of less

marginalized counterpublic (#YesAllWomen). This work and others (on #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen Kuo

2018; on #MeToo Worthington 2020) complicate the reductionist notion of dominant

public/counterpublic membership.

Fraser (1985; 1990) and Benhabib (2008), as well as Habermas (1998), have also built on the

concepts of the weak public sphere (or "background culture" (Benhabib 1997)). This weak public sphere

may be separate from or perhaps the broader foundation of the public sphere. In the weak public sphere,

broad public opinion is formed, but the Habermasian "rational deliberation" around politics (in the state)

and ultimate public decision making is done in the strong/dominant public sphere. However, Benhabib

has later said that this relationship and model of interaction needs to be reconsidered "in the light of the

complete proliferation of the electronic media" (2008). Much of this work, as it related to popular cultural

consumption, theorizes around a series of questions posed by media and cultural theorist Sonia

Livingstone (2005): when is an audience a (weak?/counter?) public? When is a public an audience? And

when might this audience-as-public interact with/enter into (strong) public sphere deliberation?

Answering these questions involves continued expansion of the traditional, theoretical understandings of

public-ness, pushing instead for understandings that consider identity and belonging, concepts central to

counterpublic conceptualizations as well.

The theorization of civic culture/society is also central to this conversation. Broadly, civic culture

can be one of community, solidarity, collectivity, or a "sense of connectedness" (Bennett 1998; Inthorn et

al. 2013). A strong civic culture is necessary for a strong Democratic political (public) sphere (Putnam,

Leonardi and Nanetti 1993). Livingstone (2005) uses this language of civic culture as in-between private

and public in ways similar to the "weak public sphere." For some, the civic sphere is one that required in-

person community engagement, such that media (often consumed at home/on one's own), detracts from

the civic sphere and therefore detracts from the ways in which the civil sphere can support a healthy

public sphere (Putnam 2007). However, for others, popular media is a particularly influential part of

necessary civil connectedness. For example, Alexander's (2006) theorization of the civil sphere has explored how some entertainment culture has acted as a shared culture, a shared language, and became a way for "Americans to express their civil judgments in figurative rather than intellectual language, which made it easier, in turn, to identify with one or another solidary group" (79). In this sense, the media is an important institution of the civil/weak public sphere.

In this below analysis, I build on these literatures of public(s), politics, deliberation, and connectedness to show how cancel culture involves collective discussion of cultural expectations around values, action, and responsibility that occurs within a context of popular celebrity culture. In constructing a typology of cancelations in part one, I argue that popular culture is not only a site of civic engagement, but that the interactions between counterpublic discourses, the weak/civil sphere, the (strong) public sphere, and popular culture are more nuanced and involve less distinction than theorized. Celebrity cancel culture allows its participants to drift in and out of these spheres, and given their blurred boundaries, consumption of/participation in popular celebrity culture can provide accessible (Goldilocks) opportunities for the development and enactment of political judgment (as Arendt (1961) suggests is a benefit of art but not entertainment). In part two of the chapter, I explore the drivers/processes of political engagement through the rejection of, struggle with, or participation in cancel culture, illustrating *how* these young people engage various realms/spheres/publics, and how such engagement, while playful and entertaining, can reveal the personal and interpersonal challenges associated with entering into and deliberating/acting in the public.

Cultural (Foundations of) the Public

Theories of public sphere interaction-based audience studies and reception theorize a potential for political engagement in entertainment media, providing tools for understanding cancel culture. As suggested, media studies and sociological audience research have complicated the public/private

distinction more broadly (e.g., Radway 1984; Press 1991; Spigel 1992; Stewart and Hartmann 2020; see Cavalcante, Press and Sender 2017), at times specifically speaking to political public sphere engagement (Livingstone 2005; Couldry et al. 2010; Naerland 2020; Mancino 2021). For example, regarding formal political engagement, Jackson (2009) argues that this can illuminate the political socialization potential for entertainment media.

Most of this work explores the broader relationship (perhaps as a weak public sphere to the above scholars). Both van Zoonen (van Zoonen 2005) and Hermes (Hermes 2006b; 2007) theorize types of "cultural citizenship" that acted as a bridge between explicitly political entertainment media and political engagement. Similarly, Dahlgren (1995) argues that media contribute to the semiotic environment through which the political public sphere can be understood and can act as a tool and a resource for the construction of individual subjectivity and collective identity, thus shaping (and being shaped by) the public sphere (see also, for example, Boisvert 2020). Lunt and Pantti (2007) Gorton (2009), and Wahl-Jorgensen (2019b) all theorize these tools in considering the relation between emotion and reason, as blended in popular entertainment consumption: a relationship greatly relevant to this exploration of cancel culture. Livingstone (2005) argues that literature's contrast of private/public and entertainment/engagement is flawed in its premise, founded "on a traditional and, arguably, limited conception of politics" (19). Rather, she argues that a broader understanding of politics, one that incorporates identity and belonging, reveals a more complex relationship between audiences and publics and the movement between the two.

Finally, Street et al. (2013) and Inthorn et. al (2013) extend this literature to discuss the political engagement/talk among young people in the context of entertainment media. Street et al. explore the ways in which popular culture (reality television shows, video games, and pop music) can contribute to or even catalyze civic connectedness, through the struggle with and working through of knowledge, values, emotion, and belonging/affinity with popular culture. This chapter builds on this and the above work by

exploring how a relatively "vapid" realm of popular culture, celebrity culture,[25] can be a site of civic

engagement, and even further, playful political struggle. Further, given the (at times contradictory)

research discussing the internet as a new type of public sphere[26] (e.g., Ward 1997; Dahlgren 2005; Shirky

2011; West 2013; Rauchfleisch and Kovic 2016; Davis 2021), as well as the differences between cancel

culture, with a large digital component, and traditional consumer boycotting (discussed below), there is

potential to understand cancel culture as a type of public sphere interaction.

Background: Cancel Culture, a Type of Political Consumption

The act of canceling (a type of boycotting (to varying degrees) of a celebrity) was initially seen on

the VH1 show *Love and Hip Hop*, and it gained popularity as an in-group memetic joke on Black Twitter

(Romano 2020). It then became (culturally?) appropriated by Tumblr culture, an often extremely liberal,

White, and queer as discussed by one of my participants and a Tumblr user Elicia. Here it combined with a

similar phenomenon known as "call-out culture," whereby "problematic" behavior was to be "called out"

by those around them. From Tumblr (as well Black Twitter), it rapidly spread with the language and the

act taking on great meaning in different demographic/social groups (e.g., by age, race, political

identification, etc.). The "cancel" discourse is one founded in popular entertainment culture and is now

perceived to be a prevalent type of pop-cultural boycotting, particularly popular among young people.

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[25] At the end of each focus group, I asked the friends to generally rank their pop-cultural media we discussed from most to least political (TV, music, celebrity culture, online culture/memes). This was an interesting though inconsistent exercise that spoke more to the group and our discussion than any representative patterns, with exception to one: celebrity culture was almost always at the bottom of the "just entertainment" side of the spectrum. It was regularly described as shallow, stupid, useless, pointless, vapid, and worthless, including by those who followed celebrities (in social media or tabloids, for example). Most times, people either participated as a guilty pleasure or they "couldn't care less." Conversations on celebrity cancel culture, however, brought an enthusiasm around their opinions and considerations that, even if indecisive, seemed to reflect prior deliberation. Unlike many other media in this dissertation (with exception to perhaps reality TV, also "vapid," disparaged, and feminized), celebrity culture was seen as less political than the broader climate of the "new normal," even as this exercise followed the focus group's discussion on cancel culture.

[26] I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 6 on political (dis)engagement in online spaces and through memes.

While interest in political participation broadly has been theorized as publics targeting the state (Verba 1972:2), boycotts are often focused on corporate entities and power. Boycotts, and "buycotts," (purchasing a particular product because you agree with the producer's values over a competitor's), are motivated by "'social or political' (dis)agreements with corporate entities" (Endres and Panagopoulos 2017:2). Given the socio-political motivations, therefore, many boycotts are considered in terms of political consumption. As cancel culture can, for example, lead to individuals and groups refusing to listen to a musician's music, to go to an actor's movie, or to follow a general celebrity on Instagram and therefore not view their content, it is a type of political consumption.

However, the large influence of the often-mediated, often-virtual entertainment context of cancel culture cannot be dismissed in reading cancel culture as a boycott. For the purposes of this study, not only are the targets of cancelation celebrities, with the cancelations and details behind them bringing a heavy element of "gossip" (certainly entertaining within groups of friends I spoke to), but importantly, much of this "gossip" was spread online. Respondents discussed sharing information with each other in digital, interactive entertainment spaces (e.g., sending posts on Instagram, posts on Twitter, and, more recently, humorous TikToks about the celebrity/cancelation in question. The rapid diffusion of this information could arguably change the potential "strength," "severity," and/or "effects" of this variation of political consumption, leading to the fears held by much of the public (perhaps magnified by the hostile reputation of political deliberation online, as discussed in Chapter 6).

Part 1: The "Problematic" Critique and a Typology of Celebrity Cancel Culture as Micro-Political Engagement

To understand cancel culture, one must first consider the common form of pop-cultural critique expressed by the young people I spoke which involves labeling a person/product *problematic*. Something that is problematic is typically something that is or might be deemed racist, sexist, homophobic,

transphobic, fatphobic, ableist (etc.) by consumers. For example, participant Dani called Ariana Grande's

cultural appropriation of Japanese "tones," in her music video for *7 Rings*, "problematic." Jinx called

Caitlyn Jenner's embrace of the Republican party "problematic." One person, Hunter, problematized

Ariana Grande's "performative allyship" for the LGBTQ community, sexist plotlines in Marvel movies, the

killing off of people of color in *Game of Thrones*, fatphobia and heteronormativity in *Avengers: Endgame*,

sexism, racism, and reproductive rights in *Blade Runner*, and sexism in the international film markets. This

was all in one interview. The "problematic" critique is often applied by young liberals against people,

products, or organizations that are not seen as "woke" enough (often in other language), i.e., not

progressive enough, or as participant Sebastian said when talking about wokeness, not "social justice-y"

enough. While many conservative participants took part in their own "cancel culture" of sorts (though in

different language), the larger argument remains the same: someone is problematic if they act in a way

that you vehemently (though perhaps to some degree) oppose.

Young people are recognizing this type of cultural critique going on around them. They see their

peers problematizing pop-cultural figures and artists, even if they don't themselves view them as

problematic. For example, Kevin (a Black man speaking to Black culture), said this about musician Drake

sweeping the 2019 Billboard awards.

> Kevin: Some people don't feel like he deserves it. They don't feel like he hasn't put out much for
> the culture, like, he's doesn't send any value to the next generation or something like that. He's
> just doing it for himself while other artists, they do it to help people with their problems and stuff
> and they don't feel like Drake does that. But I feel like he does, he just does it in a different way.
> He makes people feel, like, Drake wants to get away from all the negativity. But some of his songs
> he'll talk about his life and his mom and how his dad wasn't around, so I don't get why they were
> saying that.
> SJP: Do you know who it is they like more?

> Kevin: People like J. Cole, Kendrick Lamar, you know, even Jay-Z,[27] they feel like those people bring more value to the culture. Their music speaks on multiple things and they feel like Drake doesn't talk about things like that. But that doesn't count at the Billboard's, they just care about numbers.
>
> SJP: Do they think it should count?
>
> Kevin: Yeah, they do. They feel like it should be thought about more, but it's all about sales.

Even though Kevin himself does not think Drake winning all these awards is problematic, he sees (his friends and peers online, as he discloses later), problematizing these wins as unworthy. This kind of cultural critique, then, can be part of a communal (civic) conversation in which people put forth their varying perspectives on, in this case, artist responsibility to "the Black culture." Some participants even participated in a meta-conversation about the ubiquity of this "problematic" critique. After themselves problematizing the music industry, including a discussion of sexism in the Robin Thicke song *Blurred Lines*, friends Lala, Bobby, and Kate critique the phrase "problematic," calling it "overused" and "performative." This criticism will be discussed later in the context of people struggling with this cancel culture critique. This is, however, indicative of the ubiquity of this kind of social evaluation.

When these young people problematize the popular culture they are consuming, it often shifts how they are able to interact with that product. A clear example of this comes from participant Kelly. In this example, she uses a scene from a television show as an analogy for how that same show has become problematic for her.

> Kelly: One of my friends told us about [something she read] about how *How I Met Your Mother* is sexist and I realized that I never really wanted to get into that with the show because I was watching it purely for entertainment. I wasn't trying to get something from it and maybe I was just trying to ignore the fact that that was there a little bit. But then my friends were talking about, like, one of my friends specifically was like 'I wouldn't not rewatch it.'

---

[27] Artists like J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar were frequently discussed as "woke" artists. In comparing Drake to these artists, Kevin is suggesting that some peers are critical of Drake for being not "woke" enough, and therefore not being politically progressive and active enough to be making positive change "for the culture." Separately, Kevin discusses Kendrick Lamar via a civil connection, discussed in Chapter 4.

SJP: Did that conversation change the way you think about the show or anything?

Kelly: Yeah, okay, there was this one episode about shattering the glass of what you think about things and it was mostly about people's qualities and stuff but I feel like that was a glass shattering cause I thought more about, like, how it's funny in the moment but, like, the way they talk about women and stuff like that but then you have strong women in there like Robin and Lily. So yeah, it got me thinking more about it.

In the episode of *How I Met Your Mother* Kelly is referring to, season 3 episode 8 entitled "Spoiler Alert," a character thinks he is finally dating the perfect woman before his friends "spoil" her for him, pointing out a major flaw. When she is "spoiled," you hear glass shattering as the main character's rosy view of the woman is razed. Throughout the rest of the episode, each characters' main flaws are pointed out, accompanied by the recurrent shattering glass, until everyone is "spoiled." In the above quote, Kelly is arguing that problematic critique has in some ways spoiled the show for her. Importantly, this playful (Goldilocks) engagement with representational gender politics through the problematic critique stems from peer discussion.

This spoiling, in which the image of a pop-cultural product or figure is shattered like glass, was a common experience among participants, who frequently had a difficult time continuing to interact with these products and figures as they once did. This often led to what many referred to as "canceling." Canceling is when a consumer "cuts off" a product or figure because they disagree with an action or belief, e.g., because the figure is "problematic." In this focus group with Jinx, Kiki, Isabelle, and Emmy, a group of Black friends, most of whom were queer, and most of whom were liberal or very liberal, they show how the problematic critique can lead to cancelation without direct prompting.

SJP: Do you ever like to talk about lyrics and music and stuff together or with other friends?

All (overlapping): [Yeah!] [A lot.]

Jinx: And I like to talk about a lot of this stuff on Facebook. I like to talk about, like, is this artist too problematic...

Kiki: Yes!

Jinx: ... or are they okay and all this other stuff.

Kiki: Yes, that's the main problem when it comes to music these days it's like, you can find the

one artist that you really click with and then all you have to do is go on Instagram and you'll see

"oh this person did this this and this in 2011" and you're just like "well now I need to cut you off"

Jinx first talks about problematic critiques, to which Kiki responds by saying that this, perhaps necessarily

("I *need* to cut you off") leads to canceling that which has been deemed problematic. The glass has been

shattered, the pop-cultural figure has been "spoiled," and you can't see them the same way anymore: like

a TV show, they have to be canceled.

The discursive foundations of this problematic critique can come from a variety of areas. At some

points it is clearly a counterpublic discourse. As discussed below, critiques about the racism and colorism

seen in celebrity culture that come from Black, dark-skinned women are coming from a marginalized

space, expressing criticisms *about* the public while on the edge of the dominant public itself: they are

attempting to bring new criticisms and considerations about racial politics into the public discourse via

cancelation and problematization. As seen in the below section on canceling due to identity, some

participants with privilege "play" with these counterpublic discourses while themselves existing in a

different but less marginalized public, closer to a subpublic (Fraser 1990). This reflects a theoretical

spectrum from counterpublic to dominant public sphere in which audiences can creatively play with

discourses in their critique of celebrity culture as "problematic."

Later in this chapter, I will detail the processes and motivation for cancelation: my data suggests

that people cancel for different reasons, all of which come with different theoretical implications. Before

discussing this, though, I will first outline some different types of cancelation observed in my data. These

are *cancelation for problematic action*, *cancelation over socio-political expression*, and explicit *cancelation

due to politics*. The relationship between these three forms of cancelation will be discussed throughout

their descriptions.

1a) Cancelation for Problematic Action

The celebrities in this group of canceled pop-cultural figures were often the easiest to cancel, considering the process of canceling later in this chapter. They have taken outrageously and undeniably bad/harmful/"problematic" actions,[28] and in *most* cases, their cancelation is near unanimous in my data (among those who discussed these celebrity figures). To discuss this type of cancelation, I will explore three cases of significance that emerged from the data: R. Kelly, Louis C.K., and Chris Brown.

R. Kelly

R. Kelly was discussed in most focus groups as an exemplar for cancelation. R. Kelly is an R&B musician who has long been accused (and has since been convicted) of egregious sexual abuse and misconduct with underage girls. He first was indicted and later acquitted of child pornography charges and his affinity for young girls (including the underage Aaliyah, whom he illegally married in 1994) has been well known throughout pop culture.[29] In 2018 Kelly faced calls for a boycott by the #MeToo movement and the Time's Up organization. This culminated in the grassroots #MuteRKelly movement (https://www.muterkelly.org), which aims to "end the financial support of R. Kelly's career" by financially boycotting his music and ending any financial support received from digital streaming and sales, radio

---

[28] After data collection and during the writing phase, an interesting case of this type of cancelation emerged and continued to grow in popular discussion. *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* cast member Erika Jayne was named, along with her husband, in a lawsuit "for allegedly embezzling funds meant for the families of the victims of [a fatal plane crash]" (Wikipedia Contributors 2022b). Fans and celebrity tabloids have castigated Jayne, calling for her cancelation broadly and often quite literally, i.e., from the show (see Parhan 2021 in "The Sun"). While this is very different from the violent offenses of R. Kelly, Louis C.K., and Chris Brown, discussed below, the canceling of Erika Jayne is also one for problematic action. While not assured, this case could lead to civic deliberation, as suggested in preliminary online observations, around white-collar crime, social power, and gender.

[29] During the child pornography scandal, a video leaked to the Chicago Sun-Times of Kelly's reputation in "various sex acts" (raping) an underage girl before urinating on her. This further cemented Kelly's reputation as an abuser of underage girls in the public consciousness, so much so that comedian Dave Chapelle released a comedy sketch making fun of this open secret. The sketch, a parody music video entitled "Piss on You," aired on Comedy Central's "The Chapelle Show" in 2003. It's still available on Comedy Central's YouTube as of March 2022, attracting continued commentary (Comedy Central 2017). Chapelle has faced calls for cancelation recently as well.

plays, or concert bookings (@OffMuteRKelly 2018). In May 2018, streaming service Spotify pulled all R.

Kelly music from company-curated playlists, an act that was seen as a response to the #MuteRKelly

movement (Coscarelli 2018).[30] In 2019, Lifetime aired a critical six-part documentary series entitled

Surviving R. Kelly (Bellis and Finnie 2019) detailing the allegations that intensified the spotlight cast by

#MuteRKelly. This, generally, is the point of data collection.

Given the allegations of abuse, many of my participants argued that R. Kelly was an easy person

to cancel. Some people didn't listen to him, and now certainly wouldn't start, but many, particularly Black

participants, argued that they had grown up listening to R. Kelly with family (e.g., at barbecues), but

couldn't do so anymore. Kevin and Pedro (who discussed Kendrick Lamar in Chapter 4), and friend Marie,

talked about this together. All three said they had canceled R. Kelly, and Kevin elaborated:

> I'm like with Pedro, I don't really care about politics, but R. Kelly, what he's doing with younger
> girls, I can't deal with that… And when you listen to his music, like, all his popular music is about
> love-making and everything like that. I can't listen to you talk about that knowing that you like
> young people. I can't listen to "Bump and Grind" and stuff knowing that you probably made that
> some thinking about something else.

R. Kelly's cancelation wasn't seen as a political statement (unlike other forms of cancelation below),

despite being a firm message about gender politics and violent (celebrity) power. Like participant Kelly's

above description, R. Kelly had been spoiled, the glass had been shattered, and Kevin couldn't listen

anymore because it made him think of these allegations.

A diverse group of participants communicated the totality of this cancelation. According to

Marge, R. Kelly is "firmly canceled," unlike other cancelations for socio-political expressions, discussed

below, which didn't have a "full send" behind it. Recall the focus group with Raquel, John, and Darius from

---

[30] Conversations about R. Kelly were likely so common in my focus groups because he is indicative of the firmest, widest form of cancelation. Having his music taken off of Spotify (playlists) became a yardstick against which other cancelations were measured, as seen in the chapter introduction and discussed further here.

the beginning of the chapter, who compared R. Kelly's cancelation to that of Kanye West, a political

cancelation discussed below.

> SJP: Have y'all heard about the R. Kelly stuff?
>
> Raquel: Canceled!
>
> John: Canceled! Canceled!
>
> SJP: So I've heard people saying R. Kelly needs to be taken off of Spotify…
>
> Raquel: Of course! Canceled. Bye!
>
> SJP: Should Kanye be taken off of Spotify?
>
> Raquel: No, no, he's not that canceled. He should just chill.

While the complicated cancelations of people for socio-political expression and political reasons will be

discussed later, my argument here is that cancelation for "problematic" action is easily justified. R. Kelly

(then allegedly) raped underage girls, his history of abuse is well documented, and he's an easy, full,

"firm" cancelation.

Louis C.K.

Like R. Kelly, comedian Louis C.K. was facing allegations of sexual misconduct shortly before data

collection. After rumors began circulating about him masturbating in front of women comics, usually

early-career entertainers over which he held professional power, the *New York Times* published an

exposé (Ryzik, Buckley and Kantor 2017) in which C.K. was publicly accused by five women of sexual

misconduct. He then admitted to the allegations in an apologia of acknowledgment, stating that "The

power that I had over these women is that they admired me. And I wielded that power irresponsibly"

(Elahe 2017). He lost a variety of television and movie deals after the scandal and appeared to leave the

business for about a year, before restarting his stand-up performances with continued controversy and

mixed reception.

Due to his abuses of power, many participants I spoke to had decidedly canceled Louis C.K.,

despite his apologia of sorts and temporary hiatus. Betty describes what this cancelation looks like:

SJP: Do you care about artists' politics in that you listen to anyone less because of their politics or listen to anyone more because of their politics?

(All nod)

…

Betty: I know if comes up with comedians that I follow too, like, the whole thing with Louis C.K. and all those comedians, T.J. Miller, and it comes out that they're either very horrible towards women and then I'm, like, alright, I'm going to stop supporting them. Like, if they have an album on Spotify, I'm not going to give them the 1/10th of a cent for the stream on Spotify. Like, I won't support them for that. And I know it was a whole debate, well, not a debate, but I read an article on, like, it was something like 'millennials are killing artist culture' because now they're super worried about artists' personal values rather than their work that they're putting out but I feel like now they go hand in hand, like, the ethics are of what they're putting out.

Like with the #MuteRKelly movement, the cancelation of Louis C.K. has intended financial consequences. I will discuss the various reasons why people cancel below, but here we see Betty canceling because she just doesn't agree with what Louis C.K. stands for, as evidenced by his problematic actions. Betty also clearly reflects an acknowledgment of the *Harper's Bazaar* type critique of cancel culture, but such concerns do not deter Bett's engagement through judgment and action.

In another focus group, Faz and Frankie bring up Louis C.K.

Frankie: I also feel like with celebrities there's a point where I'm like 'Okay, this person is terrible' and then I'm also enjoying what they're doing to where it's, like, I'm so disgusted that I can't watch it…

Faz: Louis C. K.

Frankie: Yeah, Louis C. K. It just makes you feel gross.

Because of his actions, Louis C.K. is "spoiled," and now they just "feel gross" consuming his cultural products.

In my focus groups, I did not hear anyone excuse, forgive, or minimize Louis C.K.'s actions, despite his formal, public apology. Like R. Kelly, this appeared to be a "firm" cancel. This is not necessarily the case for all those who have been canceled due to problematic actions.

Chris Brown

Chris Brown was a more complicated cancelation. In 2009, the musician got into a highly disturbing fight with his then-girlfriend and fellow pop-star Rihanna. The fight escalated, became physical, and left Rihanna with shocking facial injuries. The high visibility of the couple and the clear visibility of the violence (see a sample of those distributed in tabloid media and celebrity news in Image 1), led to a large public outcry. Brown's music was pulled from multiple radio stations and under public pressure was forced to step down from various public appearances. Brown eventually pled guilty to felony assault and served six months of community labor, five years of probation, and had to complete domestic violence counseling (Ryan and Winton 2009). In a biography of Chris Brown, Andy Kellman writes "In March 2009, Brown was charged with felonious assault of Rihanna, an altercation that had prevented his then-partner from taking the stage at the Grammy Awards. Brown was scheduled to perform as well, but he did not appear and maintained a low profile for several months. A fairly substantial backlash resulted in Brown's songs being pulled from rotation on several radio stations. Ultimately, however, it had little bearing on the progress of his music career and side acting gigs" (Kellman). My data, however, suggests a more nuanced story.

(See Img. 2 below.)

Image 2: Leaked images of Rihanna's injuries in popular digital tabloid outlets

When I spoke to young people about cancel culture and who, if anybody, they personally canceled, Chris Brown came up more than any other name, at times as a point of debate. Because of his popularity as a musician as a celebrity, the similar popularity of Rihanna, and the publicity of the scandal, Chris Brown was an early target online of what now is discussed as cancel culture. Like others in this category, he was canceled for actions taken deemed problematic. Many people canceled Chris Brown, largely as a sign that these actions are unacceptable. When asked simply if she pays attention to music lyrics, Jill brings up the canceling of Chris Brown on her own:

> SJP: When you are listening to music that's lyrical, do you pay much attention to the lyrics?
> Jill: Me personally, 100%. I don't listen to Chris Brown anymore after the Rihanna thing. I just feel very strongly that I don't want to support that behavior.

Though the question wasn't even about canceling, she equated a close listening to music to a mindful consideration of the artist. As I will discuss later in exploring why and how people cancel, this makes clear the impact that producers' and celebrities' actions have on their cultural products.

Along with canceling Chris Brown, many people also canceled other artists who collaborated with or otherwise supported Brown. In an interview, Katie discussed a media diary entry about how she and a

friend were drinking at a bar and started talking about canceling Justin Bieber after one of his new songs

came on.

> Katie: Yeah, [the new song is] really good.
>
> SJP: You sound sheepish.
>
> Katie: I know. I'm supposed to be out on Justin Bieber and in some ways I'm out on Justin Bieber…
>
> SJP: Why are you supposed to be out on him?
>
> Katie: Cause he took to Instagram to needlessly defend Chris Brown, saying 'Oh, it was one
> mistake,' like, 'Why, Justin Bieber… You don't have to be a hero, but you can't be a villain!' And so
> me and [my friend] started talking about it and I was like 'Yeah, I'm out on Justin Bieber and this is
> why' and he was like 'Dang, that's so bad, but I love Justin Bieber.' Justin Bieber for us has been so
> consistently around since, like, middle school. So I've spent, like a decade loving Justin Bieber's
> music and I have a Justin Bieber song for every occasion. So we were just talking about that, why
> it's so much easier to say 'I don't want to listen to Chris Brown or R. Kelly' because they meant
> less to us, but Justin Bieber, or just his music, it means a lot. We were just discussing the
> difference between an intellectual decision and an emotional one. I know I should cancel Justin
> Bieber or whatever. I should not give my patronage via Spotify streams but also I love him, so…
> We talked about that for a while. We want to [cancel] but we're weak-willed!

Though she struggled to fully cancel Justin Bieber (a common phenomenon discussed later in this

chapter), she likened his defense of Brown to the actions of Brown himself, as well as to R. Kelly.[31]

Brown's problematic actions had a toxicity that problematized all those who came near them: in this case,

Justin Bieber. Other focus groups beyond this one mentioned canceling Justin Bieber because of this

association.

Participants also criticized peers who chose not to cancel Chris Brown, as such problematic

toxicity spread to fans. Multiple times in the focus group with Jinx, Emmy, Kiki, and Isabelle (regarding the

problematic critique), they brought up Chris Brown "apologists." Kiki said fans are "always making

---

[31] Again, notice the importance of studying peer conversations: Katie and her friend were led to a discussion
involving social critique of a celebrity's defense of violent misogyny, all based on a pop song at a bar. The
significance of these socio-political peer conversations around pop culture is central to my broad argument.

excuses" for his behavior, only, according to Emmy, "because they're celebrities." Jinx argues that this is a

larger problem, among many people:

> Yeah, I don't see a lot of fans calling him out and like holding him accountable. Like, maybe one or
> two, but I wish more people would speak up because then I think listening to problematic artists
> would be less stigmatized. Now I feel like most people who listen to problematic artists aren't
> open to a conversation and when people aren't open to a conversation all they have left to do is
> make assumptions or something.

While most people that I spoke to who mentioned Chris Brown were in favor of canceling him, I also did

see what Jinx was commenting on. Two different focus groups, both made up partially or entirely by

young Black and/or Latina women, discussed how the Chris Brown situation is "complicated" by Brown's

description of and apology for the abuse in his 2017 documentary *Welcome to My Life*. In the film, Brown

frames his relationship with Rihanna as a "perfect and bad combination" fueled by immaturity at a young

age. In discussing their fights he said, "she would hit me, I would hit her, but it never was okay," saying

that after the infamous abuse incident he "felt like a fucking monster" (Sandler 2017). Because of this

blend of explanation and excuse, depending on the viewer, some participants argued that Brown no

longer needs to be canceled because, as fan Alexis said, "Rihanna hit him too" and though as a man he

should never have done that, he "has changed to a degree" (he has a daughter now, which was a

redeeming factor) and has "taken credit for what [he's] done." To her, the incident was just him being

young and "very stupid" and immature. Obviously, while convincing for Alexis, this is what Jinx and their

peers would refer to as making excuses and being an apologist.

While cancelation for problematic action is the least disputed of the three types of cancelation,

the Chris Brown case shows that cancelation is rarely, is ever, unanimous from consumers, and can

change over time. In fact, while not in my focus group and interview data, online observations reveal

apologist stances on Louis C.K. and, though to a much lesser extent, R. Kelly as well (e.g., seen in Raphael

2019). This shows the heterogeneity of opinions on single cancelations, as well as opinions on cancel culture as a whole (discussed below).

1b) Canceling Over Socio-Political Expression

Canceling for problematic action was the most universal (though still not unanimous) type of cancelation. It was also the least explicitly political, or rather the least politicized. A less common, more political, though still popular type of cancelation is what I call canceling over socio-political expression. The celebrities canceled for this cause were doing or saying things that were problematic, though in a more subjective sense rather than the more extreme forms of violence seen above. These expressions that led to cancelation, in an older language, might be considered politically incorrect and offensive to the participants who are canceling. To explore these, I am going to focus on the focus group with Jinx, Kiki, Isabelle, and Emmy, quoted throughout above, who were particularly incensed by this type of celebrity indiscretion, though I will bring in other focus groups as well.

Cardi B

Hip-hop and rap artist Cardi B has been a controversial figure since her rise to fame on the reality television show *Love and Hip Hop*. Many people love her: she's the highest-certified female rapper of all time according to RIAA's Top Artists (Wikipedia Contributors 2021) and was listed as one of *Time's* 100 most influential people in the world in 2018 (Time Magazine "2018 Time 100" 2018). While many people loved her for her relatable, unapologetic attitude and personality, some disliked her and felt only disconnect: Jay, a 27-year-old Black woman said of the artist "Cardi B, goodness… It's really sad. Like, I'm Black, but I'm definitely not that." Further, some have turned away from the popular rapper through cancelation, because of controversial comments deemed colorist and transphobic.

In August 2017, Twitter user @WokeMutant posted a thread of instances where Cardi B had

made insulting comments about Black women, particularly dark-skinned Black women, using the word

"roach" (McKinney 2017). One post also used the slurs "tranny" and "monkey" to describe a woman. This

was picked up by the popular entertainment news outlet *The Shade Room* (popular on Instagram, Twitter,

and elsewhere) after Cardi-B pushed back on the claims, stating that she uses the word roach for anyone

that she didn't and claiming that she had already apologized for the transphobic slur (The Shade Room

"#Cardib was Not Having It with Twitter" 2017). For some, though, the damage had been done.

Cardi B's path to cancelation continued into 2018 when her official Facebook account posted a

meme using the highly offensive slur often directed at trans people.

Image 3: A screenshot of a transphobic meme on Cardi B's social media, from entertainment site "The Wrap"

Though Cardi B denied posting the meme, saying a former staffer had control of the account, this incident

was added to her problematic record. She has since continued to push back against criticisms of colorism,

homophobia, and transphobia since my data collection, stating on Twitter "Ya keep using that same 1

video that I apologize for over & over again to call me homophobic & transphobic 1 but never post about

the ones where I support the LGBT community which are multiples and the multiple tweets I posted in

support" (cited in Schnurr 2020). This is insufficient for some people.

Cardi B was canceled by some participants because of this history, despite her apologies and

pushback. Emma, Marianne, and Gio, featured in the introduction, talked about this in a broader

conversation about artist's personal lives affecting how you listen to their music:

> Gio: There's a lot of people where if they do something you're like 'You're canceled.'
>
> SJP: Is that a similar thing to what you're doing?
>
> Gio: Yeah, yeah, exactly. I don't want to be a hypocrite and so if I want to stay true to myself I
> don't want to ignore that they did this one bad thing just cause their music is good. Because if
> you think about it, that's who they are and would you really want to look up to somebody like
> that just because they have one good song?
>
> SJP: Do y'all have any examples?
>
> Marianne: Like, as soon as I stop liking them because of something that they did, like, their music
> becomes, like, I can't even get into it anymore. I guess like Cardi, I used to get so turned up, but
> now I'm like, (sighs).
>
> SJP: What did she do?
>
> Marianne: Things about what she said, just, like, transphobic stuff.
>
> Emma: Yeah, I held on as long as I could. And then her apology was not an apology.
>
> SJP: So she was canceled?
>
> Emma: Yeah. But in my mind I don't even try to, the music just loses its, I don't know, yeah.

Here, Marianne argues that she canceled Cardi B because of these transphobic comments. The

comments from the musician convey a socio-political stance that is problematic, or in anachronistic

language, is not "politically correct." Marianne feels like can't enjoyably listen to Cardi B's music anymore,

so she is effectively canceled. Emma feels similarly, and vocally rejects the artist's apology/refutation.

As the conversation with Gio, Emma, and Marianne shows, Cardi B was "firmly canceled" by

some. For others, though, there was more cognitive dissonance than was seen in the "problematic

action" style of cancelation offense. Kiki, in the conversation with Jinx and friends, said the following

about Cardi B:

> Me and my friends like to talk about Cardi B. When we first started talking about it, it was like
> how much we admire her and her realness but then it turns out she's kind of problematic too, so I
> guess that's one example of me liking someone who's problematic. I like her music, I like her
> energy that she's putting out into the world, but I can't appreciate some of the things she's said
> about dark-skinned women and her comments towards trans people. I don't like it at all. I guess
> that's where I find conflict.

While she initially admired Cardi B for her "realness" (she is often praised for her candidness about her

sexuality and background), she was put off by the comments on dark-skinned Black women and trans

people. This is not a surprising position, given that all of the people in the focus group were Black, one

person was trans, and all were queer. Kiki was a part of, or had social access to, counterpublic discourses

useful for constructing such a critique. However, while the comments by Cardi B were thoroughly

"problematic," rather than being "firmly canceled," Kiki faced conflict, struggle, and negotiation

associated with the artist and her music in getting to that point.

This conflict is representative of the broader category of cancelation over socio-political

expression. There can be more internal struggle around "firmly" canceling a celebrity for this reason, as

it's seen as less outright harmful than the violent offenses often involved in the problematic actions

category of cancelation.

The Kardashians

A controversial group of pop culture figures that were brought up in almost every focus group

was the Kardashians. From Kim shooting to fame after the leak of her sex tape to Kylie becoming the

world's youngest "self-made" billionaire (Robehmed 2019) to Caitlyn Jenner's transition, people have a lot

to say about regarding the famous family, love them or hate them, even if the participants initially said

they "couldn't care less" about the family. Relevant to a discussion on cancel culture, some of my

participants canceled, or considered canceling, the powerful family because of their history of cultural

appropriation, often through problematic expression in style and fashion, and related business ventures.

In the sisters' multitude of business ventures, like Khloe Kardashian's Good American denim line

or Kendall and Kylie Jenner's swimwear line, they have been accused of stealing designs from Black

creators (Dent 2017). As well, they have found themselves in *multiple* controversies for repeatedly

wearing traditional Black protective hairstyles, particularly Fulani braids/cornrows, which Kim infamously

called "Bo Derek braids" on Snapchat (Heller 2018), and more recently, Bantu knots. The issues of

hairstyle compounded a general discomfort I've witnessed online over the Kardashians' general aesthetic:

"curvy" figures and large lips, which are praised as "trendy" when paired with Whiteness, while

historically "mocked (and) sexualized" on Black women (Dent 2017). Dent in particular compares Kim

Kardashian's Paper cover, below, to Sarah "Saartjie" Bartmann, known as the "Hottentot Venus." This is

viewed as problematic by many of my participants, as such embodied style is paired with little-to-no and

often too-late action (often read as performative anyway) when it comes to speaking out on issues like

the Black Lives Matter movement and police violence against Black women and men.[32] It also has the

effect of fans viewing these aesthetic expressions as a Kardashian/Jenner-set trend, rather than

understanding the cultural, historical foundations.

(See Img. 4 below)

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[32] Kim Kardashian was praised by some participants for her interest and limited work in prison reform ("getting these people out of jail" from one participant), though others have accused this of being too-little-too-late or being self-interested.

Image 4: Kim Kardashian's cover for Paper Magazine

Because of the "self-made" persona Kim and Kylie in particular have cultivated, many

participants, especially women, had some respect for the Kardashians. However, some struggled with the

cultural appropriation they witnessed which resulted in the Kardashians being deemed "problematic" and

facing possible, if conflicted, cancelation. The biggest critique against them was that they are "culture

vultures." Alexis, a Black woman, reflected this:

SJP: What do you think about the Kardashians?

Alexis: The only one I really like is Kourtney cause I feel like she's unproblematic.

SJP: You think the other ones are problematic?

Alexis: I mean, Kim, you do you, sis, she makes a ton of money and has a beautiful family, but,

like… they're total culture vultures and I feel like some of the things they do is like 'oh this is so

chic, this is so new' and, like, girl, we've been doing this for so long. And back in the day when we

would do it would be seen as ghetto or unprofessional but when they do it it's, like, exotic.

Honey, no. It's just annoying to me because I'm a Black person and I wish people would give us

the credit that we deserve and not steal our things from us and take credit for things that we do

and come up with and just steamroll over us. And now all the influencers are doing it too.

Alexis expressed many of the sentiments expressed by other participants. The cultural appropriation

problematized the Kardashians. She later said she used the watched the Kardashian's show, but no longer

does.

> The above sentiments were also expressed by Sara, a White woman.

> Sara: I used to go to bat real hard for the Kardashians… But when I started to really pay attention
> to how much they benefit off of cultural appropriation I was like 'Yeah, I can't really jive with this
> anymore.' And they're complete tone-deafness about it… They still wear cornrows. I don't know
> how you can get all those Instagram comments about it, so now I'm like, nah, not anymore.

Sara responded to this cultural appropriation as an expression of "fashion," with a fairly firm cancelation.

However, this was often not seen as aggressive and violent as the problematic action category of

cancelation, as many participants struggled with a "firm" cancelation of the Kardashians. Participant Faz,

a Hispanic woman, told me that she had been watching their show since she was a kid, and while she

recognized that they did "bad shit," she didn't want to stop because she thought good things came out of

the show as well, (like Kim's interest in criminal justice reform discussed in footnote 8). Another example

of this conflict, Sosa, a Black woman, and Greg, who is Native American, Asian, Black, and Hispanic,

contended with the Kardashians' self-expression/cultural appropriation:

> Sosa: I actually like Kim but I don't like how the family, like, I don't know the correlation between
> them and Black men. It's kind of like they [are in romantic relationships with Black men] for the
> trend. Also how people are giving her crap for having Black hairstyles, but also people give her
> crap for just living. It's easier to hate on someone, like, if you already don't like Kim Kardashian
> for a reason, it's easier for you to be like 'Oh, she's racist,' or say she's appropriating culture.
> Greg: I think she does do that.
> Sosa: Appropriate culture?
> Greg: Yeah. Based off of what she finds interesting. She may not do it consciously, but she does
> do it.
> SJP: Do you think that's a problem?

Greg: In some ways yes because then all those other people who look up to her who have no idea about this kind of culture say 'Hey, she's doing it, I can do it too.' And they're just saying 'Look, I got Kim Kardashian braids!'

Sosa: Yeah! So I guess that's what it comes down to.

Through pop-culture-centric peer talk, Greg and Sosa debate and discuss the severity of these acts of cultural appropriation in relation to the continued consumption and support of this "product" of celebrity culture. The presumed next question after "Do you think that's a problem?" is "How bad is it?" and "What are the implications of this transgression? What actions should be taken?" Again, critical pop-cultural discussion has the capacity to lead to problematizing, which has the capacity to lead to canceling, both of which are political acts that contribute to public deliberation on, here, race and gender.

Another big problem with the Kardashians that participants expressed was their relationship to Kanye West (married to Kim Kardashian). In the words of Jinx, while speaking of the Kardashians, "I don't like all the racism and I definitely don't like what her husband is doing." I argue that the problematizing of Kanye West is different from the above cancelations for problematic action and over socio-political expression. Kanye West's cancelation is explicitly, overtly, and necessarily political.

1c) Kanye West and Cancelation Due to Politics

Kanye West has long been a political figure in the long (politicized) field of rap and hip-hop music. In a famously public political critique, West stood next to comedian Mike Myers during a benefit show and concert for Hurricane Katrina relief in 2005 and proclaimed that "George (W.) Bush doesn't care about Black people." Both praised and criticized for his bold political remarks, West would go on to say that he was speaking for others as "the voice of this generation" (Dixon 2008). He continued to be known through the years as a creative, can't-be-tamed celebrity personality who would make bold comments about musicians and politicians alike. His interest in politics came to be a problem for many of his liberal fans after the election of Donald Trump.

Despite donating to both Barak Obama's 2012 campaign and Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign (Wikipedia), West has since shown support for Donald Trump. After meeting with president-elect Trump during the transition, West has been pictured in the famous "Make America Great Again" hat and tweeted the following, among other pro-Trump tweets:

Image 5: Kanye West's pro-Trump tweet, as captured from Twitter 09/01/2020

Given Trump's unpopularity among many young Americans at the time of my data collection (Kirby 2018 reports a 33 percent approval rating among young people), West's embrace of the president was not taken well by many of my participants, leading to him being seen as problematic due to these overtly political statements and actions.

For some people, Kanye was outright, firmly canceled because of his political expression. For Mac, Gemma, and Violette, his politics were a nonstarter:

> Mac: Kanye's dead to me.
>
> Gemma: Yeah, Kanye sucks now.
>
> Mac: He's done. He's gone-zo. Never again.
>
> SJP: Did you like his music before?
>
> Gemma: I did.
>
> Violette: Yeah.
>
> Gemma: I liked Kanye a lot. But he's removed from my Spotify.

They go on to discuss how they used to love how he was political (assumedly harkening back to the George Bush type of criticisms), but that now he's "done," actually removed from the digital space he once inhabited for Gemma. And for Mac, this is firm: "never again."

Others, surprisingly, compared Kanye to others that have been canceled in the problematic action category:

> SJP: (After a conversation on cancel culture generally) Is there anyone you have canceled?
> Lucy: Chris Brown, for what happened to Rihanna. I stopped listening.
> Bea: I've thought about that too, recently, with Kanye.
> All: Yeah
> Zelda: It makes me not want to listen to his stuff.

In this large focus group of seven friends, Bea brings up Kanye West in relation to Chris Brown, whose transgressions are similar enough (both being problematic) that one reminds her of the other. This surprised me, as the above descriptions of other forms of cancelation show a distance between the desire/need to cancel people for socio-political expression as opposed to problematic (and in this case violent) action. However, they appear similar enough that Bea's relationship with one reminds her of the other.

This relationship between Kanye West's transgressions and the "worst" transgressions of violent problematic action is seen in other focus groups as well. Here, Kelly compares Kanye West to Kodak Black, who, while not discussed above, would clearly fit into the problematic action section.

> Kelly: If I know something, like, I used to like Kodak Black, but I don't listen to him anymore because he's in jail for sexual assault. So, like, I don't listen to Kanye West anymore. I just don't think they deserve any more views or any more claim to popularity or anything just cause now they did something awful…

Kelly's argument seems to suggest "I canceled Kodak Black, so of course, I canceled Kanye West too."

Despite some people viewing political transgressions similarly to active, violent ones, others pushed back against this argument. Carly and Fred put Kanye's expressions compared to others in a hierarchy closer to that which I was originally expecting:

> Carly: I guess with Kanye it's not as serious as it is with, like, R. Kelly, I think that's a lot more serious, so I'll still listen to Kanye's music.
>
> Fred: And those are his opinions, those are his views, it's different from molesting children. Let's not liken those two things.

Because Kanye's transgressions were not as serious, Carly, Fred, and the rest of their focus group struggled to decide whether or not to cancel him, or rather, *how canceled* he should be.

Interestingly, the focus group with Raquel, John, and Darius noticeably played with Kanye's controversial status. After they bring up Kanye as a political figure in popular culture, I ask about his cancelation (they have already used this language of canceling by this point):

> SJP: I've heard people say Kanye was canceled.
>
> Raquel: Canceled! He's canceled.
>
> SJP: What do you think about people getting canceled? Do you think it's okay to cancel people?
>
> John: Yes, if it's a good enough reason, yes, but if it's a dumb reason then no.
>
> …
>
> SJP: So I've heard people saying R. Kelly needs to be taken off of Spotify…
>
> Raquel: Of course! Canceled. Bye!
>
> SJP: Should Kanye be taken of off Spotify?
>
> Raquel: No, no, not that canceled. He should just chill.
>
> Darius: If he's just expressing himself that should be okay.
>
> John: That's what I'm saying, Kanye's just being Kanye.
>
> Raquel: He's not being Kanye.
>
> John: I'm voting for Kanye 2020. He gonna win.

John does not appear concerned by Kanye's actions though there may be some layers of humor here.[33]

Interestingly, John later comes out and says he doesn't like Trump very much (though he's not as

concerned as some of his peers are), but on his demographics questionnaire he describes himself as

apolitical. Regardless of his own positions, though, he is bringing into this peer discussion around pop

culture a message that complicates Raquel's initial firm cancelation, though she continues to argue that

it's more than "just being Kanye."

Image 6: Kanye West during a White House visit where he states MAGA hat gives him "power" (Lucey 2018)

Typology Discussion

Regarding the political capacity of cancelations, the case of Kanye West shows that canceling

someone for (the expression of) their politics can in some cases be more "firm" than a more subtle socio-

political expression, like cultural appropriation. West's politics are so explicit and "in-your-face" (e.g.,

above, seen wearing the MAGA hat) that cancelation might be harder to avoid, or, in other words, non-

cancelation may be harder to justify (given the "new normal" discussed in Chapter 4 and resultant

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[33] Humor, irony, and ambiguity in political judgment and expression are discussed in detail in Chapter 6, focusing on memes and the online context.

pressures discussed below). For others, however, an expected continuum of canceling for violent action → problematic socio-political expression → differing political views can be found, and a celebrity (West) having a political view that is different from your own is the least significant reason to cancel a celebrity. This spectrum reflects a movement from more implicit concern with politics ("private," interpersonal or immoral violence), to the seemingly civil or somewhat political (discussions of cultural, collective symbolic violence), to the explicitly and formally political.[34]

That being said, most if not all of these forms of cancelation should be considered political actions on the part of consumers, just with varying explicit formal politicality, and therefore more or less recognition in or centrality to a public sphere. Considering a necessarily broad definition of politics and public sphere participation (a la Benhabib 1992:215, for example), the act of canceling someone for sexual misconduct, cultural appropriation, or explicit political expression are all political actions that make meaningful claims about, in examples seen above, gendered politics, race/ethnic politics/civility, and overt governance in their society. These are all examples of pop culture and politics melding for young people in the civic institution of popular media (Alexander 2006) and in a context of public peer deliberation. In other Habermasian terms, these types of cancelation, in different ways, allow for "the conversion of the principles of intimacy into those of a critical publicity," (Cohen and Arato 1992:215) as these intimate critiques in private consumption speak to larger concerns, often explicitly.

Fiske ([1989] 2010), despite critics claiming a perspective of wholly free and open interpretation, has argued that some popular culture has more potential for political readings than others: this is reflected in Chapter 4 in considering text and the Goldilocks zone of political play. Here, a conversation about Kim Kardashian has perhaps less potential than a conversation about Kanye West to turn political,

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[34] Interestingly, this spectrum of political overtness does not match up with a spectrum of ease in cancelation. Most respondents had the easiest times canceling violent action and opposing political view violators, though those with socio-political expression used more explicitly political conversation. This is reflected in the focus group and interview data below.

given people's strong feelings about West's overt, controversial politics. This is also different from a

conversation about R. Kelly, which while explicitly about gender, might not be seen by the

audience/public as being about broad gender *politics*. That being said, the degree to which these

conversations (in this case, cancelations) are *formally* political, that is to say dealing with a narrow

definition of politics (re: government action and electoral events), should also be considered on a

propensity continuum. The cancelations of Chris Brown, Kim Kardashian, and Kanye West are all political,

but some have the potential to lead to more political conversations than others, formally or otherwise.

These cancelations are all political, but some are more Political than others.

Regarding the civil/weak sphere and strong public sphere, these typologies show varying levels of

"publicity," as measured by collective discussion regarding power and control. This entertainment context

of the civil sphere, the pop-cultural "institution" of the civil sphere, can itself be both the substructure for,

but also the substance of public discussion. And given the foundations of many of these cancelations in

anti-sexism, anti-racism, anti-transphobia, etc., many of these young people are playing with both

counterpublic and public sphere discourse, in the site of civil sphere "connectedness" through popular

culture. Such connections are not always considered the pure, sacred, rational deliberation of the public

necessary for democratic action, and the blurring and bridging across public sphere are discussed below.

However, this is a type of emergent, often mediated political engagement among young people, bringing

new voices into public discussions on power and abuse. Given the popular critiques of this cancel culture

discourse ("A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" 2020), I believe

the politicality in the above cancelation suggests the need for a reconsideration of the democratic

potential in such civil/public interaction, and at a minimum, the variance in these cases here suggests a

more nuanced critique of cancel culture.

This exploration of typology shows that, even when it may not be seen as such in the popular

discourse, that cancelation is in fact a way that young people are engaging with politics in varied ways. To

theorize the character of this engagement, though, we must understand the complexities involved in the process of cancelation itself: who cancels celebrities for these transgressions, who does not, how, and why?

Part 2: Processes of Engagement in and through Cancel Culture

In part two of this chapter, I move beyond the cases of cancel culture and the variety in such cases to explore the processes behind such a playful engagement through celebrity culture. I discuss those young people I spoke with that didn't participate in cancel culture, those that struggled with cancelations, and those that participated in some way, ultimately analyzing the processes and motivations behind this judgment and any potential action.

Why Young People Don't Cancel: "Separating the Art from the Artist"

For some young people, cancel culture just didn't resonate with them. They didn't see the need to connect artists' actions/expressions/values to the music and found cancel culture itself unnecessary for media consumption (without discussing or explicitly discounting its potential impact on social change). For example, Jacob stated the following:

> If you find something out about some celebrity, like, they support Trump or they said this thing five years ago or something then you just cancel them and stop enjoying everything that they do and I don't like that at all. Cause what if I like their work?

Jacob disagreed with the premise of cancel culture because if you like the product, a celebrity's personal actions shouldn't necessarily affect your relationship with the celebrity's entertainment value. For many participants, this involved a process of separating the product from the producer, or often, in the case of music celebrities, the art from the artist. In the same focus group with Jacob, Joseph explains why he does this:

I kind of keep musicians and their views separate. It just kind of spoils the music if I connect it with their views. I try to avoid the situation that [my friend] found himself in that he doesn't like listening to Kanye anymore because he knows that Kanye feels XYZ about politics. I just try to say, you know, that's someone who has their opinion and that's separate from the artist that is making whatever music. I try not to rope it all together. It's easy to do that unless whatever they're being artistic about is heavily skewed to their politics.

Joseph's latter sentiments were often repeated by other participants: unless the product is about the actions/expressions/values you have a problem with, it's relatively easy for some people to *separate the art from the artist*. In other words, some people can avoid the glass-shattering, spoiling effect that Kelly discussed. For those who do cancel celebrities, this was not so easy, as discussed below under "Why Young People Cancel."

Interestingly, some statements from participants complicated this notion. Chris, a White moderate-conservative, said he didn't need to cancel R. Kelly because he's singing about "believing he can fly," and not singing about sexually abusing underage girls, thereby ignoring (or being ignorant of) the vast collection of hyper-sexualized R. Kelly music, like "Bump and Grind," that made so many (Black) cancelers uncomfortable. Some participants went further, arguing that even if the product seems to go explicitly against what they believe, they as consumers might not care and will focus instead on other aspects of the product (e.g., the beat or general musicality). Kevin and Pedro shared this sentiment, despite early being explicit critics of "Bump and Grind" in the R. Kelly case:

Kevin: So with me with Kanye, Michael Jackson, and Chris Brown, the reason why I will still listen to their music is because what they do and what they think does not relate to their music for me. Kanye, some of his songs, he does portray his political views and everything, but most of his songs he don't, so that's why I can still listen without thinking about what they did or said or what they're being accused of. With R. Kelly I can't do that.

SJP: So let's say Kanye's new album drops, it's called "MAGA Country," all the songs are about how great Trump is or something but the beats are dope and he's got a good flow, what do you do?

> Kevin: Listen to it.
>
> Pedro: I'm gonna listen to it.
>
> Kevin: If he makes a song about how great Trump is and it's got a great beat, I'm dancing. Cause it's about how the music makes you feel. It's like a chemical reaction in the brain. It's a feel-good thing. It's out of your control.
>
> Pedro: If it's the whole album… I don't know if I could listen to the whole album. But I'd check it out of curiosity. If it's fire, though, yeah, I'm gonna play it in the car.

While Kevin and Pedro noted themselves as moderate and apolitical on their demographics questionnaire, they had already in the focus group remarked on their dislike of Trump. Still, that obviously did not stop them from liking and listening to Kanye West, arguing that it's not even about whether you agree or disagree with him, but it's a "chemical reaction in the brain" that is "out of your control." This chemical reaction didn't appear to be enough to overcome R. Kelly's transgressions though (as discussed under "Cancelation for Problematic Action), suggesting again, nuance and variation in cancelation critique and outcome. Marie, who is in the focus group with Kevin and Pedro, disagreed with her friends, saying that she can't listen to Kanye anymore.

Separately, Rick argues that he doesn't view his consumption of a cultural product (in this context, music) as necessarily an endorsement of the celebrity:

> Rick: I don't view my plays as votes. Like, Spotify plays get them, like, pennies. Ultimately, I don't care about who you are, I'm consuming the product that you make. That product makes me feel a certain way and I view that as a commodity separate from who you are.

He is making a few points here about why he doesn't cancel and the process of arriving at that decision. Firstly, canceling or not canceling does not have much of an effect regardless, as their consumption only gives the producers "pennies." This sentiment, also voiced by people who struggle with cancel culture (discussed below) reflects the cynicism of many young people in their political context, though often made very actively, itself a political statement. He then goes on to say that he doesn't "care about who you are," but only about "the product that you make.," again, separating the art from the artist. Finally,

he claims that he is drawn to a product because it makes him "feel a certain way," discussed as though he is the passive receiver of the product's effects, with no control over how the product makes him feel. Because of that affective effect, he can (or perhaps naturally does) separate product from producer.

Other than separating the art from the artist, I did hear one very frank explanation for why a young person might not cancel "problematic" celebrities, and in fact why they have a problem with cancel culture as a whole. This argument came from Chris, discussed above for not canceling R. Kelly because "I Believe I Can Fly" isn't about sexual exploitation and abuse. Chris identified as a moderate-conservative but appeared to hold very conservative beliefs, particularly when compared to his fellow focus group participants Hunter and Elicia, both liberal and LGBTQ. That being said, Chris was conscious, as seen in the below quote, of how he comes across to others.

> Chris: But that's the culture. It's like this person did X, we're completely done with them.
> SJP: Why do you have a problem with it?
> Chris: Oh my goodness, "Hi, Chris, I'm a straight White man…" It's because even though I know I would never commit a crime on this level, there's still that fear that if I get high enough, someone could do this to me. I make jokes all the time. They're not racist or very bad jokes, but I make crude-ish jokes because I think they're funny and I think they shock people and people have gotten on my case before for an innocent comment that I make that I don't really think affects anyone. Nothing irreverently racist or transphobic or homophobic or anything like this. It's just a little joke that people just latch onto. I just think 'oh shit, that was an off comment that could tear me to pieces.' I personally fear for that.

Chris argues that he has a problem with cancel culture because of fears that he, as a straight White man, could be at particular risk of being canceled[35] if he reaches a "high enough" (successful enough) status. In recognizing his privilege at the beginning of the long quote (though with ironic humor), he recognizes that it is a particularly privileged position to be scared of cancelation (as opposed, arguably, to being scared of

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[35] I discuss Chris' concerns further in Chapter 6 in the context of young conservatives feeling marginalized among their peers, including in online spaces.

the violence/discrimination/prejudice that people are now canceling others for), yet he goes on to discuss

this fear anyway. Chris and others (conservative and otherwise) expressed the belief that cancel culture is

not a fair response to these problematic actions/expressions, as it can significantly harm people's careers,

at times unjustly ("an off comment... could tear me to pieces"). Elsewhere, Matt considered the unjust

effects and implications of cancelation as well:

> If you don't agree with what they're saying, then don't listen to them or whatever, but at the
> same time, I think cancel culture is getting to a point where people are making stories of sexual
> assault or rape and getting people canceled who don't deserve to be canceled, and it's not
> becoming a very blurry line of who do we believe, who should we deplatform... It's hard and it's
> just getting worse.

Some people, as discussed, just didn't cancel celebrities whom they admitted were problematic and were

instead able to separate the art from the artist. There were also many, like Chris and Matt, who were

adamantly opposed to their participation in cancel culture, as well as cancel culture as a whole. However,

there were many more people than either of these who vacillated between this rejection and a full

cancelation: they saw some value in such critique, but were often ambivalent about the act of canceling,

personally and for the collective. Or alternatively, they at times wanted to cancel but struggled with doing

so.

How You People Struggle over Cancel Culture: Emotional and Discursive Negotiation

One of the most common verbal fillers I heard when talking about cancel culture in focus groups

and interviews was "I don't know." Many participants clearly struggled with cancel culture in their own

lives, when they should cancel, how they felt about the act of canceling, what it meant to decide not to

cancel. This most clearly showed itself with groups and individuals illustrating a type of *emotional and*

discursive negotiation that is necessary when a celebrity they like is being canceled. Michael reflects this

process:

You kind of just ignore it rather than just like "I can enjoy the person's music without supporting them" it's more like "hmm, I'm just gonna pretend this is something else." You're just lying to yourself.

He then goes on to explain times when he has felt this way, like he's ignoring the transgressions of the problematic producer, and in doing so, feel like he is "lying" to himself about the values being challenged by the cultural product. Kathy, Susie, and Alex all negotiated through the struggle with these questions.

SJP: Do you care much about the politics of artists?
Kathy: Yeah, I do. I remember when Kanye's new album came out at the beginning of the summer, one of my friends was like "Honestly, like, I don't know if I can listen to it. Like, I love Kanye, but I don't know if I can listen to it right now." So…
Susie: I definitely take it into consideration and will think why do they think this, what is their reason for thinking this, but it usually doesn't stop me from, like, if I think someone's good as an artist, then…
Alex: Kind of the same thing with Kanye, like, with his new album I was like "do I want to listen to this," and, like, I didn't want to buy it but I still streamed it because I liked one of the songs so I'm not gonna deprive myself of it because I don't agree with him right now. I'm not gonna be a Kanye fan really but I still like that song.

All three women (or at least Kathy's friend, whom she remembered at this time) show that they struggle with what to do when an artist's values (political, in the case of Kanye West) don't match their own and come to differing solutions through this emotion, discursive, individual and collective negotiation. The in-between of cancel culture, to craft varied negotiated middle-grounds, as these women did, is a heavily populated space, I have found observing young people play with politics in the Goldilocks zone, it is clear that this play can be one through such negotiation and through such struggle.

This negotiation is indicative of *playful* political deliberation, within oneself and among peers. Participants are considering and discussing the relationship between consumption and socio-political support, itself a type of speech/action by consumers. These young people are considering the political implications of their consumption-as-action while weighing the extremely personal forces of *taste*

(musical, in the case of the above examples) and socio-political values. This negotiation did also include

concerns about effects, or rather, lack thereof. Lala made this point, discussing how she knows her own

canceling "doesn't make much of a difference," but that doesn't stop the "personal guilt." This, combined

with desires from taste, often results in her going "back and forth" on the issues. Whether this back-and-

forth is the means or the end (or, perhaps, an autotelic struggle) it is regardless a negation between Lala's

understandings of action, socio-political consequences of her actions, and the power *and* pleasures of any

resistance to what she feels are injustices (in this case, racism, sexism, and R. Kelly) in the context of

relative powerlessness.

As heard from countless popular figures and writers (particularly on the right), many of these

young adult participants across the political spectrum struggled with cancel culture because they saw it as

flawed, or in other words, saw cancel culture itself to be problematic. While Chris, above, criticized cancel

culture as a potential threat to him, Mark, a Black Independent, argued that cancel culture could be and is

used and targeted in racist ways:

> Take the Kevin Hart [being dropped as the 2019 Academy Award host] thing. They're digging up
> some old tweets about him making disparaging remarks about LBGT people and me and a couple
> of people, we're picking up tweets from other white comedians making similar remarks. In fact,
> Amy Schumer was saying some real shady stuff. But the thing about it, the dude is a comedian,
> he's just making jokes, but somehow when it comes to a Black person about to be hosting the
> Oscars, they're like, 'we got to dig up some dirt about this guy.' Prince got targeted because of
> that, [Michael] Jackson got targeted because of that.

Mark is not arguing that the anti-LGBTQ comments are okay, and that's why Kevin Hart shouldn't be

canceled (though he remains agnostic on these accusations and criticisms), but rather he argues that

cancelation is not equally applied across all social groups, and specifically, that Black people (Black men?)

are more at risk of being canceled than White people (women?), because of racism that even exists

within this "woke" critique. In this way, Mark problematizes cancel culture because of its application,

rather than the core idea of cancelation in general, unique from Chris. Others shared similar concerns in

negotiating cancel culture, as Kate, for example, expressed an argument that James Charles, a gay

makeup artist canceled over alleged predatory behavior towards straight men, was almost certainly

problematic, but may have canceled (so quickly) because of widespread homophobic stereotypes about

gay men. Kate was highly ambivalent about the cancelation.

Some people struggled with cancel culture because of its perceived lack of nuance, despite the

wide variability seen in the participation explored in this chapter thus far. Joe made this point when his

focus group was talking generally about the "problematic" critique, the identifier "woke," and cancel

culture, arguing that they are all performative and shallow compared to more "real" or "legitimate"

politics. This shallowness comes from the perceived binary pressures of cancel culture: either you don't

cancel/are not woke (and judged as such) or you do cancel/are woke. Joe associated this with the

cancelation of R. Kelly.

> Joe: The people who are being woke are the people in cancel culture. Like, 'if you're woke, you
> would cancel R. Kelly.'
> SJP: And you think it's more complicated than that?
> Joe: Yeah, but you have how many characters on Twitter. That's as complicated as you're allowed
> to get.

Here, Joe's comments reflect the connection between cancel culture and online culture, as seen in things

like the #MuteRKelly and #MeToo hashtags, as well as its popularity in spaces like Tumblr and Twitter,

discussed above. The aggressively partisan reputation of online culture will be discussed in Chapter 6, but

this is seen as fueling cancel culture polarization as well. Here, he reflects a common sentiment among

my participants that cancel culture as a form of cultural critique is unsophisticated and lacks the

necessary nuance to be productive.

However, in drawing their own boundaries around what might be more or less acceptable and

what might be more or less open to cancelation, people were often vague, contradictory, and extremely

variable in these distinctions. For example, in one focus group, Joshua makes a distinction in cancel

culture regarding reproductive rights that he does not around racist slurs, noting age:

> Like, some guy dropped the n-word and he was 13 years old on his Twitter page and he got
>
> canceled, like, that's terrible. But, I mean, being like "Women don't have a right over their
>
> uterus," maybe that's, like… Like, it's different, if you're actively shitting on a group or, like,
>
> aggressive towards someone, that's when cancel culture's fine I guess. Like, does it actually
>
> impact the world? If it doesn't impact the world, why should I care?

Clearly, there are nuances at play here that are not immediately present in the image of a "mob-

mentality" cancel culture, namely, what defines aggression or "shitting on a group," and why is this racial

slur not included for Joshua (when it clearly is for so many)? Of course, this was a trend among White

participants (I heard this particular defense multiple times), and clearly linked to motivations by identity

below. The point here is, as other participants noted, the boundaries of individual interactions with cancel

culture (like the boundaries of Goldilocks political play), are varied, nuanced, "slippery" "fine line[s]" that

are not reflected in popular perceptions of cancel culture as shallow and homogenous, reflected in the

broader criticisms.

These varied concerns were echoed in many focus groups (though often debated by participants),

including in the following long except from friends Bobby, Kate, and Lala. Included in length for context, I

have emphasized key sentiments.

> Bobby: I have a lot of thoughts about cancel culture. I think cancel culture is just a way for people
>
> to think that they're doing something that they're being positively involved. **A lot of it is so**
>
> **superficial.** And it's just become a trend, like, people will see someone else on Twitter canceling
>
> somebody and they're not really thinking about what this means or what this person's actually
>
> done and, I mean, **there are a lot of examples where people have been rightfully canceled**, like
>
> Michael Jackson and R Kelly and stuff **but there's a lot of people who are being canceled who I**
>
> **think it's not productive, it's not doing anything.** I think it's too black and white and it doesn't
>
> encourage people to do better, it just encourages people to be so careful about everything you're
>
> doing, which is a good thing, but…

Kate: It's so **performative**.

…

Bobby: Like, we might cancel R Kelly but we're not gonna have these discussions about the ways in which young girls are sexualized from a very early age and how that can lead them to be vulnerable to older men taking advantage of them. Like, no one was talking about that, they were just talking about the things that R Kelly did and why we can't listen to his music because of that. So I completely agree that cancel culture is, like, very performative and that **the main part of it is not addressing these structural issues but pinpointing these individuals** to blame for those structural issues, and it's, like, once we cancel them it's as if these problems are gone.

…

Lala: I do believe that the intention of cancel culture at first was probably well-intentioned. And I will admit, I was on board for cancel culture because I had a lot of problems with these people that were being accused of doing really bad things, but just the fact that it's taken up such popularity and the fact that cancel culture has continued but none of the problems that they're trying to cancel are being canceled, that makes me not have any faith.

Bobby, Kate, and Lala also think that cancel culture can be shallow and performative, that there are "rightful" but also unproductive (wrongful?) cancelations, that it perhaps brings up important questions, but doesn't actually address the nuanced problems of sexism, racism, or other offences that are the cause for the cancelation in the first place…

These critiques can be very different from the ones coming from Harper's Bazaar, Trump, and other popular critics. While some argue that cancel culture stifles free speech (e.g., Chris and Matt above), some argue that it actually doesn't do enough to accomplish the goals it has set out to achieve. My above data suggest, however, that cancel culture is rarely as "black and white" as critics claim. Young people struggle over canceling celebrities of whom they are fans. This can result in partial cancelations (e.g., Raquel saying Kanye shouldn't be taken off of Spotify, that "he's not that canceled") and cancelation retractions (e.g., in the case of Chris Brown). When there is a cancelation in some form, there can be a variety of motivators driving the negotiation process.

Why Young People Cancel

My data show a variety of reasons why people participate in the process of cancel culture, even if it's a complicated struggle with and degree of participation. Importantly, these motivators are not mutually exclusive, but rather often co-occur. These motivators (*peer influence*, *identity*, *value*, and *pleasure*) show different kinds of access points into public deliberation from the realm of popular culture.

Pressure/influence from peers

Some people expressed a need to cancel problematic celebrities because of pressure or influence from others. For example, Emmy shares this experience:

> You either have to stop listening to them or you risk the social stigma of listening to someone who's problematic. You have to determine which is more important.

Emmy expresses this as a choice, as opposed to the above values-motivated cancelations, which were felt as a personal drive, a need to cancel. She also speaks of a stigma associated with not canceling. This was expressed by some participants, but usually only the liberal or very liberal ones. This shows pressure by peers to act and consume politically, emphasizing the importance of peer groups, as well as popular culture, as political socialization agents.

Reported more frequently than feeling a "social stigma" and direct pressure was a more subtle influence from peers (direct peer pressure that comes to mind with the "mob" analogy often used by cancel culture critics). William gave an example of this when talking about problematic action and Chris Brown:

> I actually used to listen to a lot of Chris Brown because I had never really put it into context with, like, his past behavior, and eventually Charlotte actually pointed it out to me and we just had a conversation about it and I definitely listen to him less now. I'm gradually being drawn away from artists that I like because that conversation activates something in my brain.

Charlotte, who was also in the focus group, had previously stated that Chris Brown was someone she had firmly canceled. While William didn't firmly cancel Chris Brown, just listened to him less, this move was influenced by his peers and seemingly internalized. He became a more conscious and political consumer due to peer talk around popular celebrity culture, thereby becoming more engaged in relevant public deliberation.

Peer groups have long been understood as socialization agents, particularly in political socialization (Thorson et al. 2016). For these young people exploring their political identities and considering what those identities mean for entertainment consumption, pressure from peers is an expected and reasonable motivator, given the collective nature of the civil and public spheres (as opposed to private identity development through art or the novel), despite claims of a mob mentality from critics of cancel culture.

Motivated by values

Many participants were moved by their values and sense of ethics to cancel celebrities (or at least often articulated such motivators). This was often expressed as a non-choice, but rather a strong, deeply personal force that was driving action. Bobby, quoted above, described this motivation, despite herself having conflicting feelings about the role and power of cancel culture when it comes to social change. When discussing music from problematic artists, like R. Kelly, she argues "It's hard to enjoy music from an artist when the first instinct you have is to think about what they've done like that. It ruins the music listening experience in the first place." This is not framed as *choosing* to cancel problematic artists, but the rather "listening experience" has fundamentally changed because of the association of the product with the problematic producer. If the values of the producer, as judged by the problematic action, conflict with personal values, the music often seems to inevitably become less enjoyable.

This motivator was expressed in an explicit way by Marge, in response to her friend Irelyn (who is also in the focus group):

> I really resonated with what you said Irelyn, about 'maybe you can separate the artist' but sometimes you just can't. And you don't even mean it to be a political statement or anything, it's just that you feel differently about the music now because I'm just thinking about that picture of Rihanna after Chris Brown beat her up.

The first point to note is that Marge argues that she doesn't mean to make a political statement. This motivation for cancelation shows that much like the participants in Street, Inthorn and Scott (2013), young people are often not setting out to make political claims in their consumption of and conversation around popular culture, but this does not mean that these statements aren't political. Marge's sentiments reflect this: she claims that's she's not meaning to make a political statement, that this is not her intention, but that is still the result. This illustrates the advantages of the Goldilocks zone's accessibility in opportunities for engagement. Secondly, she echoes the comments made by Bobby that "you just feel differently about the music" when it becomes associated with values (in this case, violent misogyny on the part of Chris Brown) that don't align with your own.

This was a motivator in other realms beyond music and celebrity. Matthew spoke of this during the focus group's conversation about how producers' political beliefs might affect (or not) their consumption patterns.

> Matthew: [Celebrity political beliefs] haven't changed my listening habits but it has changed how I want to watch different sports leagues, like, the NBA versus the NFL. There's a pretty stark difference between what the leagues as a whole allow the players to say and do and get away with. So, like, there are tons of people in the NFL that are known to have beaten their wives or women and get 5th and 6th chances because they're good at playing. And they don't let their players speak out that much. And the NBA is just very different. That has kind of changed my desire to watch one over the other.
>
> SJP: Is it because you don't want to support the NFL or is it because it's no longer as enjoyable?
>
> Matthew: I think knowing… Like, before I didn't really know that there were these problems with

the NFL, I just didn't keep up with it outside of just watching the game. But knowing that makes it

less enjoyable for me to watch.

Again, it is "less enjoyable" for Matthew to watch certain sports (and the sports celebrities he may follow)

because the values of the NFL as indicated by weak responses to domestic violence and the shutting

down of player activism becomes associated with the product, the sport, and Matthew, who identified

himself as very liberal, does not associate himself with those values.

Finally, it's important to note that young people recognize the criticisms some have lodged at

them for participating in this value-based consumption and canceling. In this interview excerpt quoted

above as well, Betty defends herself against stated critiques after discussing Louis C. K.:

I know it was a whole debate, well, not a debate, but I read an article on, like, it was something
like 'millennials are killing artist culture' because now they're super worried about artists'
personal values rather than their work that they're putting out but I feel like now they go hand in
hand, like, the ethics are of what they're putting out.

While ethics and values have always been present in cultural products, Betty feels like that connection is

more salient now for her generation, which shows their values in pop-cultural consumption, even if they

know it will only be worth "1/10th of a cent."

This value-based model of consumption is one long seen in the sociology of culture (e.g., Max

Weber reprinted in 2002). In terms of Swidler (1986), ethical motivators such as anti-racism and anti-

sexism are tools that many of these young people use to shape strategies of action (such as whether to

cancel or how much to cancel) particularly given the unsettled, highly ideological pressures of the "new

normal" discussed in Chapter 4. This can lead to political action (cancelation, of varying types and

degrees), and as seen in my focus groups, can easily lead to political deliberation and debate. Other

motivations behind cancelation, which can be combined with value-based motivators, are found in the

data as well.

Motivated by identity (politics): Theorizing marginalization and cancel culture

Jinx, a non-binary, trans, queer, asexual Black participant, expressed multiple, intersectional marginalizations because of their race, gender identity, and sexuality. As seen in the quote here, this affected their relationship to the problematic critique and cancel culture.

> Jinx: It's hard for me to trust a lot of artists. Like, when you're in a bunch of [minority/disadvantaged] communities, it makes it hard to trust them, because, like, rappers are homophobic, some rappers are transphobic, some artists are, like, sexist and all this stuff and it's just like, politically, I may not just support them. But also, it's hard for me to just throw them away, cause like, then I don't have anybody.
>
> SJP: So, what do you do? If you're listening to an artist and you don't like the lyrics or the message or the politics, how do you deal with that?
>
> Jinx: I talk about it. I'll put out, like, a disclaimer. Like some things are problematic, but where do we draw the line? Like, I'm not going to feel like the worst person in the world if I miss something.

Because of Jinx's intersectional marginalization, they feel backed into a corner regarding their capacity to cancel problematic celebrities. This led to a unique type of cognitive and emotional negotiation. Another example regarding negotiated cancelation due to intersectional marginalization is seen in Kiki's discussion with jinx and friends about Cardi B (above):

> I like her music, I like her energy that she's putting out into the world, but I can't appreciate some of the things she's said about dark-skinned women... I don't like it at all. I guess that's where I find conflict.

Kiki finds Cardi B problematic due to her salient identity intersection regarding dark-skinned, Black femininity.

Jinx and Kiki are clearly using counterpublic discourses in applying their problematic critiques. However, this simultaneity of Jinx's experience/salience of intersectional marginalization is unclear. It seems like they would be inclined to cancel a celebrity for being sexist, racist, and homophobic at the same time, but this is not necessary for possible cancelation. For example, Jinx (and Kiki) criticized R.

Kelly's violent sexism in his abuse of underage girls and young women, but race was not a salient point of this discussion, despite many of his victims being Black women and girls.

Other expected patterns emerged regarding identity motivators: for example, many of the straight, college-educated, White women I spoke to, sexism was the most salient identity they drew upon in talking about their personal connections to cancel culture. This is seen in discussions about sexual abuse of (often White) women in cases like the Louis C.K. cancelation who was accused of sexual misconduct (e.g., exposing himself without non-coerced consent to young women comedians).

Other identity (politics) based motivators centered around marginalization were often connected to peers and/or values, as discussed above. These connections between political and personal identities, often common among the left, fuel the critiques from the right about the rising centrality (dangers?) of identity politics (Bacon Jr. 2021). This is hyper-apparent in an opinion piece by Zachary Faria for the Washington Examiner (2021) entitled "Identity-obsessed liberals and social justice are the roots of 'cancel culture'," as he discusses cancel culture's explicit jump from culture to politics. Faria states that "the Democratic Party has fully embraced the brain rot" and "the toxic worldview of liberals, between the racialization of everything and the confused world of gender politics, is what needs to be the focus of cancel culture opponents."

These particular connections would be of concern to public sphere theorists (highlighting their vulnerability to feminist critique). If rational deliberation requires that one leave behind much of their private self to come together as a collective, in the collective interest, in concert (Arendt [1959] 2013; 1965; Habermas [1962] 1991; Benhabib 1992), then the concerns of the right may be justified (despite, however, their own centering of identity in political critique). However, identity has long been central to political consumption in general, including boycotts (Bennett 2003; Endres and Panagopoulos 2017) and attacks on such politics are often grounded in (or at least have the effects of) public sphere exclusion (e.g., women's exclusion for the bourgeois public sphere in Fraser 1990; see Walters 2018 for overview in

contemporary political context). These data illustrate that there is a relationship between identity and cancel culture for many young people. I explore here, in the following chapter, and in the conclusion, the implications of this relationship more broadly.

Pleasure

The final reason why people cancel is I believe the most theoretically interesting one. While the process of cancelation was often difficult, as evidenced by the struggles and negotiations frequently associated with cancelation, many people derived a sense of pleasure from enacting such political critique of popular cultural figures and products. This could likely be because it is pleasurable to fulfill one's values, fulfill peer expectations, or validate one's identity. But the process of playing with socio-political critique in a collective way seemed to be a uniquely pleasurable one (both Couldry et al. 2010; and Couldry 2010 argue that pleasure is the top priority in such engagement). While not always voiced (though at times observable, as in the opening interaction of the chapter), my questions to the focus group seemed to be tapping into a pleasurable aspect of their cultural consumption, one that was deeply social, be it discussed on- or off-line, with friends or unknown fellow consumer-participants. This was expressed in the interview with Jinx and friends:

> SJP: Do you like to talk about lyrics and music and stuff together or with other friends?
> All: Yeah, a lot.
> Jinx: And I like to talk about a lot of this stuff on Facebook. I like to talk about, like, is this artist too problematic...

Early in the focus group (music was the first type of product discussed), Jinx brings up the problematic critique, expressing that they discuss this online and with friends. They are not (always) reflecting the deep personal struggle of engagement, but instead state that they "like" to make these critiques (arguably related to the relationship between collective critique and deliberation, in a Habermasian,

public-sphere sense, or regarding political judgment for Arendt). There is a sense of enjoyment associated with these conversations.

Kelly, who provided the spoiling metaphor from *How I Met Your Mother*, expressed this as well, talking about problematizing the reality TV show *The Bachelor* with friends. In discussing how it can be read as anti-feminist in a variety of ways, she says that the collective "problematic" critique is "a nice, like, way to express your frustrations sometimes, maybe. It's cool making the connection between a show and real life. It's a nice place to be like, 'Why does this need to be this way?'" In stating that it's a way to get out her frustrations, she alludes to the struggle and negotiations discussed above that many feel when they have value-based problems with products they are consuming. While she doesn't cancel *The Bachelor(ette)*, she does problematize it, and thereby attaches a "disclaimer" (as discussed by Jinx earlier) in such a way that allows the consumption to be enjoyable again. This illustrates that critique can, somewhat paradoxically, add pleasure to the consumption of the product, even given such struggle.

Finally, Hunter, who expressed a laundry list of problematic critiques from Ariana Grande to *Avengers: Endgame*, reflected this pleasure that comes from critique. Hunter was explaining to me a variety of role-playing games she had played with friends as logged in her media diary. These role-playing games were all based on movies (the particular one we were discussing was based on *Blade Runner*), and in playing, the group of friends often discussed problematic elements of the film (the sexism, racism, and reproductive rights concerns discussed at the beginning of the chapter). When I inquired as to why they all like these games, Hunter responds:

> [We like RPGs about movies because it forces us to] internalize these things that we love and actually sort through them. Naturally, of course, we would do that anyway, just talk about them, which is what a lot of these turn into afterwards, talking about why we love these things, what about it do we love, what about it are we frustrated by. Yeah, mostly because the people that we're doing this with feel very similarly in terms of, 'Yeah, let's critique the things that we love because we want them to be better.' So yeah, that's a lot of fun. To break them apart and reassemble them we actually know them a lot better now.

Like Kelly, Hunter expresses the sentiment that dissecting popular cultural products, breaking them apart

and reassembling them, is a pleasurable way to alleviate the frustrations caused by the problematic

aspects of the product. This has implications for why people cancel, and what motivates the process of

political judgment, critique, and deliberation broadly through popular culture.

Whether it results in cancelation (Jinx liked to discuss if a musical artist was "too problematic,"

presumably too problematic to listen to), a distancing, or an even deeper affinity for the product/figure

(in Hunter's case, problematic critique made the product better) there can be pleasure in the socio-

political critique associated with problematizing and canceling cultural products. This has the capacity to

reduce some of the frustrations that come with observing/living through sexism, racism, and/or other

social problems and provides a spaces for the necessary emotional and discursive negotiations associated

with continuing to consume those products. Critique has the power to bring pleasure back to the

problematic.

Discussion

(Cancel Culture as a Playful Process of Negotiation and Resistance in Weak/Strong Civil/Public Sphere(s))

This chapter has illustrated that, contrary to reductionist criticisms and concerns, there is nuance

and variety in celebrity cancelations as well as in the processes in and motivations behind interactions

with cancel culture. What the *typology of cancelations* in part one of this chapter shows is that the socio-

political critique of pop-cultural products and figures allows for young people to engage in politics

through various spheres. While some cancelations are broadly speaking to civil concerns (e.g., the case of

Erika Jayne, discussed in footnote 4), the cancelations discussed here often bridged the civil, weak public,

and strong public spheres to varying degrees and with varying resolve or "firmness." By engaging

celebrity cancel culture in talk (deliberation) with peers, these young people can use media as an

institution of the civil sphere (Alexander 2006) to engage symbolically and discursively (perhaps in a more

Habermasian sense, [1962] 1991; [1964] 1974) and (inter)actively (Arendt [1959] 2013; Zerilli 2005) in

public matters. This typology shows variation in (strong, dominant, formal) public-ness, as well as

simultaneous contributions to these clearly blurred "spheres." For example, young people contested

shared civic understandings and interpretations of R. Kelly's music, debated the role of cultural figures

(like Kelly) to the civil sphere, played with counterpublic discourses regarding critiques of systemic

sexualization, and contributed to public deliberations around Kelly's ultimate, punitive fate (regarding

both preferred legal outcomes and those for public opinion/mass censorship). This engagement across

blurred spheres of varied public-ness is seen throughout the typology in part one, though this bridging is

most evident in the case of Kanye West. Deliberation on his cancelation often draws on questions and

discourses of the civil, counterpublic, weak public, and dominant public sphere(s). Faz illustrates this

blurring and bridging (emphasized below) after separately bringing up Kanye West twice, without

prompting:

> I really did enjoy his music for a while, but **once he got onto endorsing Trump, that was where I was like 'Oh, I think my time with this person is done now,'** just because, **he said some comments about Black folks needing to rethinking racism** and to endorse, like, **Trump is a racist, he's done all these awful things,** he's the reason why little babies are being separated from their parents and he doesn't care because their skin's brown, and **if you support someone you're basically agreeing with their actions**. **So then if I support Kanye I feel like I'm supporting someone else who's affecting all these people.** I haven't listened to any of his recent stuff but I've heard that the artists he works with now, like he's playing with 6ix9ine. And I've heard the music from other people playing it in the background and it doesn't really talk on the same social issues that he used to. Which isn't wrong, but... I just can't give it a chance because that all would be on my mind when I'm listening to it.

Faz displays participation in the civil sphere (role of the artist in society, role of consumption), weak

public(s) (considerations of political identity and potential expressions of that identity), counterpublic(s)

(antiracist critique on Kanye's remarks on race and racism), and the strong, dominant, formal public(s)

(deliberation on actions by the state, forming and expressing public opinion regarding the Trump

administration's policy on family separation and the detention of migrant children at the US-Mexican border). Given that so many concerns with popular culture, in the Frankfurt School and beyond, pertain to ideological control that resent resistance, the ability of Faz to critique social power broadly *through* a critique of popular culture suggests a capacity for a significant (though still limited in effect) reclaiming of mass media products for the masses. In fact, Benjamin ([1935] 1969) exhibits a relatively rare sense of optimism within the Frankfurt School regarding new mass media, with exception to his concerns about a powerful cult of celebrity that may emerge from new media technologies (the close-up in film). The ability to critique social power through a playful critique of celebrity, on multiple layers of public-ness, suggests more nuanced theoretical potential for audience power than is often considered.

Part two of this paper illustrates how varied engagement with these spheres through cancel culture is often a negotiation with and struggle for control (power) in deliberation through consumption on a micro-political but collective scale (as noted by cancel culture's focus on a "mob-mentality"). These young people struggle internally (*emotional negotiation*) and externally (*discursive negotiation*, e.g., with peer talk) in an ultimate larger struggle over the public-spirited matters driving cancelations and cancel culture. Further, by developing and presenting their *values* and *identity* (and values as connected to other's identities), through collective interaction (and *peer influence*), these young people are participating in politics in that they are fighting for control to shape culture and society, in opposition to the problematic institutional messages and actions put forth by entertainment media and celebrity culture. These young people are using the tools of private and at times civil spheres to bridge to, contribute to, and engage with the often narrowly defined political realm, using their own, shared cultural language. In this critique and judgment through the realm of popular culture these young people are engaging in collective, playful, and at times enjoyable ways that appear to encourage such participation.

As noted by the *pleasure* many participants draw from engaging in critiques of the problematic, this political, cultural evaluation can bring enjoyment, in terms of internal, individual pleasure, as well as

fun, external and collective, in that it makes confrontation with (socially, civilly, and politically) oppositional "at worst tolerable and at best enjoyable" (Fincham 2016; see also Podilchak 1991). The problematic critique allowed some young people to add criticism and a "disclaimer" to their popular culture, and again enjoy the content by way of such critique (as Hunter illustrated). Further, consider the conversation with Jinx, Kiki, Emmy, and Isabelle about Cardi B: here is a Black woman celebrity that they have admired for her "realness," who is unapologetic and refuses to conform to respectability politics and who is successful in an industry and genre so dominated by White, male, normative faces. When it is revealed that this celebrity they were fans of may be "problematic"— via connections to transphobia and colorism—these four Black friends, some dark-skinned, some women, some trans and most queer, could have and likely might have been deeply disturbed and upset by this seeming betrayal. Given the pollical context of the "new normal," discussed in Chapter 4, this could easily lead to frustrated, cynical, and active disengagement from both the celebrity and the politicization of celebrity. However, the conversation around Cardi B in this focus group is a lively and enthusiastic exchange through discursive group struggle, negotiation, and *play*, and further appears to be both pleasurable and enjoyable. Later, Jinx explicitly says, as quoted above, that they like discussing this and applying this problematic critique. This is because cultural critique has the potential to be fun and make what could be a destructive revelation about a pop cultural figure bearable and even enjoyable.

This is not always fun for participants though. In the above discussions, particularly for those who must negotiate around cancel culture, we can see that, when faced with a problematic critique of a celebrity or other popular culture that they enjoy, many young people are made deeply uncomfortable by cancel culture. This can be because their identity is facing belittlement or symbolic violence due to the actions of celebrities, e.g., Alexis, a Black woman, seeing Kim Kardashian be praised for wearing a Black protective hairstyle while being told by broader society that it's unprofessional if she as a Black woman does this. This led to playful cancelation, but not necessarily fun. Alternatively, this can be because, as

discussed above, a fan may feel betrayed by a celebrity or at least conflicted in their clashing desires to consume but not support (symbolically, financially, or via action) the celebrity ("Honestly, like, I don't know if I can listen to it. Like, I love Kanye, but I don't know if I can listen to it right now."). I heard (and saw) a lot of uneasiness as participants negotiated seemingly incompatible strategies of action given the reputation of cancel culture as "black and white," to cancel or not. While different from the pleasurable fun I saw some people having, I argue that such struggle with cancel culture, and therefore such struggle with civil/public spheres, is *a type of at times frustrating, effort-laden play* with value, identity, and other elements of cultural belonging.

Parts one and two both illustrate in various cases how cancel culture and critiques of the problematic are a variable and nuanced "playful resistance" (Henricks 2015), often targeted (from the left) on the sexism, racism, colorism, transphobia, and other identity-based abuses of power that young people see in celebrity culture and the media more broadly.[36] When young people struggle with whether or not to cancel, whom to cancel (via type of offense), or how completely to cancel, they are playing with (even if uncomfortably), exploring, and enacting their political perspective in relation to the civil/public spheres. This is an outward push (against both celebrity culture and public issues) and an internal push (through struggle and negotiation) that reflects the centrality of power/resistance and identity to some scholars' understandings of play (in childhood play for Sutton-Smith 1997).

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[36] While play scholars often emphasize the necessity for autotelic recreation (Burghardt 2005; also see Burghardt 2011), and cancel culture broadly, seemingly, has a goal of social change to critical pressure, most participants a) expressed a sense of futility in their individual actions (emphasizing the minuscule difference their lack of Spotify streaming revenue may have, for example) and b) focused any discussion regarding cancelation motivators on that which pushed them to cancel, often internal, rather than that which they are hoping to accomplish, i.e., a collective goal. This is evident by the common language of feeling, suggesting playful exploration and action results in a pushing against the public, as opposed to a pushing against driving such exploration and action. This distinction is important in considering Arendt's concerns with culture and instrumentality (Arendt 1961), which do not necessarily appear to be applicable here.

In making and acting on these playful critiques, these young people are linking (popular) culture

and politics, as some, including Hannah Arendt, have argued aesthetic judgment of art is meant to do

(Lupton 2014). And in playing with politics by working through their cultural critique, young people are

exploring and developing their own beliefs and values, consumptive patterns, and critical limits

(considering, in this case, how far a cultural figure can push political boundaries before they cancel),

similar perhaps to the Habermasian novel (Habermas [1962] 1991). This illustrates different forms of

engagement, development, and action through interactions with discursive similarity and difference,

which will be explored in the next chapter.

Critics, as discussed above, argue that cancel culture is unproductive. This is seen in the media

(*Harper's Bazaar*), from political figures (both Obama and Trump), and from participants (as discussed in

the struggling with cancel culture section). I argue though, that cancel culture and the problematic

critique can be a tool for political engagement that could allow for more young people to develop,

inform, discuss, and even act upon various political perspectives and identities. This should be taken

seriously as a powerful form of micro-action around (and often a micro-resistance to) what young people

see as harmful trends in society, culture, and politics.

Taking the nuances of cancel culture seriously illustrates a process of play-as-working-through, in

which young people consider and negotiate the various judgments around cancel culture, reflecting the

deliberation necessary for the kinds of public sphere interactions detailed by Habermas ([1962] 1991).

Further, this cultural critique reveals the centrality of judgment to both consumption and *active* political

engagement (Arendt 1961). Young people are playing with politics through judgment, and in doing so,

have the capacity to deliberate public matters and "act in concert" (Arendt [1959] 2013:244) in their

cancelations (often digitally, discussed in the next chapter). Despite theoretical academic concerns and

broad public criticism, the varied and nuanced participation in cancel culture is a meaningful process

(while playful, popular, and entertaining) of interaction with politics that has the capacity for personal

exploration and collective deliberation, which ultimately can drive active participation in the civil, weak

public, counterpublic, and extended public sphere(s).

Chapter 5 Appendix: Limitations and Effects of Cancelations

As seen throughout this data, there are limitations in considering the potential for any significant, broad soci-political change that cancel culture and "problematic" critiques can accomplish (beyond general citizen identity development and any expansion in public sphere participation). The direct "effects" of such cancelations are variable regarding celebrities' careers and the capacity for cancelation to be part of a sustained, impactful, broader conversation around culture and power.

Evidence for this limitation can be seen in the cases discussed by participants. For example, Chris Brown, a musician canceled for a violent attack on fellow star Rhianna, was the subject of a very sympathetic documentary, discussed above. After this, his shift into fatherhood, and the passing of time, Chris Brown's career has rebounded for many fans and casual listeners, as discussed by participant Alexis (he "has changed to a degree," has "taken credit for what [he's] done," and was just "young a stupid" at the time of the Rhianna beating). While some people continue to cancel him and his collaborators many in the public media has argued that he has made a "comeback without contrition" (Cochrane 2012) and keeps "getting a pass" (Rayner 2019). This deliberation has continued, though, given the recurrent emergence of new accusations of physical and sexual violence against women spanning from his assault on Rihanna in 2009 to different allegations of abuse in 2013, 2015, 2016 (twice), 2018, 2019, and January 2022 (Girgis 2022).

Regarding problematic socio-political expression, the Kardashians remain both extremely successful and quite controversial. While their long-running reality show *Keeping up with the Kardashians* ended in the summer of 2020, the famous family soon after announced a new show on Hulu, for which the women will reportedly split a nine-figure paycheck. They have many successful business ventures between them as well, with Kylie's makeup and skincare lines thriving and Kim's shapewear consistently selling out of new releases, getting a further publicity boost with *Skims* providing the official underwear,

sleepwear, and loungewear for Team USA's women athletes at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.[37] However,

many critiques of the Kardashian as problematic have grown and expanded, often discussed in

accusations of "blackfishing," "a step beyond cultural appropriation, when people alter their appearance

with makeup, cosmetic surgery, filters or digital editing to appear Black" (Lang 2021). A Page Six tabloid

article (Reslen 2021) addressed these increasingly popular criticisms: after Kim responded to general

blackfishing critiques arguing that "a lot of the time it comes from my daughter asking us to do matching

hair" (Kim had her daughter, North, with Kanye West, so she is biracial) and "there's also a history of

braiding hair in Armenia, and people forget that I am Armenian as well." Page Six also presented the

backlash to these mixed defenses:

> One Twitter user wrote, '"Kim Kardashian is trash wtf does Armenian have to do with you wearing
> braids in your hair the same s–t that black people get told is unprofessional."
> "Another, highlighting the Kardashian family's long history of taking style inspo from black
> culture, added, '@KimKardashian you and certain members of your fam were Blackfishing LONG
> before you had a kid!!!! Don't use your child as an excuse, that's so lame! Fess up to it and move
> on.'"
> …
> "YOU 👏 ARE 👏 NOT 👏 BLACK 👏," one person tweeted at the time, while another wrote,
> "How does she keep getting away with it."
> "You think she'd learn," [another] user argued. "Put your hair up in a high pony and go to the
> fashion show like everyone else."

Though Kim and her sisters clearly have continued fame and financial success, they continue to be

marred by the problematic critique and calls for cancelation. Given the presence of this deliberation in

this major entertainment news outlet, as well as types of outlets like *Variety*, *Time*, *Slate*, *Fox News*, and

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[37] I personally am not sure why Olympians, presently competing at their physical peak, need to represent a brand
best known for shapewear (e.g., compression and body-smoothing underwear and bodysuits, "maternity
shapewear," and their famous waist trainers), but this at a minimum illustrated the ubiquity of the Kardashians
throughout popular culture, even in elite sports.

many others, it is clear that this collective critique and questions of cancelation have had relative success in directing or expanding public deliberation around representational race politics.

Meanwhile, the results have been mixed with Kanye West, canceled for explicit political values (supporting, at the time, Donald Trump). Though he seemed firmly canceled by some, and not at all canceled by others, the results on his career seem mixed. Many have called for the return of the "old Kanye," speaking to both older music and before his Trump support and conservative shift (e.g., Beaumont-Thomas 2018). It is unclear how this has affected or will affect his long-term fame and success as a musician, particularly as West continues to exist in the celebrity drama spotlight.[38] While one popular source in 2018 (Dennis Jr.) criticized in the headline that West is "making his hall of fame career irrelevant by pushing his musical genius to the footnotes of his legacy," he has since rebuked Trump on Twitter, but continued voicing his conservative political critique and ambitions, putting into question the redemptive potential for what many saw as a harmful transgression. West has released two successful albums since data collection and has used the publicity of these releases to further his political commentary, including making explicit and symbolic criticisms of cancel culture through his support of and public associations with Marilyn Manson (accused by multiple women of physical, sexual, and extreme emotional abuse) and DaBaby (canceled for homophobia comments about HIV and "nasty gay n*****" at a live show and then in his clarification/apologia online). In an interview with Hollywood Unlocked (2022), West claims that he is "the main person that's been canceled," but takes pride in this, especially given continued success. Ending a discussion of the hype around West's new music, a *Mic* article reports "as long as West never stops being boring, he'll never be cancelled" (Nelson Jr. 2021). However, critiques of his actions, including his support for Trump and larger conservative beliefs, remain central to his popularity-through-the-

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[38] Based on subjective observation, I do not think it would be wrong to hypothesize that Kanye West has been in "the tabloids" more days than now for the past year or so, for various controversial reasons.

problematic, so though his formal cancelation has failed thus far, the continuation of relevant

deliberation may be a success in terms of public sphere expansion.

This being said, there are clear cases where cancelations have been sustained and have

contributed to ongoing socio-political conversation in the public sphere. R. Kelly is the clearest example of

this. In 2019, R. Kelly was charged with 10 counts of aggravated criminal sexual abuse by the Cook County

State Attorney, which was raised up to 18 charges later that year. He was denied bail in 2020, and the

charges were raised to 22 counts. On Sept. 27, 2021, Kelly was convicted on nine counts, including sex

trafficking and sexual exploitation of a child. Kelly was the "firmest" cancelations I investigated and his

legacy appears forever tainted. Regardless of "effect," the rapid rise of "cancelations" of Kelly (at times in

other words) undoubtedly fueled the rise in public attention, and ultimately, the formation of collective

public opinion as a product of discussion and deliberation.

Most of the cancelations discussed by my participants have not resulted in "firm," permeant,

widespread cancelation. However, as suggested this doesn't seem to be the broad ultimate goal. Long-

term culture-wide change, one that better reflects the values and beliefs of the consumer-citizen is one

that requires discussion among the masses. All cancelation cases explored here led to some degree of

public, politically-minded, **playful** working-through among young people, many of whom aimed otherwise

to avoid such engagement. Popular culture, including celebrity cancel culture, has the capacity for

increased political engagement for many young people within the Goldilocks zone, a space in which

celebrity culture can clearly reside. This further led to in some cases, the capacity for large, collective,

public deliberation, action, and even widespread, public-minded, social and cultural change.

CHAPTER 6: ENGAGING AND DISENGAGING THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT SPACES

(Political conflict avoidance alongside varied forms of virtual engagement, and also "stupid memes")

In a focus group with four women[39], the friends often discussed media in a way that suggested they had curated their entertainment spaces to minimize politics. In their music, they avoided messages they didn't like in music (hypersexualized or objectifying content, "Blurred Lines") as well as "pandering" music and artists, and instead preferred more "party songs" and "background noise." Later, however, they go on to discuss enjoying socially-conscious music with "a message [we] can relate to" on an emotional level. Further, discussing television, Marnie talks about the show *Queer Eye*, discussing how she enjoys the big makeovers, the personalities, the feel-good nature, and despite avoiding "controversy" elsewhere, the social commentary. Regarding celebrity, the group starts off saying they don't care about the politics of cultural figures ("I don't really pay attention.") and are more interested in the entertainment, but eventually, through discussion, they start to collectively work through and process the extent to which this might matter: initially drawing the line while discussing white supremacy in heavy metal ("Yeah, extremist views are the problem."), they eventually discuss Chris Brown, *The Office*, Michael Jackson, Five Finger Death Punch, Taylor Swift, and Kim Kardashian, deliberating, judging, and critiquing this content and these figures in a playful, public-minded way They consider their own role as consumers here as well. Throughout, though, there is a continued sense that they can, and do, work to disengage from political content in these realms, or at least, from content that they read as too political.

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[39] Because of the sensitive nature of this group's discussion, I am using letters from participant's chosen pseudonyms rather than the full names.

This dynamic was different when discussing the context of online spaces of leisure and entertainment. This popular cultural engagement was not framed around a discussion of the apolitical content they enjoyed and the spaces in which they engaged. The conversation did not fall into a discussion of, as seen in Chapter 4, how this entertainment space actually might be political. Instead, the group shifted from television to deliberate the role of screens in children's lives which eventually turned to disclosure from L regarding a traumatic childhood experience of online harassment via graphic threats of sexual violence. She was under 13 when this occurred in a semi-public fan blog setting she shared with friends. As the group then remarked on sexism online and the dangers of online spaces, L seemed to retreat from the discussion. She did not fully shut down, and her friends were consoling her, but it was unclear how much her friends knew of this before now. While relatively quiet throughout this, I then intervened in the conversation to broaden the scope of discussion and re-ground the topic of conversation in the research context.[40] I segue from sexism to online hate, then to broad instances of conflict online, mentioning how previous focus groups talk about "Facebook fights," for example, as commonplace clashes over serious matters, but also over the "really mundane shit" (laughter and agreement). I ask about political conflict online, and if the online culture that they see is at all political:

> G: Did you just ask if online culture is political?
> (All laugh)
> N: Everywhere all the time.
> S: It's *crammed* down your throat online. [speaker emphasis]
> G: Yeah. And yet we're still on it.

L does not chime in yet, but rejoins the conversation shortly, and with enthusiasm. L did not refer to her childhood experience of violent sexual harassment online again, nor did the group as a whole.

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[40] While usually I encourage the organic movement of group discussion to a large degree, and try to de-emphasize the research context, I felt that now the research dynamic would allow L some distance from this trauma and vulnerability if she so desired, but could continue to discuss if she wanted to share, I hoped that the group would follow her lead in this regard, which is what occurred.

In this opening exchange to a discussion on online culture, there is a consistent emphasis on unwarranted aggression in these spaces. Of course, I am not suggesting in comparing these moments that "Facebook fights" are equivalent to L's traumatic experience. Rather, I am remarking on the group's response to L (in first discussing sexist harassment online) and their strong subsequent reaction to my pivoting question about politics online (portrayed as an aggressive intrusion, framed in violent terms of politics being "crammed down your throat"). I do not believe that these friends were at all suggesting an equivalency here either. But I do believe that their concerns of aggression are, in both cases (of L's experience and of politics), grounded in similar perceived causes. The juxtaposition here of violent (digital) sexual aggression towards a child and the perceived aggression of political conflict in social media signifies an essential aspect of the broad reputation of online culture: because of their unique attributes, online spaces of entertainment and leisure can and do easily become hostile to detrimental and adverse effect.

I did not hear other stories of experiences like L's, though there very well may have been some left unshared. The general sentiment of hostility, though, was wide-reaching, with participants frequently expressing this perspective in discussing online culture as aggressively, destructively political. This is often paired, including in the above focus group, with the same participants expressing a great disdain for politics and therefore often avoiding it in interpersonal interactions as well as other entertainment media (e.g., in television and music, discussed in Chapter 4). Online spaces were different though: the social and participatory elements of consumption made politics harder to avoid. Further, the affordances of these spaces seemed to worsen political aggression, and conflict appeared louder, closer, and more threatening in this these spaces. In fact, any political discussion online was often seen as particularly toxic, and therefore particularly dangerous for online leisure and entertainment. *And yet*, the large majority of these young people are "still on it," and in fact, still enjoy these spaces under threat. As the above focus group conversation progresses, the four women end up discussing how they get good "takes" on "social issues"

online, from friends as well as algorithmic suggestions. S suggests this is also nice because sometimes

things will just "pop up" on her Twitter and she can see how people from different positions might "feel

about things." Once we started to discuss memes ("Yes!" "This is the topic we've been waiting for!") they

deliberate the humor behind "anti-vaxxer memes," and whether such things were a funny criticism or too

serious a matter for the medium, given the effects on human lives and wellbeing (so even if one did think

it was a funny meme, they shouldn't share it). This discussion occurred in Spring 2019, almost a year

before Donald Trump declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be a national emergency, marking the start of

chaotic public deliberation on lock-downs, masking mandates, and vaccination. This prescient

deliberation between friends around memes suggests that online spaces may provide more than (just)

toxic aggression. This chapter illustrates how these participants understand and interact with the political

content/reputation of online entertainment. Building on previous chapters, this chapter continues to

illustrate when and how young people might engage with the public sphere through a hostile popular

(online) culture. Building further, I illustrate what forms such engagement might take while also

considering the particular opportunities and challenges in a participatory media context.

In part one of the empirical analysis of this chapter, I explore the particular context of

participation-consumption in online spaces of entertainment and leisure that contributes to the

reputation of political conflict and hostility of this medium, unique from other media contexts in this

dissertation. Ultimately, this leads to concerns of polarization and avoidance that fuel cynicism and

hopelessness around politics online. There is a general sense of deep apprehension reflected consistently

in my data regarding online spaces' capacity for *productive* political deliberation and/or action. In fact, the

general assertion of my participants is that public-spirited deliberation online is not only unproductive but

is greatly counterproductive.

However, despite this popular reputation (and focus by academics and journalists on such issues),

I find that because of the unique affordance of the medium, these young people encounter and at times

benefit from unique opportunities for engagement, deliberation, and action that have the potential to

strengthen their role as citizen (broadly defined) in identification and in practice. Therefore, in part two, I

explore the Goldilocks opportunities for engagement through entertainment and leisure and

conceptualize the forms such deliberative and participatory engagement can take: *cultivation* and

connection through similarity, and *cohabitation* and *confrontation* with difference. Regarding online

media in particular, I show how participatory consumption and interaction, even when centered on

entertainment/active avoidance of the aggressively political, holds potential for varied forms of

broadening public sphere participation.

Finally, to better understand the implications of such potential engagement, I explore the varied

contexts of "successful" engagement. In part three, I analyze one of these young people's most preferred

forms of online entertainment/interaction: memes (humorous images and visual messages[41] that are

easily shared and widely recognized throughout online spaces). In the optional second phase of data

collection, participants from the focus groups could keep a media diary in preparation for an individual

interview, and in doing so were also instructed to collect 1) "memes of interest" regarding the content of

their focus group conversation as well as 2) what they might describe as memes "typical" to their "meme

diet." Using this collection, along with focus group and interview discussions on memes (and politics), I

discuss participants' understandings of memes, typical interactions with memes, and their interactions

with/interpretations of political memes (both broadly and narrowly defined). Given the "interpretive

communities" around memes (Fish 1976; 1980), often absurd and extremely self-referential, these

cultural products are very clearly a part of a broad digital civil sphere, representative of online culture(s)

(Mihailidis 2020), though, perhaps, a weakened representation of civic conversations or public

deliberation (Milner 2016). Pushing this further, I theorize memes as potential tools for interactive

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[41] Memes can often be text-based as well, as are many in the chapter, though usually shared in a visual file format. I accepted the definition of memes used by each focus group, often (but not always) including, for example, screenshots of tweets and videos as well as still images.

political play in a perhaps inaccessible (area of the) public sphere. However, while the playful ambiguity of memetic humor and irony is part of what allows for a playful engagement with politics uniquely available online, it also raises questions about the value or benefits of such engagement to the public sphere.

Literature Review

Understanding of the Public Sphere and Political Action

Critical theorists have long opposed productive political engagement and mass consumption, particularly of entertainment media, which is theorized as distracting indoctrinated consumers from the necessary revolutionary progress towards emancipation (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 1994). The spirit of this argument is prevalent in contemporary understandings of entertainment media and continues to thrive in many understandings of online practices and culture (see the succesful Carr 2020), as discussed below.

Conceptualizing political engagement in terms of the (inter)active, discursive public sphere, Arendt ([1959] 2013; 1961) and Habermas ([1962] 1991; [1964] 1974) both oppose consumption (in this case, of popular entertainment media) and productive politics. Arendt (1961) argues that if entertainment (a private need) and subsequent cultural consumption move into the collective, political arena of public action, the public can become corrupted. Habermas argues that the public sphere, based in its emergence in the 18th century, is a space for participatory democracy and rational political deliberation. However, such deliberation needs to necessarily occur outside of economic consumption, which are private acts, and must be spaces where people leave behind their private selves in favor of rationality and the public, collective interest (separate from their role as consumer). Discussed below, the capacity of online spaces to act as a public sphere has been widely debated and often grounded in these theorizations. Given the necessary separation of public and private, so blurred in (the problematically social (Arendt [1959] 2013)) online spaces, these theories suggest concern, as action and speech occur

without private space for contemplation and reflection (Mancino 2021) and an individual's self-actualization and self-expression, of higher priority, occur alongside (therefore ultimately trumping) any collective interests in interaction (Dahlberg 2011). Further, one's private sense of self becomes corrupted as well, concerned with the digital Other (Eicher-Catt 2013). Below, young people share many of these concerns, and share observations of these blurring spheres and related harms. However, I also outline how such "social" engagement actually comes in different forms, therefore with varying degrees of public-ness and private-ness (Pitkin 1998), and thus with different outcomes regarding democratic ideals.

Further, there is potential, if minimal, in these foundational understandings of the public for entertainment media (and therefore online spaces of entertainment) to possess some sort of capacity for pre-political engagement. Arendt (1961) argues that art, rather than entertainment, can be a private realm where individuals build creative judgment, a skill necessary for political engagement as well, and Habermas ([1962] 1991) argues that the novel can be a tool in developing one's subjectivity, in the private sphere, that allows people to move into the public sphere as rational actors (though leaving behind their individuality in so doing). If the distinction between art and (the reputation of) entertainment fall, as has been occurring in cultural studies theorization for decades, perhaps popular entertainment has can be a tool for judgment and subjectivity development. I illustrate this below, for some forms of engagement, and discuss variation in the effects of such development.

Considering Other Publics and Spheres: Counterpublics, Subpublics, "Weak" Publics, and the Civil Sphere

Critics of public sphere theory have greatly complicated these understandings of an ideal participatory democratic, challenging the above requirements for a necessary distinction between public and private through feminist scholarship (Benhabib 1993) and the exclusion of women from the physical space of the public sphere (Fraser 1985; 1990). This explores how those excluded from the public can and

often do still take public-minded and even public-directed action, thus theorizing beyond the one

dominant democratic sphere, in which all would theoretically participate. In her complications and

contributions to Habermas' work, Fraser (1990) put forth the concept of a counterpublic, an active

collective of people sharing marginalization or exclusion from dominant public sphere participation (e.g.,

women's exclusion from Habermasian coffee houses). Fraser illustrates how these individuals came

together and formed alternative spaces for public discussion. Warner (2002) greatly builds on this notion

of counterpublics: "counterpublics are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and

contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion" (63).

He also briefly proposes the concept of the subpublic, a smaller type of public with its own discourse,

interpretations, and ways of reading the social and political world.

Critical here is the theorization of public*s* that can differ from the powerful bourgeois public

sphere, a concept upheld by scholars because of its association with "the public values of rationality,

dialogue, truth, and transparency" (Alexander 2006:276). These alternative counter-/sub-/publics have

the capacity to introduce alternative and/or oppositional voices into public deliberation. Below, I explore

the multiplicity of publics (or at least the discourses of such publics) in online spaces., illustrating the ways

in which people playfully explore, embrace, judge, and challenge these different publics (through direct

and indirect exposure to such discourses).

There has also been discussion in this tradition regarding the "strength" of these and other

alternative publics, regarding the direct politicality of different spheres of public concern or deliberation.

In broadly discussing women's groups, Fraser also discusses how some of these groups exist as/in "publics

whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion-formation and does not also encompass

decision making" (Fraser 1990). As they may be concerned less with collective action, these spheres are

more private oriented than are "strong" publics. However, the collective opinion-formation component,

though, does (or at least may) still make such a collective a public. Benhabib (see 2008) discussed this as a

decentered public of collective identity and conversation that could impact the "decisional public

sphere."

Theorizations of the civil sphere have also addressed this type of collective engagement separate

from decision-making. In the Habermasian tradition, Putnam (Putnam et al. 1993; Putnam 2000) has

emphasized the importance of the civil sphere for a healthy liberal democratic public, theorizing a social

order of collective belonging emerging from collective groups, criticizing increased popular media

consumption, among other institutional changes, for dragging people away from collective groups and to

their television screens in their private homes. Alternatively, Alexander (2006; Alexander and Smith 1993)

has theorized the civil sphere in terms of these collective groups, but also includes the institution of

popular (entertainment) media as well, which regulates the necessary civil order through considering and

forming solidarity in the presence of difference.

In considering popular online spaces of (social) entertainment a civic medium (or of a weak public

sphere), and the ways in which these spaces regulate civil order through participatory engagement, I

explore the ways in which such engagement has such a capacity to "bridge" political difference and

"bond" through similarity (in the language of Putnam 2000). However, the analysis of memes as a

particular tool for playful digital engagement with publics suggests there may be consequences of

concern for these varied spheres and realms of life, as *engagement through similarity* without an

engagement with difference, in the context of popular entertainment culture and media, may have

antagonistic effects on identity, (in-group) solidarity, (out-group) understanding, and ultimately,

democratic deliberation and action. This work, and other findings in this chapter, also builds on

considerations of these many publics and the civil order in media studies and (British) cultural studies.

Public Sphere, Civil Sphere, and Media in Cultural Studies

Livingstone (2005) theorizes these above perspectives with a focus on audience, asking when a Putnam-like audience can act in a civil sphere. To the extent that audience can deliberate in a civil sphere, audiences can explore that "which [is] 'public' but not yet 'the public,'" (26) and can have to capacity to bring such matters public. Therefore, the audience role can be a mediating position of engagement. Many media and cultural scholars have contributed to the above concepts by theorizing such cultural foundations of the public.

In this sense, popular mediated culture has been theorized as foundational to the public in its civic contributions to collective identity, ideology, and political norms (Dahlgren 2003), similar to theorized as a type of "cultural citizenship" (Hermes 2006a; 2007). Lunt and Pantti (2007) discuss the role of emotions in bridging entertainment media and politics, reminiscent of and greatly extending the Habermasian analysis of the novel. Going further, Couldry et al. (2010:6) argue that the contributions of popular culture "involve more than just 'social belonging or expressions of identity'," discussing framing/agenda setting (in a broad sense) as well as media's contributions to political values, also broadly defined. Radically different from Putnam's decline of the civil through television, for many in this cultural tradition the core of the active citizen can be found, in part, in popular entertainment media. John Street and others (Street 1997; 2011; Inthorn et al. 2013; Street et al. 2013) make this explicit in theorizing popular culture as a "resource for political engagement" and deliberation, broadly defined.

Fundamentally, I am building on these above varied literatures regarding political engagement, public/civil sphere(s), and (private) consumption of popular entertainment culture by exploring the mediated (online) spaces of these cultures as potential sites of playful engagement with various levels of politicality. I explore the ways in which this participation-consumption is defined against engagement as well as how, in the contemporary context, they blend: how do young people view the public, but personal deliberation that occurs online, namely, the contentious, aggressive, hostile, *irrational and unproductive*

deliberation? And further, might the civil medium of digital spaces allow for (some) engagement despite this context? Here, I speak to the civil sphere and cultural studies literature in showing a capacity for engagement in multiple dimensions, building in part off of academic debates around the internet's capacity as a public sphere. This literature reflects the varied optimism and pessimism seen above for popular culture and entertainment media as a whole.

The Internet as a Public Sphere

Debates around the internet as public sphere(s), civil sphere(s), and/or counter-/sub-public(s), have been around since academia's interest in the internet with its creation. In a foundational *Annual Review* article, Dimaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson (2001) discussed five major themes of sociological research on the internet, one of which being "the impact on politics: renewed public sphere or electronic battleground?" The significance of this mediated cultural site to the above literature on political engagement has been evident from the start.

Many early theorizations were quite optimistic about the internet's capacity to contribute to a democratic public sphere (Negroponte 1995; Hill and Hughes 1998). While these enthusiastic perspectives were not without concern (e.g., Negroponte 1995 on privacy; Browning 1996 on hacking) the digital space afforded by the technologies was seen as innately expanding the potential for inclusive, democratic, free discussion, where people *literally* left behind their distinct, material, private self to enter this new digital public sphere. Later, writing squarely in the "digital age," boyd (2014) continued to emphasize the role of these technologies in discussing "networked publics," shaped by specific digital affordances (such as anonymity and socio-physical distance, discussed in the data and analysis below). Unlike previously theorizations of publics, which are necessarily bounded by time and space, networked publics are enduring and searchable, can reach wider audiences, are easily spread and shared. Shirky (2011) also highlights the expanded capabilities of the virtual public, exploring affordances in

spreading/retrieving information in different activist movements' online communication and organizing. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) present different movement logic in these digital spaces, suggesting that the logic of connection in online political engagement, while different from traditional logics of collective action, should not be dismissed as "clicktivism."

Other scholars though have taken a more critical, distrustful approach to the internet, one that is (currently) more popular in academic and public perceptions. In prescient foundational works, Marcuse (1941) discussed the power of new media technologies as instruments for "control and domination" and McLuhan's theorizations of embodied media effects provide cause for concern regarding the now ever-present internet: "Once we have surrendered our senses and nervous systems to the private manipulation of those who would try to benefit by taking a lease on our eyes and ears and nerves, we don't really have any rights left" (1964). These early theorizations in the "internet age" reflected such concerns, e.g., fears of increased control via increased surveillance (Zuboff 1988) or mob manipulation (Stahlman 1995). Buchstein (1997) argued against even the most moderate "neutralists" that suggested even limited, potential benefits for the public along with potential dangers. Such skeptical/pessimistic (as well as the above optimistic) views of the internet and democracy have moderated, becoming more nuanced. For example, Takis (2008) and West (2013) explore how the internet may provide a public square for some but acts less democratic, to counterproductive effect, for others. This chapter reflects similar conditional, contingent optimism paired with constrained concern.

In the contemporary context of Brexit and Donald Trump's election, Davis (2019:184-187) argues the rise of powerful online public(s) has led to "'volatility, fragmentation and polarization." Schlesinger (2020) has referred to this present time (and digital media context) as one marked by the unstable "post-public sphere" leading to further broad instability in the democratic political model. Davis et al. (2021) go beyond instability and skepticism, arguing that these online spaces act as an "anti-public sphere," in that they are not spaces of rational democracy, but instead are full of hate, exclusion, and trolling. This, Davis

et al. argue, is also ultimately pushed offline upon broader public discourses. Of course, many of these contemporary concerns regarding online deliberation and the public sphere are linked to misinformation, disinformation, "fake news," and the rhetorical power in claims of "fake news" (Marwick and Lewis 2017; Donovan 2020; Zimdars 2020; Pérez-Curiel, Domínguez-García and Jiménez-Marín 2021). All of these concerns are addressed below in analysis, and often, are addressed explicitly by the participants themselves, in articulating their concerns with (and disengagement from) any online sphere.

Given this criticism and current pessimism about the internet's role in supporting a healthy, democratic public sphere, the early optimism has largely subsided, which is reflected in the public imaginary and below participant data. The contemporary scholars who show (limited) optimism in the internet's potential to act as a politically and/or civic-minded public sphere point to its capacity as a mobilization agent (West 2013). Much of Shelley Bouillanne's work has explored this capacity (Boulianne 2009; 2015; 2016; Boulianne and Theocharis 2020), often with a particular focus on young people's political mobilization through online engagement (be it through news on social media timelines or less obvious, more social/entertainment participation-consumption). In a very different framing, Penney (2015) also supports this limited optimism in his work positioning Facebook profile picture filter campaigns as more "civic engagement" than "slacktivism" based on qualitative evidence of further forms of engagement (see also Robards and Buttigieg 2016).

Exploring causal direction in this relationship, Vissers and Stolle (2014) two-wave panel study shows that small acts of engagement with online publics (e.g., joining groups, liking content, organizing events online) has associations with *future* online political engagement as well as future, more "traditional" offline political action (e.g., participation in protests). Others (Quintelier and Vissers 2008) show that this "predictive" relationship is dependent on the type of online activities, such that "chatting with unknown people, blogging and contributing messages to discussion groups, purchasing or selling things, following the news, and forwarding political e-mails" have greater positive correlations with future

political engagement than chatting with friends or playing video games (negative though not significant correlations). As suggested, this research is also typically focused on socialization/identity development, particularly for young adults, though there is a relationship for late adolescents as well (Kim, Russo and Amnå 2017; Penney 2020).

Given this at times contradictory research, the internet may provide more of a public/political space for young adults than other age demographics, or perhaps more of an opportunity for civic engagement (along with its public sphere benefits) for young adults. "Young people are at a critical life stage where their political identities and orientations are still in formation" (Boulianne and Theocharis 2020:113) and given the centrality of online spaces to their interactions with peers as well as potentially new worldviews, online resources could prove to be useful tools for identity development *as well as* opportunities for active engagement (see also Quintelier and Vissers 2008; Jenkins, Itō and boyd 2016).

Below, I explore these varied literatures in the context of young people's interactions with entertainment-based online spaces (non-news outlets, social media, memes) and their interactions with/impressions of "online culture." In part one of this chapter, I explore the frequent reports of political avoidance online on the part of these young people, rooted in particular causes and effects of a hostile political environment *in online spaces* specifically. This analysis illustrates that these young people share similar pessimistic concerns with the scholars throughout these literature regarding anti-democratic behavior, though sometimes, these concerns are grounded in different and contradictory democratic ideals. In part two, I consider the limited optimism seen above, exploring the ways in which young people can and do engage in civil consideration and public deliberation/action online (despite stated intentions of avoidance in the hostile environment). Exploring this, I present four forms such engagement can take, which contribute in different ways to citizenship and the public sphere: *cultivation and connection through similarity* and *cohabitation and confrontation with difference*. Finally, in part three, I consider the

subfield to the above literature that discusses memes, analyzing relevant data to illustrate further

nuances in understandings (and concerns) of an online public.

Methodological Note: Infotainment Online

This particular section of the focus groups began with a discussion about participant's online

leisure/entertainment habits broadly, discussing their social media (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook

(or the lack thereof)) as well as less interactive sites of online engagement (e.g. where they might

consume content but not post, comment, like Reddit or YouTube). Politics often came up organically as a

realm that crept into these entertainment spaces regardless of participant-consumer desire, as reflected

in previous chapters on other media. When the discussion shifted to politics online, many participants

began to bring in more formal/traditional news outlets that they followed in these spaces. I generally

tried to shift the conversation back to more conventional understandings of entertainment, though the

blurring of the news/entertainment boundary has been greatly complicated (Williams and Delli Carpini

2011), particularly in the context of online spaces where one can stumble upon the news in incidental

points of exposure (Kim et al. 2013; Mihailidis 2014; Feezell 2018; Park and Kaye 2020; Feezell and Ortiz

2021).

I therefore am relying on data that focuses on online spaces of entertainment, like those

discussed above, though participants often shared experiences of interacting with news-type content

while in this context. This chapter thus continues the analysis of popular entertainment media's

interactions with politics and young people's subsequent capacity for public sphere engagement.

Part 1: Online Culture and Participatory Political Conflict Avoidance

In a supplementary 2021 focus group, three friends were discussing the internet in a way that was very familiar to me by then, laughing together and describing to me the (humorous) chaos and absurdity of their online spaces. "Everything is on the internet," one person says, though the speaker is unidentifiable in the recording as someone starts talking over them to warn me about Rule 34 of the Internet: "if it exists, there is porn of it." They begin joking about the "good side" and "bad side" of Reddit. Soraya then brings the discussion back to the larger focus group theme of popular culture's relationship to politics:

> The Internet is the Wild West, it's totally true. It's not managed at all. And there's good and bad things. Now politics just falls into the bad things.

As shown in the opening exchange as well, counterproductive conflict, to at times put it mildly, is a significant aspect of popular and academic reputations of online culture, and toxic, hostile political conflict is particularly prominent in these understandings. This reputation was applied broadly by my participants, as politics could sneak into any part of one's online consumption, even when they were just looking for entertainment (like Sally looking for cute animals, discussed later in this section), and even when they were actively avoiding such political content/engagement.

Mediated political conflict was a particular focus of discussions on online culture, as opposed to just discussing political *content*. While this toxic spread of political content is seen throughout popular entertainment (e.g., television, music, and celebrity, discussed in previous chapters), the criticisms of the invasive public varied qualitatively and quantitatively regarding online media. Because of the unique affordances of this interactive and participatory digital space of leisure and entertainment, namely socio-political space/distance and anonymity, the people I spoke with feel that they are not escaping from, but must exist within the toxic, contentious public sphere if they are to exist online at all. Such affordances and conflict come with unique "effects" felt and observed by young people, leading to a particularly

pessimistic reputational view of any potential online "public sphere," and therefore resulting in further active avoidance. Thus, in this section, I outline these components of young people's perspectives on an online public sphere: causes and affordances, the resultant polarization and avoidance, and reputational doubt and cynicism. Throughout, I illustrate how interactive, participatory entertainment consumption online differs from more traditional audience/producer media discussed in previous chapters.[42] This section speaks to the above pessimists' and skeptics' criticisms of popular culture and the internet as sites of public sphere engagement.

1a) Causes of Conflict

In online spaces of entertainment, young people were concerned about political conflict with and between other participant-consumers (as opposed to just being bombarded with political content from traditional producers). Often, people felt that the interpersonal distance between these other participant-consumers was too large to have a productive, rational, politically-minded conversation. This was due to affordances of digital space/distance, both physical and social (re: a large distance with strangers or a unique distance, socially, from non-strangers like family relatives). Further, the affordance of anonymity (e.g., on Twitter, Reddit), in combination with this space/distance, often resulted in emotional responses of, most emphasized, anger.

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[42] Of course, media like television, music, and celebrity gossip distribution have converged to an extreme degree with the internet as a medium (Jenkins 2008; Galili and Jenkins 2020). This statement attached to the footnote is, in fact, quite an absurd one to make, given the shifts in/to participatory consumption for most media through the internet (beyond the theoretical shifts towards active audience conceptualizations of consumption). However, I make this theoretical distinction to better understand engagement with/avoidance of online participatory entertainment as opposed to (active) audience entertainment, which traditionally has different deliveries of content and contexts of consumption. This is a distinction is a heuristic one given this media environment but illuminates how active-*ness* or *extent* of participation can come with different popular culture/pubic sphere relationships/opportunities.

In many focus groups, participants expressed to me that they preferred politically-minded conversations to in-person be rather than online, even when discussing other popular culture content or media (e.g., conversations about cancel culture and problematic celebrities). Ruth and Ester reflected this sentiment, preferring physical space over virtual for such interaction:

> Ruth: … It's more effective to have conversations one-on-one instead of putting it out on a public social media platform.
>
> SJP: Why do you think it's more effective?
>
> Ruth: Because when it's one-on-one it's more about the relationship and you have a deeper conversation where even if you don't agree with each other you can still discuss ideas whereas when people are behind screens it's so easy for people to just say something and not really understand the weight of it when they're not face to face.
>
> Ester: It's a lot less personal online because you're not seeing someone you're just seeing their words and I feel that there are a lot of assumptions that go with that that you might not even realize. You draw your own opinions about them.

Initially, it appears that it is the public-ness of politics online, that too many people can see the discussion and Ruth would rather keep politics private (reminiscent of Eliasoph 1998) and between two people. But Ruth clarifies that it is because of the lack of physicality between those interacting in online spaces that feel like the conversations will be less "efficient" and "deep." The apparatus of the screen and the virtual nature of the space is what disrupts any potential for a constructive dialogue. As Ester reflects, many of these young people believe that there are more miscommunications than in face-to-face conversations. While Arendt, in some places, emphasizes the people engaged in action and deliberation over the physical space ("Not Athens, but Athenians, were the polis." (Arendt [1959] 2013)) and while Habermas ([1962] 1991; [1964] 1974), through theorizing the physical context of salons and coffee houses, is concerned more with discursive spaces, other public sphere scholars, particularly those focused on geography and urban publics, have found physical space to be essential to public action, as people come together to deliberate at a shared time and in a shared space (Sennett 1977; Mitchell 1995; Low and

Smith 2006; Cassegård 2014). This is also the case for digital public spheres, who some argue are

ineffective, at least on their own, in creating a public "space," due to the lack of materiality (Gillespie,

Foot and Boczkowski 2014; Parks, Starosielski, Acland et al. 2015; Willems 2019). Ruth and Ester express

this broad perspective, that space matters in a way that the digital medium cannot make up for. They

later discussed fear and nervousness around participation in any political online discussions they might

come across because of these risks of miscommunication and judgment due to the virtual environment.

This group, and others, discussed this in a very broad sense, such that digital connections were generally

seen as significantly less rich, genuine, or productive than interactions offline (a concern also of interest

to media psychologists, e.g., Lieberman and Schroeder 2020which has permeated the public focus).

The presumed effects of discussions happening from "behind screens" are not just results of

spatial/physical distance, but also anonymity. In one focus group, Sophia discusses this in saying the

problem with politics online is that people are "under no criticism of public opinion" when they are

offensive or aggressive in their political arguments. "[You can] spew [your] beliefs… and keep that

anonymity behind your participation," so there's no accountability. This could theoretically be framed as

an advantage for the public sphere: if the public sphere is a space where people leave the private,

individual self behind to come together as a collective, then the distance between physical self, identity,

and public (online) action and engagement could be beneficial for public deliberation. However, such

anonymous action, according to these participants, is not for the collective and cannot be accountable to

the collective, so the anonymity associated with online spaces therefore harms any potential for

productive, rational deliberation. In this sense, the affordance of the medium is not conducive to public

sphere deliberation.

Space/distance and anonymity are often blamed for the toxic, hostile online culture these young

people face so frequently. Other respondents spoke of this in different words like "fiery" and "unpolite."

Because of the perceived ubiquity of political conflict online, spreading to all areas of their online

entertainment, young people felt that they were almost always at risk of encountering such destructive,

stressful interactions. Participants, therefore, expressed a sense of always being on guard, or perhaps

always being prepared to be accosted with such conflict during their leisure and entertainment

consumption. This appeared to be an extreme invasion of the private by an aggressive, contentious

public. As well, this reputation was very frequently and explicitly attached to sites that are, according to

participants, not usually political, *even when these sites did not have the above affordances of concern*.

For example, friends Dani, Rebecca, and Kelly had the following exchange:

> Rebecca: People will say whatever they want online because they're behind an anonymous thing.
>
> Dani: People are really mean on Facebook.
>
> Kelly: Yeah.

Facebook was discussed as having little to no anonymity and with a greater sense of "in real life" physical

connections, as people often got into or witnessed conflict with/between their friends and family. While

these affordances of distance and anonymity were seen as the cause of conflict, unique to digital cultural

spaces, they were not necessarily present when such conflict was perceived in specific spaces. Further,

before politics were introduced to the focus groups, many people discussed Facebook as a site only really

used for finding local events and "stalking old friends from high school" (keeping up with old

acquaintances, even if without interaction). This is not to say that there is no anonymity on Facebook, or

that Facebook isn't more political than they initially suggested. It does appear however that online spaces

have the reputation *in general* of being hostile because of *general* anonymity and *general* distance in

perceived online culture, even when such contexts and affordances do not apply. This indicates that even

when/if engagement is largely entertainment-focused and not representative of such toxic conflict,

politics may still be seen as a threat to such leisure. Considering the previous chapter's discussion on the

Goldilocks zone for political play, while the medium comes with constraints on opportunity, given

particular affordances, the *reputation* of the medium can also bring more constraints, possibly shrinking

the Goldilocks zone further.

Ultimately these affordances cause concern around emotion in conflict and the harms this poses to private leisure online and public deliberation: namely, the emotions of anger, resentment, and importantly, antagonism (Mouffe 2013; Phillips and Milner 2017) results in any online conflict being, ultimately, harmful. People felt that political discussion online often escalated to an emotional level beyond the rationality necessary for productive public sphere deliberation. In one focus group, Michael referred to this as "too emotionally charged," while elsewhere, Jacob talks about people, including himself, just "getting mad" which only leads to "political arguing." The (negative) emotionality of online spaces would similarly be of great concern to the above public sphere theorists, who would argue that the emotional individual needs to be left in the private sphere when entering the public sphere. Without that, in Arendtian terms, the private and social will corrupt the public, eradicating the potential for emancipatory political change.

The medium affordances of online entertainment and leisure spaces, therefore, are seen as causing hostile, emotional political conflict in this digital space: because of distance and anonymity, anger and antagonism can take over any public sphere. This not only results in a blurring of the emotional, private individual and the rational, public citizen, but young people see this as having extremely harmful effects on the public sphere more broadly, beyond these virtual spaces, thus aligning with the theoretical pessimists discussed above.

1b) Effects of Conflict

Polarization due to anonymity, distance, and emotion:

One of the most foundational concerns regarding politics in online spaces is polarization. An ongoing focus of academics studying the internet since its early stages (see Neumann 2001 for reviews; see also Farrell 2012; and Iandoli, Primario and Zollo 2021), contemporary popular frequently worries about social media's effects on political polarization, building off of academic research to proclaim "Social

Media is Making a Bad Political Situation Worse" (Molla 2020) and explore "Why Social Media is so Good at Polarizing Us" (Mims 2020). Though some recent journalistic work hedges the direct causality in these claims a bit (e.g., Klein 2020), it is not surprising that these participants also saw a very clear connection between online culture (often as a monolith), emotional conflict, and political polarization, and expressed these uneasy observations to their peers and to me. As an effect of the above conflict, polarization was presented as a counterproductive and as harmful threat to the public sphere.

Online spaces, including those for entertainment, were seen by these young people as places that are a) for polarized people and b) where people otherwise would become polarized. To the first point, polarized conflict largely among people with polarized beliefs was seen as a direct effect of the distance in digital space, as people with such polarized views wouldn't typically be so combative in face-to-face interactions. Participants believed the "behind the screen" positionality and lack of physicality made those with loud, radical perspectives feel more empowered to be aggressive online, due to a lack of physical accountability. Online spaces of all sorts were therefore a place for the loudest, most aggressive beliefs to thrive. After friend Sophia argued that there's a "human element" and "degree of politeness" in discussing politics with people in person as opposed to online, Charlie shared the following observation about family member conflict online (which again, has assumedly less social distance than interactions with strangers online, despite the screen, though the reputational attachments of general distance remain):

> Like, my brother and my aunt, this is very personal, but they have extremely opposing political views and online, on Facebook, will get in these crazy threads and I just don't see that as being something that would come up if we were to go to Maryland at her house. I mean it could, but that online platform has given them in particular this place to go at it I guess. Yeah, I don't know. It makes things worse.

Many participants shared similar personal stories in which they observed polarized conflicts, assumedly made more polarized through aggression and emotional escalation online. These observations contribute

to the reputation of online culture being a space of hostile conflict where only a few can thrive and where

such conflict is ultimately detrimental to public deliberation overall, and therefore, such spaces were not

welcoming ones for political engagement by these young people. The conflict and resultant polarization

online did not allow for rational, open, genuine deliberation, but pushed people further from this

common interest. This would be a central concern to Habermasian interest in an online public sphere.

In fact, it was very few, usually the most passionate, more polarized participants, that expressed

much genuine[43] interest in political argument or debates (with varied language). Mark, who has a high

political engagement index score and identified as a "strong Black independent" (certainly participating

in/from counterpublics) said in response to a question regarding if he participated in conflict online, "A

lot. I get into a lot of political arguments on Facebook." Mark expressed that he enjoyed "talking" or

"flighting" with people about politics. For others, this interest in engagement wasn't always expressed in

such explicit language, instead perhaps talking about "having to challenge" their political opposites in

comment sections, articulating this as a responsibility. This was often discussed as "fact-checking,"

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[43] I did speak to a handful of young men who admitted to "trolling" in these spaces, participating in political argument not out of any interest in the collective, and politics' role in the collective good, but only to exasperate those who were (more) serious about deliberation. Trolling was usually done for humor and entertainment, and often came, self-admittedly, from their own generalized frustrations and political cynicism. The trolls I spoke to said they didn't (often) participate in this type of engagement anymore (evoking laughter from his friends, one troll stated he is "reformed"), and though they had varying levels of political engagement at the time of the focus groups/interviews, they expressed they were necessarily disengaged (and disillusioned) when they were active trolls. While interested in conflict online at the time of trolling, this was not genuine public-minded engagement on their part, at least in a straightforward sense, but such actions do have the capacity to shape the tone of any potential online public sphere. Many people mentioned coming across trolls or trolling behavior in their observations of conflict online, noting it as extremely counterproductive, but also seeming to write it off as less significant than polarization to the health of the "public" because of its lack of seriously-held contributions. While interesting work has been done on the psychological motivators for trolling and its social effects (Shachaf and Hara 2010; Phillips 2015; Zezulka and Seigfried-Spellar 2016; Gylfason, Sveinsdottir, Vesteinsdottir et al. 2021), more work should be done on trolls' personal reception of online culture and their perception of an online public sphere. The aggressive, humorous, but partisan and politically engaged actions that may be deemed "trolling" (but do not reflect the disconnection and cynicism from the self-professed reformed trolls above) will be discussed in the meme section below as a type of genuine political engagement aiming to both exasperate as well as convey a message about political beliefs and cultural values/identity.

though such interactions were still acknowledged as extremely heated. Whether they frame themselves as participating in "fights" or not, the people who appeared more polarized (or engaged?) seemed to be the only ones enthusiastic about (or even open to) participating in conflict. And still, the large majority of participants, including most of the self-identified very-liberal/conservative, saw such conflict as detrimental, and thus did not participate.

Many participants expressed the belief that polarized individuals were the ones that thrived in online spaces, and that online spaces weren't significantly open to "moderate"/"nuanced" political beliefs or reasonable, rational arguments (usually speaking of their own position). Further, because polarized opinions were the "loudest," or perhaps the most involved or enthusiastic opinions observed online, many participants believed that online spaces were the cause of previously moderate folks' ultimate radicalization. While there was some debate about this in her focus group, Maggie, who describes herself as moderate, made the following point:

> I think because people push it very far, like, you could come out and say "I believe in abortion under this circumstance" people will come at you from both sides and expect you to pick one. You have to back yourself up against the wall so you can only be attacked from one side. In real life, you can say your thing and people are like "okay, that fine," and they won't push it whereas on the internet they will dissect it to pieces and force you to put yourself into a place where you can't be dissected anymore, you know? And more often than not that's on either extreme.

Maggie first argues that the online culture is not welcoming to moderate voices, so much so that they "force" you into a more polarized position "on either extreme." Maggie herself, as well as others in the focus group (including "liberals" and "somewhat liberals") felt this pressure online. Many focus groups and interviews related this to the emotional intensity of online spaces: not only do these users feel aggression towards them (the best-case scenario is that you are only "attacked from one side"), but many expressed how this resulted in more emotional intensity within themselves in response, all of which they associated with polarization. The reputation of online spaces is that those moderates who participate in

(or "get sucked into…") political arguments online become more polarized, resulting in more (intense, emotional) engagement, but assumedly less productive citizenship. Those who identified as more polarized already, often such polarization and extremism on the other side.

This looks very different from Putnam's (2000) concerns about popular entertainment and the medium of entertainment television driving people home and away from the public square. In the case of conflict and online culture, private pleasures and civic life (or perhaps civility more broadly) are at risk of corruption, in the eyes of these young people. People are not driven home to their own private entertainment, but are frequently interacting with others (in what should be a space of leisure) in a polarized, politicized, emotionally "heated" way that is less productive for the public. As Maggie suggests, it isn't a lack of group membership/collective interaction that is preventing political engagement: the digital public square is extremely (possibly too?) accessible. The problem is that this intense collective membership (the always present "both sides") is expressed in *online* rather than *in-person* deliberation/conflict, facilitated by particular digital affordances, and as such is not resulting in the right style of political involvement. This "bonds" people with similar perspectives (a benefit itself worth exploring more, below) but cannot, according to participants, "bridge" diverse populations, in Putnam's language. Similar to academic perspectives above (Davis 2021), these young people see polarization as the harmful effect of online political deliberation that silences diverse and productive deliberation. In the terms of Mouffe (2005; 2009), explore more in the conclusion of the dissertation, online culture is an antagonistic culture to these young people. Importantly, this polarized antagonism is omnipresent, *invading even in the spaces most intended for leisure and entertainment*.[44] In one focus group, Sally spoke about the pervasive, polarized political conflict online:

> And it's every comment section. It could be the most innocuous, innocent little thing, like [a video of] a bunny eating a carrot and there will somehow be a "go Trump 2020" or "lock her up"… Then

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[44] Antagonism and polarization in popular entertainment media will also be discussed at greater length in the conclusion of the dissertation.

people will start getting heated…

The only option for Sally and others who want to escape this heated, antagonistic, polarized conflict and prevent emotionally-draining polarization themselves, is to avoid any political content and discussion in their online spaces more generally. This conflict, thus, leads many of the young people I spoke with to (seemingly) disengage with any public sphere potential the entertainment spaces of online culture might bring.

(Failed) avoidance due to anonymity, distance, and emotion:

Participants were dependably explicit about avoiding political interactions online, often referencing with frustration the emotional context of the ever-pervasive conflict. Joe and his friends, ranging from liberal, somewhat liberal, moderate, and somewhat conservative, discussed this, in agreement:

> SJP: Do you think these online spaces are political?
>
> Derrick: Oh yeah.
>
> Joe: Oh for sure.
>
> Sebastian: Yeah. They get really political really quickly.
>
> Joe: And I would say for all four of us we don't want to have political fights on there.
>
> Derrick: Yeah, we don't engage.
>
> Joe: Because it's like, you aren't going to be able to convince anyone, because if they are that passionate about any specific issue there's no way you're going to move them.
>
> SJP: If they're passionate enough to comment?
>
> Joe: To comment and to fight people.
>
> Derrick: They're all aggressive and mad and stuff.

Penney (2019) found a sense of "duty" motivating young people, in a limited fashion, to intervene in conflict and combat misinformation online. While I did find this among some enthusiastic participants,

particularly with "fact-checking," above, I very much did not see broad patterns of a "duty" to intervene.[45]

Rather, Joe is comfortable enough to speak for the group, and Derrick supports his claim: these friends all

very much do not participate in politics online, nor do they want to, which is the frequent expression in

these friend groups. The primary cause of this avoidance is the aggression and anger they associate with

online conflict. In effect, the friends all actively avoid political talk online, initiated by themselves, friends,

strangers, regardless. This is not a productive public space.

      As in this above discussion, many people pointed to the comment section of online content (seen

Sally's comment above as well) as a representative site of "toxic," polarized conflict, and a representative

site of avoidance. Ruth shared a personal experience regarding the comment section of one of her own

posts when she attempted to engage politically:

> There was this one thing in high school when I posted something that I wrote about
> homosexuality and how I didn't believe it was right as a Christian and how I still want to love
> people who are homosexual or whatever but I just don't believe what they're doing is right. And
> so I was trying to make that distinction and I tried to write it in a way that was, like, loving,
> because I had friends that weren't straight, but then there was a ton of backlash and there were
> over 80 comments that were paragraphs and paragraphs long and people were yelling at each
> other and fighting and it was really sad to see how divisive it was and so since then there have
> been a few things here or there that I posted but in general I don't get involved in those things

---

[45] While Penney (2019) used focus groups in this study, participants in the groups appear to all be strangers assigned together based on scheduling and political affiliation (e.g., pro-Trump v. anti-Trump), though there are also politically-mixed groups that were "polite and cordial, if somewhat more reserved" (233). Penney aims to address any potential Hawthorne effect by, it seems, through moderation towards a "discovery of 'negative cases'" (234) meant to draw out perspectives beyond those most prominent in any given focus group. However, as these participants likely feel observed and evaluated by the unfamiliar moderator(s) as well as other participants, there may be a desirability bias at play leading participants to present as highly engaged in a context of increasing (felt) pressure to do so within this "new normal" (discussed in chapter X). If so, this is still significant, as it illustrates the "honorable" cultural frameworks (Pugh 2013) of collective duty for these young people. However, in these friend groups, I observe a comfort with which young people (could) share their avoidance, seemingly without judgment from their friends in the focus group, and even at times recognizing the problems with avoidance to more engaged friends and still admitting, even defending such avoidance. Given this, I believe that this may possibly be a truer representation of young people's interaction with politics online.

because I see that it often does more harm than good and it's more effective to have conversations.

Not only was this comment section highly polarized, but the intensity of the emotional conflict drove her from participating in political online discussions in the future. We see again that this is also caused in part by the affordances of online spaces, as she positions the effectiveness of "those things" (political discussion and conflict *online*) as less effective than "conversations," presumably offline. Unlike media discussed in previous chapters, the frustration with and avoidance of politics in these spaces is inherently rooted in the interactive, participatory nature and digital affordances of this medium, which make the hostile politics that much more threatening. Below, I discuss Ruth and her friend's disengaging from online spaces broadly, illustrating an avoidance of *any* potential exposure to such conflict, along with potential participation.

Participants also discussed avoiding the comment sections of posts even if it wasn't their own post and had no connection to it. "Never read the comments" was a frequent locution. Jonathan and his friends expressed this while discussing the, as they see it, inappropriate politicization of sports on the sports entertainment site "Bleacher Report":

> SJP: So in the comment section, that's when people are politicizing [the story about an athlete going to play golf with the president]?
>
> Derrick: Oh yeah, the comments are crazy.
>
> Joe: Comments are a scary place.
>
> SJP: And you don't like that?
>
> Derrick: I don't care. If people are having useless conversations I'm not going to jump in. So I don't even open them usually
>
> Tony: It's pure ignorance.
>
> Derrick: Yeah, the things you're saying are absolutely wild, what are you talking about? So yeah, I just ignore them. I don't usually read comments because it's just a waste of my time.

This exchange is a series of stating and then defending/supporting their avoidance, which existed throughout this focus group (for example, the segment at the top of this section soon followed this one).

Comment sections (even for the most seemingly non-political pieces of entertainment) were seen as the worst digital place to be, and the first place to avoid, as they foster the most toxic kinds of (polarized, emotional) political discussion. Engaging in politics online here seemed unattractive, exhausting, and futile, none of which is desired during online leisure and entertainment. This is not only an active avoidance of political content, but an active avoidance of *the media itself* (in this case, comment sections) that might lead to any political interactions.

Like with music and television, people attempt to use their online spaces of (social) entertainment as an escape in an effort to avoid. However, while many go to Instagram and Twitter to "mindlessly scroll," they find they are still, as Bobby said, "constantly inundated" with political content and conflict. For many young people, while they see and express avoidance as an effect of conflict, it is a *failed avoidance*. They are not avoiding politics online, as they can't achieve this goal. All they can do is try to keep the politics at bay. As Arendt (1961) suggests, entertainment is a private need that should be protected from the world of public action. This is what Bobby and others are aiming and failing to do in avoidance, suggesting harm to the public sphere through the failure of such boundaries.

For a minority of people, conflict could lead to relatively successful political avoidance, but only through avoidance of online spaces in general. Speaking with his friends about the pervasiveness of politics online, Jim shares how this (among other things) has driven him from online spaces in general:

> Sometimes I would love to be blissfully ignorant. That's why I'm trying to unplug myself from the internet. Everything has become so political… People turn politics into an identity and can't just talk to each other as another human being. I try to keep my cards pretty close to the chest when it comes to politics, and it's even better if I don't have an opinion 'cause I don't know enough to form an opinion.

Jim aims to avoid political conflict, largely avoid politics in general, and therefore is disconnecting from online spaces (including spaces of entertainment, as he later discusses TikTok and Instagram in relation to this politically motivated disengagement). Ruth, above, shared her story of posting blatant anti-LGBTQ+

content on her Facebook, describing the heated controversy it attracted and her subsequent avoidance

of such political interaction online. She and her friends expanded on such avoidance in an enthusiastic

discussion around periods of broad social media abstention, comparing how long they disengaged from

particular sites in different periods, in part because of the "emptiness," in their words, of online culture as

a space of social meaning.

While this is most obviously read as political avoidance, thereby resulting in online spaces

detracting from democratic engagement in a public, abstention or disengagement from social media has

been theorized as a possible political practice, itself a form of political engagement. Portwood-Stacer

(2013) theorizes abstention as action against the broad power(s) of social media, similar to the previous

chapter's discussion on cancel culture as boycott in the contemporary popular cultural context, and

Karppi (2011) theorizes from the humanities, conceptualizing disengagement from Facebook as

"politicized asceticism," contextualized as a "digital suicide attack" against the powerful platform. Ruth

and her friends discuss abstention alongside critiques of online culture's reputation for vile, destructive,

polarized political discourse. In this case, the avoidance and critique of any potential online "public

sphere" is associated with a disengagement from online spaces as a whole, eliminating its potential to act

as a shared, collective, civil sphere that scholars above (Dahlgren 2005; Hermes 2007; Couldry et al. 2010)

theorized. While such disengagement may be political, it severs any ties these young people might have

to the (civil)public through the online spaces of leisure, discussed below.

Ultimately, these young people recognize the above criticisms of conflict and often remarked on

the reputation of these online spaces with skepticism. To conclude part one, I want to focus specifically

on these participants' explicit views on the potential for a productive online public sphere. and the

implications of these views on how young people might imagine that the Internet can be a site of their

own political expression and public action.

1c) A Counterproductive Online "Public Sphere," From Conflict and the Lack Thereof

The above exploration of perceived conflict online, and the ultimate polarization from and avoidance of such conflict, suggests unique concerns regarding this space of online entertainment as a public sphere. Not only are these online spaces unproductive spaces of escape ("mindlessly scrolling"), but young people see any engagement through these spaces as largely counterproductive. As Ruth said above, online political discussion "often does more harm than good."

Online culture as it is perceived by these young people, as well as online spaces shaped by particular affordances, are not kind, considerate and respectful or rational enough to make any political progress or changes individuals might be aiming for, so they don't see any point in online "public" deliberation. Jordan also reflects this.

> I don't really get in Facebook fights 'cause I don't think your comment, like, my one comment isn't going to undo a lifetime of this person thinking this way. This isn't going to do anything. It's a huge waste of energy.

Considering the emotional risks and vulnerability involved with entering a political discussion online, this seems like a completely rational perspective. Jordan has a low political engagement index score (2/12), so it may be concerning that her doubt and cynicism about online deliberation may lead to doubt and cynicism about political engagement or deliberation overall. Given young people's association of *toxic* political conflict online with *all* political deliberation online, and association of this with "online culture" *as a whole*, the spread of a corrupted political public into the private space of leisure will ultimately poison both (Arendt [1959] 2013; 1961). Though this appears deterministic, fatalistic, and misguided, as I argue below in considering more nuanced reflections on and from young people, this popular perspective underlies the doubts of many academic, journalistic, and public conceptualizations of online culture.

However, two other concerns with online political engagement are related not to the presence of unproductive conflict, however, but somewhat paradoxically an unproductive lack thereof. Many respondents discussed that, in order to avoid conflict and emotional distress, most people's online digital

spheres consisted mostly of views that they agreed with. While this was at times similar to arguments about polarization, it differed in focus and effect. Sherry discusses this:

> More often than not, social media is just a sounding board or an echo chamber for your own ideas. I think if you're gonna go on some pro-Trump rant on Facebook, the people that are going to [read] it are the people that are already pro-Trump. You're not changing anyone's mind.

In a different way from the polarization argument, there's no possibility for change based on rational deliberation. In the former, the polarized users most often engaged are not open to considering opposing, polarized positions, and are only open to exploring further down their path to radicalization. In Sherry's understanding among others, people don't see <u>any</u> perspectives that differ significantly from their own, so even when they do see political material, they are in no way exposed to varied perspectives in a conversation. The "echo-chamber" concern was recognized by many participants: however, while some admitted to their own social media feeds reflecting this, many suggested that they actively sought multiple and varied perspectives online (if and when they allowed politics into their online space) in a direct attempt to reject the echo-chamber model, and it was *others* who lacked this digital literacy, thereby rendering any online public sphere potential largely unachievable. These arguments will be discussed below.

Finally, one of the most cynical and frequently discussed reasons to doubt the political potential of online spaces is that even if people believe think they are doing something politically minded and participating in the public sphere, this participation is likely shallow, performative, and ultimately insufficient. This was often discussed in terms of "slactivism," where someone shares a political post or comment or participates in a viral political trend (e.g., changing a profile picture Penney 2015, also discussed by my participants) in an effort to, as these young people see it, make the slacktivist feel better about the problems of the world and make themselves look engaged in this "new normal," while they aren't actually accomplishing anything. Liz and Matt reflected this argument while discussing political action online, though at the end considering an alternative perspective.

Liz: I feel like a lot of [online political engagement] is very performative, too. Like, you see a lot of it pop up, like, after the George Floyd thing, everyone's posting, and then two months later there's no activism or nothing's changed. It's one of those things, like, why are you posting this? You obviously don't care enough to-

Matt: Are you making a difference?

Liz: Yeah… You can go out and protest or donate your money, but when you're sitting in your house posting a black square, what is that doing for anything?

Matt: It's the illusion of empowerment, like, "wow, look at me go, I pressed a button."

(laughter)

Liz: But also, I know awareness can help.

`The group of friends finds it comical how little online action does, how it is purely performance, and yet Liz still needs to note that, while she generally discounts such action, perhaps it can do *something* productive*,* though the value of this and exactly when it can be helpful are unclear. This critique of slacktivism was voiced by friends Charlotte and Sara as well, and they too end up qualifying this criticism in an interesting way:

Charlotte: I also think that people will post things on social media, like 'I'm gonna post this petition' or 'I'm gonna say trans people matter,' like, slacktivism. I think slacktivism has become so present because of social media and people think that's they're actually doing things to change the world when they're just, you know, 'I'm gonna change my profile picture for gay pride month,' but that doesn't mean you're actively trying to be better about supporting companies that are LGBTQ inclusive or stuff like that. It's made people, even myself, lazy in a way.

Sara: Yeah, I feel like I struggle with that issue. I feel like there's something to be said just for making things part of the conversation…

Charlotte: Oh absolutely. I agree.

Sara: But then it is, yeah, people get lazy and complacent. But also maybe it scoops people in who maybe wouldn't be having this conversation.

Charlotte: There could be benefits from commenting back and forth with your conservative relatives or whatever. Or even, like, my parents are pretty liberal but don't always have the right

language, so social media can help with that.

Sara: Yeah, it can.

Charlotte was quoted above as a politically engaged consumer who liked to interact in political conversations online. However, Sara has a lower score on the political involvement index and says that she dislikes politics, is the participant who originally brings up a counter-argument to the slacktivist critique, suggesting it might be advantageous (to the public sphere). Slacktivism as political action is lacking for many of these young people, but in describing how, their argument becomes more nuanced. As Soraya says in a different focus group, considerations of online political action "brings out the questions of what's a good protest and what's a bad protest." She then says, "It's sticky."

The reputation of online spaces (even for entertainment and leisure) clearly led young people to express little optimism, at least initially, for an online public sphere. These concerns with an online public sphere, marked by contentiousness, are unique to the participatory medium affordance and provide unique challenges to engagement that more "traditional" mediums of entertainment reception do not face. Anonymity and distance, polarization and avoidance, and a reputation of counterproductive politics through conflict, echo chambers, and slacktivism all combine to actively discourage political engagement in these participatory spaces. But as these above qualifications suggest, I did find evidence in my data that suggested more to politics online than these concerns. Young people, though typically after initial expressions of this reputation and skepticism, often did recognize some potential in these spaces. As illustrated above, they often failed to fully avoid politics, and their interactions with the online public sphere were frequently more nuanced than suggested. Many participants expressed how they and those around them subtly but at times intentionally played with politics online, and they reflected a variety of benefits regarding such political engagement and public sphere interaction that seemed to be derived from this online play.

In part one, I have explored the unique political landscape of online spaces of entertainment and leisure. The particular affordances of these spaces suggest unique constraints that seemingly further counterproductive political engagement OR avoidance, both harmful to the public sphere. In part two, I explore how engagement can occur in this contentious participatory space among the young people who expressed a deep desire for avoidance through popular culture. By exploring this playful engagement in this hostile environment, I illuminate the forms such public sphere participation can take in even the most unreceptive contexts of entertainment.

Part 2: Playful Engagement Online, Active and Incidental, though Similarity and Difference

The draw for young people to online spaces is play, entertainment, and often, as discussed in Part 3, humor: in speaking of politics online, Bobby says "I see things that are political but that's not why I have a Twitter. It's mostly for, like, funny stuff." As discussed above and theorized by public sphere theorists in particular (Arendt 1961; Habermas [1962] 1991), the spread of the political to these spaces of entertainment, and vice versa (consumer overcoming the citizen), is seen as a distraction from a healthy public sphere. However, as some sociological and political research on online engagement has shown (see Boulianne and Theocharis 2020 for meta analysis), there is much less consensus than assumed for this popular claim that digital media is a harmful source of distraction and avoidance from civic political engagement. Though young people (and others) see these spaces as counterproductive, they appear to have surprising potential regarding productive political engagement, as seen in my data. While research has shown that social media and online spaces do not alone catalyze new public sphere engagement (Keating and Melis 2017), my data suggest that it may provide unique opportunities for those frustrated with other forms of engagement.

To say the absolute least, young people spend a significant amount of time online. My data below show that social media can act as a site of (at times unintended) political engagement, despite conflict, perceived hostility, cynicism, and avoidance. For example, Jessica said in a focus group that she ends up (unintentionally) hearing about a lot of news and current events from social media, as reflected in the literature on incidental exposure above, with her friend Gloria saying that a point of these spaces, as well entertainment, is that "we use it to know stuff." This blending of information and entertainment has been occurring over time and outside of online spaces (see, for example, disucussions on "Saturday Night Live," "The Daily Show" in Williams and Delli Carpini 2011), and while there is necessarily a need for entertainment and distraction from politics in these online spaces, this association of entertaining online spaces with play can provide an opportunity for (at times limited, subtle, and/or brief) civil and political engagement, even alongside expressions of explicit avoidance. As seen in Chapter 4, there is also a Goldilocks zone for playful political engagement online, but constraints on this play are unique to the participatory nature of the media and related affordances. Here, I explore what emerges from such opportunities online, outlining the variety of ways in which people engage in this context. I thus conceptualize playful political engagement online in four forms: *cultivation* and *connection* through similarity, and *cohabitation and confrontation* with difference. These different forms of engagement suggest different implications for the relationship between online spaces of entertainment and leisure and civil and counter-/sub-/weak public sphere(s), particularly when these different forms are considered together (through cooccurrence or the lack thereof).

2a) Engagement through Similarity: Cultivation and Connection

For those who at times admitted to living in a virtual echo chamber, their online engagement with the political, though admittedly (sheepishly) homogenous, appeared at times more nuanced than popular criticisms suggest. These data show that, even when young people are (relatively) successful in

avoiding oppositional political perspectives, there can still be valuable engagement with the discourses of various civil/public spheres that are more similar to and compatible with their own, taking the forms of *cultivation* and interactive, interpersonal *connection*.

Cultivation through similarity

Firstly, as the above literatures suggest (e.g., in Rauchfleisch and Kovic 2016) entertainment-based spaces online, particularly social media sites, can facilitate such engagement by acting as a site where young people can craft more nuanced, refined views of broad political beliefs, even if not radically changed. While young people (along with many academics, and journalists) are often critical of polarization and homogeneity in online spaces, participants often reflected the ways in which their incidental interactions with politics online, similar but not identical to their own, allowed for the *cultivation* of richer political perspectives, and ultimately, a more developed citizenship with which to move into public deliberation and action. While clearly a blurring here of public political action and private subjectivity/identity development (of concern to Arendt, Zerilli 2005), such cultivation of perspective within the context of play and leisure reflects engagement where there would otherwise be, and is simultaneously a pursuit of, a complete retreat from the hostile public and any political action.

Charlotte, who is very liberal, reflects with her friends on how she has engaged in public-spirited conversations via cultivation through similarity. She recognizes how her engagement *only* occurs in contexts close enough to existing political position, but argues that the associated "echo-chamber" critiques reflect shallow views of engagement, as the nuances of such perspectives allow her to further cultivate a political argument to bring into public deliberation.

> Charlotte: I feel like I definitely don't participate in a lot of conversations with the right but also I think I sort of balk at the question 'Do you come across many differing opinions' because my Twitter feed is super, super far Left but there's still people who believe in prison abolition and people who don't so there's a lot of differing opinions within that conversation, you know.

SJP: So you're still seeing a lot of variety...

Charlotte: Right, but I don't think it's worth my time to be conversing with people who, like, still believe in conversion therapy, I just don't.

SJP: Will you get in conversations with people, like, among the left?

Charlotte: Oh yeah, for sure. Like, I do like to talk about sex work decriminalization stuff, which takes, like, there's a big portion of people on the left that could use some outreach on that stuff. And I think a lot of it is just being exposed to the kind of language that people are using. That kind of stuff.

While social media is not a site where people's beliefs are often (radically) changed, it is a space where people can learn and can actively develop and refine their personal political values and attitudes. This cultivation may have a democratic effect such that more people are increasingly exposed to more nuanced political logics. In honing their own political arguments, these young people are ideally become more engaged citizen-actors, even if their political development is one seen as radical or counterproductive to the mainstream.[46] For Charlotte, this means she can play with the nuances around her general political perspective, both in her reading of politically-minded content (which can pop up in unexpected times of entertainment and leisure online), but also in a more active sense when and if she engages with (e.g., comments on or shares) this content. She can play with the discourses of different sub-/counter-/publics, namely those she is already more receptive to, in her engagement through cultivating more nuanced political perspectives (e.g., prison abolition). While this is a key component of the civil sphere, it also can take place alongside more explicit public deliberation (in this case, on sex work). Charlotte writes off much political deliberation online (critique on slacktivism above with Sara, as well as critiques of the echo chamber elsewhere in the focus group), but she reveals a more nuanced type

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[46] While Charlotte cultivated her far-left views, much has been said about the internet's capacity to encourage the development of far-right views as well. I would imagine, to Charlotte, this would seem harmful, as it allows for growing engagement of those who promote marginalization and exclusion. This illustrates the "paradox of tolerance" (Popper [1945] 2020), explored in the dissertation conclusion.

of playful engagement, cultivation, that appears constructive and productive, though not reflected in the

broad reputation around politics in entertainment online spaces.

Frankie, Faz, and Julie illustrate the engagement form of cultivation through similarity. They too

argue that such engagement has allowed them to develop more nuanced understandings of their political

beliefs and has better prepared them for public sphere deliberation, *even with radically oppositional*

political adversaries.

> Frankie: It's interesting because since so many of my friends share my politics, you can see
> nuances in people's politics online which I think is really productive and interesting. But it can still
> get heated, which is cool. It just shows that people care.
> SJP: Do you see many opinions that differ greatly from your own in your online spaces?
> Faz: Not so much.
> Julie: I mean, yeah. I have friends from my past that I've kept up with online that have differing
> opinions from me. And I sometimes watch, like, I think it's helpful to engage with leftist things
> that are critiquing right-wing media so then you still see the piece of media even if it's through a
> critique.

There are two limitations of this form of engagement that should be noted in this exchange. First of all,

Frankie argues that the interactions can still "get heated." While it is likely that heated conversations

between nuanced, agonistic adversaries is less distressing than heated conversations between radically

antagonistic enemies (Mouffe 2005; 2009), this conflict might still discourage some users from

participating. Even in engagement through cultivation in a context of relative similarity (when

resemblance is known and recognized), the toxicity of conflict is still a threat. Secondly, Julie's comment

suggests that this might lead to more polarization (though perhaps is any exposure to opposing

perspectives is better than a complete lack thereof?).[47] Nonetheless, these online spaces of leisure and

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[47] If engagement via cultivation through similarities is the *only* engagement one might have with alternative perspectives, this is clearly a cultivation of political perspective using only a limited number of tools and frames in development. However, as discussed below, this is often not the only way that young people engage through online culture, despite efforts at avoidance.

entertainment are spaces of learning, growth, and cultivation for Frankie and Julie, as they have the potential to become more engaged with politics when the wall of avoidance is down in the context of play in a like-minded online space.

Connection through similarity

A more collective form of engagement, be it civil or public, online space can provide *connection* through networks of support for like-minded individuals who feel socially, and often politically, marginalized (e.g., see Rheingold 1993; Pullen and Cooper 2010; Chaplin 2014; Miller 2017; Knight Steele 2021). These spaces can act as clear and relatively straightforward counterpublics, or at least have a large capacity for a civil foundation for counterpublics. Helen talked about this regarding the experiences her roommate has shared with her.

> My roommate is trans and he's on Reddit a lot and he follows a lot of support groups because it's a community that just shares their experiences and they can make jokes with each other and support each other, so he's really active with that and will show me funny things from the pages. So I think part of it is that you have this community aspect where you're gonna be supported by these people.

This is reminiscent of the counterpublics formed by women marginalized from the bourgeois public sphere of coffee houses and salons, as outlined by Fraser (1990). Sara expressed this as well, from a first-hand perspective.

> Facebook can be helpful for keeping in touch with people and I like it for that and it sort of helps me find a community, like, a queer community, a female community in [the city] with all the different events.

Online spaces can be arenas where marginalized people can connect together and form (subpublic or counterpublic) community specifically based around their marginalization.[48] While this doesn't always and necessarily lead to political deliberation (and at times, the collective actively carries out boundary work to keep the space centered on *private* support instead of supporting *public, political* action), there is at a minimum engagement through connection to a civic foundation in these spaces, centered around, in part, entertainment (humor in Helen's case). I show in the below section that memes, through shared humor, can be a tool for connection to/through collective political critique of structural and institutional factors that lead to such marginalization. These spaces therefore have the capacity to act as places of collective micro-resistance, a result of individual engagement through connection with the similar. Similar to the playful engagement with different political discourses that is seen in chapter X on cancel culture, young people can engage through connection with similar perspectives to gain access to new political discourses with which they can play.

By providing a space through which young people can cultivate and connect with the similar, a much more welcome context outside of toxic conflict, leisure/entertainment social media spaces therefore allow for engagement that can be particularly productive for participant-consumers otherwise marginalized from the public sphere. Jill and her friends surprised me by reflecting on such cultivation and connection, in conjunction, after a long discussion of the "vulgar" "ignorance" of online spaces. Jill starts off by sharing her entertainment-based social content on Instagram, while I am expecting political avoidance, before she pivots to discuss explicit political engagement online, rooted in the civil but extending to explicit and intentional deliberation and action (via intentional political consumption).

SJP: Do your online spaces encourage politics?

Jill: I think it's like a double-edged sword and it's also what you make of it. So I am someone to

---

[48] While many of these cases of engagement as connection were within counterpublics with clear (identity-based) political connections, online organization around subpublics comprised of people with largely similar views (e.g., UFC fans among a right-leaning participant) showed a capacity for civic and public engagement as well.

flex [my personal life] on the gram and I know it's just my highlight reel and it's basic but that's just what I enjoy. But Instagram has [also] literally shown me so many things. Like, I follow so many activists now, I've learned so much. Like, even on Facebook, there's this meme group called 'Post-Colonialist Memes for Orientalist Teens.'

(Overlapping agreement from peers: "I love It," "Yes," "It's quality")

Jill: It's this whole community that comes out of social media! … I've just learned so much about movements. And there's this account called "Orientistan" which just posts photographs of the Middle East and North Africa and I'm just learning so much. Plus exploring different artists and, like, clothing brands. I was just telling Sherry about this clothing brand that makes clothes in Palestine and donates 10% of their profits to the Menstrual Education Project. So I literally got all that from Insta.

…

J: And Insta introduced me to this one organization that I'm super passionate about now. It's sexual harassment [training] and sexual education but for Muslim spaces. I wouldn't have found that without Insta. And now that I've posted some stuff, some of my friends follow them now! So I like that if I'm passionate about something I can share it and people can follow them. I think it's what you make of it.

While this relationship between identity, politics, entertainment, and consumption is counter to much of the public sphere theory discussed above, this provides a space for those excluded from formal politics (whether from counterpublic marginalization or young people not being seen as "political" enough), to increase engagement. In the case of Jill, her budding, playful engagement online through memes, discussed in Part 3 of this chapter, and fashion accounts led to participation in (and the spreading of knowledge through) clear counterpublic organization. While social media algorisms are often blamed for conflict and polarization, they can clearly also provide tools for *cultivation* of political identity and beliefs, *connection* with community, and the resultant public deliberation and action. Online entertainment spaces can be a site of civic culture (Dahlgren 2009) *if* playful enough to subvert the avoidance driven by this reputation of hostility and polarization.

Many people that end up engaging with politics in online spaces do so in this way that supports but furthers a priori political predispositions, through engagement with similarity and playing with more nuanced perspectives in a more comfortable online space. However, the participants in this study also reflected the subtle and surprising ways that online spaces can lead to engagement in the forms of *cohabitation* and *confrontation* through difference, despite their claims and goals of avoidance.

2b) Engagement with Difference: Cohabitation and Confrontation

Given the unique avoidance and conflict involved with politics *online* in particular, as seen in part one of this chapter, most people saw large limitations around any opportunities for productive engagement with opposing views (highly restricted Goldilocks zone), thereby limiting the potential for productive, diverse deliberation in these spaces. People felt that the politics of online spaces suggested that what exposure there may be to different political perspectives (broadly) is not productive for the public (in this particular political context), as such exposure just further fuels counterproductive clashing. But in this following discussion with friends Carly and Fred, one can see slim but significant opportunities for engagement with difference on the internet, despite the perceptions and concerns about such spaces.

> Carly: Yesterday I was on Twitter and I had seen someone re-tweet this pro-life organization, like, Life Action or something, but someone had retweeted one of their tweets, like, arguing with them and I kind of got in a tunnel where I started to go through that pro-life page. 'Cause sometimes I am curious what other people's, like… 'Cause I'm so set in my ways but I'm curious to see what other people think at times. I kind of get sucked into holes where I'm watching more conservative views.
>
> SJP: Do you think that's productive?
>
> Carly: Oh no. Not at all. Because I'm not gonna change my mind, it's just me getting even more infuriated with the subject in a completely useless manner. It's not productive at all. I guess sometimes it could give me a new perspective on how to think of things, but most of the time I'll be reading a tweet and I'm just like 'That's stupid, that's wrong,' and I'll get more set in my ways than feeling like I'm understanding it any better.

Fred: And on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, the comment sections aren't conducive to having, like, a discussion. But, like, that's the case for some sub-Reddits too, they're just toxic echo chambers. But there are some discussion subs that I go to read coherent discussions and coherent points of view from an opposing frame of mind which I think is helpful.

SJP: Do you think it's valuable because it changes your view at all or changes someone else's view or what? What makes it valuable, seeing these other opinions?

Fred: I think if you go into something like that with the goal of changing someone's mindset it's not gonna be productive but for me I go in to try to understand what background or belief set contributes to informing an opinion on something. If you're able to phrase it and explain it in a rational way I think it can be productive.

Carly and Fred start off by implicitly understanding productive conversation as one of change and being between people open to radical shifts in their political thoughts and opinions. In perceptions of the use of online spaces, people do not go to these sites for deep engagement and consideration: rather, they turn to these spaces, in active avoidance of such challenging interactions and instead for light entertainment and leisure, which such engagement would just disrupt. When Carly encounters such challenges, she rejects them, thus such exposure is unproductive in this context, perhaps even counterproductive, given emotional responses seen in part one. However, this emotional response from Carly ("it's just me getting even more infuriated") may not necessarily indicate a lack of productive engagement, as the cultural element to the public sphere has been theorized as one of affect (or perhaps a cultural public sphere in and of itself, see McGuigan 2005; Ahmed 2015). Further, Carly and Fred each qualify this broad criticism to concede that the act incident of exposure to opposing political ideas itself *could possibly* (only hypothetically for Cary) result in more nuanced consideration and deliberation, depending greatly on tone and context. While focusing on the popular, negative reputation of these spaces, they do leave open the opportunity, in their understandings, for a productive public result emerging from exposure to oppositional perspectives in online spaces. Frank suggests, while elsewhere expressing avoidance, that he goes to particular places online for such engagement, not to intentionally try to change his mind, but to

explore differing perspectives on the world, including through politics. Such exploration is still couched in a broader context of leisure and entertainment, though politically, grounded in the idealized logic of rationality. This suggests, in a very limited scope, more openness to and potential for exposure to difference than otherwise reflected. Such exposure allows for engagement through *cohabitation*, incidental and/or intentional, and engagement through active *confrontation*, potentially hostile, but also, as admitted by these participants, surprisingly productive.

Contrary to the "echo-chamber" argument, some young people expressed that they are often exposed to and even engage with opposing views in these online spaces, though often unintentionally and even unwillingly. Rick shares this experience regarding a time when he did feel the need to speak politically online:

> SJP: Do the rest of you participate in online discussions about political things?
> Rick: I don't enjoy it, but I know I am friends with a lot of people on FB that don't have the same views that I do, so I'll share something, like, I think the last thing I did was when Trump announced the policy that led to family separation I spoke out against it 'cause, I mean, they were separating families and housing them in Walmart's. It sounded very dystopian. So I posted something and I knew there was gonna be backlash, there was backlash, and so I just thought I can be respectful and civil about the way I communicate my opinion and I thought that would set a positive tone. Even though I was positive on the thread and respectful, inevitably, the friends that I have that are more liberal and the friends that I have that are more conservative just continued and it snowballed. Nothing that I did there was wrong.

The discussion online did not look like the rational Habermasian public sphere that has defined understandings of productive political deliberation, and so many young people disregard this type of deliberation as unproductive, but importantly, Rick and his peers were exposed to very different beliefs through this interaction. Considering political sorting among peers (YouGov found a 14% rise from 2016 to 2020 in the number of Democrats who say they are not close friends with "anyone who holds very

different political views from them" (Sanders 2020)), these young people may even interact with

perspectives different from their own *more-so* in these online space than in their close circle.

For Rick, this was not a positive engagement (though play is not always pleasurable, as discussed

in Chapter 5 on cancel culture), and he did not claim to learn from it (though exposure to difference, even

if uncomfortable, seems necessary for eventual deliberation). Even if negative, I heard many more stories

of interaction with differing perspectives online than the criticisms of polarization and echo chambers

suggest, particularly given such expressed (but clearly failed) avoidance. Engagement with these

perspectives can occur through *cohabitation*, in which one's political views are faced with opposition

from another in the same (online) media habitat, and *confrontation*, in which there is active engagement

with a political other through deliberation (at times hostile, at times otherwise). Both forms can result in

exposure to new counter-/sub-/publics or discourses. Such exposure and engagement is not as reliably

negative and unpleasant as the above reputation of online culture as an anti-public sphere suggests.

Cohabitation with difference

Online spaces allowed, at times, for people to be exposed to perspectives oppositional to their

own, defined by difference, and in a way that could productively challenge their own political beliefs and

understandings of the social world. Many times, this *cohabitation* with difference was actually intentional:

young people shared the ways they curated their online spaces to mix entertainment and information,

with both supporting and challenging perspectives, discourses, and publics. For example, Olivia,

somewhat liberal, shared how she follows "this hardcore Republican on YouTube" to see "what the other

social and political side is doing right now." This is mixed in with other YouTube subscriptions, many of

which are not explicitly political. Elsewhere, friends Raquel, John, and Darius actually defy the frequent

adage in Part 1 of this chapter to "never read the comments," as Raquel says she enjoys being able to get

"both sides" there and her friends agree. Importantly, it is not just people who are already politically

engaged that can have these positive experiences. Raquel has an average political engagement index

score (7), but John has a 3 and describes himself as apolitical, and Darius has a 1. As suggested above,

while there are shared critiques about echo chambers online, many young people claimed to actively

work against this and seek out new perspectives, which could lead to new or different engagement. This

may well be exaggerated testimony in the research setting (i.e., a reflection of shared honorable

schemas, Pugh 2013), but there appears to be a value placed on such seeking out public discourses that

challenge one's own perspectives, and further, in actively, intentionally building a digital habitat that

allows for such mutual exposure.[49] This repeated claim suggests that online spaces, even in

entertainment contexts (of avoidance), have the theoretical capacity at least to reflect this value in

cohabitation. Here, the optimistic view of the internet as a public sphere appears in a relatively

articulated perspective, despite the hostile reputation.

However, in blending the entertaining, the political, and the social, such challenges to perspective

that might occur in cohabitation are often not intentional and curated. Because of this, though, young

people may have their perspectives confronted in a way that allows them to learn about other political

views and discourses in social interaction that may not be available in their "habitat" offline. Such

experiences were often shared with me alongside and despite criticisms of polarization and homogeneity

online. Jill, above, discusses her meme group "Post-Colonialist Memes for Orientalist Teens" and later

emphasizes the echo-chamber critique. While she repeats this, she also shares here that there she is still

exposed to varied political positions online, which can lead to a type of casual education through

cohabitation.

> Jill: I agree that I sort of curate my feed so it's like an echo chamber but I would like to think that
> when I do post stuff, like, I kind of have a friend who's a [conservative] and she believes that

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[49] In this sense, such politically diverse cohabitation is often conveyed (through reported action and expressed values) as a symbiotic and mutualistic (online) habitat interaction, to use ecological terms (Holland and Bronstein 2008). However, it is clearly not framed as such in part one.

abortion should be illegal and that you could just buy abortion pills on the black market but and I've messaged her privately about her posts and I think we've both learned from that. I also have a lot of friends that are, like, dying to know how they can be allies [to people of color] or dying to know how they can contribute to these movements, so when I post some stuff, I know that they're seeing it. And I've seen changes in some friends, not just because of me, but because they're curious. And I'm providing a way of, like, 'I think this is really cool and here's a safe way for you to explore stuff.' As opposed to they ask me and all the onus is on me to educate you on all these issues which I think is also taxing as a person of color. I think that's a nice part of social media.

In the latter part of this quote, Jill reflects how her friends have possibly learned from her social media engagement, assumedly because they're already open to ("curious" about) her perspective, e.g., cultivation through similarity. She also reflects though how she and this conservative acquaintance have used online spaces to learn from each other. While she is not actively seeking a challenge to her own political perspectives, and in fact is not seeking political content at all, the social affordances of the spaces result in cohabitation that allows for such incidental exposure. Further, this goes beyond personal consideration of alternative perspectives and discourses (similar to cultivation), and moves into deliberative, interactive *confrontation*, discussed below. For Jill (here), these online spaces are paradoxically "safe" spaces to playfully explore different perspectives, even, as she notes, those that may differ radically from her own.

This "habitat" at times very much appears as a civil sphere: individuals coming together in a virtual public and explore their shared world in ways that may contest individual assumptions and beliefs. And at times, it seems to end there. Sosa, who seemed quite politically engaged in her private, personal beliefs and values but was very critical of the potential of online spaces for political action, reflected in her political engagement index that she would observe political content that appeared on her feeds, but with which she would not interact.

I love coming across people's opinions, not necessarily to debate with them, but to hear how

other people think. If you're just stuck in your own idea of something you'll never really learn.

For Sosa, any politics in her leisure online spaces could be used for growth and identity development,

either through cultivation in similarity or cohabitation with difference, which is key to the civil sphere

though insufficient for the political <u>action </u>central to the public (Arendt [1959] 2013). The frequent

(intentional or incidental) exposure to politics online provided young people a low-risk entrance into a

civil sphere where they could explore public deliberation, despite expressed efforts of avoidance. Many

young people took such opportunities and expressed a positive recognition of digital cohabitation to their

political beliefs, even if couched within the larger, more popular criticisms of such

entertainment/leisure/social/political interactions.

While such beneficial, productive cohabitation is by no means guaranteed, it appears, according

to this data, to be an underestimated capacity of these spaces. Further, this engagement went beyond

civic identity/perspective development, as some young people, like Jill, shared stories of action and inter-

active engagement through difference, at times similar to that expected of the ideal online public sphere:

This engagement took the form of confrontation with difference, both hostile and otherwise.

Confrontation with difference

The often-maligned comment sections that were discussed above reflect a perhaps surprising site

of confrontation of with perspectives of difference. Despite stated avoidance of these spaces in

particular, they proved to be sites of participatory engagement, as some young people contributed to

public discussion via active confrontation with difference in such spaces. In one focus group, Kevin, Pedro,

and Marie's discussion of politics thus far led me to believe they too would actively avoid politics online.

However, while they certainly were exposed to politics via diverse political cohabitation in these spaces,

they also thought this could be beneficial, and this led to active confrontation by Kevin and Pedro (as well

as, previously, Marie). Note, however, that the start of the discussion still foregrounds the negative

discourse around such spaces.

> SJP: Do you think these online spaces are at all political?
>
> Pedro: Yes.
>
> Marie: Yeah!
>
> Kevin: Absolutely!
>
> Pedro: If you're on Facebook and you scroll, like, ten posts, you probably see 3 or 4 political posts.
>
> Kevin: Someone's always criticizing.
>
> Marie: There's always some argument.
>
> SJP: Do you interact in those conversations?
>
> Kevin: I do sometimes…
>
> Marie: I used to when I was younger.
>
> Kevin: Time to time. I don't like it when somebody bashes somebody else. Like, if somebody likes
> Trump, like, he's a big thing, either you like him or you don't. And people who do like him, they
> get so bashed, they get treated like them theyselves is a bad person. That's when I jut in, I might
> say something, like, "yo, this is their view, this is your view, you can't get mad at them. If they like
> the way Trump is doing things, that's their thing." But also, I think it's good because it lets people
> speak how they feel. Because a lot of people aren't talking like we are right now. A lot of people
> won't say a damn thing, they'll just get on Facebook and explode. Let it all go.
>
> Pedro: If I am getting involved in a political argument it's because of fact-checking. I don't really
> care what your opinion is, but you're not gonna get facts messed up. You're not gonna make facts
> up.

At first, the friends reflect the reputation of conflict-ridden online culture, saying "someone's always

criticizing" and calling these conflicts "arguments" instead of framing them as discussion or deliberation.

As I am expecting avoidance but probing anyway, they surprise me when I ask about interaction and

engagement with this politicized content. Kevin takes action to elevate the political conversation, making

it more of a rational, public sphere deliberation in his eyes. Here, he is engaging by confronting those in

the public sphere to actively challenge and contribute. And despite the conflict, he still finds it to be

"good, because it lets people speak how they feel," in a world (though very different from Eliasoph 1998)

that feels so nervous about the perceived toxicity of contemporary, polarized politics, perhaps therefore more democratic than silence out of fear,[50] or, alternatively, building up to an explosion, in Kevin's words. Facebook can be a site of explosions, but as such, it is an outlet for those who otherwise may not be able to "speak." The transitions from negative to positive critique and back again reflect a more nuanced view of online spaces than popular discourse suggests, and further suggests a varied capacity for public sphere engagement dependent on context. Confrontation, while so often explicitly avoided as ineffective and even counterproductive, was at times still a form of engagement. Also of note, Pedro comments on the importance of fact-checking, which while still often partisan in practice, appears like it could be key element to confrontation in an online public sphere, particularly if such fact-checking comes from a marginalized standpoint in reality, namely a counterpublic or subpublic operating in an online public space.

Despite hearing many stories of productive confrontational interactions with differing perspectives online, they were typically shared with a tone of surprise and with an implication of exceptionality. Jen and Richard share their positive experiences with these kinds of exposures, which again contradict the "online culture as counterproductive conflict" and "online culture as a counterproductive echo chamber" reputations. Previously in the focus group, Jen, who is close to the DACA community, discussed how she sometimes would post about immigration-related issues on social media, including memes and stories she comes across online. She is quoted above discussing how people can learn from this. This quote below refers to an episode about DACA on the fictional entertainment show *Grey's Anatomy* that spoke to some changes by the Trump administration that was particularly moving to her, which she posted about it on Facebook.

> Jen: Facebook can get heated. After I posted my thing about DACA [a] roommate shared it or
> commented or something and someone from her hometown commented some things against it

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[50] The consequences of such possible expansion of voice, in this playful context, will be explored in this conclusion.

and they had a back and forth about that, like, I didn't expect that…

SJP: Do you think that conflict or debate is good or bad or anything?

Richard: Totally good.

Jen: Yeah.

Richard: It allows people to share their side and you can see people's perspectives and why they think that way and I think that's really good for making people come together.

First, it is important to note that it was Jen's roommate's Facebook friend that initiated conflict, illustrating the expansive exposure from cohabitation in "social networks." While Jen believed she was engaging with a particular, limited habitat, she ultimately was engaged in a broader conversation as she was confront*ed* through incidental exposure in expanded cohabitation. Then, despite sharing this experience and explicitly stating that these spaces are "really good for making people come together," the friends, soon after this and then throughout the focus group, continue to reflect a pessimistic perspective on any potential for a productive online public sphere, specifically speaking to how the anonymity/distance "creates barriers" (in Richard's words). Richard and Jen clearly don't seem to think that ALL confrontation between people with opposing perspectives is unifying and/or productive, but it has that capacity. It can lead to people forming stronger rational political arguments and logics, building a stronger sense of identity as a member of the public, discussed above, and at best it can be a productive debate that leads individuals to "see people's perspective and why they think that way," which is foundational for collective-oriented political thought and action. However, this view of these entertainment/leisure online spaces is relatively submerged compared to the more popular, articulated pessimism attached to cynicism and avoidance, and *even despite personal, positive experiences of confrontation*, it is still discussed as something to be avoided.

People shared in the focus groups and interviews their experiences of surprisingly productive online confrontation through differences with extended family (e.g., aunts, cousins), peers/acquaintances (people from high school/college, former coworkers), and even, though less frequently, strangers,

suggesting there is a public, or perhaps civil, capacity for engagement strengthened by rather than

despite the affordances of online spaces. In this lengthy response below, Nancy elaborates in this

exceptionally long story shared in a focus group, discussing engagement through a confrontation she had

when she not only was exposed to opposing political beliefs in incidental, algorithmic cohabitation, which

she says has helped her more than offline spaces, but also when she became deeply engaged in

deliberation with the ideological adversary:

> SJP: Yeah, I'd love to know if you do see content that you disagree with?

> Nancy: I was just about to say, I feel like another thing that social media has helped with, I'm not
> someone who uses the DMs on social media, but I have seen, like, I think social media really
> awakens, like, you're more exposed to a lot of people and a lot of people that you don't
> necessarily agree with. There were moments right after the Trump election on Instagram where
> for some reason my Explore page[51] was all Trump supporter posts. At first when I read it I didn't
> get it. There was this one post that this soldier made who was very pro-Trump that was ranting
> about immigrants, blah blah blah, and I was reading the comments, I'm a comment reader, I like
> to see what people respond to a person, and it was very toxic. But then in a weird mood, I
> decided to DM this person and just be like 'Hey, I'm just curious where you're coming from
> because you only get to hear about 30 seconds in an Instagram post. What is going on in your
> head? I just want to know. This is who I am as a person, I'm not going to agree with you probably
> but I just want to hear.' And we were able to have this very long meaningful conversation with
> someone who if I, like, just as a person, I would never want to be friends with, I would never talk
> to this person because of the things he said on this post, I thought he was insane, so different
> from who I am. But in that moment, I don't know what triggered me, if it was the thousands of
> comments that were like 'You're trash,' blah blah blah. I just thought it was so unnecessary that I
> messaged him and was like 'You're a veteran and I respect what you do but I also don't agree
> with what you just said in that video. Let's talk about it.' And we were able to talk about it and it
> was very interesting to be able to see that I can have this conversation that I don't even know
> that I don't agree with and we were able to have this conversation and social media gave me the

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[51] Later, after expressing my surprise, she revealed that most of her Explore page is actually not such explicitly
political content (lots of celebrity content), though she did seem to blend entertainment and politics to a higher
degree than other participants (e.g., more clearly political television).

means to be able to do that. *I think for me social media has introduced me to a bunch of people that I disagree with but it has also taught me how to react.* We're so trigger-happy in this day and age that when we see something we don't like we're so quick to be like 'Hey, I don't like this, I don't like you,' and you see it in the comment sections all the time. … I think being able to see that has really helped me really think about, like, 'Okay, yes, this is something I don't agree with but at the end of the day this is a person and I have the obligation to respect you as a person, so how do I go about it respecting you and still sharing my point of view and having a genuine conversation with each other without being insulting or calling you trash, even if I don't agree with what you're saying, even if I don't like what you're saying, how can I be kind to you?' I think that is what social media has really taught me in seeing other people.

Importantly, Nancy was confronting someone who was "ranting about immigrants," a perspective of stark difference as she later revealed that both of her parents immigrated to the US as young adults. The bolded section above illustrates the potential benefits of engagement in what seems to be hyper-political online culture: not only can people be exposed to perspectives oppositional to their own (when their offline habitat may not have such opportunities), and not only do they have the opportunity to engage with the perspectives via confrontation, but they can come to recognize ideal characteristics for public interaction by identifying unproductive conflict and adjusting one's own behaviors accordingly. Nancy appears to believe that these online spaces have allowed her to grow into a better citizen and acts accordingly. This occurs in spaces of social, leisure entertainment, which while causing great frustration at times, also allows for such incidental, medium specific opportunities for unique forms of engagement: cultivation and connection through similarity, and cohabitation and confrontation with difference.

However, given the reputation and subsequent avoidance, young people may not feel that they come across many opportunities for such (safe) engagement: Nancy even says she was in a weird mood and typically wouldn't do this. However, despite the tone of surprise and irregularity, the several stories of such engagement I heard came with appreciation for the context of play in online spaces that allowed for exploration and growth. While the most recognized public-leaning engagement is seen as toxic,

unproductive, and "crammed down your throat," more positive engagement (in the eyes of the participant-consumer) can occur in unexpected times. The clearest cases of engagement in my data are in memes, in which humor and entertainment are the sole priorities, but when under the right circumstances, many young people found themselves engaging with politics and even in political deliberation without the sense of toxicity that may otherwise lead to avoidance.

Part 3: Memes Online Humor, and Interactions with the Political

SJP: I do want to talk about memes.

Michael: Oh thank god.

Ian: I thought you'd never ask.

Discussions on mete were often, if not usually, the peak of participants' playful experience in the focus group. When snowball sampling, new focus groups frequently told me that their recommending friend convinced them to participate by describing the project as "talking about memes and stuff." Many groups expressed that a lot of their virtual interactions together and with others (or at least a meaningful amount) is through memes, and often seemed to enjoy showing off their group chats as evidence. In one focus group, Trent stated that "Memes, gifs, vines, all of us at one point or another communicate through these forms of media," to which Charlie replied "It's a language. It literally is a language." The powers of memes as a tool of communication for these young people is so strong that it was often expressed that "long periods of time" would pass (days, even weeks) where friends may *only* communicate through memes, and many people shared that they have friend group chats solely for memes and meme-based communication. For these young people, the meme is a medium of mass and interpersonal communication in and of itself. Memes, for many, is/are the emblematic medium of online culture.

The "meme" was initially defined by Richard Dawkins (1976), understood as small pieces of culture that spread and evolve via replication and imitation. Now largely specific to virtual

communication, they are typically shared, repeated, self-aware cultural items of humor which are usually

understood to be visually spread and structured (though can be solely textual in content, variably defined

by participants). Memes are central forms of internet culture and often reflect this in a self-referential

fashion (Shifman 2014). Many participants remarked on the unique humor of memes, at times seen as

"stupid" on its face, and funny only to those who can understand the many layers of reference. This can

be seen in the examples below from participants in Image 7.

Image 7 Memes shared and described as the "stupid memes" typical to participants' "meme diets; 7a (Guy Fieri and Zac Efron as father/son), 7b ("moth meme"), 7c (Rihanna as different umbrellas).

Memes 7a and 7c require celebrity knowledge, self-referencing, reinforcing, and reconstituting other

areas of popular culture in their humor. Memes 7b and 7c are especially indicative of the absurd, self-

referential nature of many memetic trends: they are only funny when one is already "in" on the absurdity

(i.e., in on online culture). In fact, 7b and 7c were shared as examples of participants' apolitical meme

diets: Maggie argues that the moth meme is very representative of what she sees, shares and enjoys,

"and that's the least political thing you could do." However, some representative memes participants

shared with me and the group, often still absurd and self-referential, contained social, civic, and even

political judgment and critique, like those in Image 8:

Image 8: Memes with socio-political critique, shared alongside "stupid" memes; 8a (Weight loss/laxative coffee parody), 8b ("Is your child texting about anarcho-communism?" parody), 8c ("Game of Thrones" Men's Rights critique, anonymized)

∘8a is clearly a criticism of beauty standards, gender, and influencer/celebrity. The communism meme (8b), while very "silly," was shared directly after Maggie's discussion of the moth meme. 8c is a screenshot from a massive, multi-cohort/"generation" sorority group chat titled "Phuck Meme Up," which is only for communication through memes. The participant shares that there is a large variety in memes shared here, often not seen as political, that are usually "just funny pictures" that are really "just gar-bäge." When the chat does reflect social commentary, she argues that it can be wide-ranging in political perspectives. I asked her to share one from the group that she did enjoy, and she send this *Game of Thrones* reference.

Clearly, memes are deeply social and cultural artifacts and key virtual indicators of "socially constructed public discourses" (Shifman 2014:8). As such, memes have been of interest to those concerned with the civil/public potential or harms of online culture. Here, I explore memes as a particularly creative tool of/medium for online interaction, further these questions around "whether the internet can really lead to positive social change, or whether it's simply encouraging people's worst

appetites for narcissism, isolationism, polarization, hate, and propaganda" (Mina 2019, introduction, para. 15).

Reflecting the larger doubts regarding the democratic benefits of online spaces, there has been mixed judgment on the role of memes for political engagement, with consistently increasing interest. In analyzing the 2016 US presidential election, Denisova (2019) argues that meme consumption patterns result in particular harm to the public sphere: "Memes are a rapid virus – but a virus of a choice… Memes appeal to the immediate, unreflective reactions of the Internet crowds" (Denisova 2019:186). To many scholars, these immediate reactions often reflect and magnify online culture's racism (InJeong 2016; Williams, Oliver, Aumer et al. 2016; Dickerson and Hodler 2021) and sexism (Drakett, Rickett, Day et al. 2018; Harlow, Rowlett and Huse 2020; Paciello et al. 2021), as well as ageism (Lee and Hoh 2021), ableism (Preston 2021), and other forms of marginalization and symbolic abuse, all of which can be seen in meme popularity.[52] Milner (2016) theorizes the antagonistic effect these memetic trends can have on any such online public sphere (i.e., exclusion over inclusion), and Marwick and Lewis (2017) theorize such antagonism as an intentional tool for media manipulation, for example, in the use of "Memetic Mondays" on *The Daily Stormer* as neo-Nazi "gateway drugs."

However, directly following his argument of antagonism, Milner (2016) discusses the role memes have played in increasing public participation and deliberation for groups like Occupy Wall Street and police reform movements (and their associated counter criticisms of adversarial sub-publics), thus arguing that memes can be a tool for expanding participation in public deliberation and collective action. These memes are largely explicitly political, though, and would be of little interest to many of my participants, as discussed below. Others have explored the political power of memes, often focusing on the meme-ing of political candidates, for better or worse (Heiskanen 2017; Penney 2017; Ross and Rivers

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[52] And, as Denisova (2019) pointed out, the racism, sexism, ableism, etc. of such toxic online culture was also reflected in the memes strategically shared by Donald Trump. Memes, it could then be argued, were both a political tool for and a broader reflection of exclusion, and the weakening and shrinking of the public sphere.

2017; Davis, Love and Killen 2018; Domagoj and Marija 2018; O'Boyle 2021). More broadly, scholars have explored the ways in which humor online is a critical tool for young people's civic and public engagement online, broadly defined (Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2015; Vromen et al. 2016). Through humor, memes have the capacity to expand the public via playful resistance and pushing against power structures (Sutton-Smith 1997; Henricks 2015): for example, Williams (2020) explores how "Karen" memes can exert discursive power on the racisms of contemporary White femininities, and Haldley (2016) explores both the spread of ableist memes and the disruption of such trends with counter-parodic memes, thus displaying a reclamation of discursive power and memetic deliberation. Such public expansion is theorized as the product of the collective identity building in an online sub-public or civil space (Gal, Shifman and Kampf 2016; Anderson and Keehn 2020) in such a technological context that results in the amplification of marginalized voices (Mina 2019). Penney (2020) theorizes young people's use of political memes in terms of bonding, coping, and advocating, speaking to the capacities for both civic and public engagement in various forms, individual and collective.

Memes appear to be playful by default, even when cynical, negative, or dark (a type of coping, as often shared by participants). Phillips and Milner (2017) explore this play through the lens of humor, irony, and antagonism, and more specifically, as a play with identity. But as with many playful spaces online for these young people, such play is threatened by the invasion of political conflict. I heard, often in the same focus groups, that the memes these young people interacted with were a) usually not political or social, and instead were just "stupid" and/or b) actually often quite political, "about every third meme." The following memes were shared with me by the same person, Marge, who expressed general political avoidance online:

Image 9: Marge's representative memes, taken from a meme group chat; 9a ("accidentally call your teacher mother" Barney meme), 9b (anti-abortion state senators, White men), 9c (Marvel producers ending sexism meme)

These memes all came up in the large group meme chat to which the focus group all belonged. Marge

saved these to share in her interview (among others) as they were representative of her meme diet and

generally funny. By exploring memes as a *potential* (not guaranteed) medium for play with various

discourses of varied public-ness, I am continuing to illustrate *how* popular entertainment can be a space

of both civil and public engagement, what forms can this playful engagement take, and then explore the

implications of such expanded access to politics, broadly defined. More specifically, if a meme about

Hollywood sexism (9c) or abortion legislation (9b) falls into Marge's Goldilocks zone of political play,

alongside "stupid" (like 9a) what does the resultant engagement, in this case, though communication

with her friends, accomplish? First, I discuss how young people (intentionally or otherwise) can at times

use memes to engage through similarity (*cultivation* and *connection*) before turning to explore the more

complicated matter of memes as engagement with difference (*cohabitation*, and more frequently, *confrontation*), often indirect.

Cultivation and Connection through Memes

For some young people, memes were a more accessible entrance to the political discourses they may otherwise be open to. In a broad discussion on politics, Ava said she "avoid[s] general politics" but might engage if it's more relevant to her ("if it's an issue that pertains to me very specifically, like, trans rights or LGBT rights"). When I asked what this engagement looks like, she said she might talk with friends and "that's about the length that [she'll] go to," generally showing disinterest in public political deliberation or action. Later, though, she discusses sharing memes and engaging in humorous discourse online regarding social issues as well as formal politics (via criticism of politicians). Memes often seemed to have the ability to overcome political avoidance and present (Goldilocks) opportunities for playful engagement with discourses these young people may not want to address in the hostile public sphere.

Ian (who has a very interesting, "ironic" meme diet, discussed below) also shared how memes can be a gateway into (even formal) political considerations and deliberation: "Memes can keep up with politics and stay relevant with politics much more than music or television. Because they are produced daily. Hourly." Memes can provide media <u>relevance</u>, and therefore political content in memes can feel less distant and be a more accessible communication tool for personal cultivation and collective connection. In fact, despite the counterproductive affordances of distance attached to the reputation of online culture, discussed above, Ian notes how memes are more functionally relevant than the potentially engaging political commentary provided in (entertainment) television and music. As memes are often topical, they could be political, broadly defined, and if they speak to the participant/consumer's preexisting though perhaps under-developed political inclinations, they could be tools for engagement through cultivation and/or connection.

Katie shows both forms of engagement through similarity in her continued interactions with a particular memetic trend. Most of the political memes that people discussed in focus groups or shared with me in interviews were civil or political in a broader sense, not speaking to formal electoral politics and politicians. Instead, they were shared because they were funny, and happened to be "topical." In an interview, Katie expressed this, discussing how she noted some political memes in her diary given our conversation on politics, but said she actually just liked them because they were funny. She had found and shared a few "gay rat wedding" memes, which spoke to an episode of the children's show "Arthur" in which a rat character, the main character's teacher, is revealed to be gay and gets married, with students in attendance. Alabama Public Television refused to air the episode, which catalyzed a reaction very typical of online culture of frustration, absurdity, and cynical humor. After seeing some funny memes about the controversy (featured in Image 10, all received from the participant), Katie discussed with me why she liked them and ultimately shared them with some friends on a road trip.

> Katie: We were driving back and I just asked them if they had seen the memes about the gay rat wedding. Have you seen this?
>
> SJP: Is that [about] Arthur?

Katie: Yeah. So in Alabama they're not allowed to show this but the internet got ahold of it and are talking in abstract about the gay rat wedding. There have been a lot of tweets about it but the one I first showed them [shows 10a] I thought was really funny. But there were others. [shows 10b and 10c] That just killed me. I don't know but I thought the gay rat meme in general was just a hilarious meme.

(See Img. 10 below)
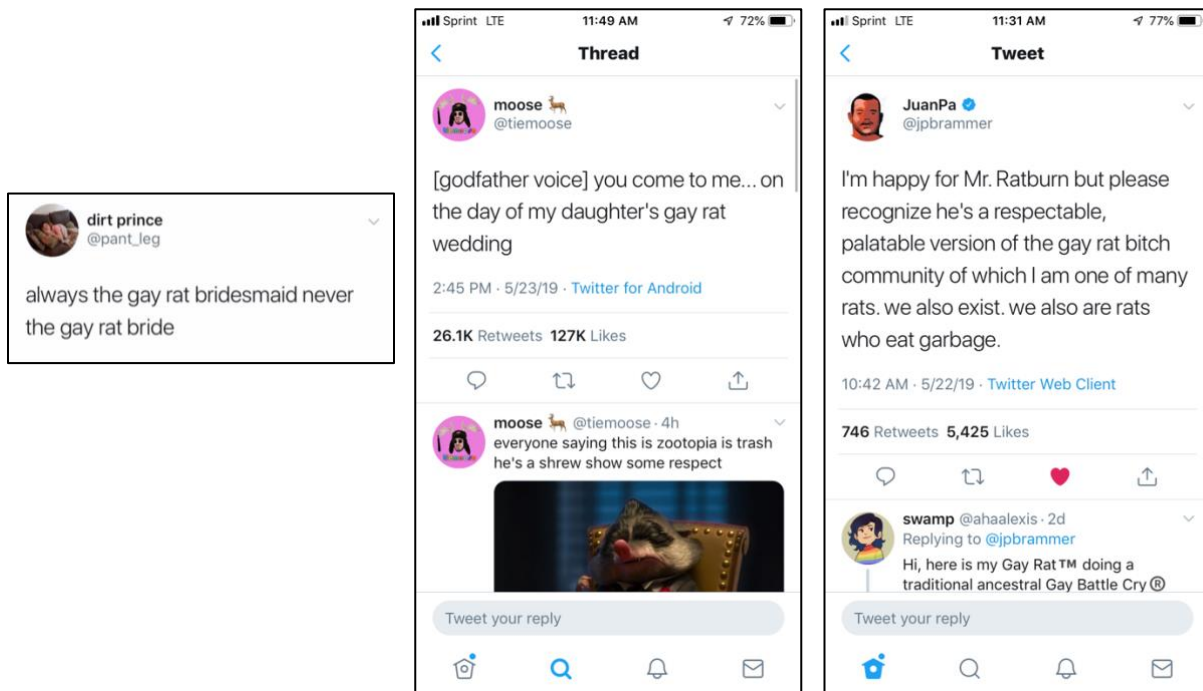
Image 10: Katie's shared "gay rat wedding" memetic tweets; 10a ("always the gay rat bridesmaid never the gay rat bride" @pant_leg), 10b ("[godfather voice] you come to me… on the day of my daughter's gay rat wedding" @tiemoose), 10c ("I'm happy for Mr. Ratburn but please recognize he's a respectable, palatable version of the gay rat bitch community of which I am one of many rats. we also exist. we also are rats who eat garbage." @jpbrammer)

Katie was following this meme because of a shared, collective sense of humor, focused on this, but upon probing, I found that she clearly connected with political perspectives and critiques, foundational to such humor. In fact, her judgment of the humor, and her judgment of the entertainment factor, was also clearly a political judgment (as art might prepare the citizen for, according to Arendt [1959] 2013; 1961). When I ask Katie why these are funny, she says most of them are "just stupid," (referring to 10a and 10b), but that perhaps, she guesses, "we think the idea that Alabama would not allow children to see this episode is absurd," and this absurdity is reflected in the memes, thereby reflecting a particular, critical "political aesthetic" judgment (Holm 2017). Here, she uses the plural first-person "we," a shift from previous language from her and in my question. While slightly ambiguous, I do not believe given the

context that she is talking about her group of friends, but rather, referring to "the internet [that] got

ahold of it," and including herself in this cultural collective. In this sense, the "gay rat wedding" meme,

even the "stupid" ones that do not provide straightforward critique (e.g., 10a and 10b) can allow for

engagement in the form of connection: Katie connects to those with similar perspectives in the public

sphere deliberation on LGBTQ+ matters, namely with those who view anti-gay sentiments as "absurd."

Further, she uses this meme-as-communication to connect politically with her friends, potentially

initiating political discussion through memetic entertainment and humor.

Further explaining the humor, Katie considers that the final (10c) meme she shared (a since-

deleted Tweet) was funny because of its framing of *how* the character is gay, "being palatable," and so

she guessed it was "political in a sense," beyond the general critique of absurdity. While entertainment

humor is the main motivator, this memetic trend of the "gay rat wedding" was, in this tweet, humorous

because of its allusion to deeper deliberation about identity and representation politics. As a young,

straight, White college student, Katie appeared to be playing with the sub- and counterpublic critical

discourses around respectability politics through this memetic humor, in a near-instantaneous moment,

contributing to the (micro-)cultivation of her own position in such deliberations, which she shared with

friends. And to the extent that these memes can act as or can facilitate richer deliberation over power

and the decisions of those in power, memes may be a bridge from this shared, collective, online civil

sphere to the public. In fact, Katie built on this last meme, thinking out loud in the interview that it could

be "playing on, for example, Buttigieg and why he's doing so well [in the 2020 Democratic primaries],

[because] he is palatable."

Katie had high a political engagement index score, so she may be engaging with memes politically

because of preexisting investment (though these likely interact closely), but did state that she has friends

who aren't very political, and separately mentioned a friend who actively disengaged/abstained from

some social media because of the "depressing" culture. Katie's own engagement through cultivation and

connection likely has effects in her private network (which, of course, extends to her virtual, semi-public

social network, where many memes are shared).

While Katie engaged with more broadly political material, centered on identity, Emma reflected a

favorable view of more explicitly political memes, sharing a particular meme with the group:

> Oh, I saw a meme recently that was like, about the 6-week abortion ban in Georgia and it was like
> 'what a real fetus looks like at 6 weeks' and then 'what Republicans think that a baby is at six
> weeks' and there's a lady with like a toddler inside of her. So it's just funny and it keeps the mood
> cool so you don't get too stressed about the real issue in a way. Memes are really good to put
> things out.

*Image 11: Meme shared by Emma, sharing humor with other pro-choice liberals regarding an absurdity around
extreme pro-life legislation ("what Republicans think a fetus looks like at 6 weeks)*

While explicitly political, Emma argues that memes allow for the communication of such political ideas

online without the stress typically associated with the reputation of such spaces. The centrality of humor

"keeps the mood cool," and is therefore seen as a positive, productive form of online political

engagement with a like-minded community (though, here, perhaps without further cultivation for Emma).

Later, friend Gio builds on her comments arguing that memes can "lighten the mood" when he's stressed out about social issues, though he clarifies that he still recognizes such concerns (e.g., abortion) as "serious issues."

Finally, in a 2021 focus group of friends who were all, like most focus groups, quite skeptical of politics online, Jim clearly reflects a resistance to pushy, "too political" content while also reflecting the cultivation and connection forms of engagement that memes can allow through humor and entertainment:

> Jim: If I want to know anything about an issue, I'll go looking for it, I don't want it force-fed on me, that's my whole thing. If I see a meme and it looks funny I'll say, "Oh cool, what's this thing about?" and I'll go look it up. Like if it's social or political current events or something, if I'm like "What's that? I don't know anything about this?" I'll go do the research if I want to and I'll go from there. I don't want it force-fed on me.
>
> SJP: So what would lead you to research further?
>
> Jim: Most recently it was the... the Kenosha Kid. So Kyle Rittenhouse, there are some members of the gun community, the 2A community on YouTube and Reddit and some other places that started calling him the Kenosha Kid.
>
> SJP: Are you in that community?
>
> Jim: Kind of, I like guns. There's this one guy on YouTube... It wasn't forced on me, but I saw stuff online and I did a little more research... he made a funny video about it and posted some memes.

Of note, Jim's demeanor and later comments suggest that he does not see himself as being fully (or even very) incorporated into the "2A" community, but he "like[s] guns" and can gain access to resources (e.g., educational and training materials) through the online community. After these above remarks, Jim then expressed that he doesn't like everything thing this 2A YouTuber, Brandon Herrera, has to say, but he did like some of the memes and repeated that he started looking into some things more after seeing these. In exploring this content, I found a video discussing Kyle Rittenhouse in which Herrera (2021a) first shares and discusses gun-related Halloween memes, including some with people/children dressing up as the "Kenosha Kid," or, as Herrera frames him, "you know, the kid who did nothing wrong." Within the

Halloween gun memes, Herrera includes updates on Rittenhouse's trial, also through a rhetoric of humor. Arguably even more so than in the infotainment of late-night talk shows (e.g., The Daily Show as discussed in Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Williams and Delli Carpini 2011), Jim's meme exposure and any subsequent research/exploration illustrates the blurring of news and entertainment. In a separate video, one that was not clearly sharing memes according to the title and description, Herrera acknowledges this, again through humor: "Now mainstream media coverage of [of the Rittenhouse trial] has been dog shit, predictably, but in this case actually, worse than usual, so I know you guys are coming to the one place you know you can always trust for unbiased news…… Okay, at least correct news……. Most of the time, let's get into it" (Herrera 2021b). Importantly, however, Jim did not initially seek out political entertainment (as many The Daily Show viewers might), nor did he want it forced on him (seen as the intrusion of politics into entertainment). Further, while his latter research shows clear engagement as cultivation, in such a way that may not be accessible outside of the online entertainment context, his engagement though connection is clear but perhaps more nuanced (while only "kind of" a part of this community, he appears open to the direction of the subpublic in his later research). Jim shows that he prioritizes humor in his online entertainment and expects his online space to reflect that. Cultivation, and at times connection, can occur alongside this prioritization of humor and entertainment, as the humor and political messages are often both grounded in similarity.

While the above memes did provide these participants with a way to engage through similarity, they often did so through shared humorous critique of other perspectives, (e.g., anti-LGBTQ+, anti-abortion anti 2-A perspectives). In this sense, an analysis of engagement through memes complicates the clear distinctions between engagement through similarity and engagement with difference. How might young people engage through cohabitation with difference via memes, and how might mems be a tool of direct, interactional confrontation? Can young people engage in these ways at all through memes?

Cohabitation? Confrontation? Engagement with Difference?

Despite expressed political avoidance, many young people clearly interacted with political memes online. While this could result in exposure to alternative perspectives, it was often still through similarity, further cultivating their existing political perspectives and connecting with a like-minded public online. These direct forms of engagement with difference could still occur, though.

Chris, a moderate/conservative with an average political engagement score, who also states that he adamantly hates and actively avoids politics in entertainment, shared the following memes with me in his media diary (among others, including many "stupid" memes). After a focus group with his two liberal friends, he said that he wanted to share with me some of the funny memes he has sent them:

(See Img. 12 below)

Image 12: Chris memes; 12a (critique on cancel culture), 12b (Trojan Horse/Trump trade deals juxtaposition), 12c (cynical, humorous criticism of Obama and "capitalism imperialism")

Meme 12b, though centered on a political subject, does not have any evident public-minded argument or critique (beyond, perhaps, a remark on the absurd). This appears to be topical, though not public-minded, humor. 12a, however, is a clear criticism of cancel culture (therefore a broadly political criticism of the public sphere), and 12c is a clear and bold critique of formal politics in perhaps exaggeratedly academic terms. This latter meme was particularly surprising for me to see during the interview given Chris' expressed more conservative political positioning thus far. When I asked about how he came about this meme (that he found humorous), he stated that you can find every perspective on the internet, the implication being that you will frequently be exposed to new and different ones. In finding, enjoying, and at times sharing these memes, Chris engaged through connection, and perhaps cultivation, as his similar

beliefs on cancel culture are reflected in 6a (and similar memes may or may not challenge him to consider more nuanced perspectives, though not likely in this simple meme alone). Further, his cohabitation in online entertainment spaces with @jaboukie (or rather, with those who themselves engaged in this deliberation by sharing the tweet/meme originally by @jaboukie, then seen by Chris) allows for perhaps a perspective challenge. Here, as far as I could tell, the confrontation did not happen in an online public sphere in the traditional sense, but rather over interpersonal communications (text), when Chris sent these different memes to his liberal friends who might be challenged, find general, shared humor, and find connection and/or cultivation. Cohabitation and confrontation here appear to be present for here Chris.

For many others, however, most memetic exposure to difference appears to come from and be framed through engagement through similarities. Chris came across progressive memes and confronted this perspective by initiating deliberation through memes with his friends. But such engagement through difference in this way, resulting in exposure/consideration in cohabitation and confrontational deliberation, was actually quite rare in these focus groups. *Direct* engagement with political difference via memes was infrequent.

This lack of direct engagement with difference through memes appears to be linked to broader political context. Given the proximity of data collection to the 2016 election, which was at times called the "meme election" (Mina 2019)[53] or "World War Meme" (Schreckinger 2017), the partisanship of political memes was salient and was a common form of categorization of political memes for my participants (even through to the supplementary 2021 focus groups). Like in other entertainment media

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[53] Many participants explicitly discussed the meme-ability of the election, Clinton, Sanders, and particularly Trump. In one focus group, Ian stated that "Donald Trump is such a meme," and in a different group, when Rebecca argued that she sees a large quantity of Trump-related memes, Aang responds "Trump *is* a meme," which garners great laughter. Elsewhere, participant Kate called Trump "The first meme president." That being said, I saw many memes from participants mocking politicians across the political spectrum. While there also were memes in support of their own perspective, these seemed significantly less common.

that were seen as too explicitly political, many of these memes, regardless of ideological affiliation, were rejected. In the rest of this section, though, I explore how participants of different political leanings understand and (indirectly) engage political difference in memes. While an oversimplification of individuals' political identity, I will discuss first liberal engagement with difference and then conservative engagement with difference, illustrating the potential harms to the public when online deliberation lacks direct engagement in the form of cohabitation and confrontation.

Partisan Understandings and Criticisms of Memes

Despite this relative openness to political memes (in some contexts), they were also recognized as reflections of online partisanship and criticized as such, though not in the same way as above discussed generally toxic online culture. Liberals were often very concerned with the memes of the right, frequently citing the racism of Pepe the Frog (a common target of popular criticism and fear, see De Cristofaro 2018) or other memes that are "just attacking one type of subgroup for [no] reason One liberal participant argued that the right was "trying to weaponize" memes, a claim perhaps supported by the far-right's Infowars' multiple "Meme Wars" contests, encouraging the production of anti-CNN memes (Infowars.com 2017) and particular memes critical of "social justice warriors" through the NPC trope (Infowars.com 2018). Conservative (and some moderate) participants criticized the left's memes as the tools of these "woke" "social justice warriors" and of a warped logic of political correctness that attacked normal, everyday Americans without sufficient cause. For example, when the focus group turned to discuss the "alt-right" online, one conservative argued that "The liberal equivalent to the alt-right I feel is feminism in some way. Feminist memes. They're all just really aggressively angry at men. So it's not even, like, women's rights it's 'men suck.'" These young people were critical of "radical," polarized memes, as they were of other online spaces, and conservatives in particular often expressed that they felt isolated from their peers online because of such partisanship.

As many journalists and academics have argued, memes may reflect and magnify polarization and radicalization online (e.g., Denisova 2019; Askanius and Keller 2021; Paz et al. 2021). The young people I spoke to did criticize the memes of the other side, and often admitted to a partisan meme diet (though many said they saw memes from the other side in one way or another). However, many participants expressed to me that memes that they saw from "the other side" were uncivil partisan attacks, while their side's memes were qualitatively different. This is largely due to greater engagement through similarity, in cultivation and connection, with most engagement with difference being first largely filtered through similarity. Though they expressed diversity in online spaces, this did not always transfer to memes, perhaps due to the space for humor. Therefore, memetic diets, and the engagement that emerged from socio-political memes, appear quite partisan.

Leftist memes and the indirect confrontation with the right

Those on the left did not frequently engage with memes from the right, and when they did, it was coded in mediated framing as counterdemocratic (Alexander 2006), largely in terms of racism, sexism, etc. Speaking to this, Teddy says that with liberal/progressive/leftist memes, "there's like "oh this is feminist and fun" whereas I feel like, inherently, [the right's] memes will always be making fun of someone at their expense. Like, they'll be making fun of people of different races or sexual orientations at that person's expense. So [the difference is] if you're making a meme of someone it's [at their expense] or it's something we all can laugh at as a group." Teddy wants to use memes for connection, and argues that political memes from the (far?) right cannot do this. Elsewhere, Charlene says the memes she sees from the right "dehumanize" in their humor. Both of these left-leaning participants claim to avoid politics online AND try to curate a space that is not an echo chamber, but here, they illustrate why they want to avoid cohabitation and confrontation in their meme diet.

The counterdemocratic memes these participants did come across were either from friends and family, which they often ignored (though at times would "call out"), or more frequently were shared in a space of similar perspectives, whereby memetic cultivation and connection were engaged through shared criticism: deliberation of, but not with the other. Famously, this process was made visible in the Pepe the Frog meme, which started as an explicit attempt by internet trolls to fabricate an association of the cartoon frog with the alt-right and violent racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism (where there was previously no significant association). As there was little cohabitation with the memes of the right, the trolls were able to successfully construct the framing around this meme, such that most liberal interactions with the meme were indirect, secondary criticisms, obscuring the misrepresentation of both the meme and the alt-right. The reputational factors of the internet shaped many leftists' views of difference when engagement forms of cohabitation and confrontation were less available.

However, the Pepe the Frog meme case illustrates how exposure through similarity can be so successful in shaping political understandings of memes and (partisan) engagement through memes (when the online space is not as successfully curated for diversity as seen in Chris' above memes). In 2016, recognizing the concerns and criticisms of the left around Pepe memes, those in, around, and supporting the Trump campaign began using the imagery in the context of memetic humor, critique, and ambiguous absurdism. Donald Trump Jr. posted a meme prominently featuring Pepe on September 10, 2016 (see Image 13), itself full of other in-group references. Simultaneously, the alt-right does in actuality begin to incorporate this meme into their ideoculture. David Duke, former KKK leader, tweets a variation of the meme the day after Donald Trump Jr (tweet now suspended, see Dickson 2016). This embrace is occurring *after* trolls' fabrication of such associations, and further, only after Clinton and the left began to denounce this manufactured association. In fact, Donovan (2020) argues that the association of Pepe with the alt-right, and the ultimate co-optation of the meme, by the right and for the right, may not have occurred at all if not for Clinton's public denunciation motivated by the left's concerns around the meme.

Image 13: "The Deplorables" parody movie poster meme featuring Pepe the Frog, posted by Donald Trump Jr. to Instagram, last accessed 2022

My argument here, in this data and in the case of this particular Pepe meme, is that had there been

access to memetic engagement through cohabitation and *direct* confrontation with the memes of the

right, participant consumers on the left would not have been so vulnerable to manipulation through their

limited engagement occurring in forms solely through spaces of similarity (cultivation and connection). In

the Pepe case, trolls played on the impressions that Teddy and Charlene derived from their engagement

with similarity, presenting a fabrication that supported preexisting understandings of the memes of the

right as "dehumanizing." Such readings of this meme were then verified via their engagement with the

meme through critical similarity, and could not be verified through direct cohabitation or confrontation

with difference. The lack of direct engagement with difference thus likely contributed to the success of

the Pepe disinformation campaign by these trolls and therefore likely also contributed to the ultimate

(ambiguous) cooptation of this meme for polarized, partisan means at best (and, as discussed in the

conclusion of this chapter, oppressive exclusionary antagonism at worst). Here, the medium of memes

did not act as a tool for solidarity in civil society (Alexander 2006), due to (the exploitation of) limited

forms of engagement.

Memes on the right and the indirect confrontation with the left

On the right, the young people I spoke to reflect a different style of play with memes. In our

opening portion of the meme discussion, still quite broad, conservative David says, of the memes he

enjoys, "I think anything that makes fun of anything is funny," earning laughter from the group. While, of

course, the liberals discussed above still ultimately showed me memes that make fun of others in a way

that may not always connect as Teddy suggests. However, many conservatives saw liberals and

progressives as the divisive aggressors. In talking about people on the left trying to get into fights online,

Derrick argues that "woke" people think it's "their job" to start unnecessary conflict online. For these

conservatives, this was beyond frustration with conflict: it was clearly a frustration with what they saw as

the warped, polarizing logic of the left.

Chris, who is featured above with the cancel culture meme in 6a and also featured heavily in

Chapter 5 on cancel culture, was exceptionally upfront about these frustrations with his leftist friends in

the focus group, as well as in his interview. In a conversation about Pepe the Frog memes, Chris grows

exasperated, scoffing and rolling his eyes as Elicia and Hunter try to explain why this is concerning and

dangerous. "I just think it's crazy that people want that Pepe the Frog banned... it's a drawing of a frog."

He calls the meme stupid, pleads that we "we shouldn't take [memes] as this serious statement," and

importantly, highlights the irony behind such memes. He and other conservatives blame the left for

making everything political, in a particular way that silences. Given his previous concerns about cancel culture Chris is clearly frustrated with the seemingly senseless standard of "political correctness" to which memes are held "these days." Referring back to the cancel culture discussion, Chris discusses how he is under threat in this new culture, clearly applicable to the online memetic context as well:

> Oh my goodness, "Hi, [Chris,] I'm a straight white man…" I make jokes all the time. They're not racist or very bad jokes, but I make crude-ish jokes because I think they're funny and I think they shock people and people have gotten on my case before for an innocent comment that I make that I don't really think affects anyone. Nothing irreverently racist or transphobic or homophobic or anything like this. It's just a little joke that people just latch onto. I just think 'oh shit, that was an off comment that could tear me to pieces.' I personally fear for that.

Trying to show the hypocrisy and absurdity of the left and meme culture, he abandons his efforts with "Oh god… My head hurts."

I saw Chris' frustrations elsewhere, but he identified as both moderate and conservative, and was in a focus group with two good friends who both identified as liberal. As seen above, despite these frustrations, he was still able to engage with difference online. Other conservatives engaged with difference almost entirely through the filter of similar perspectives around them.

Joshua and Rich, conservatives in a focus group with two liberal friends, played off of each other (in the significant sense of play to this dissertation) in opening up to me about their use of memes and humor online. They both were trolls in the traditional sense when they were younger, with the only intention of causing chaos. But now, as Chris suggests, they enjoy and share memes (though in less public online spaces) that shock through humor. Frustrated with the silencing of voices, the humor in many political memes they come across is in such a sharp pushing-back, particularly as Joshua argues he often feels like an outlier in online spaces. At one point, Rich uses the language of "bullies" to describe the left's regulation of online entertainment and leisure activities. As David suggests, I am under the impression in this discussion that almost anything is fair game, as long as it's funny. Again, the boundaries of this are

unclear, but it's clearly a very different framing than the liberals above. Unfortunately, I was not able to attain any of Joshua and Rich's memes, which may have an intentional, defensive withholding on their part to protect their shared space from the intrusion of liberal judgment. Their shared meme exchanges appeared to be a retreat to a safe conservative space, where they could freely challenge the aggressive left and playfully push against these silencing forces through loud, absurd shock and humor. Joshua and Rich knew what these memes meant, what they did, and did not appear to trust me to understand, empathize, or "get it."

Clearly, their own humor is tied to a criticism of liberals' use of memes, namely, in the left's use of (and regulation of) memes to (as conservatives see it) silence others' expressions of humor by "taking it too seriously." This criticism of liberals is itself expressed in memes, often with a sense of counterattack through shock as a challenge to "wokeness." An example of this is the NPC meme, derived from "Non-Playable Characters" in video games. The meme is used to mock "social justice warriors" as blind followers of "woke" culture who have no independent, agentic "inner-voice" (Know Your Meme "Npc Wojak" 2021). The meme was criticized as a fascist dehumanization of those concerned with social justice which of course, further fueled the memetic arguments, through humor, of mindless following.

Seeing a similar institutionalization as Pepe, Infowars held an NPC meme contest with a prize of $10,000 (Infowars.com 2018). This followed their CNN Meme War contest (Infowars.com 2017), illustrating the formalization of the right's use of memes to critique the left and leftist concerns. Also, considering the homogeneity of the site of these contents, it is reasonable to consider that the exposure to "social justice warrior" memes that inform the NPC memes is one through similarity, individual cultivation and collection connection, rather than direct engagement with difference (the left). Joshua and Rich's retreat from the "woke" online culture, and continued critique of these spaces, reflect that their exposure to these spaces is, at least now, filtered through critiques of these spaces that they engage with through similarity. In other words, much of the right's critiques of woke online culture is informed by

engagement with critical NPC memes, rather than direct engagement with the woke online culture that is

defined through difference (in NPC memes). Those concerned with the silencing effects of oppressive

memes on the left will likely not frequently engage via cohabitating with such memes.

When I ask young people about political memes, this often immediately triggers a critique of the

other, as they draw coded symbolic boundaries around their *democratic* use of political memes against

the *counterdemocratic* use of memes by their opponents (in that both ideological political poles see

other's use of memes as one of exclusion from the public sphere). In defending their positions, people I

spoke to often explicitly remarked on the playful affordances of humor in the medium of memes. More

specifically, they considered the playfulness of irony and ambivalence (Phillips and Milner 2017) in

memes, and the potential harms of political play in entertainment spaces, even as a result of *all* of the

above forms of engagement.

Playing with Irony and the "Mask of Ambiguity" Online

Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner (2017) explored ambivalence online, focusing on how the

unique affordances of the internet, like those explored in part one of this chapter, allow for unique types

of play, "with self and others." Their discussion on play largely focuses on play with identity, broadly

defined, and how we *all* play, as in perform, in the online quasi-frontstage. They discuss ambivalence as a

mask in this performance, particularly in anonymous contexts, where that which is behind the mask is

largely unknown to those interacting with the actor.[54] Further, the affordances of these spaces allow

actors to not only control what is seen, but also how much is seen. This ambivalence around identity and

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[54] Further, there is ambiguity around the presence of this mask of ambivalence. At times, participants online may see and recognize this mask, labeling a troll as such or acknowledging the effects of anonymous participation, making identity a known unknown. Other times, the mask is unseen, and the actor's performance is wholly believed, making this mask of identity an unknown unknown (or unrecognized unknown). There is, of course, typically an in-between, uncertainty and ambivalence regarding this very masking through ambivalence, perhaps assuming some performance of self in all online interaction, but to what degree of "authenticity"…

authenticity, framed as play for Phillips and Milner, is the core of young people's concerns with the spaces

as a public sphere.

However, I am concerned with a different kind of play. As explored above, people play with

politics online by engaging, in different forms, with political similarities and difference in an environment

"separate from serious performance" (Burghardt 2011). Considering the hostile context of politics online,

this *playful* engagement is an imaginative exploration in (and against) what young people see as an online

public sphere, but with a level of distance from political "work" that makes public deliberation more than

accessible, but even enjoyable. In the case of cultivation and cohabitation, this can please a playful

engagement with political identity, perspective, and "self-realization" (Henricks 2015). In connection and

confrontation, this can be a playful engagement with civic and public discourse, action, or resistance.

However, this is a creative, interactive type of play (recreation or pastime) that exists within the virtual

actors' play (dramaturgical performance). Considering Phillips and Milner along with Bateson, it seems

the mask of ambivalence, or perhaps a mask of ambiguity, is central to understanding how playful

engagement can occur on the hostile stage of any virtual public sphere, while still remaining outside of a

serious performance.

To move beyond the mixed metaphors, I want to return to Ian. I above quoted Ian's enthusiasm

in getting to the meme portion of the focus group. He makes it clear that this discussion is why he

showed up to the focus group. While elsewhere he shares how much he dislikes political conversation

online, he does enjoy this content in his memes, as it's so much more "relevant" in this medium. When

we begin to talk about specifics, he reflects upon the self-referential aspect of memetic humor,

emphasizing the role of irony in this communication:

> Irony is a big thing with memes and I personally like when it gets to the point where the irony
>
> breaks down any form of legibility to people that don't understand the meme. It's like repetition
>
> of the concept to the point where the memes can stop making sense and that's part of what
>
> makes it so funny.

Ian reflects here a sense of joy, almost pride, and certainly plays with the absurdism of irony and seeming ambiguity. With multiple levels of meaning, all of which must be understood by a reader within that particular cultural logic, it seems that the ability to understand the meme *is* the entertainment. This is the ultimate absurdism in memes: ambiguity to the point of near obscurity. Certainly, this is play in its emphasis on autotelic pleasure.

When we move to discuss politics in memes, though, both the playfulness and the performance in play become evident, along with the roles of ambiguity and irony, in Ian's engagement online. He seems to get very slightly frustrated with the group's discussion on Pepe the Frog and presents a meta-argument as, seemingly, a defense:

> I also think a lot of the discussion around memes and politics is, like from old people who don't understand that memes are ironic. I think a lot of what is shared, like, I have a large group chat with friends and, like, a lot of stuff shared there would make us all seem like horrible people that have horrible political beliefs or something but the joke is that it's an absurd thing to say.

Ian identifies as liberal and has a high political index score (10/12), so while he makes it clear that his memes may be (at least to "old people") ambiguous in meaning to those not in the culture, he does not appear ambivalent in his political values and beliefs. Despite my request, Ian does not save or take note of any memes for his interview. It is clear though that his meme diet does not reflect his political views *without an understanding of irony* and may instead reflect its face quite the opposite perspective. As he points out later, this could be cause problems and misunderstandings if observed by those "in the know" (again, "old people" who don't get online culture).

For Ian, irony is central to his political play through memes, assumedly through cultivation and connection (e.g., in his friends' group chat) would likely decode these memetic texts in the same way, and this "get" the irony. Katie, quoted above discussing the "gay rat wedding" memes, shared that she enjoyed these layers of meaning as well. She also mentioned that this is why people see a need to put in their Twitter bios the disclaimer that retweets are not endorsements: you can never know how people

will read your memetic communication when it is layered under irony. However, this is clearly an

affordance as well, as individuals can play different characters, play different roles, play *with* different

political discourses online (similar *and* different) by donning different masks of ambiguity and irony.

Similarly, Katie and Ian are both protected in this, as their peers online seem to recognize the polysemic

nature of memes.

Of course, though, such ambiguous, ironic play can have effects beyond furthering perhaps

identity development and citizen engagement (Milner 2016; Phillips and Milner 2017). In a long disclosure

about his concerns for his brother, Teddy illustrates with significant emotion the dangers of what to Ian

and Katie is a productive, playful costume of irony and ambiguity [original spoken emphasis]:

> I think, and this might be a bit of a tangent, but I'll play video games with my little brother
> sometimes and he'll sometimes have his friends come into our conversation and stuff like that
> and they'll share *very* offensive and *very* inappropriate, wrong memes, and things that are just
> bad on the platform. And because it's behind this layer of joking and kind of just, like, trivializing
> it, they feel that it's okay and they'll just develop these kinds of views and have these long
> conversations about things that are blatantly, grossly wrong or things that they wouldn't agree
> with politically that they kind of then develop a tolerance for and even kind of like a viewpoint of.
> Like, these bad, racist, sexist things. And then they kind of change their viewpoints based on this?
> Like, they'll say the n-word. They'll say terrible things. I'll call them out, I'll talk to them, and it's to
> the point where I can't even interact with them anymore. And they're in that little echo chamber
> where at first it's kinda "we can get away with saying this online because it's okay and, like, even
> though we would never call someone that" they're starting to say it in real life and they feel
> comfortable talking about people and thinking about people like that in these awful ways. I've
> noticed at least on Reddit, I've seen little portions of it where it's this haven of really blatantly
> disgusting things … At first, I thought it was kind of a joke, like, "hahaha Pepe the Frog is alt-right"
> but seeing this happen to my little brother [and his] friends is insane. Like, they're turning into
> crazy alt-right gamers and it's just because they thought these memes were funny. And then they
> thought it was okay to share them. And now they have these viewpoints and it's really scary … So
> you can frame these, like, intolerant or, like, cruel things and people tolerate them because
> they're in meme form. Because they're something funny and ironic.

Participants were pretty clearly divided on this issue of irony in and engagement through ambiguous memes. Many young people felt that this ironic humor is central to their generational culture (also seen, for example, in suicide-based meme humor). Ian, above, appeared defensive about this humor, appreciating the playful ambiguity and its contributions to engagement with the similar. However, Teddy is greatly concerned about how ambiguity and irony in memetic humor might blur the boundaries between cultivation/connection and cohabitation/confrontation, perhaps creating playful political ambivalence from such memetic ambiguity around (Teddy sees as) ideal democratic values. Perhaps, for Teddy's brother and his friends, what once was playful confrontation through irony has since become ambivalence and a playful cultivation through that which is now familiar through (previously?) ironic exposure (to racist, sexist discourses). This smooth, seamless transition was made possible only through donning a mask of ambiguity, in which perspectives can form and change without the accountability and commitment of a "serious performance" as the actor hides (from the assessment of themselves and of others) "behind this layer of joking."

In a separate interview, Jen, liberal, shares a meme (Image 14) she was sent by a co-worker with whom she has a complicated relationship. The meme is a screenshot of a Snapchat of a high schooler asking someone to prom with a racist sign:

(See Img. 14 below)

Image 14: Racist prom-posal sign, in a snapchat, screenshotted, shared as a meme

Jen shares with me that she really hates when he shares these kinds of memes.

> Jen: But he's dumb, he just likes being controversial and kind of pushing people's buttons.[55] So a lot of the time we get into it about race issues and political stuff. So he just sent me that and I just thumbs downed it on the iPhone, you know how you can do that, the thumbs down reaction.
> SJP: Do you think he really believes the things that he's saying or do you think he's just trolling you?
> Jen: I wonder, I don't know! He flip-flops back and forth... I can never tell if he's really serious about what he's saying or if he's just kidding. And I ask him but I really can't tell.

The racist memes appear to, at times, actually have sparked political deliberation between Jen and this co-worker, but this is not the inclusive democratic public sphere[56] envisioned with increased political engagement. If Teddy's brother and his friends are now more engaged, but through adopting language that excludes, marginalizes, and silences, this appears to be counterproductive to the memetic engagement that most young people of all political leanings are arguing for (though in different in valued coded language) in their criticisms of the "other side" as being exclusionary.

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[55] Based on Jen's description, this sounds like the type of "shocking" humor that Joshua and Rich might share. Due to their history of trolling, though, I might expect their memes to be more nuanced than this one in Image 14.
[56] This racially offensive, marginalizing humor is particularly concerning, as this co-worker shares such memes with Jen, an Asian-American woman of color.

Alex Jones of Infowars, a clear counterdemocratic force once, argued that he is "extremely proud" of the role he is playing in the "meme wars" reflected in this section. Further, he states "quite frankly, whether it's people that are supportive or folks that hate me, I don't care." As a far-right commentator (featured in The Deplorables meme above), he recognizes that he is the target of memes of the left (some shared in these focus groups). He also, though, recognizes the power of ambiguity and irony in these memes. He says liberals listen ironically, meme ironically, share ironically, and ultimately, "we're actually waking them up, through the celebration of making fun of each other" (Ohlheiser 2017).

Discussion

Of memes, Denisova (2019:194) remarks on the potential for playful engagement. She illustrates the capacity for connection, assumedly with effects on cultivation as well. However, this is ultimately a point of concern.

> [Memes] belong to the ethos of the carnival, playful and jovial banter on easily digestible politics… The circulation of memes among like-minded individuals [help] these users feel that they [are] not alone in their beliefs. While he or she may have never met many similar-minded users in person, the online sphere and meme sharing generated this vibe of collective involvement and community feeling. From this perspective, maintaining the noise in the carnivalesque Twitter communication was the winning political strategy of Trump's supporters.

Denisova argues that the playfulness of memes is why they are a democratic threat: "As the fast-food communication of the social media, memes convey the ideas from the media discourse in an unreflective and subjective manner" (194). However, Mina (2019:chapter 5, paragraph 1) argues that memes themselves are not progressive or regressive, but a communication tool, a "media strategy." Phillips and Milner ultimately argue that "the same behaviors that can wound can be harnessed for social justice" (Phillips and Milner 2017:14). This chapter, in short, reflects the latter perspectives of Mina and Phillips and Milner. As seen in other chapters, this medium can be a site of engagement or disengagement,

though with unique opportunities and constraints, given technological affordances. Above, I detail four

forms such engagement can take. The question clearly then becomes, what determines the effect of such

engagement(s) in terms of a democratic public?

Firstly, we need to recognize the complexities seen here in the blurring of public and private

online. While online spaces were ones in which individuals aimed to actively avoid politics, they were also

spaces where politics frequently crept in, even in entertainment spaces (comment sections on frivolous

YouTube pages). This also blurs a defining characteristic of publics: publics necessarily have a clear and

shared political aim (Livingstone 2005). Publics in the mediated context discussed above do not seem to

be bounded around a collective goal, but rather the goals appear to seep (or, to some, aggressively

invade) into and emerge from consumption as an audience in a shared virtual space. Despite the

traditionally clear theoretical distinctions made between audience and public (as discussed in Livingstone

2005) the participatory audience/consumers here can slip in and out of a public, unbounded by time and

space. This is a running finding between the focal points of this dissertation and is obviously present in

the case of online interaction and humorous memes. However, this chapter shows the ways in which

slipping from audience to public can be a highly undefined shift, playing with multiple publics at once,

through similarity and through difference. This clearly has the capacity to bring more participant-

consumers into citizenship roles (in a playful performance of identity online). It appears, however, that

individuals have variable access to varied forms of engagement in varied contexts online. This has

implications for any possible effects on the public sphere.

Part one of this chapter illustrates that there is a uniquely narrow Goldilocks zone in online

spaces of entertainment, due to the affordances of such spaces and, perhaps more importantly, the

reputation around such spaces. Considering part two, it appears that most participants engaged through

similarity. Most engaged by cultivation, as they were exposed intentionally or incidentally to views in

the/a public sphere that were similar but not identical to their own. This exposure could lead to active

engagement through connection, as was the case for many of the young people I spoke to and particularly those with marginalized identities: Jen spoke in this section about how much she's learned on Instagram, illustrating how cultivation and connection can reinforce each other, e.g., through the meme group called 'Post-Colonialist Memes for Orientalist Teens' and the Palestinian clothing brand her friend told her about. In discussing the "gay rat wedding memes" in part three, Katie illustrates how much of the humor of memes comes from similarity, and a similar engagement in and through the absurd. Even through irony, Ian illustrates that the mask of ambiguity is a successful tool for humor (and humorous play) because of the ways in which he and his peers are "in" on the joke in similar ways.

In part two, I also explored how engagement with difference is possible, despite claims of echo chambers, and can be productive, despite concerns of conflict. Many participants shared stories with me about their intentional and incidental engagement through cohabitation with difference. However, while I also heard stories of productive confrontation online, these were largely considered outliers given the hostile reputation of online deliberation in social and entertainment spaces. Further, at least in the typically enjoyable communication medium of memes explored in part three, such engagement with difference appears to be less common or perhaps less possible, and certainly less productive, than engagement through similarities. People expressed criticism and concern over the (often few) memes from "the other side" that they came across, and since many of the memes they did see were filtered through similarity and/or a mask of ambiguity, they often viewed these memes of difference as a tool of the oppositional political extreme to silence, marginalized, or exclude others. There was little *direct* cohabitation (consideration from exposure) and confrontation (interaction) with memes of difference. When there was personal engagement through difference, this was often ironic and ambiguous, which Ian did not see as a problem, but Teddy, who felt as though he was watching his brother be radicalized through memes, was deeply concerned by. There was often agreement that the memes of "the other

side" were harmful to the public sphere, but disagreement among these young people if memetic

ambiguity was as well.

Further, people expressed variation in their understandings of personal access to these different

types of engagement. I actually heard this most, and almost exclusively in fact, from conservatives.

Conservatives Sadie, Chris, and Joshua and Rich (in three separate focus groups), all expressed times

when they have felt that entertainment spaces online (Instagram, Reddit, Twitter) are very leftist, in that

right-leaning politics are unpopular, unwanted, and marginalized. As discussed above, Ruth and her

friends, all conservative, ultimately disengaged from online spaces entirely, in part because of the political

atmosphere that did not seem to represent their values. Unfounded concerns of systemic conservative

marginalization, silencing, censorship are common in the contemporary public sphere and among the

political class (see Tripodi 2018; Martinez 2019; Barrett and Sims 2021). However, these young

conservatives do genuinely feel and believe that they are the numerical minority in their generation, and

they are (Maniam and Smith 2017; Dimock 2019; Parker and Igielnik 2020). They do not see much as

much option for cultivation and connection in these spaces, and often don a mask of ambiguity in

confrontation, out of both play and as a type of defensive critique. Considering the cases of Teddy's

brother, Ian, Joshua and Rich, and trolls, it appears that all of these participant-consumers could be

sharing similar memes, on their face, to an online public sphere, but with different motivators and

through different forms of engagement.

Clearly, this playful engagement, and the lack of some forms (engagement through difference)

has effects on individual citizenship, as this dissertation has largely explored. Individuals, through online

and memetic play, could further develop political identity, values, and beliefs, could interact with others

through deliberation and learning/education, and could at times go beyond these online spaces to take

political action, informed by interactions with publics online. This illustrates, though, that any expansion

of citizenship and the public sphere that may be facilitated by online culture, or other popular

entertainment culture and media, has effects beyond individual participation. In this case, online culture may expand opportunities for engagement through playful participation and memetic irony and ambiguity: this allows Jill, Sherry, and Nancy to find, share, and spread "Post-Colonialist Memes" that can connect and challenge, lead to deliberation and action. This also allows Teddy's brother to find, share, and spread vitriolic discourses, perhaps similar to that which Jen had shared with her. Further, I would like to return to the opening focus group with G, N, H, and L. L's early experience online, clearly one of conflict and uncertainty, resulted in her exodus from online spaces, which remains to be the case at the point of our discussion. Not everyone has equal access to these types of engagement online. As L withdrew because of this violent interaction experienced as a girl, we must consider how the symbolic violence of Teddy's brother and his friends, themselves new, creative, playful participants in this digital public, could very easily result in the systematic marginalization of others in these spaces.

In the conclusion to this dissertation, I consider these implications of playful engagement with the public sphere through popular culture in this particular context of conflict and hostility. Ultimately, I illustrate the necessity for considering this play within agonistic or antagonistic struggles, considering the work of Chantal Mouffe.

Regarding the particular capacities of engagement through participatory online spaces of entertainment and leisure, though, it is evident that the space, and the cultural object of memes, can facilitate political avoidance as well as intentional and incidental engagement, in multiple forms. These different forms illustrate nuance in variation in context, consumption, and implications, that encourage a move beyond considering the internet as a broad threat to the public sphere. Further, avoidance alongside different forms of engagement illustrates different pathways, often through the civil sphere or weak public spheres, to counter-/sub-/dominant publics, illustrating different ways to increased citizenship through play.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

My conversation with Elizabeth, Addison, Carl, and Lee was about as close to an ideal-typical focus as could be seen in my sample. This group of students was diverse racially: the women, Elizabeth and Addison, are White, Carl is Asian, and Lee identifies as Asian and Hispanic. Lee and Elizabeth both identify as bisexual, and both discuss their marginalized sexuality in the focus groups, while Addison and Carl identify as straight. While Elizabeth identifies as Liberal and has a political index score of 10, most of the group identifies as Somewhat Liberal with average or below average political index scores: Addison's score is 6, Lee's an average 7, and Carl's a 5. When asked if they enjoy politics, the friends reflect the frustration seen in most participants. Followed by nods and agreement from the group, Addison shares her feelings about repetitive emphasis:

> I hate politics, I think politics is corrupt. I think government is important, but I don't like politics. I really hate it. I think the issues are important that go through politics but I hate politics themselves, so I tend not to talk about them. And I think there's a difference between politics and social issues. If it comes up I might talk about social issues, but I hate really politics. I don't like political parties. I don't know… I just don't like it.

The friends all share, with enthusiasm, their disdain, exhaustion, annoyance, and active avoidance of politics: a unique participant in this regard, Elizabeth shares that she used to want to go into national politics but has become disillusioned with the system and (very much) does not have this goal anymore. They similarly reported avoiding politics in their popular culture (especially online). However, like other participants, these expressions of avoidance occurred alongside apparent engagement. In this focus group, I heard how these friends *played with politics* through popular entertainment media, with each other and in their own reception/consumption/participation, and in doing so, how they interacted in public deliberation. Here, I review some key contributions from the dissertation through an analysis of this particular focus group.

The Political Play of Elizabeth, Addison, Carl, and Lee

Addison's quote above illustrates the *active avoidance* of politics taking place in this particular political moment of the "Trump era." However, the group also reflects the other motivating force within this political *"new normal"*: the friends, multiple times, discuss the pressures they feel to be more political, specifically (as liberals) to be more "woke." When I ask what they mean by woke, a term used in many focus groups, they describe it as such:

> Addison: Like, knowing to ask people their pronouns.
>
> Lee: Just the whole social justice thing.
>
> Elizabeth: Knowing about the things that people face and willing to be accommodating.

Addison and Lee, both somewhat liberal and less than average and average index scores, relatively, first describe wokeness (and the pressures of wokeness) in a neutral, if ambiguous, sense: I found pronouns to be a triggering topic for some conservatives (and moderates), and Lee's language may reflect the critical tone of some more disparaging remarks on "social justice warriors" that I have heard. I take these as neutral descriptors based on tone, though. Elizabeth, who is more left-leaning and more politically engaged, shifts the framing of the collective answer, suggesting that being woke is just being understanding and considerate. While most participants did not explicitly identify as woke (and later in the study, explicitly rejected this term that had come to be regularly mocked and derided in popular culture), most liberals (at least Liberal and Very Liberal), reflected this framing of leftist politics. The group accepts this framing as representative of their own politics, while still remaining critical of the forces in the "new normal" that push them for more public sphere engagement, and they express concern for the social issues while actively avoiding much formal engagement. This also results in avoidance of politics in their popular entertainment, seeing the inclusion of such as an invasive threat to their mediated escape.

However, interwoven with expressions of avoidance were expressions of *playful engagement*. The conversation on wokeness initially emerged when Addison, who clearly and emphatically hates

politics, begins discussing the many political issues addressed in the TV show *Grey's Anatomy*, which at

the time she enjoyed greatly, which was "weird" because it was "SO political right now." As the

conversation grows in this regard, the friends are clearly sharing, with enthusiasm, when and under what

conditions they engage with certain entertainment media texts in the *Goldilocks zone of political play*.

Variable by person and text, this group illustrates how some points of consumption can lead to political

engagement: *Grey's Anatomy* falls within this zone, of *doing both*: entertaining and engaging. As the

friends illustrate variation between each other and by text, there is also clear variation by medium (Lee, a

musician, appear to have a much wider Goldilocks zone with music), as well as social/environmental

context (they particularly emphasize mood and energy). Lee, as quoted in Chapter 4, makes visible the

boundaries of the Goldilocks zone in an exceptionally overt way:SJP: Do you feel like pop culture at all

facilitated this "getting woke"?

> (Nods, remarks of agreement)

> Lee: Hard yes. If it comes off as mildly educational it's a turnoff but if it comes into something
> that I thoroughly enjoy, I would pay attention.

These friends illustrate that there are opportunities for engagement with the public and civil sphere(s)

through popular culture *if* such engagement is adequately playful: recalling Burghardt's elements of play,

Lee illustrates how this play *must* (for him) be autotelic (also a requirement for Arendt's artistic, aesthetic

judgment, necessary for political engagement), and separate from the "serious performance" of

civil/political development/consideration/deliberation. Addison expresses pleasure and reward from

Grey's Anatomy, and in their discussion of escape from the pressures of the "new normal," they express a

playful escape from the functional requirements of the public sphere. While the Goldilocks zone is

bounded by the discussed and likely many other conditions, these friends show how they are playing with

public-spirited matters through popular, and perhaps more significant in this data, through discussion and

deliberation around the popular. This latter point illustrates how much of this play is discursive, at the

very site of my data (informal conversations among peer groups about the popular).

Elizabeth, Addison, Carl, and Lee also illustrated how such play in the Goldilocks zone is not always pleasurable in a straightforward way. The group brings up the *problematic critique* naturally (after the discussion on wokeness), as they begin critiquing different celebrities. When I explicitly link this to *cancel culture,* however, Lee describes this as "so toxic," with responses of agreement from the group. As we explore specific cancelations, there is a more nuanced response marked by struggle and negotiation as the group works through the varied reasons to cancel celebrities (and thus participate in this "toxic" popular culture):

> SJP: [What about R. Kelly?]
>
> Lee: Oh no, he's canceled.
>
> Elizabeth: He's so canceled. He needs to go to jail.
>
> SJP: I'm also thinking about the Chris Brown thing [that Elizabeth mentioned earlier]. What do you think about this artist having said something or done something or acted in some way that you disagree with and so you're just not gonna listen to their music, no give them plays on Spotify…
>
> Lee: I mean, it varies, but I respect that. A play is money in their pocket. If you don't agree with them you have every right to not.
>
> Elizabeth: But people are saying "Rihanna hit him too."

Lee and Elizabeth reflect the *discursive negotiation* that occurs in the act of playing with(in) cancel culture, as young people struggle with public-spirited matters through deliberation on celebrity, removed from the "serious performance" of the formal public sphere(s). Lee illustrates the nuances in cancelation reflected in the *typology of cancelation* presented in Chapter 5, showing how considerations of and responses to calls for cancelation vary in politicality and public-ness. This varies from *cancelation for problematic action* (R. Kelly or Chris Brown, mentioned above), *cancelation over socio-political expression* (e.g., Kim Kardashian, whom Elizabeth calls a "culture vulture" due to the history of cultural appropriation), and *cancelation due to politics*, which Lee, a Kanye West fan, explicitly discusses. Speaking to the latter, Lee illustrates the *emotional and discursive negotiation* that can occur through such

Goldilocks play with formal, electoral politics (considering West's support of Trump) through popular culture:

> SJP: Often in these focus groups when we're talking about politics and political music, Kanye West comes up-
>
> Elizabeth: (enthusiastically interrupting) I was wondering if we were going to talk about him! The thing is, does he rap about his politics in his songs? No. So that's kind of complicated. And the people who are making songs like that are country people and I don't listen to that.
>
> Lee: I do like Kanye.
>
> SJP: How did you feel when it was all happening and he was wearing the MAGA hat?
>
> Lee: I love the guy but that turned me off. But see, here's my thing. Someone brought this up to me, there's a lot of evidence that Kanye is high-functioning [on the autism spectrum], but he does things to put out ideas. Like, putting on the Trump hat was supposed to be a "let's hold hands" type of deal but that was literally the worse way to do that. All these people were like "he's a Black dude that hates Black dudes," and then he was like "slavery was a choice" and all these Kanye fans were like (sighs).
>
> SJP: Did that change your relationship to his music at all?
>
> L: He talks about his struggles a lot and you can just get how his mental state can affect that. I don't know. (sighs) It's hard.

Lee draws from, considers, and struggles with multiple discursive perspectives in the collective deliberation around Kanye West's support of Donald Trump. In this playful working through via celebrity, he also displays a personal, emotional struggle grounded in his connection to West and his music. This illustrates not only the social conflict in celebrity cancel culture, but also the internal conflict, itself central to play,[57] which are the conflicting internal positions of "loving the guy" and being "turned off." His last remarks in this except, "I don't know" and "It's hard," linked by a deep sigh, illustrate the ways in which this playful engagement can be a site of struggle and, at times, frustration.

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[57] Consider, for example, the internal struggle and conflict in puzzles and puzzle-type video games (Sutton-Smith 1997).

Burghardt states that play needs to be "spontaneous, voluntary, intentional, pleasurable,

rewarding, reinforcing, *or* autotelic*"* (2011; emphasis added) *and* separate from "serious performance,"

but this does not necessarily mean that play is separate from struggle, challenge, and frustration.[58]

Rather, the opposite is often the case: Sutton-Smith (1997) builds off of Darwin's theorization of the

"struggle of survival" to illustrate how play is a facsimilization of these struggles. For example, he argues

that games of chance and risk mimic "chances with physical and economic fate," and the play of teasing

and hazing "is about difficult initiations into social memberships" (2008:139). Sutton-Smith, as well as

Huizinga ([1949] 1980) and Henricks (2008; 2015; 2020), all theorize the cultural implications of such

playful struggle for resistance and power, clearly significant to this mediated Goldilocks engagement with

the public sphere. Celebrity cancel culture is a site of popular play, grounded in entertainment, that

closely mimics the negotiation and struggle in political judgment. Arendt (1961) argues that the

(necessarily autotelic) reception of and engagement with high-quality (highbrow) art can organically

result in the development of taste and (aesthetic) judgment, necessary for developing political judgment

and participating in the public sphere. Lee (and Elizabeth) here illustrate that the autotelic play with

celebrity culture via nuanced considerations of different cancelations can be a facsimilization of the

struggles of the public sphere, such that political judgment can be developed in such play. Further, this

judgment is playfully exercised in varying degrees of public-ness in cancel culture, with Lee considering his

fandom, constructed from aesthetic judgment, in relation to civil/political judgment of Kanye West,

MAGA, Trump, racial politics, polarization, and mental health.

As the group first frames cancel culture as "toxic" before discussing their own nuanced

participation in it (a common occurrence), they illustrate again expressions of active avoidance and a

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[58] While cancel culture often involves struggle and negotiation, and always involves judgment and critique (even for those who do not cancel), this may or may not involve pleasure. Pleasure appears to be one of many *motivators behind cancelation*, along with peer influence, values, identity, and likely many others. The enthusiasm in this discussion from Lee and Elizabeth may reflect such pleasure, and the group displays these other motivators throughout the focus group's displays of judgment as well.

critique of the blending of popular culture and what should be the serious, rational public sphere (reflecting similar concerns of public sphere scholars). In no place is the toxicity of this blending more greatly emphasized, despite continued Goldilocks play, than in online culture. Addison shares that online spaces are where public deliberation is "the most negative," specifically referring to her spaces of leisure and entertainment (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Reddit). When I create space for elaboration and ask if everyone else sees politics in their online spaces of entertainment, Lee states in a commonsensical tone that "That's where it happens. That's no man's land." Carl says that he's "scared" of the aggressive conflict online that emerges from this intrusion of politics to "anywhere and everywhere" online, to which Lee agrees: he is also "afraid" of politics in these spaces. During these admissions of fear, the friends are exchanging knowing chuckles that communicate how their perhaps dramatic language is only slightly exaggerated.

However, as the discussion and criticisms continue, the friends also articulated experiences of engagement in these professedly hostile, threatening spaces. Such engagement could take different forms: Addison and Lee exhibit engagement in the form of *cultivation* as they discuss how their views on gun control have developed, in part, through incidental exposure (after mass/public shooting events) to similar but still distinct and nuanced calls for change. Here, one can see what they consider to be "mainstream" discourses alongside bold perspectives "that [are] not on the news." Even though they both claim to avoid politics online, and claim to deeply hate the intrusion of politics in their online spaces, they use this case as an example of how Twitter, in particular, is the best place to stay informed and to learn (thus, to gain playful tools for exploration and growth). This is at times related to engagement in *connection*: speaking specifically to Twitter, Elizabeth states "that's the thing that opened me up the most" to political engagement, through cultivation but also in joining the type of curated liberal community for which Twitter is often known. For example, she shared how she was recently enjoying and participating in the popular discussion on Twitter around the controversy regarding the pop-hit "Old

Town Road" and racial politics in the music industry. Addison builds on this by sharing how she had

recently been connecting along a generational dimension with other fans of the band Paramore on

Twitter. The music spoke to her and other Gen Z fans, she argues, because of the civic messaging on

mental health:

> Addison: It deals a lot with depression. Like, a lot.
>
> Lee: We're all so sad these days. Actually, people have been sad.
>
> Addison: We have reason to be! (laughs)
>
> Elizabeth: People have been sad, but we're finally talking about it.

This point of generational civic connection around mental health challenges was common in these focus

groups, particularly in expressions of cynical play, and often included public critique (e.g., a playful

connection between generational depression and climate change). Addison's engagement online with

other fans led to a connection in those spaces, as well as here, with her friends.

Playful engagement with similar public-spirited perspectives was common and is perhaps not

surprising, given the frequent critiques of "echo chambers" online and political self-sorting in social life

more broadly (Sanders 2020). However, these friends also reflected a playful engagement with political

difference. This was often discussed as an incidental stumbling-across of oppositional (in this case,

conservative and (far-)right) perspectives. For example, Lee and Carl, who play video games, discussed

frequently encountering the ongoing controversies around YouTube gamer and content producer

PewDiePie, long criticized for promoting racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, and other hateful messages (shrouded

in irony, humor, and ambivalence).[59] Reflecting the notorious contentiousness of comment sections

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[59] The PewDiePie controversies were particularly salient at this point in data collection, only a couple of months
after his name was mentioned by a white-supremacist terrorist just before an attack on two mosques in
Christchurch, New Zealand. While PewDiePie had long been a controversial figure regarding "ironic" hate speech,
this incident launched questions of humor, speech, individual responsibility, and online community into broader
public discussion. In a separate focus group, liberal friends Elicia and Hunter debated this with
moderate/conservative Chris: the former two friends criticized PewDiePie for irresponsibility normalizing
dangerously hateful discourse (similar to Teddy's concerns with his brother in Chapter 6), hiding behind humor and
irony to create a distance and protect him against critique, thus allowing for the legitimate spread of such

online, Carl shares that he often sees people fighting about PewDiePie in the comments of video-game-related YouTube videos, and Lee agrees, tying this back to cancel culture and stating that he has seen "really messed up" perspectives in these comments that are defending the content creator who is, again, facing cancelation. Through their interactions with these entertaining online spaces and products, Lee and Carl are engaging with the many public-minded issues around the PewDiePie controversies through (unintentional) *cohabitation* with difference. It is shortly after this that I ask if they engage with politics online and they playfully express that they are "scared" and "afraid" of such conflict and avoid participation. Nonetheless, exposure through such cohabitation has the capacity to lead to a playful and less/unserious (though possibly also uncomfortable) opportunity for learning and development, perhaps a playful mimicking or facsimilization of the serious performance of formal public sphere deliberation.

In speaking of engagement, after Carl and Lee express their avoidance, Elizabeth (with a higher political index score) shifts the perspective from total avoidance to her own (limited) engagement via *confrontation* with difference:

> Elizabeth: I used to not be very good at picking my battles [online], I realize now you have to be good about picking your battles...
> Carl: There are some people in the online space that you know from their words they have the capacity to listen to what you have to say, and even if they don't agree with what you say, they'll at least listen to it. And you can learn from them and they can learn from you.
> Addison: Yeah, but if you put it out there and they don't take it, you can't do anything...
> Elizabeth: The other thing is you have to think about is if it's a strong enough platform, even if they don't listen, who else is going to read your thing. There's somebody on my Facebook who's very ignorant. I've known him since I was younger...
> Addison: Wait, was he commenting on recent things?
> Elizabeth: (sighs) Yes, he has. I have not unfriended him yet because I don't have the guts to. Also every time he comments on something it's an excuse to inform everybody else. But every time I

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discourses. Chris, already frustrated with a conversation that to him appears to censor (his type of) humor, responded to a mention of the Christchurch attacks with the exasperated exclamation "Are we suggesting that PewDePie is responsible for that?!"

say something in any type of liberal way, he'll say something. Like, I said something about

abortion the other day, but you know, (surprising tone) we actually got to a good point there, I

mean, we actually still seemed to agree to disagree-

Lee: Which is the best way to end that kind of debate.

Elizabeth: Yeah, but he… I usually let him comment on my stuff, as pissed off as it makes me so

that I can say other informed things that I know everyone else will read.

Firstly, other opportunities for cohabitation are evident in this exchange: Addison casually and seemingly

organically[60] reveals a type of indirect, secondary cohabitation made possible by the network affordances

of social media platforms. Though she is resolute in her hatred of politics, and particularly the hyper

"negative" conflict around politics online, she reveals here that through peer connections (Elizabeth), she

is exposed to alternative politics (and such conflict) through cohabitation. We do not discuss any

engagement Addison might have beyond this (e.g., political deliberation and/or development from such

exposure), as Elizabeth continues to share her own engagement (one of play, negotiation, and struggle) in

the form of *confrontation* with difference. Carl, despite his own avoidance and fear, has suggested that

such confrontation can be productive, and while Elizabeth does share a recent example of this regarding

her old acquaintance and deliberation on abortion, she generally continues to maintain the popular

reputation of online spaces, culture, and deliberation as counterproductive and a source of great

frustration. Still, she reveals, as many other participants did, seemingly surprising (though empirically not

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[60] Addison's remark is a clear example of incidental engagement through cohabitation *despite* active avoidance in the "new normal." The methodological structure of a) focus groups and b) peer groups was, again, foundational in accessing both the articulated *and* submerged actions and beliefs: Addison is responding to Elizabeth as her friend with a reflexive inquiry, *not* responding to any inquiry from me, a stranger, in which she must formulate (in some more or less organic way) a more distanced response. This, therefore, is much less a response to my act of observation and instead is her own observation of Elizabeth's response. Of course, as discussed here, her observational inquiry itself inadvertently reveals data on action and lived experience that might not be accessible with such validity in traditional, individual, more structured interview disclosures. The types of casual responses, reactions, and verbal and/or nonverbal feedback seen here reflected the comfortable and established peer group dynamics of the focus groups and provided some of the most profound and, I believe, faithful observations of public-minded engagement in the context of play, which was so often easily minimized by the (also collective) active avoidance, and as stated in Addison's case, "hate… hate… hate… hate" for politics.

that uncommon) acts of confrontational engagement that are foundational to any public deliberation.

Further, such engagement, as Elizabeth is aware, has impacts beyond the individual: while Elizabeth has a

higher than average political index score, and her confrontational engagement may be expected (though

this did vary), Addison had a score of 6, below the total sample average of 7, and Carl, who shifted from

discussing fear to discussing "some people" online having the "capacity to listen" after Elizabeth's

intervention, has a score of 5.

The discussion on memes in this group is atypical in that it is notably short due to time

constraints and enthusiastic, playful talkativeness that was at times difficult to rein in. They agree that

they all love "stupid" memes, though they also do often see political ones, which may be a frustrating

invasion or a humorous reflection of relevant, current events. Carl remarks both in the focus group and in

his interview how many political memes are "trying to push an agenda," though they can sometimes still

be funny enough to engage with and share. The group also suggested that the political memes they saw

(at least during around the 2016 election) were often heavily polarized, just trying to make fun of Clinton

or Trump, and returned to critiquing these spaces.

The group's conversation on these online spaces of entertainment and leisure organically

expanded to a discussion on their participation in political deliberation broadly. When talking about

sharing political memes, Lee shares how he tends to not participate in political discussion at all (or at

least, does not enjoy such discussion). Throughout this conversation, the friends agree that much of their

frustration with politics, leading to the stated goal of avoidance (despite continued play, as seen above),

comes from perceived polarization.

> Lee: I don't like political conversations in general because they always go in circles. The truth is
> life isn't black and white, but everyone wants to believe in one thing and stick to that.
> …
> Carl: It's like a sports team kind of culture right now. Either you're with us or against us. I consider
> myself liberal but if I say "hey, this conservative guy is saying some reasonable thing" someone

will be, like, either you're with us or against us.

Addison: I agree. I think everyone's all or nothing right now. On both sides. Super liberal people

will not listen to super conservative people and super conservative people will not listen to

reasonable liberal people.

…

Addison: It's just wild because most people are moderate, most people are in the middle, but it's

the intense sides…

Lee: They're the loudest people.

Addison: Yes, everyone else just kind of gets lost.

Elizabeth: There are crazies on both sides.

These friends, as seen above, are clearly playing with politics through pleasure and struggle, with

similarity and with difference, learning, growing, experimenting, and challenging through consumption,

reception, and discussion. However, here, emerging from a discussion on memes and "Facebook fights,"

they illustrate the key concerns to be had around such playful engagement in a context of

contentiousness: playful politics can become a bellicose game on the warped field of the public sphere.

Political Engagement as Competitive Gameplay

Avedon and Sutton-Smith (1971) illustrate in the introduction to their edited volume that games,

like play, are difficult to define: "it would not be impossible to defend the position that a game is what we

decide it should be; that our definition will have an arbitrary character depending on our

purpose" (2). Ultimately, they argue that "it makes more sense to map the subject matter [of games]

rather than to define it" (5), though they do present common themes in different disciplinary

understandings: games are familiar, predictable, have a goal and "procedural and contingency rules,"

implicit or explicit, and perhaps more essential, games are oppositional (7). Examples discussed in this

cited volume include ancient board and dice games, athletic games and sports, ideocultural games

specific to small groups, "the kissing games of adolescents in Ohio," and even solitary games: the puzzle-

solver works against the impersonal, oppositional challenges and obstacles of the puzzle. Games have been theorized as a necessary process for social identity and skill development, particularly for children (Freud [1920] 2010; Piaget [1932] 1965; Goffman 1956; Mead 1964), though adult games, such as gambling, have also been explored as tools for development and exploration (e.g., deep (competitive) play).

In the influential work *Homo Ludens* ([1949] 1980), Johan Huizinga centrally theorizes one form of gameplay, that of competition and contest. Specifically, he considers this play in terms of the Greek *agon*, speaking to the competitive, agonistic activities that "dominated the whole of Greek life," including the Olympic games. Playfulness, or the "ludic function" as Huizinga argues, is inherent to the agon, and therefore "the agon in Greek life, *or the contest anywhere else in the world*, bears all the formal characteristics of play" (1, emphasis added). Thus, Huizinga's cultural theorization of play, explores the inherent playful-ness of historical conflict broadly, considering, among other things, epistemology, law, art, and war.

Sociologist of games Roger Caillois (1961) criticized Huizinga's understanding of play as narrow, theorizing four categories in a broader typology of games. The first of these forms, though, remained the agon, or competition. In defining agonistic games against other forms (namely alea, or games of chance and luck), he defines the necessary boundaries of such competitive games: "*Never is there any pursuit or conflict outside the space delimited for the journey.* That is why it seems legitimate for me to use the term *agon* for these cases, for the goal of the encounters is not for the antagonist to cause serious injury to his rival, but rather to demonstrate his own superiority" (1961:16; original emphasis). Thus, Huizinga and Caillois present an essential characteristic for understanding social conflict as game: competition and contest are critical components of agonistic social life that can be productive, magical, "civilizing" cultural forces *if* played within defined rules and boundaries.

When a competitive game is corrupted, these boundaries fall, as the goal of the game overtakes the rules: for the agonistic game, corruption means that "the rules of courteous rivalry are forgotten and scorned... Implacable competition becomes the rule. Winning even justifies foul blows. If the individual remains inhibited by fear of the law or public opinion, it nonetheless seems permissible, if not meritorious, for nations to wage unlimited ruthless warfare" (Caillois 1961:56). Sutton-Smith (1997) theorizes games, competition, and boundaries as well, building on the work of game theorist De Koven ([1978] 2013): Once players exit the defined boundaries of the agonistic game, such factional competition should be less central to player identity than the sense of unity among players as participants, who, I would argue, ideally share the value of sportsmanship in a competitive spirit. Sutton-Smith argues that "when the game is played only for the good of the larger community that plays it, then it can be well played. If not so subordinated [to this community of players], games may run away with their players and cause friction and conflict" (1997:100). When competition trumps community, play becomes too focused on "power and contest" rather than shared (right to) "belonging" in the game.

Above, friends Lee, Carl, Elizabeth, and Addison present their observations on the competitive game of popular political play. Carl suggests the polarization in this (popular) cultural realm of play is "a sports team type of culture right now," an analogy very frequently heard throughout data collection. Addison and Elizabeth speak of "both sides," "intense sides," and the teams of "us" versus "them." However, they do not themselves feel like these teams necessarily represent their perspectives and voices: "most people are moderate," but everyone outside of the loudest representative of these teams "gets lost." These friends reflect the frustration expressed in many focus groups and interviews around the state of play in the public sphere's political game right now: to use the language Sutton-Smith (1997), many of these young people view play with politics as fully driven by power in contest and wholly focused on fractional team (partisan) identity rather than the "larger community" of citizenship. Further, as the conflict of this political game "run[s] away with [its] players," it has expanded beyond its boundaries of

play (the public sphere), permeating all aspects of identity and social life (i.e., private realms and spaces of entertainment). In the view of these young people, political participation has become a corrupted game of only "us" versus "them," without a sense of the broader "we," that has turned engagement from a playful, accessible citizenship to a site of ever-present, ever-demanding "unlimited ruthless warfare" (Caillois 1961:56).

This is the concern and critique expressed by these friends and most of the young people I spoke to, who so actively tried to remove themselves from the game's playing field. Yet, in at times surprising and subtle ways, they revealed their own continued play. They played in complicated ways, cheering in the game field of Old Town Road controversy, struggling and puzzling together over Kanye West's cancelation, sparring and spectating on Facebook… While the playful nature of this political engagement led to the game of politics being so dangerous and so vulnerable to corruption, it also allowed *even the most resistant* an opportunity to join in on the play and reap the incidental benefits of such ludic engagement. Huizinga states the following in defending the significance of play and the study of play:

> Any game can at any time wholly run away with the players. The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid… Play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play. (Huizinga [1949] 1980:8)

Such an observation has within it both danger and opportunity. While people often spoke of the contemporary political field of play as a corrupted game dominated by faction identities, Lee responded with a pleased, enthusiastic "hard yes" when asked if popular culture played a part in him entering the game. In fact, he positively credited popular culture with him joining the particular team of "wokeness," as his friends (teammates) nodded in agreement. If this private play turns to public seriousness, and vice versa, and in doing brings in more, diverse citizens to allegedly corrupted teams, what might this mean for consensus and progress in the democratic process, beyond the prerequisite of engagement?

This dissertation has explored when and under what conditions young people have access to such political (game)play through popular culture in a Goldilocks zone, as well as the processes and

motivations behind such gameplay and the different forms of such engaging play. The large-scale, structural implications of this political play are far beyond the scope of this interpretivist exploration of meaning, mediated experiences, and peer group interactions. However, in integrating the literature of (agonist, competitive) play with (deliberative) public sphere theory, paired with the findings in this dissertation, I suggest that an exploration of such implications must consider the work of Chantal Mouffe while continuing to build a culturalist approach to popular entertainment culture and politics.

Playful Agonistic Pluralism

At the center of public sphere theories of democracy is the collective deliberation and action that works towards the ultimate goal of decision-making grounded in consensus. This is the purpose of the public sphere, where individuals come together to "act in concert" on the institutional force of the state (Arendt [1959] 2013). The public opinion that emerges from deliberation and interaction must necessarily be separate from private interests, and thus, from economic action. Such separation is needed for the *rational* deliberation capable of unifying a diverse public as a democratic force. Clearly, such unification is not occurring in the playful political game explored in the preceding chapters, despite (or perhaps because of?) increased participation.

However, political theorist Chantal Mouffe (1999; 2005; 2013) radically challenges this understanding of democratic power and processes, contesting the underlying assumption that unity is, should be, or even could be the ultimate goal of democracy. In her early work with Laclau ([1985] 2014), they argued, like many of the discussed public sphere critics, that distinctions between public and private, or further, distinctions between public and civil, are "only the result of a certain type of hegemonic articulation" ([1985] 2014:169), meaning that the socio-cultural definitions of what is political and what is not are embedded in existing structures of power. While this is clear to public sphere critics like Fraser (1985; 1990), Benhabib (1992; 1997), and others (e.g., Pitkin 1981; Pateman 1983; Warner 2002; Dillon

2004; Hermes 2006a; Calhoun 2013), Laclau and Mouffe argue that the necessary theoretical adjustment

is not to theorize an endless multiplicity of spheres and publics that must be considered in such

unification of public opinion: the pluralism recognized in these criticisms is foundationally incompatible

with the universalistic requirements of the deliberative democratic "citizen." In the political game that

determines the rules of public deliberation, legitimacy, rationality, and basic humanity are *always* defined

by political hegemony and discursive power, and thus, exclusion:

> We have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony,
> as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion. The idea that power
> could be dissolved through a rational debate and that legitimacy could be based on pure
> rationality are illusions, which can endanger democratic institutions. (Mouffe 2000:104)

Division, marginalization, and exclusion are thus not idiosyncratic flaws of particular public spheres

(Greek, bourgeois, or otherwise), but are inherent to every formation of a public or a multiplicity of

publics, as "division is inescapably 'constitutive' of political order" (Haw 2021). Thus, instead of working

towards the unachievable "illusion" of unity through deliberation, Laclau and Mouffe theorize an

agonistic model of democracy,[61] based not in deliberation towards the goal of consensus and unity, but

rather, based in agonistic conflict towards a goal of respectful and passionate democratic decision-making

grounded in pluralism rather than hegemonic domination.

Evoking the competitive character of ancient Greek life, as Huizinga ([1949] 1980) and Caillois

(1961) do in theorizing play and games, Mouffe has built on the distinction between *agonism*, or conflict

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[61] While Arendt ([1959] 2013) speaks of agonist democratic action, the conflict that is included in such public considerations is still necessarily a limited and exclusive one, one that is "still too selective, still too aristocratic (or self-deluded) in its demand for 'disinterestedness'" regarding the public/private divide (Villa 1999:125). Further, though Arendt acknowledges this agonistic conflict of the public, consensus remains the goal/function of this public. As stated, for Mouffe, true consensus is not possible given the inevitable and hegemonic exclusions that remain hidden in Arendt's agonism. Mouffe explicitly discusses the role of judgment in this regard, linking Arendt's agonistic political action to Habermas' public deliberation: "It is clear that what she seeks in the Kantian critique of aesthetic judgment is a procedure to obtain intersubjective agreement in the public sphere. Despite the differences in their respective approaches, I therefore believe that Arendt, like Habermas, envisages the public sphere as a place where consensus can be established" (Mouffe 2010).

between adversaries, and *antagonism*, or conflict between enemies. Central to this theorization of citizenship and political participation is the recognition of conflict as an inevitable feature of diverse societies and pluralistic democracies. In agonistic politics, as in agonistic games, an adversary is recognized as a legitimate opponent within the defined system, and thus is tolerated as a valid participant in the "common symbolic space" of political difference (Mouffe 2000). While this space is intrinsically one of passionate opposition, grounded in an "us" versus "them" construction of the (socio-)political, it is also a space of acknowledgement and respect, and therefore, of non-violence. The recognition of conflict here is vital, as if left unchecked (in, for example, a deliberative model of democracy that strives for consensus), such conflict will take its essential form of antagonism (Mouffe 2005).

Antagonism lies at the heart of political conflict and is inherent to human relations (Mouffe 2005; 2000; Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2014). In antagonistic politics, the opponent is not an adversary to be challenged within the field of play, but is an enemy to be excluded from play entirely, whose very existence in the political community is rejected as illegitimate, or otherwise whose citizenship is at its core not recognized. Such antagonism may even appear as consensus: the dominant public sphere of Nazi Germany seemingly (superficially?) neared consensus in public sphere deliberation through the (physical) exclusion of (ethnic) enemies.[62] In fact, extremism (on the right in Mouffe's conceptualization) is exceptionally threatening under a logic of consensus, as unity in a public can be more easily reached through the means of exclusion and elimination of the enemy (Mouffe 1999). The goal of democracy,

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[62] As many have pointed out in critique (e.g., Roskamm 2015), this case is particularly meaningful given Mouffe's expansion of the work of Carl Schmitt and his conceptualization of antagonism through the distinctions of citizen/friend/us and other/enemy/them. Schmitt was a powerful force in Nazi Germany, a prominent leader in the party's intellectual class whose legal and political theory provided ideological support to the regime and Nazi state violence. Mouffe recognizes the significance of Schmitt's focus on the centrality of antagonism to the political, but "disagree[s] with the consequence that Schmitt draws from that" (Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014:267): Mouffe argues instead for an agonistic public. A historical note of interest to the subject matter in this dissertation: at the time of Schmitt's rise in party leadership, Huizinga's early cultural histories were "swiftly banned" in Nazi Germany, with understandings of opponents in conflict and the power in play/seriousness that were radically oppositional to those in Schmitt's theorizations of political confrontation and hostility (Lambrow 2021).

then, should be to recognize, and then "tame" and "sublimate" this inherent, ever-threatening

antagonism (Mouffe 2005:20-21), and transform such conflict into agonistic relations between

adversaries that tolerate difference while challenging, rather than rejecting, the (political) other.

Thus, for Mouffe, the biggest threat to democracy is not conflict, partisanship, and fragmented

public identity, all of which are seen in the concerns of public sphere theorists and many of the

participants in this study, who fear the consequences of the public/private blur in the "new normal" and

pop culture's role in a polarized political play. For Mouffe, the biggest threat is a lack of conflict, or rather,

the lack of recognition of such conflict. Agonistic politics are necessary for a healthy democracy in a

diverse society, and therefore in this theoretical perspective, (respectful) partisan play within the political

and a "sports team kind of [political] culture" is productive, if paired with the necessary agonistic value of

sportsmanship. However, these young people I spoke with are extremely frustrated with the state of this

game. Combing Mouffe and the above play theory, the competitive game/conflict of politics at this time

seems corrupted to a dangerously antagonistic state. The respect necessary for agonism, or "the rules of

courteous rivalry" in the field of the public, have fallen to "power and contest" between partisan teams,

"us" versus "them," rather than foregrounding a sense of community between player-citizens, all of

whom belong in this game.

Mouffe's conceptualization of democracy suggests that the solution to concerns of antagonism

expressed by these young people, as well as those emerging from public sphere theory and popular

journalism, is not to separate the (increasingly populist) blending of entertainment and politics, which

appears to so many to worsen both avoidance (actively so, for many of these moderate young people)

and extremism (in a mob-mentality of "woke" culture, or in the ambiguous, exclusionary politics seen in

the story of Teddy's brother in Chapter 6). The solution to these threats is to expand upon the spaces in

which agonistic forces can challenge extreme antagonism. This requires a fundamental recognition of the

inevitability (and democratic capacity) of conflict and then, instead of trying to eliminate exclusionary

extremists, work collectively to make agonistic forces the dominant powers in defining the state of play and the rules of the game (Mouffe 2013). Encourage the play that makes this political participation accessible to these young people, normalize *respectful* political conflict in/as gameplay, and, theoretically, a mature agonistic pluralism can repress antagonistic conflict through conflict.

I will return to this agonistic proposal in a more grounded fashion below. To do so, though, requires first a critical reconsideration of Mouffe's original evaluation of public sphere theory and deliberative democracy. Mouffe and Laclau ([1985] 2014) argue that traditional understandings of the public sphere are flawed due to the hegemonic assumptions underlying notions of rationality, identity, and the political. This is addressed in their reframing of democratic ideals in pluralism and agonism over consensus. However, as deliberation in the public sphere had game rules of rationality in citizenship, so too does agonism have game rules regarding the values necessary for pluralism, namely, respect, diversity, and, perhaps paradoxically, a broad sense of citizen-belonging (to the shared game) that can support and sustain lower-level partisan division (in different teams). These game rules, even in their support of pluralism, are necessarily hegemonic in definition and application. What does respect look like? What makes for sufficient recognition of diversity? When might play be considered disrespectful? And critically, what happens when someone breaks the rules? Despite calls for inclusion, even in the face of threatening, antagonistic forces, Mouffe consistently grounds her framing of an ideal pluralist democracy in the premise that exclusion will *always* be central to the very existence of a political space, which is necessary for defining the field (of play):

> An extreme form of pluralism, according to which all interests, all opinions, all differences are seen as legitimate, could never provide the framework for a political regime. For the recognition of plurality not to lead to a complete *indifferentiation* and *indifference,* criteria must exist to decide between what is admissible and what is not. (Mouffe [1992] 1995:13, original emphasis).
>
> ---
>
> What such [an extreme] pluralism misses is the dimension of the *political* relations of power and antagonisms are erased and we are left with the typical liberal illusion of a pluralism without

antagonism. Indeed, although it tends to be very critical of liberalism, that type of extreme pluralism, because of its refusal of any attempt to construct a 'we', a collective identity that would articulate the demands found in the different struggles against subordination, partakes of the liberal evasion of the political. To deny the need for a construction of such collective identities, and to conceive democratic politics exclusively in terms of a struggle of a multiplicity of interest groups or of minorities for the assertion of their rights is to remain blind to the relations of power. It is to ignore the limits imposed on the extension of the sphere of rights by the fact that some existing rights have been constructed on the very exclusion or subordination of others. (Mouffe 2000:20)

While the democratic response to antagonism should *typically* be a creative sublimation of such conflict through constructive, agonistic pluralism, encouraging healthy and playful competition within an agreed-upon game **there must be limits on, and therefore exclusions around, the antagonisms than can be allowed to play in the agon.** For the game to function, players must play by the game rules: this includes adopting "a collective identity" of belonging to the game and recognizing the multiplicity of other players and teams that share this sense of belonging. Players must respect that their adversaries have equally legitimate claims to this field of gameplay. Extreme antagonists do not follow these rules and thus threaten other players and the underlying stability of the game. There must be a response to the power of antagonisms that strip the right to play from others. Mouffe is clear that this cannot be allowed within democratic pluralism, but is not clear in what the response should be.

This challenge to Mouffe's pluralist agonism reflects what Karl Popper ([1945] 2020) briefly discussed as the "paradox of tolerance," arguing that "If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. […] We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant" (518). That the forward to this new edition of Popper's work is written by George Soros, billionaire philanthropist, progressive political

investor, and boogeyman to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of the right,[63] illustrates the theoretical

implications of this paradox.

In our contemporary, seemingly antagonist field of play, "both sides" see the other as a hostile,

intolerant, dangerous enemy in conflict that often needs to be excluded, expelled, or ejected from the

game for the purpose of preserving the rules and openness of the game. There is variation in defining

these rules and the subsequent boundaries of unacceptable antagonism/unacceptable gameplay (e.g.,

labeling *some* cancelations as crude, careless woke politics while justifying others, or defining

exclusionary humor as antagonistic by intent and not effect). Play with politics in popular entertainment

media does appear to be an access point for young people to enter the playing field, but it is a highly

frustrating game of undefined rules, intense team combat to define such rules, and a reputational threat

of hostility that lacks the air of respect and community necessary for a true, competitive, agonistic game.

Achieving Mediated Agonism Amidst Paradox

The threatening reputation of antagonism in contemporary politics is clearly the overwhelming

force shaping young people's view of the public sphere. Mouffe argues that the solution to such

antagonism is not some unattainable rational deliberation and unity, but a recognition of the inevitability

of conflict within a diverse democratic society and an expansion of spaces for pluralism (though within

limits) and the agonistic forces that can creatively challenge hostile extremism. This theoretical

perspective better reflects the findings in this dissertation as they complicate the necessity for a

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[63] Donald Trump has promulgated such conspiracy theories around Soros on multiple occasions, and Bill O'Reilly has framed Soros as a threat to democracy, an "extremist" who is "off-the-charts dangerous": O'Reilly argues that Soros "can demand that politicians running for office do what he tells them to do" (Brown and Steinblatt 2017). While a critique of the power of the billionaire class is certainly a valid one to make, this is a framing of Soros as a political player acting outside of the rules of games, a threat to the game, grounded in antagonistic dog-whistles that build on anti-Semitic theories of "hidden agenda" of a powerful Jewish elite (Achenbach 2018). This is an antagonistic attack against that which itself is framed as antagonism.

public/private distinction (in embracing pluralism over a hegemonic unity) and as they illustrate the role

of play, as creative opportunity, as struggle with complex multiplicity, and as growth and engagement

with similarities (in a team) and difference (against an adversary). As popular entertainment media and

culture provide unique sites separate from "serious performance" in which playful engagement can occur

alongside and despite expressions of avoidance, the playful-ness of agonistic engagement and

competition in these Goldilocks zones may prove indispensable to the sublimation of counterproductive

antagonism. However, while popular entertainment spaces may allow for this expansion of pluralism,

how might the other components of Mouffe's response to antagonism be accomplished?

Firstly, the recognition and acceptance of innate conflict appear to be a matter of media and

digital literacy, at least in the context of the popular cultural field of gameplay. Further, such recognition

appears to be occurring in some regards in this data: many participants reflected a conscious awareness

of the media they, their peers, and their adversaries were engaging in (inevitable) conflict. For example:

- Chapter 4 highlights displays of critical analysis of one's own entertainment consumption and
  discussions of media influence via pandering
- Chapter 5 illustrates political judgment through a critical struggle (with conflict) and
  engagement with entertainment they may deeply enjoy
- Chapter 6 features examples from a multitude of considerations and critiques on the media's
  construction of conflict as grounded in digital literacy:
  - The role of technological affordances
  - Echo chambers and their nuances
  - Limitations in digital communications (sending and receiving)
  - Ambiguity and humor as tools of antagonism

Digital literacy appears to improve with digital nativity, and much interdisciplinary work is being done to

teach and improve children's digital literacy from an early age, often including play (Harker-Schuch, Mills,

Lade et al. 2020; Mihailidis 2020; Yuliana, Octavia and Sudarmilah 2020; Zimdars 2020). This could

improve broad citizen recognition of (healthy) conflict. The second matter at hand in Mouffe's response

to antagonism, though, is the establishment and acceptance of shared rules of the game.

As stated, Mouffe takes as an assumption that the rules of the game include respect, valuing

diversity, and adopting a shared sense of citizen-belonging in the form of a larger collective identity based

in the agon. In terms of this study, this would mean having a shared identity of citizen perhaps developed

through a shared sense of belonging in an audience-public (Livingstone 2005), which seems accessible.

This also would require shared respect for a collectively recognized pluralism. For some, the deliberative

cancelation of Kanye West reflected pluralism in terms of formal politics and/or conceptualizations of

(popular) culture and the public sphere. For others, cancel culture, particularly in such a formally political

case, is unequivocally an(other) example of antagonistic exclusion of conservative voices in the woke

culture run wild. For some, the sharing of Pepe the Frog memes is (or can be) a tool of irony, humor, and

even a knowing, heavily referential, progressive critique. For others, this is a highly polysemic, ambiguous

tool that is not inherently agonistic, antagonistic, or even political. And then others, like Teddy, see the

ambiguity of such memes pairing with the ambiguity of (political) play to destructive, deeply upsetting

ends, as he observes his young brother become radicalized, in a playful, warped manner, into a

destructive antagonist, appearing more as an enemy of Teddy's political team, and even of the whole

game, than an adversary. Ultimately, the (limited and relatively failed) cancelation of Kanye West in woke

culture is clearly *not* an antagonistic exclusion of difference in the way that extremist hate speech and

symbolic violence, grounded in social/cultural/institution histories, have excluded large portions of any

"public" from civic and political engagement, be that through audience-participation (in Teddy's brother's

case, the historically contentious and exclusionary space of video games) or in a formally recognized

public sphere. For (accessible, mediated) agonistic play to tame, sublimate, and control the antagonistic

play that "run away" with its players (Huizinga [1949] 1980; Sutton-Smith 1997), the rules of gameplay

need to be defined, the field of legitimate play needs to be bounded, and unfortunately, this seems to

require the very deliberative consensus and unity that Mouffe states, definitively, is unachievable: not

achievable, anyway, outside of the inherent hegemonic distinctions embedded in existing power

structures. Central to scholarships of play, entertainment media, and political engagement, though, are

explorations of opportunity for social progress, development, and betterment on many levels, with some

power structures suggesting more playful, agonistic opportunity than others.

Future research on the role of popular entertainment media and political engagement should

take the existing relationships explored in this dissertation seriously, moving beyond literatures that focus

merely on detraction, escape, mindless consumption, or the effects of any seemingly increasing banality

of that which may appear to be "just entertainment." Discounting the active, nuanced relationships

between popular culture and citizenship (broadly defined) does not just ignore the opportunities for

playful engagement embedded in individual consumption and readings: this would also fail to recognize

the innate centrality of such mediated play to our particularly combative "new normal." Further, future

research must consider the implication of this mediated political play, accessible, autotelic, and often

pleasurable, in terms of this paradoxical nature of democracy and tolerance and plurality. In considering

the paradoxical rules and limitations around such play, both ideal and in actuality, future interdisciplinary

scholarship must consider the dangers and threats of varied mediated play (and its audience-players) to

healthy and productive conflict. Perhaps more important, though, is a playful search for a creative

response to antagonism: along with these above foci, I intend to continue exploring the complex, popular,

mediated opportunities accessible to diverse audience-player-citizens that might allow access to

social/civic/public engagement. How might engagement with these matters, separate from serious

performance and imbued with passion and creativity, combat the innate antagonistic forces of politics

than cannot be ignored, or, as seen throughout this project, avoided? Considered alongside the risks of

such play, how might the playful popular be a useful tool in influencing power structures in a way that

might create a more conducive environment for respectful, pluralistic agonism? In short, future work will

explore how this particular site of consumption, exploration, and conflict, this *mediated political playground*, may be a site of hegemonic and/or transformative power, masked even by those playing and avoiding within it and the theoretical traditions central to core academic understandings of the space.

The mediated political playground explores the shared space where entertainment engages as art, the consumer decodes and deliberates as citizen, emotion constructs rationality, the private bridges to and distances from public(s), and "play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play" (Huizinga [1949] 1980:8). The recognition of this space by scholars and these players alike is necessary for addressing the opportunities, threats, and limitations embedded in young people's mediated experiences of their new social, cultural, and political normal.

METHODOLOGICAL APPENDICIES

Sample Focus Group Schedule

- Media Survey: TV, music, celebrity, online culture, + sports, video games, books
- General
    - What kinds of media and popular culture do you enjoy? Which are the most important?
    - Of things that are most important, what makes them important to you?
    - Of the things that you do but aren't important, why does it not feel as important as others?
- Music
    - Do you listen to/discuss lyrics? Why?
    - Do you like to talk about music with your friends? What do you discuss?
    - Do you think music is about bigger social issues or just entertainment? How so?
    - Do you see politics in music? Do you care about the politics of artists?
- Televisual
    - What shows do you watch? How do you watch them?
    - What makes [specific show] fun to discuss? Or what about [specific show] do you like to talk about?
    - Do you think TV is at all social or political? Do your friends ever discuss this? How so?
    - Do you think TV or music is more political? Discuss.
- Celebrity
    - Who do you like & why do you like to follow them?
    - Do you like to talk about celebrities with your friends?
    - (If it hasn't come up) What do you think about the Kardashians? Why do you think people like to talk about them?
    - Do you think celebrity culture is at all political?
        - How do you feel about celebrity's politics?
        - How do you feel about celebrities having political power?
        - Do they have a responsibility to speak or not?
- Online Culture
    - What online sites/apps do you like to use a lot?
    - What do you enjoy about these online places? What do these online spaces provide?
    - Do you think the online spaces you go to encourage politics?
    - Do you think conversations online are more political than conversation offline? Why or why not?
    - Do you participate in political conversations online?
    - Do you find politics in memes at all?
        - Alt-right memes?
        - Leftist memes?
- → Politics
    - Do you think any of the media we've discussed are more politicized than others? How so?
    - Do you think popular culture affects or has affected your own views on politics?
    - Do you like politics?

Sample Recruitment Materials

Sample email correspondence:

Hello _____,

Thanks for reaching out on Facebook! Let me give you a little info about the project: I am studying how young people talk about popular culture with friends. You can earn up to $50 for participating in this study. The study has two phases: the focus group and the interview.

1) The focus group is like a group conversation, where you would get together with 3-5 of your friends to discuss popular culture, like television, celebrities, etc. The conversation would led by me and would last about an hour and a half to two hours. You would get $25 for organizing the focus group (finding a time and place for you and your friends to talk with me) and $5 for participating in the focus group (your friends would each get a $5, too). It's usually a pretty fun conversation! Easy money.

2) After the focus group, participants will have the option to earn another $20 by completing a media conversation diary (instruction on that to come later) and participating in a one-on-one interview with me that would last about 30-60 minutes.

You can participate in parts 1 and 2 of the study, or just part 1 if you'd rather, and will be paid accordingly.

Please let me know if you are interested in participating! If so, we can start organizing a focus group. I'll be in [city] around [these dates]. Maybe we can meet sometime then? If not, I'll be conducting focus groups through the summer.

Let me know!

Sarah

Hi _____,

My name is Sarah Johnson and I'm a graduate student at UVA conducting a study on popular culture and society. Your friend _____ suggested I reach out to you to see if you're interested in participating in the study. Let me give you a little info about the project: I am studying how young people talk about popular culture with friends. The study has two phases: the focus group and the interview.

1) The focus group is like a group conversation, where you would get together with 3-5 of your friends to discuss popular culture, like television, celebrities, etc. The conversation would led by me and would last about two hours. It's usually a pretty fun talk and I'll bring pizza, which is a bonus!

2) After the focus group, participants will have the option to continue the study and keep a media conversation diary (instruction on that to come later) and participate in a one-on-one interview with me that would last about 45 minutes.

You can participate in parts 1 and 2 of the study, or just part 1 if you'd rather. **If you participate in both parts of the study, you will be paid $20 for your time.**

Please let me know if you are interested in participating! I'll be in [city] throughout the summer, so I'd love to find a time to talk.

Let me know!

Sarah

Hi _____,

This is Sarah Johnson, the woman running the pop culture study you participated in a few weeks ago. Thanks for chatting with me during the focus group! It was a really interesting conversation. I'm writing to see if you have any friends that might be interested in participating as well. I'm looking for more people to talk to, so anyone you can recommend would be greatly appreciated.

I'm also writing to schedule phase 2 of the study. This would consist of completing a (short!) media conversation diary for three days, then meeting up to talk about it. The interview itself would take 30 minutes, not too long, and the diary is pretty easy. I've attached the instructions below. **If you complete phase 2 of the study, you will get paid $20.**

Let me know if you have any suggestions of people to talk to. If you still want to participate in phase 2, let me know! I'll be in [city] around [these dates], so I'd love to meet with you some time in there.

Best,

Sarah

POP CULTURE STUDY

Seeking groups of friends age 19-24 to participate in focus group for study on popular culture and society. Participate in research by talking with your friends about television, memes, celebrities, and more!

Participation contingent on brief screening process.

Free pizza!

For more information, please contact:

Sarah Johnson-Palomaki

srjohnson@virginia.edu

UVa IRB-SBS #2566

Popular Culture Study: FREE PIZZA
Contact:
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srjohnson@virginia.edu

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Informed Consent Forms

Project Title: Popular Culture and Socio-Political Talk

Informed Consent Agreement – Not in College

Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Purpose of the research study: This study aims to explore the ways in which young people use and discuss popular culture. I believe by talking to participants about their conversations around popular culture, I will be able to learn more about the connections between popular culture and broader socio-political engagement.

What you will do in the study: In this study, you will first be asked to fill out a short questionnaire on demographics and political engagement. You and your friends will then be asked a series of questions about popular culture. If you choose to do an additional media conversation diary and interview (phase 2), this will be completed at a later date. Your responses will be audiotaped. You are completely free to skip any question on the questionnaire or in the focus group/interview that you do not wish to answer, and you are free to stop and/or leave the interview at any time.

Time required: The focus group (phase 1) will require about 2 hours of your time. Phase 2: The media diary will take place over 3 days and the subsequent interview will last approximately 1 hour.

Risks: There are no anticipated risks in this study.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study, outside of your contribution to the growth of knowledge on popular culture and socio-political engagement.

Confidentiality: The information that you give in this study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a pseudonym. The list connecting your name to this pseudonym will be kept in an encrypted folder on a private, password protected computer. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report, but rather pseudonyms will be the only name used for the individual during the recorded interview and subsequent analysis. After transcribing the audio, the files will be deleted from my computer.

In a focus group setting, I cannot ensure that other participants will not repeat what is shared in the focus group, though I will request that the conversation not be discussed outside of the group interview.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to do so, you will also have to option of rescinding your interview up to that point as well, in which case the audio recording and any notes will be destroyed. If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact the primary researcher.

How to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you want to withdraw from the study, please inform the interviewer that you want to stop, and simply leave. There is no penalty for leaving the study.

Project Title: Popular Culture and Socio-Political Talk

Informed Consent Agreement – College

Please read this consent agreement carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Purpose of the research study: This study aims to explore the ways in which groups of young people use and discuss popular culture. I believe by talking to participants about their conversations around popular culture, I will be able to learn more about the connections between popular culture and broader socio-political engagement.

What you will do in the study: In this study, you will first be asked to fill out a short questionnaire on demographics and political engagement. You and your friends will then be asked a series of questions about popular culture. If you choose to do an additional media conversation diary and interview (phase 2), this will be completed at a later date. Your responses will be audiotaped. You are completely free to skip any question on the questionnaire or in the focus group/interview that you do not wish to answer, and you are free to stop and/or leave the interview at any time.

Time required: The focus group (phase 1) will require about 2 hours of your time. Phase 2: The media diary will take place over 3 days and the subsequent interview will last approximately 1 hour.

Risks: There are no anticipated risks in this study.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study, outside of your contribution to the growth of knowledge on popular culture and socio-political engagement.

Confidentiality: The information that you give in this study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in an encrypted folder on a private, password protected computer. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report, but rather, all interviewees will choose a pseudonym to protect their identity, which will be the only name used for the individual during the recorded interview and subsequent analysis. After transcribing the audio, the files will be deleted from my computer.

In a focus group setting, I cannot ensure that other participants will not repeat what is shared in the focus group, though I will request that the conversation not be discussed outside of the group interview.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to do so, you will also have to option of rescinding your interview up to that point as well, in which case the audio recording and any notes will be destroyed. If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact the primary researcher.

How to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you want to withdraw from the study, please inform the interviewer that you want to stop, and simply leave. There is no penalty for leaving the study.

Focus Group Paperwork: Questionnaire (with political participation index) and Pop

Culture Survey

Pop Culture and Politics Study
Questionnaire

Your answers will be kept confidential and will not be reported in any way that can be traced to you.
You may skip any answer that you do not wish to answer.

Name:

Pseudonym:

Date:

1. Age:

2. Gender:

☐ Woman

☐ Man

☐ Other: _____

3. Current Occupation (if unemployed please write "currently unemployed" but list your former occupation if applicable):

_____

4. How would you describe yourself? (check as many as apply)

☐   American Indian or Alaska Native   ☐   Other Hispanic, Latino or Latin American

☐   Asian, Asian American or Pacific Islander ☐   White

☐   Black or African American   ☐   Other: _____

☐   Mexican or Mexican American

5. How would you describe yourself? (check as many as apply)

☐   Straight/Heterosexual   ☐   Trans

☐   Gay   ☐   Queer

☐   Lesbian   ☐   Asexual

☐   Bisexual   ☐   Other: _____

Page 1 of 3

6. Are you currently enrolled in school?

☐   Yes

☐   No

If enrolled, what level/grade are you in? _____

7. Please select your highest level of education:

☐   Did not/have not yet completed high school

☐   Received a high school diploma or GED

☐   Attended a two-year school but did not/have not complete a degree (vocational or technical school/junior college/community college)

☐   Graduated from a two-year school

☐   Attended a four-year school but did not/have not complete a degree

☐   Completed a Bachelor's degree or equivalent

☐   Completed a Master's degree or equivalent

☐   Completed a Ph.D., M.D., or other advanced professional degree

Major or concentration, if applicable: _____

8. Father's highest education level completed and occupation, current or at retirement:

_____

9. Mother's highest education level completed and occupation, current or at retirement:

_____

10. How would you describe yourself?

☐ Very Conservative

☐ Conservative

☐ Somewhat Conservative

☐ Moderate

☐ Somewhat Liberal

☐ Liberal

☐ Very Liberal

☐ Apolitical

☐ Other: _____

11. Which of the following have you done? (check as many as apply)

☐ Voted in a presidential election

☐ Voted in a non-presidential election

☐ Participated in a political event (rally, protest, speech, etc.)

☐ Participated in a political organization/group/club

☐ Participated in or volunteered for a political campaign

☐ Displayed a political button, sign, shirt, etc.

☐ Discussed politics and political issues with friends

☐ Discussed politics and political issues with family

☐ Shared a news or political link online

☐ Commented on or contributed to a political discussion online

☐ Read/watched political content online by people you agree with

☐ Read/watched political content online by people you disagree with

Name:

Pseudonym:

Date:

Pop Culture Participation

Listed below are different kinds of popular culture. Check the box next to any types of pop culture you frequently interact with. Additionally, circle the kinds of popular culture that are most important to you.

☐ Television (incl. binging/streaming)   ☐ Celebrity Culture

☐ Movies   ☐ Sports

☐ Books   ☐ Online Culture (e.g., Reddit, YouTube, etc.)

☐ Music   ☐ Video Games

Diary Instructions

Project Title: Popular Culture and Socio-Political Talk

Media Conversation Diary Instructions

The purpose of the media conversation diary is to understand the context in which conversations around popular culture take place. Over the next three days, you will be tracking whenever you take part in a conversation around popular culture, either in person, online, or otherwise. **Entries should be short but as frequent as possible.** Please note the following information:

When: Approximate time and day
What and Who: What popular culture was discussed? Who was a part of the conversation? Give a brief descriptor of the conversation.
Where: Where is this conversation taking place? At work, on Twitter, at dinner, etc.

Examples:

April 9, around 1PM
Talked about *Game of Thrones* with friends. Discussed favorite characters (mine are Dany and Tyrion). Spent some time talking about John as the potential king.
In break room during lunch break.

April 9, around 7PM
Talked about the Kardashians with my sister and friend. Discussed Scott and Kourtney's relationship, Kim's fight with Bella Thorne.
At restaurant for dinner.

April 9, evening
Live tweeted *Empire*. Discussed latest episode, re-tweeted other fans.
At home.

Participant Data

See PDF document/ssupplemental file for participant data.

Participant Data

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